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Family Finding & Engagement

PROMISING PRACTICE,
SYSTEMS CHANGE

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Center For Excellence
FAMILY FINDING & ENGAGEMENT



About the Center for Excellence

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) have partnered together to launch the Center for Excellence in Family Finding and Engagement, designed to support county child welfare agency efforts to keep youth linked with their family members. The Center will provide statewide culturally appropriate training and technical assistance to county child welfare and probation departments, and foster care providers to enhance their practices, policies, and efforts for family finding, support, and engagement. In addition, the Center will be providing dedicated and specialized efforts for family finding, engagement and support to promote the stability and security of Indian children and families in partnership with Tribes to support the best interest of the child.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spark Learning for Organizations LLC (Spark) conducted a landscape scan to identify key policies, practices, programs, and approaches that may help mobilize a shift toward kin-first culture in the child welfare system. This document provides exemplars of such efforts and links to resources for additional information where available. The Water of System Change Framework was used to center and organize promising practices from the field within the six conditions needed for systems change: Mental Models, Relationships and Connections, Power Dynamics, Policies, Practices, and Resource Flows. The Framework is described, and exemplars are provided in each condition to support actionable and sustainable systems change. Although the conditions and corresponding exemplars are provided as discrete elements in this document, it is important to acknowledge the intersectional influence and impact across conditions, and the ripple effects of change that often extend throughout a system. For instance, a shift in Mental Models is often influenced bi-directionally by changes in Policy and Practice.

The resources highlighted in this document could not address the full scope and scale of innovations in the field, but provide a starting point for systems seeking to ensure all young people remain connected to and supported by their kin network. Of note, many of these promising practices are in the early implementation stage, and thus do not have comprehensive data related to effectiveness. We encourage leaders to honor the role of practice-based knowledge in the short term, while also consulting existing evidence-based approaches and implementing plans to collect data that will assess the evidence base for these novel interventions.

We are indebted to key informants working in county, state, and national contexts, who connected us to resources, highlighted their knowledge of culturally-specific practices and shared assessments of the promise and pitfalls of nascent practices within family finding and engagement. These individuals, while not named to allow for frank discussions, provided important insights that guided this work and are shared throughout this document. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge the [Child Welfare Playbook](#) and [Foster America](#) for surfacing helpful examples of state and county policies, and [Grandfamilies.org](#) for resources that synthesized the landscape [promising kinship practices](#) and [creating a kin-first culture](#).



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FAMILY FINDING AND ENGAGEMENT

Family finding is an activity designed to increase options for young people's legal and emotional permanency, either prior to entry into foster care or for those already in care (Campbell, 2005). Narrowly defined, family finding refers to any number of proprietary models and nonproprietary approaches that follow a structured set of steps to connect young people to their kin - those related by blood as well as found family.



In 2018, California's Department of Social Services issued guidance to the state's county-administered child welfare and probation departments that reiterated guidance related to family finding and engagement (FFE), and suggest practices that may be useful to counties in meeting these objectives (CDSS, 2018). This guidance represents a continuing effort to meaningfully connect young people to kin through the life of their involvement with county agencies. Far from implementing a discrete intervention, this policy will require a substantial shift in practice to go beyond meeting existing statutory obligations regarding notifying relatives when a child enters care to "build a network of permanent connections which can support the child throughout his or her life" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

This document provides a framework for supporting counties in this work by highlighting promising approaches and exemplars in other systems that have moved toward a comprehensive approach to family finding, engagement, and support.

Sources:
Campbell, K. (2005). Six Steps for Family Finding. Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness. Resource Documents.
CDSS. (2018.) All-County Letter 18-42: Family Finding and Engagement (FFE). Retrieved from <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/ACL/2018/18-42.pdf?ver=2018-04-09-132626-940>.

