

Kin-Finding Toolkit



About This Toolkit

Children in care do better when they're placed with family members or other adults they know and trust. But identifying and connecting with extended family members can be a challenge for foster care programs.

Children can't have too many adults who care about them. A strong support system of adults supports young people's resiliency and long-term health and well-being. Yet, most youth enter foster care with more connections than they leave with.

The ideas and materials in this toolkit were compiled from over 35 child welfare agencies across the country who are part of the Child Welfare Playbook & Resource Family Working Group. That coalition is focused on surfacing and scaling promising practices in the areas of foster family recruitment, licensing, placement, and retention. The priority is supporting kin caregivers. Promising practices are published and kept up to date on the playbook website, with an emphasis on reusable templates and materials from agencies that have adopted them successfully. For more information, please visit www.childwelfareplaybook.com.

Call To Action

We hope this toolkit inspires every child welfare agency to adopt at least one new kin-finding practice. Track progress against every state's adoption of these practices at the [Kin-Finding Progress Dashboard](#).

How To Contribute

We welcome additional ideas and especially examples of practice guides, forms, letters, and other materials developed by child welfare agencies. Submit your examples to Kylee Craggett, Technical Assistance Specialist for the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center, at kcraggett@gu.org.

Terminology

We intentionally use the term “kin-finding,” not “family finding,” throughout, as our user research has shown many people in and outside of child welfare think that “family finding” means finding a foster home and/or adoptive family for a child. While that is also important work, this toolkit is focused on identifying and nurturing a child's kinship connections while in care. The terms “child” and “youth” are used interchangeably throughout this toolkit.

Acknowledgements

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Contents: List of Kin-Finding Promising Practices

Below is a list of promising practices that have proven to be successful. This toolkit provides details and notes to think about what it would take for your agency to implement these practices. Click the name of a specific promising practice to be taken to that section and read the whole toolkit to learn about them all. Ultimately, any and all of these can help improve rates of placing youth with kin.

#1: Ask Youth About Their Kin

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#1: Ask Youth About Their Kin

Youth are often placed in general foster care or in group homes when they have placement options with adults they already know and trust.

Ask youth, both at initial removal and at regular intervals afterwards, about the supportive adults in their lives. Even young children may be able to tell you about the important people in their lives.

How To Do This

- ▶ Require workers to talk to youth, no matter how young, about their connections. Supervisors can encourage this practice by regularly asking, “What did the youth say?”
- ▶ Use heart maps (see #11 below) with youth to learn more about their supportive adults.
- ▶ Ask youth about their supportive connections at every placement change, and at regular intervals – at monthly check-ins, for example.
- ▶ Designate an official place for keeping a youth’s list of kin in your IT system (see #4 below).
- ▶ Phrase inquiries carefully so that young people don’t feel like they have to supply a placement option or they will be homeless. Helpful prompts include: “Who came to your last family gathering?” and “Who would you call if you needed a ride home from school?”
- ▶ Help youth stay connected to supportive adults, even when they’re not a placement option. Create opportunities for regular phone calls, visits, or other contact.

What You Need

- ▶ Time for staff training

Inspiration

- ▶ Wisconsin has [suggested questions for talking to youth](#).
- ▶ Indiana is piloting a practice of asking child welfare workers for a youth’s input whenever the workers call the placement desk at the child welfare agency (to find a placement for that child).

- ▶ New Mexico increased initial kinship placements from 3% to 40% in one year by shifting to youth-focused practices that include asking youth about their supportive connections.
- ▶ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rhode Island set up a Zoom meeting with each group home facility and met with each youth one-on-one to discuss their placement options. They were able to move many youth from group homes into kinship placements as a result.
- ▶ Fairfax County, Virginia conducts family finding for youth annually and at every placement change.

#2 Use an Expansive Legal Definition of Kin

Using an expansive legal definition of kin allows staff to find more placement options for youth, and it can mean more adults qualify to be emergency placements.

Even if a connection cannot serve as a placement, youth need as many supportive adults around them as possible. Maintaining an expansive legal definition of kin will allow you to create a broader support system for youth.

How To Do This

- ▶ The recommended definition of kin is: “Individuals related to a child by blood, marriage, tribal custom, and/or adoption and other individuals who have an emotionally significant relationship with the child or the child’s parents or other family members (often referred to as ‘fictive kin’).”
- ▶ Adopt this definition verbatim or adjust your existing legal definition to encompass all of these categories of kin, for the purposes of who qualifies for emergency placement, for kin-specific licensing waivers/exemptions, and for the upcoming kin-specific licensing process.

