



Family Search & Engagement: Calling the Children Home

Many children and youth in the child welfare system have no “viable” connections with their families of origin. Often these children lack both a sense of family identity and a workable permanency plan, and they frequently experience a series of temporary placements with the result that they have no life-long connectedness with anyone.

Family Search & Engagement projects in numerous locations around the country have demonstrated that there are often family members available who could have provided support and/or a home for these children, but were unaware of the need or didn't know how to locate their family member.

Family Search & Engagement is a set of practices designed to locate, engage, connect, and support resource families for youth. A major goal of this practice is to move youth from a place where they don't hear “I love you” to a place where they can hear it and feel it everyday. This comes from family, relatives, and others who love them.

The success of this new approach to a basic social service practice requires skill development in each of the following key phases:

Setting the Stage: Identifying the need for family is the starting point, including legal issues, communication parameters, and safety considerations. Strengths and needs of the youth are the central consideration within the context of the child welfare system.

Discovery: Case record and internet searches must be complemented with skillful interviewing techniques to identify family strengths, resources, and connections.

Team Discussion of Discovery Information: All information is reviewed, necessary permissions and background checks are obtained, and initial contact strategies are determined.

Engagement: Family members must be contacted and informed of the opportunities to assist in planning for the child's future in ways that do not push them away and do not violate confidentiality laws, while still communicating the importance and urgency of their assistance.

Initial Meetings: Appropriate preparation of the youth and family members must consider their expectations, their strengths, their needs, and their concerns. They are usually brief, supported, and in natural settings.

Family Ties: The new array of family resources is discussed to consider the potential for long-term relationships and possible placement options. The best planning process is that initiated and conducted by the family members themselves. Often professional guidance and support is needed as well.

Sustainability: Finding family members is of little value unless there is a process in place to provide individualized support to nurture and solidify the relationship over time.

One current method for training child welfare agencies to acquire and implement this practice is a training and coaching” model in which a small team of social workers and/or supervisors is assigned a cadre of children and youth for whom no viable family connections have been found. A 3-day intensive training is provided followed by two coaching days in the ensuing months as extended family members are identified, engaged, and connected, and an individualized family support plan is developed and begun. Other training models are also available, depending on the project model.

For more information, or to schedule a project in your area, contact:

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