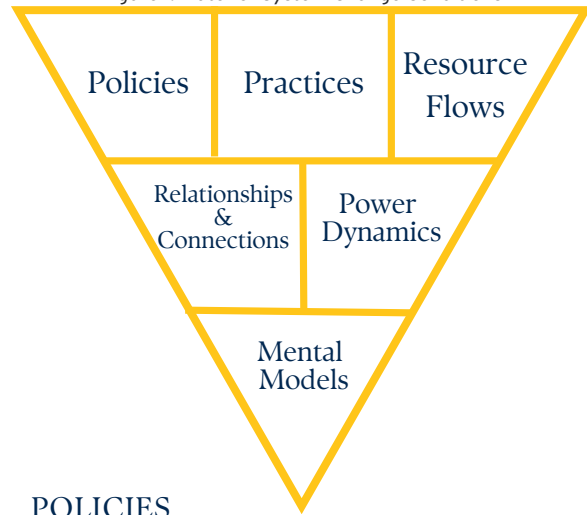
THE WATER OF SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK

This guide conceptualizes the broad work of family finding, support, and engagement includes the following:

As soon as young people come in contact with the child welfare and juvenile probation systems, a key priority is to identify their extended kin network, both relative and non-relative, which can help keep children connected to their family and community at a time of disruption and uncertainty. If a young person must be removed from their home of origin, placement with someone they know can reduce trauma and foster well-being over the long-term. To ensure authentic family finding can happen, county agencies must adopt and implement policies, practices, and organizational culture around engaging kin. These efforts should occur early, often, and be sustained, so that the kin network is broad, supportive, and resilient as young people go through the system or placements shift. Dedicated services, resources, and connection points are needed to allow this broad, sustained engagement.

This implementation challenge requires fundamental shifts in policy, practice, and use of resources, but also deeper, underlying changes to the way child welfare and probation departments do their work. To support a change of this magnitude, this resource will present findings using the Water of Systems Change framework. This approach identifies that progress on important issues may only be made by shifting the conditions that hold problems in place (Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018). Attention to explicit and less visible drivers of systems change are required to substantially and sustainability shift practice so that young people can thrive in strong families and connected communities.

Figure 1: Water of System Change Conditions



POLICIES



Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.

PRACTICES



Espoused activities of institutions, coalition, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work.

RESOURCE FLOWS



How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS



Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.

POWER DYNAMICS



The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.

MENTAL MODELS



Habits of thought; deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.

MENTAL MODELS

Shifting Mindsets to Child and Family Well-Being

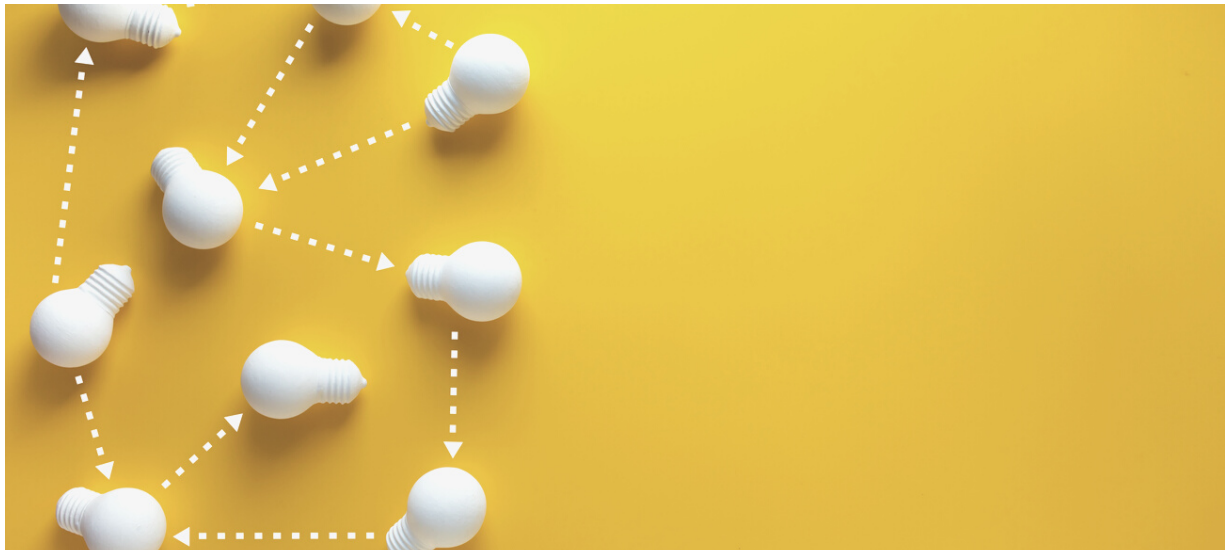
Authentic family finding requires agencies and staff with mindsets that value and prioritize connection with kin - a "kin-first culture." General resources on leadership, organizational culture, and change management may be helpful for leaders seeking to make this shift. However, kin-first culture change work is happening within a broader sea change in child welfare, which adopts public health frameworks that shift from looking at individual risks to a community-level approach to prevention within a child and family well-being system (OCAN, 2021). This new approach uses socio-ecological frameworks to consider family needs and strengths within the context of community, with principles that value pre-existing strengths within kin networks and communities. Jurisdictions that have embarked on this work have identified actionable strategies and developed useful tools that can support meaningful, culturally-respectful engagement with families that identify and seeks to address racism, disproportionate contact, and power imbalances between systems and communities. A Community Collaborative Toolkit developed in Nebraska provides a clear set of steps and resources for shifting systems, from readiness through sustainability. Other efforts to prevent serious injury or maltreatment fatalities, such as Child Safety Forward and the National Partnership for Child Safety, have adopted organizational culture approaches that value family strengths and assess unmet needs within the context of community. These, and other public health approaches, may provide a catalyst for the mindset shift that is both an essential foundation of and the product of the systems change described in this guide.