What You Need

- ▶ Potential legislative change, although in some agencies, the definition of kin is only in policy
- ▶ Significant time updating policies, forms, training, and other materials to adapt to an expanded definition

Inspiration

- ▶ Multiple child welfare advocates [came together](#) to unanimously recommend the above definition of kin to the federal government as part of the comment period on the kin-specific licensing rule.

#3: Require Senior Staff Sign-Off for Non-Kin Placements or Implement a “Firewall Policy”

Case workers don’t want to wake a director in the middle of the night to sign-off on a non-kin placement. Requiring this level of sign-off incentivizes early kin-finding and may prevent placements in group homes.

How To Do This

- ▶ Require senior staff sign-off for non-kin placements, no matter the time of day. For placement changes planned in advance, this process may look different than for emergency placements.
- ▶ Require sign-off on every placement: initial placements, subsequent placements, and congregate care placements.
- ▶ Before signing off, the senior staff member should ask questions about what kin-finding activities were conducted and about future kin-finding plans.

What You Need

- ▶ New or updated policy requiring senior staff sign-off on non-kin placements
- ▶ Clear process for sign-off, including exactly which senior staff member is responsible at any given time, recommended questions the senior staff member should ask about kin-finding progress, and senior staff contact information
- ▶ Resources for kin-finding; this is not an effective tactic if your placement desk has no viable ways to find kin

Inspiration

- ▶ New Mexico has a [policy](#) that a County Office Manager must sign off on any placement with non-kin, whether general foster care or a group home, even if it’s the middle of the night.
- ▶ New York’s [kinship firewall policy](#) puts guardrails in place to ensure kin are considered first.

#4: Maintain a Shared List of Kin

Kin are often lost in case notes or handwritten paperwork. To ensure children in care have access to all their kin, and that those kin are kept in the loop if placement or other needs shift, it's critical to have kin names and contact information in a shared electronic format. A shared list also enables team members, including foster parents, lawyers, and Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), to identify missing kin and/or to help nurture relationships.

How To Do This

- ▶ Create a shared electronic list of kin, their relationship to the child, their contact information, their contact method preferences, and brief but relevant context notes.
- ▶ Update the list with the last contact date and the team member who last made the contact. This can help avoid situations where either *nobody* calls (thinking someone else did) or *everyone* calls (creating overwhelm for the kin).
- ▶ Ideally, every team member can see and update this list, including those outside the agency, such as CASAs, attorneys, tribes, parents, and foster parents.
- ▶ If IT restrictions prevent sharing a file, get creative about workarounds (within your current rules). For example, the case worker could email an updated contact list to the child's team once a month, or the team could collectively update the list at shared planning meetings.
- ▶ Include tribes in your core kin-finding efforts.

What You Need

- ▶ A shared electronic file of some kind. This could be a Microsoft Word document on a SharePoint site or some other file within a section of your IT system. This may require creative brainstorming with your IT team.

Inspiration

- ▶ 30 Days to Family suggests that agencies [identify at least 80 kin](#) upfront for each child, with balanced representation across both parents whenever possible.
- ▶ Washington State has a [policy](#) for engaging local tribal partners on kin-finding.
- ▶ Some agencies have been able to use [Smartsheet](#) to securely store and share kin contact information outside of their child welfare IT system (but with the full blessing of IT). Your agency may have similar tools.
- ▶ [Michigan's Diligent Search Checklist](#) has many prompts for sourcing kin connections.

#5: Dedicate Kin-Finding Responsibility

The old adage that “when it’s everybody’s job, it’s nobody’s job” rings especially true in kin-finding. While every team member can play a valuable role in identifying, reaching out to, and maintaining kin connections, it also needs to be somebody’s formal responsibility at the end of the day.

The person with responsibility may vary based on your agency; a small team may thrive when the child’s case worker is also responsible for kin-finding, while another agency may need a focused kin-finding team.

How To Do This

- ▶ Determine the right place for kin-finding responsibility in your agency. If unsure, conduct a pilot to try out multiple arrangements, with feedback from employees.
- ▶ Make a process map of the kin-finding process and all its expected steps. Confirm that the responsibilities and resources are assigned correctly, and that no steps are skipped in the transition.
- ▶ Ask a variety of employees for their feedback. One team may be happy with the status quo, while another team may be frustrated that they regularly find available kin far into a child’s case.
- ▶ Detail metrics for success. New metrics should be rolled out slowly and with ample feedback. An example metric is the percentage of initial kin placements (out of all placements).
- ▶ Empower team members who are ultimately responsible for kin-finding with the ability to make changes in other areas of the agency in support of kin-finding.
- ▶ Once determined, update position descriptions, performance reviews, and other relevant materials to make responsibilities clear.
- ▶ If you have a separate kin-finding team, require that they work with the child, the parents, and the child’s case worker. Kin-finding cannot be done in isolation or without talking to the child and their parent(s) (if available).

What You Need

- ▶ Leadership and staff time
- ▶ Updates to policy, position descriptions, and training to affirm kin-finding responsibilities
- ▶ Resources for the employees with kin-finding responsibility to carry out their job successfully

- ▶ Human resources and recruitment assistance if the shift in responsibility requires new training and/or staffing

Inspiration

- ▶ In Indiana, kin-finding metrics are used in performance evaluations.
- ▶ Wisconsin has a [concise guide](#) for kin-finding responsibilities, including suggested meeting agendas for family find and engagement meetings.
- ▶ Kevin Campbell's Family Finding Model credits having a designated specialist whose primary job is to carry out kin-finding activities as a key part of an effective kin-finding operation.

#6: Use Social Media to Find Kin

Social media is widely used across cultural, geographic, and economic groups. This makes social media a powerful and unique tool for finding kin for youth in foster care.

Other people-finding tools have limited databases. For example, you must have a credit history to appear in credit searches, entirely missing kin with thin or no credit files.

How To Do This

- ▶ Search popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram for known family members, such as a youth's parents or older siblings. From there, look through public messages, photos, and friend lists to identify additional connections and message them. (This message should not reveal identifying details.)
- ▶ Online obituaries and other Internet searches can also surface information about families and relationships.
- ▶ Require social media searches as a core part of kin-finding activities.
- ▶ Maintain a social media policy with techniques to protect child and worker privacy.

What You Need

- ▶ Access to social media on work computers
- ▶ Time for staff to spend on social media to conduct searches
- ▶ Accessible, draft language for staff to send messages quickly and easily

Inspiration

- ▶ A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI) [uses Facebook and other forms of social media to identify at least 40 kin for each child.](#)
- ▶ [Ohio](#), [San Diego County](#), and [Washington, DC](#) have all encouraged social media use with detailed social media policies.
- ▶ Rhode Island's family finding team uses "DCYF" in place of worker last names on social media to protect worker privacy.
- ▶ Michigan includes social media sites on its [Diligent Search checklist](#).
- ▶ New Mexico [requires](#) a social media search to find kin. They encourage workers to create separate social media accounts that they use exclusively for work.
- ▶ Virginia's central family-finding social media accounts are called "Virginia Family Finding 1" (and 2, and 3) to protect worker privacy.

#7: Use a Variety of Contact Methods

Personal preferences, technology literacy, and mobility all impact which communication channels kin can use. If you are only using one method to reach kin, such as mailing physical letters, you are not reaching everyone you need to find.

How To Do This

- ▶ Conduct user research with kin to learn about their contact preferences.
- ▶ Collect contact preferences for kin and write them down where everyone can see.
- ▶ Enable employees to use email, text messaging, social media messaging, and telephone calls. They may even need to make in-person visits. While employees may need the ability to send physical mail occasionally, it should not be your most common method of communication.

What You Need

- ▶ Time to develop policies and practices for document retention, records discovery, privacy, data sharing, and other concerns for new communication methods.
- ▶ Suggested message templates adapted for each medium. An email will be different from a text message, which will be different from a voicemail.

Inspiration

- ▶ Some agencies use customer service tools to communicate with kin via email, text message, and social media. These tools can often handle the security, document retention, and discovery needs of an agency, while also providing a convenient single interface for an employee and enabling teams to collaborate (e.g., one employee can easily jump into messaging with kin when another is on leave).

#8: Involve Kin Prior to Removal

Many families interact with their child welfare agency prior to a child ever being removed. Identifying kin early ensures that kin placements are already known to the agency if a removal is ultimately necessary. Plus, involving kin earlier may provide some families with the support they need to avoid a removal altogether.