Lessons Learned from the Field: Building a Kin-First Culture

Interviews with changemakers emphasized the multifaceted and person-centered work required to move toward a kin-first culture. Work around addressing barriers to family finding and increasing licensed kin placements required foundational work with staff to name the historical trauma experienced by families who have been impacted by the child welfare system, particularly those who identify as BIPOC or living in low-income communities. One-on-one conversations were found to be particularly helpful for engaging staff in the intersectionality between race, kinship care, and what that means for children of color who come into contact with the system. Including and centering the voices of families who have been affected by racism and forcible separation provided grounding for understanding disproportionality and racism. These conversations are especially critical within the context of tribal communities, where concepts like interdependence and shared parenting form the core of beliefs about remaining connected to kin and indigenous culture. With this context, the next steps included partnering with staff to explore why cultural and relational permanency is important for young people.

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS



Staff Engagement & Collaboration

Authentic family finding and engagement requires building workplace culture and practices that prioritize relationships and collaboration within and across child welfare. The effectiveness of dedicated family finding units or contracted agencies may be limited by isolation from the day-to-day details of a young person's case plan. Conversely, family meeting outreach, placement decisions, and well-being focused activities on a case plan may run counter to a child's best interest if staff do not have a sense of the strengths and scope of the kin network. Some practices that have emerged as central to the success of family finding, support and engagement include:

- [Co-location of family finding units](#)
- [Engagement with private agencies](#)
- [Expedited background checks through law enforcement partnerships](#)

Family Meeting Models

Family Meeting Models (e.g., [Family Group Decision Making](#), [Family Team Conferencing](#), [Peacemaking Circles](#), and [Youth-Centered Permanency Round Tables](#)) provide a key pathway for building relationships and prioritizing family voice. For instance, Family Group Decision-Making, which includes the family and other important supportive figures in the child's life in planning and decision-making, may assist in reducing disparities by giving voice to perspectives that extend beyond the individual caseworker. These meetings also provide an opportunity to consider and expand [heart maps](#), [connect with family members about other family members](#), and [ask the young person directly](#) about their connections at the outset of child welfare involvement and at key moments such as placement changes or permanency planning.

POWER DYNAMICS

MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Thriving Families, Safer Children, a national initiative to move to proactive, community-based prevention approaches to prevent child maltreatment and unnecessary family separation. Demonstration sites across the United States engage public, private, and philanthropic sectors to create more just and equitable systems that benefit all children and families and break harmful intergenerational cycles of trauma and poverty. These initiatives have included a focus on foundational community healing and trust-building with people with lived experience, community co-design, and creating a family- and community-centered approaches to fostering child and family well-being.