How To Do This

- ▶ Explicitly encourage parents and youth to bring their supportive kin to meetings. Update templates for meeting invites and notification letters to include this encouragement.
- ▶ Ask youth and parents about their support network at the earliest possible interactions, including during investigations and in meetings. If removal is not imminent, do not frame this as asking about potential placement options. Instead, explain that this is about helping to identify and activate the family's network, in the hopes of helping the family get support.
- ▶ Keep asking about kin at every interaction. The stress and potential shame of being involved with the child welfare system may discourage people from sharing at first.
- ▶ Make it possible for kin to complete approval steps, like a background check, ahead of time, so they are already approved if removal becomes necessary.

What You Need

- ▶ Time for staff to learn, practice, implement, and iterate
- ▶ A place to record kin and their contact information, even if a case is not open
- ▶ Depending on your authorities and case status, you may need a release of information from the parent(s), like in [Iowa](#)

Inspiration

- ▶ Many states allow kin to begin their kin-specific approval process, such as getting fingerprinted, prior to removal, so they are ready if removal becomes necessary.
- ▶ Listen to Outagamie County, Wisconsin child welfare leaders [share](#) their strategies for engaging kin during intake on episodes 11, 12, and 13 of the "[Let's Have a Conversation](#)" podcast.

#9: Make a Plan to Keep Youth Connected to Their Supportive Adults

Most youth enter foster care with more connections than they leave with. Often, if a connection cannot serve as a placement resource, child welfare systems will not actively work to maintain that connection.

However, supportive connections are critical to a youth's well-being. When a formal plan is in place to maintain connections, youth will have more people that they can count on for emotional support, rides, tutoring, advice, and everyday connections.

How To Do This

- ▶ As soon as a youth enters care, make a list of all the supportive connections in their lives, including family members, teachers, friends, and even pets. Work with the youth to create this list. Consider making a genogram (#9) or heart map (#10). After that, you should:
 - Locate contact information for each connection. Staff may need to use social media to find it.
 - Make a formal plan to stay in touch with each connection. Plans could include weekly FaceTime or phone calls, letters or emails, in-person visits, transportation, mentorship, vacations, and/or school events. You can even make a plan to stay in touch with a pet, such as visits to a dog park.
 - Designate a place in your IT system to store these plans.
 - Get non-kin and kin foster families involved. Maintain a formal expectation that all foster families will help support these connection plans.

What You Need

- ▶ Staff time to learn and implement new practice

Inspiration

- ▶ A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI) [establishes committed relationships](#) with specific details regarding the ways kin can support each young person.
- ▶ EPIC 'Ohana in Hawaii' uses 'Ohana meetings to identify and engage extended families in a plan to help children stay safe and connected to family. EPIC 'Ohana's report, "[Maintaining Connections: The Values Behind Family Engagement Practices Within the Child Welfare System](#)," explains how they engage extended families for children involved in child welfare.

- ▶ Virginia uses mobility maps with foster youth to map out important relationships.
- ▶ New Hampshire engages kin in [Permanency Pacts](#).
- ▶ Arizona's [Fostering Sustainable Connections](#) program helps children locate and reconnect with relatives, friends, coaches, neighbors, teachers, and others who have been important in their lives. Once the child's important people are identified, a Family Engagement Specialist facilitates a meeting to identify ways that these people can continue or resume their involvement in the child's life.
- ▶ Indiana's practice model includes developing plans for maintaining connections for foster youth.
- ▶ Uplift Human Services in San Jose, California uses a [heart map](#) (see #11) to help youth identify and make plans with their supportive connections.
- ▶ Michigan explicitly asks identified kin to commit to staying in touch with youth on their [Relative Notification Form](#). So does [Hawaii](#).
- ▶ Michigan has a "[Maintaining Contact when Placement is Not an Option](#)" policy: Kinship connections who are not considered for placement are encouraged to maintain contact in other ways, which include supervising family visitation, transporting the child to appointments, attending school programs or athletic events, having visits, participating in phone calls, and exchanging letters.
- ▶ California State Code requires that the child welfare system make a plan for maintaining supportive connections for foster youth aged 10 and older.
- ▶ [Wisconsin](#) says: "The focus of Family Find and Engagement is not the discovery of placements. The focus is to discover and build connections for the youth."
- ▶ Iowa [policy](#) requires that: "If you determine that a person is unwilling or unable to assume care of the child, determine if the person is willing to provide other types of support to the child to maintain their connection to family and others with whom they have a significant relationship. This type of support could include postal mail or e-mail contact, phone calls, visits, respite, and participation in holiday or other gatherings."