BALANCING AND RESTORING POWER

Authentic family finding and engagement requires acknowledging and addressing the power imbalances that are embedded within interactions between child welfare system and families. Extended family members may be less willing to serve as ongoing, supportive connections for young people due to negative interactions with and perceptions of the child welfare system. This can also be exacerbated by the difficulties encountered by families when interfacing with a complex bureaucracy. Some programs are aiming to address these issues through thoughtful peer and paraprofessional support. Cultural Brokering programs provide culturally congruent services, support, and advocacy to parents and family members as they navigate the child welfare system. These programs employ "cultural brokers" to create partnerships between families and child welfare workers and help families navigate the system and their trauma histories. Other parent partner programs, such as Parents Anonymous, have promising evidence related to impact on repeat maltreatment prevention and reunification for children who are placed in kinship or non-relative placements.



Lessons Learned from the Field: Building Trust with Community

Authentic family finding, engagement, and support requires building relationships with the community that acknowledge power imbalances and create new structures for collaboration. Thoughtful attention to outreach includes identifying and engaging culturally-specific organizations to understand the priorities and needs of the community and open lines of communication that can provide meaningful connections to the people and customs that will allow young people to thrive during and after child welfare involvement. For example, some jurisdictions have engaged faith communities to understand how placement with kin fits into cultural beliefs and religious customs. This connection also serves as a resource for resource families who may have a child with specific cultural needs upon placement (e.g., religious services, prayer rugs, important customs). Interactions with indigenous communities require recognition of tribal sovereignty, with respect for customs, traditions, and ways of being that diverge from the dominant culture. Zero-sum approaches to power run counter to the cultural norms of communities of color, prioritizing collaboration, authentic engagement, and a focus on respecting people and communities within process rather than privileging an outcome or deadline.

POLICIES



COLLABORATIVE POLICYMAKING: RESOURCE FAMILY WORKING GROUP

Launched in 2020, the [Resource Family Working Group](#) provides a collaborative space to share promising practices and test new ideas. The group aims to produce "tangible, proven promising practices that child welfare agencies can implement to improve their efficiency and impact, with an emphasis on low-cost, practical solutions that can be implemented in the short-term" ([source](#)). Membership is open to any state or county (in county-administered) child welfare department, along with private agencies providing related services. Currently, 26 states are represented in the group, including California.

The Working Group focuses on key goals relevant to finding, engaging and supporting kin, including:

- Placing young people with someone they know and trust, whenever possible, and having this placement be financially supported and encourage connection to their original support network;
- Ensuring the pool of resource families allows children who must be placed with non-relatives to have that placement meet their cultural/linguistic needs, stay connected to school/community of origin, and offer long-term placement;
- Avoiding congregate care to make sure all children, including those with the highest level of need, are able to live with a family; and
- Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality and disparities due to socioeconomic status

To accomplish these goals, the group produces the [Child Welfare Playbook](#), which provides specific state examples, policy templates, and other resources related to [finding kin](#), [relative licensing exceptions](#), and connecting youth to [siblings](#) and [supportive adults](#), among others. Implementation of specific practices is supported by concise instructions, an overview of costs and benefits, and named examples of jurisdictions using existing practices (with links to policy and form templates where available). This fosters opportunities for identifying innovations and connecting with other states or counties that may be exploring new approaches to facilitate implementation.

POLICY INNOVATIONS

INITIAL FAMILY FINDING & PLACEMENT



- [Gentle and engagement-focused kin notification \(MI\)](#)
- Procedural barrier ("firewall") requiring approval for placement with non-kin ([NM](#), [NY](#), [TN](#), [WA](#))

LICENSING



- [Model and kin-specific resource family licensing standards \(MD/DC\)](#)
- [Licensing exceptions for kin](#)
- [Culturally-specific processes and support for licensing](#)
- Financial support for non-licensed kin placements ([CA](#))

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT



- Engaging young people and kin in all aspects of case planning and system improvement ([federal](#))
- Ongoing family finding in case planning and placement changes ([OH](#), [VA](#))

PRACTICES



LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIELD: GETTING TO "YES" IN LICENSING

Ensuring young people are placed with kin whenever possible is often limited not by policy, but by how legislative guidance is translated into everyday practice by systems and individuals who work within them. In another example of the connections between the conditions of systems change, staff mindsets and relationships with community can make all the difference when interpreting vague practice guidance. A kin-first culture often requires moving away from identifying the ways that kin placements failed to meet licensing guidelines to getting to a “yes” in the approval process to allow young people to be placed with people they know whenever possible. In approaching this challenge, some jurisdictions have initiated listening sessions with successful and unsuccessful kin resource families to identify the “pain points” within the approval process. This information can form the basis for training and practice guidance for staff, many of whom may not be aware of the experience of individuals going through the licensing process, as well as handbooks and other accessible, up-to-date resources for kin.



Culturally-Attuned, Kin-Centered Practice

Family finding and engagement occur in the context of historical harms and systemic inequities that have disproportionately affected BIPOC families and low-income communities. Developing and implementing practices that are sensitive to the unique traditions, strengths, and needs of communities cannot be done without direct engagement and learning. In addition, there are some special populations (e.g., LGBTQIA2S+ youth, caregivers with disabilities, and young people with significant health or mental health needs) that require special consideration and specialized attention to achieve the goals of family finding. Some promising practices include:

- Agreements between tribes and public child welfare agencies to provide training regarding indigenous culture and Indian Child Welfare Act provisions, ideally with agency staff traveling to tribal lands to show respect and gain deeper understanding of current context
- Evidence-based models for caregivers of LGBTQ+ youth
- Restorative and transformative justice approaches, including peace making circles used in indigenous communities, which focus on accountability rather than punishment, build community, and seek consensus while emphasizing healing and collective learning
- Culturally-specific kinship navigation services, for example those that promote fatherhood in African American communities or embed indigenous culture within services

Approaches to Support Implementation of Family Finding Models

- Safety Organized Practice
- 3-7-5 Model
- Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics
- Neurosequential Model of Caregiving
- AFFIRM
- Cultural Brokering
- Family Meeting Models (described on page 7)

RESOURCE FLOWS



LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIELD: DEDICATED FAMILY FINDING TEAMS

Strong kin-first policies and innovative practices cannot be implemented without considering the capacity of a system to provide necessary resources, including staffing. Dedicated teams specializing in family finding have been identified as an important success factor for successful initial and ongoing engagement. Jurisdictions who have explored this approach have identified the difficulty in prioritizing family finding when there are many competing activities that require attention, whereas dedicated workers or teams can develop specialized skills and practice approaches required to do this work well. These teams can support tasks arising at initial placement such as finding and making initial contacts with kin, but also provide a dedicated role to engage in the ongoing family finding work that is essential to maintaining a robust kin network or identifying potential kin placements for children who are placed with non-relatives. Caution is needed to ensure that these teams are not isolated from the details of a child's case or other staff, and that the narrow focus facilitates innovation rather than rote task completion. Co-locating family finding teams with case planning functions has been raised as one promising practice, as small, often rural agencies have benefitted from the close working relationships and shared context that comes from working together regularly.

Some jurisdictions have addressed the need for deep knowledge of department policies and procedures by hiring back retired staff into part-time, specialized family finding roles. However, the limitations of conflict of interest policies that require waiting periods after leaving agency service and other human resources issues have limited the ability of some jurisdictions to replicate this approach. Key informants recommended that recruitment for these positions target staff who are from, or who represent, the linguistic and cultural background(s) of the local community. This approach not only facilitates authentic and culturally-competent family engagement, but may also engender a natural sense of commitment that reduces turnover.

RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS



Human Resources

- Dedicated teams
- Family engagement liaisons or parent partners
- Engaging retired staff



Technology

- Genogram software and search tools
- Data reports to identify disparities (CT, NY)



Funding

- Stipends for kin placements pending approval (CA, OH, AZ)
- Funding for required licensing improvements (MI)
- Start-up and pre-service training stipends (OK)