#10 Use Genograms

Keeping track of a youth's connections can get complicated, and a genogram (or family tree) offers a helpful, visual solution. By organizing existing contacts using a genogram, you can see key relationships easily and start identifying possible additions.

How To Do This

You can use a genogram tool like the ones we list below, a blank piece of paper, or a dry-erase board.

- ▶ Start making a family tree to show a child's connections. All connections count, including godparents, family friends, neighbors, friends, teachers, and other important relationships.
- ▶ Include all important connections, even if they aren't legal or blood relatives.
- ▶ Use the tree to generate new leads and to keep track of your contacts and progress. Sources can include the parents and child, interviews with kin, social media searches, obituaries, and even conversations with funeral home directors to piece together family trees and community connections.
- ▶ Make the tree shareable with the child's entire team. Ideally, the team can collaboratively edit it.
- ▶ Show the genogram to every kin you meet, to get their additions.

There are some additional tools that staff may consider using. These tools are helpful on their own, but they work best when coupled with a genogram:

- ▶ [Accurint](#): Records search from LexisNexis
- ▶ [TLOxp](#): Records search from TransUnion, one of the three credit bureaus
- ▶ [Find a Grave](#): This tool can be helpful for completing genograms

What You Need

- ▶ Genogram template or software (see below) (these can require paid subscriptions)
- ▶ Time for employees to train on creating genograms and to actually create them for each child

Inspiration

- ▶ In [New Mexico](#), "All investigations now require the completion of a genogram, a map of family relationships and history, and for the genogram to be uploaded in the case record."

- ▶ In Ohio, the statewide average is 151 kin per child and the *record* is finding 559 kin for one child.
- ▶ [The Extreme Family Finding Project](#) – which has a 95% success rate – recommends that a genogram should have at least 150 to 200 people on it, as does [30 Days to Family](#).
- ▶ Tennessee has a [genogram template PDF](#).

Child welfare agencies report that these are their favorite genogram tools:

- ▶ [Binti's Family Finding Module](#)
- ▶ [FamilyEcho](#) – free
- ▶ [GenoPro](#)
- ▶ [Word genogram templates](#) – free
- ▶ [Rhode Island's Excel genogram template](#) – free
- ▶ [Michigan Genogram Templates](#) – free

#11: Use a Heart Map to Identify a Youth's Important Relationships

Many foster youth enter care with more connections than they leave with. If a supportive adult is not an immediate placement option, they are usually not tracked meaningfully by the system. But even if a contact does not serve as a placement option, they can still be an important part of a youth's supportive network.

The Heart Map exercise, which involves a child drawing those who are "in their heart," provides a meaningful way for staff to surface contacts with youth, in order to strengthen and maintain those relationships.

How To Do This

- ▶ Download a printable [Heart Map](#). As soon as a youth enters care, walk them through the Heart Map to surface people who are important to them.
- ▶ Encourage youth to list "someone in their heart" on each line, and draw more lines as needed. The two existing lines on the heart are strategic: More than one line prompts thinking about multiple relationships, but too many lines can be disheartening if youth cannot fill them all in.
- ▶ Make an action plan (see #9) to set up visits, phone calls, social media, and/or other continuing connections with each identified contact. Share the action plan with a youth's entire team, including their foster parents, so everyone can help achieve it.

What You Need

- ▶ Piece of paper
- ▶ Staff time to learn and implement practice

Inspiration

- ▶ Uplift Family Services in California created a Heart Map [template](#).

#12: Leverage the Court System to Encourage Kin-Finding

The court system, from initial hearings to ongoing check-ins, can provide a powerful checkpoint to ensure that kin-finding activities are thorough and ongoing.

Courts can also increase flexibility around establishing paternity to unlock access to more paternal kin.

How To Do This

- ▶ Include a required *narrative* explanation (not just a checkbox) in each court hearing to ask about kin-finding activities, challenges, and next steps.
- ▶ Engage and train judges in understanding the importance of following up on the kin-finding responses. This is not a “check the box” exercise; if a child’s kin haven’t been thoroughly searched for and engaged, judges should request timely follow-ups.
- ▶ Review and update any legal barriers to establishing paternity, leveraging feedback from families and workers.
- ▶ Enable kin-finding team members to start search and outreach for paternal kin regardless of legal paternity.

What You Need

- ▶ Time to update court forms and processes
- ▶ Time to create/distribute training materials
- ▶ Staff training to learn how to use the new forms and describe their kin-finding efforts in court reports
- ▶ Legal and/or practice changes to add flexibility to the establishment of paternity for the purposes of identifying and engaging kin. For example, the court may need to provide funds for DNA tests to establish paternity, or the court may need to remove extra steps (such as requiring a court appearance to establish “father status”) that make it difficult for fathers to come forward.

Inspiration

- ▶ Ohio uses a “Quality Hearing Toolkit” to facilitate discussions between judges and agency staff about what has been done to find relatives and explore kinship care options.
- ▶ [Oregon](#) court reports include the questions:

- Has the caseworker requested relative information from both parents and followed up to determine if the relatives are placement resources?
- Has the Department of Human Services (DHS) used available technology to search for relatives?
- Has anyone asked the child about placement preferences?
- What has DHS done to keep siblings in care together?

#13: Use the Snowball Method

When you connect with a youth's kin, make it a point to always ask them if they know of other potential kin, whether current connections to the child or family members that they haven't yet met.

Children can't have too many adults who care about them. Most youth enter foster care with more connections than they leave with. Help create a broader supportive network for children by asking kin you know about to help identify additional kin. This practice is especially important for children who are too young to share on their own.

How To Do This

- ▶ Require team members to ask kin about other kin during initial contact and follow-up engagement.
- ▶ Designate a place in your IT system for storing information about all kin, including names and contact information (see #4 above).
- ▶ Add a question like, "Are there other kin connections for the child that we should know about?" to any kinship-finding form letters or standard messages.
- ▶ Ask supportive adults who attend planning meetings if there are others who should be in attendance or otherwise be involved.
- ▶ Kin-finders report that kin who are incarcerated, and therefore often overlooked in kin-finding activities, can offer a wealth of connections and can explain complex family dynamics.

What You Need

- ▶ Time to update and train on new practice

Inspiration

- ▶ In California, all supportive adults at every Child and Family Team meeting are explicitly asked if they know of any other kin who should be included.
- ▶ At Family Team Decision Meetings in Washington, they ask everyone the question: Even if you can't take placement, is there anyone else within your family or that the child knows who we should be talking to?
- ▶ Michigan explicitly asks identified kin to share the names of more kin on their [Relative Notification Letter](#).
- ▶ Hawaii's [Relative Response Form](#) asks kin for more kin.

#14: Use Gentle Commitment Escalation with Kin

Kinship connections may be permanently lost if an initial communication feels too overwhelming and demanding. Some connections may be learning they have a family member for the first time while simultaneously being asked to serve as a placement. Additionally, staff may feel that they need to move immediately to the next kin connection if an initial connection cannot serve as a placement.

However, engaging newfound kinship connections with gentler techniques from the start can help prevent the loss of important connections.

How To Do This

- ▶ Develop a list of guiding questions for staff to use in initial conversations. Staff should begin with small asks, especially if the kin is learning about a family member for the first time or has not been in touch for a long time. For example, staff may ask: “Do you have a family photo you can send the child?”
- ▶ Don’t limit initial conversations to placement discussions. Even if a placement option is urgently needed, youth need a long-term support network, too. Overwhelming kinship connections risks losing those connections.
- ▶ Make sure that kin are aware of other ways to support youth. If someone cannot serve as a placement option, they can still stay connected to a youth through visits or by attending a planning meeting. Include as many kin as possible in your formal plans to stay connected.

What You Need

- ▶ Time to document and train on practice changes

Inspiration

- ▶ Michigan explicitly asks identified kin to commit to staying in touch with youth on their [Relative Notification Letter](#).
- ▶ Wisconsin has [suggested questions for talking to kin](#).

#15: Never Stop Looking for Kin

The beginning of foster care is a difficult and emotional time for children and their families. Both children and adults may be too stressed or afraid to share a complete list of connections during an initial meeting.

Reduce the risk that children will permanently lose important connections by checking in regularly about their networks. Different timing and questions often uncover more connections. And, when children are in foster care for a while, they may also develop new relationships with people who can provide vital support.

Invite youth and the known adults in their lives – like parents, family, other kin, and even foster parents – multiple times to share a list of supportive connections.

How To Do This

- ▶ Review the list of known connections at recurring planning meetings. Ask all participants if they can think of anyone who is missing.
- ▶ Set and require specific milestones for repeating kin-finding activities, such as court hearings or planning meetings, or choose specific calendar intervals. Specify exactly who is responsible for leading this work at each milestone.
- ▶ Try different approaches for learning about connections, like: Who picks you up from school? Who would you call if you got locked out of your home? Who did you see at your last family gathering? Who do you miss?

What You Need

- ▶ Time for staff to train on and implement new practices

Inspiration

- ▶ Michigan’s policy: “The relative search must begin prior to the child’s removal from the home and continues until legal permanency for the child has been achieved or case closure... Caseworkers must pursue the identification and notification of relatives and document the initial and ongoing efforts in the investigation report and each case service plan.”
- ▶ Ohio is developing a new quality hearing court guide that includes prompting for the identification of missing supportive adults. It will guide the judge or magistrate to ask participants about whether relatives have been explored/pursued and where they are in the process. It will also prompt courts to ask about kinship placement and whether the caregiver is linked with training, services, and financial support.

- ▶ Rhode Island connects with foster youth in group homes over Zoom meetings to ask about supportive connections.
- ▶ Virginia’s policy is to ask about supportive adults annually and at every placement change.
- ▶ In Washington State, every Family Team Decision Meeting includes asking participants to identify supportive connections.
- ▶ In New Hampshire, team members check in with parents and youth about kin regularly and at every placement change.
- ▶ [New Mexico policy](#) is that children who are not placed with kin are reviewed every 30 days for kinship placement. County Office Managers must provide a monthly report to the Regional Manager regarding children new to custody who have been placed in non-relative placements, as well as efforts to place them with relatives.
- ▶ [Wisconsin](#) looks for kin at these steps in the process:
 - Initial placement
 - Change of placement
 - If paternity is established
 - Prior to permanency plan hearings
 - Each time the permanency plan is updated

#16: Test Your Communications with Real Kin

Your existing messages and forms may be scaring off or confusing potential kin placements and connections. Communications that look like legal notices, use government acronyms and jargon, or that aren't translated may be discarded or overlooked. This is particularly important when sending notices to kin within 30 days of removal.

Ensure your messages to kin are clear and actionable by testing them with real kin, and then improve your messages based on their feedback.

How To Do This

- ▶ Compile a list of all kin-finding communications (e.g., notification letters, forms, meeting invitations, and phone call scripts).
- ▶ Identify a staff person or outside consultant who can collect feedback from kin about these existing communications.
- ▶ Interview a diverse group of kin, including:
 - current kin caregivers;
 - previously identified kin who are *not* current caregivers; and
 - people in the community who have never been contacted by child welfare (you could recruit in parking lots, through community organizations, and/or on social media).
- ▶ Ask the kin about the language in your current messages, the format, and the medium. For example, kin may tell you that they infrequently look at physical mail or that they don't answer calls from unknown phone numbers.
- ▶ Compensate kin fairly for the time they spend with you. For a one-hour meeting, \$25 to \$50 is common. When providing a gift card, offer both digital and physical card options and confirm that it's for a store the recipient can easily access.
- ▶ Revise existing communications based on kin feedback. Revisions may include expanding and/or eliminating communication channels (such as replacing or augmenting phone calls with text messages).
- ▶ Translate communications into other languages based on your local demographics. Use a human translator, wherever possible, over tools like Google Translate, which may not account for cultural nuances.
- ▶ Identify a solution for one-off translations or interpretations as needed, such as for-profit businesses like [LanguageLine Solutions](#) or [The Spanish Group](#). Add

these resources to the training, practice guides, and other materials used by staff who conduct kin-finding.

- ▶ Share de-identified kin feedback with staff for awareness. This could be done by posting key quotes from kin on an Intranet site, sharing them in a presentation at a team meeting, and/or including them in an emailed report.

What You Need

- ▶ A staff person or external consultant who can interview kin
- ▶ Time and resources to recruit diverse kin to share feedback
- ▶ Funds for compensating kin for their feedback
- ▶ Time and resources to revise existing forms and messages
- ▶ Translation services

Inspiration

We intend to develop example, user-tested messages in 2024 with interested agencies. If you have a letter, form, or other message you'd like to share for the toolkit, please email Kylee Craggett at kcraggett@gu.org.

- ▶ Civilia published a [case study](#) on rewriting written correspondence.

#17: Make Keeping in Touch with Kin a Formal Foster Family Responsibility

Foster parents, both kin and non-kin, may not be aware of their foster child's previous connections. Set the expectation with potential and current foster parents that part of their formal responsibility is to help the youth in their care keep in touch with the supportive connections in their lives.

Foster parents may be reluctant to maintain a child's previous connections if they think doing so will upset the child or harm their chances for adoption. However, even if a child is adopted, they deserve to have a strong support network. Making this a formal responsibility of foster parents can help keep a youth's connections intact throughout their time in care and beyond.

How To Do This

- ▶ Revise your foster parent training to include the formal expectation that foster parents will help maintain a youth's connections. For example, you may require that foster parents participate in the development and maintenance of plans to maintain connections with kin.
- ▶ Share a child's list of kin connections, including contact information, with foster parents.
- ▶ Ensure foster parents have access to the latest versions of a child's plan to maintain their supportive connections.

What You Need

- ▶ Time to revise foster parent training and policy

Inspiration

- ▶ Washington State includes these expectations in its [Caregiver Core Training \(CCT\) module](#).

#18: Use a Red Team to Prevent Adverse Placements

Fewer youth will enter group homes or other adverse placements if there is a team dedicated to finding alternative placements with kin. A red team (a dedicated team that can meet on an emergent basis) should be made up of a diverse group of agency staff who conduct kin research, construct a genogram, and ask youth directly about possible placements. The team should be empowered to rapidly brainstorm, make decisions, and pursue alternatives to group home placements.

While agencies may not be able to devote red team resources to every child, they could concentrate them on those facing extreme adverse placements, such as group homes or far-away non-kin placements.

How To Do This

- ▶ Assemble a diverse team. Strong team members will have a reputation for problem solving. Appoint a senior leader for the team.
- ▶ Formally state the goal. The goal of the red team is to find a kin placement for every youth.
- ▶ Require a red team meeting before any youth can be placed in a group home or other significantly adverse placement, such as an out-of-state non-kin home or a general foster home with unrelated youth.
- ▶ Ask about connections. As part of their process, the red team should construct a genogram and plan to ask youth about possible placement options.

What You Need

- ▶ Staff time and resources to devote to staffing a red team

Inspiration

- ▶ Rhode Island holds a red team meeting, led by the Chief of Staff of the Department, before a child is placed in a group home or in a general foster home with other unrelated foster youth. As part of the red team, the family finding office conducts kin research, the team constructs a genogram, and they ask the youth directly about possible placement ideas.

#19: Make Sure Kin Have a Robust Presence at Meetings

Most youth leave foster care with fewer connections than when they entered. However, most supportive adults want to be more involved in supporting the youth in their lives. Keeping these adults engaged and involved in case planning can help keep youth from exiting care without connections. Invite at least three times as many supportive adults as paid staff members to meetings to maximize the benefits of this support network.

How To Do This

- ▶ Redesign your meeting invitations. The invitation should serve as a prompt and remind staff to invite as many kin as they can, ideally three times as many kin as paid staff members.
- ▶ Redesign your meeting sign-in sheet. Provide enough room for kin to sign in for in-person meetings. For example, you might have three times as many lines in the “supportive adult” area as in the “staff” area.
- ▶ Ask youth about supportive adults in their lives. You might even ask youth to invite a supportive adult themselves.
- ▶ Keep track of meeting attendance. Keep track of the breakdown of roles at planning meetings. Use this information to keep track of progress towards the goal of having three times as many kin as paid staff in attendance.
- ▶ Keep asking youth about supportive adults as new goals arise. A youth may have one or more supportive adults who generally attend meetings but may have an additional supporter for a specific goal, such as practicing for a driving test, getting mentoring in math, or shopping for a prom dress.
- ▶ Adopt a family meeting model that supports kin inclusivity, such as [Family Group Decision Making](#), [Family Team Conferencing](#), [Peacemaking Circles](#), and [Youth-Centered Permanency Round Tables](#).

What You Need

- ▶ Staff time to learn and implement new practice

Inspiration

- ▶ [Olmsted County, Minnesota](#) demonstrated significantly better outcomes for older foster youth when a ratio of 3:1 supportive adults to paid staff attended their planning meetings (roughly 12 kin to 4 staff members). They also pay attention to the balance of family present from both sides of the family.

- ▶ Michigan has begun tracking who attends each planning meeting, as well as their role (e.g., CASA, supportive adult, paid staff). They do this in a simple Excel spreadsheet, with regular exports from their IT system.
- ▶ EPIC ‘Ohana in Hawaii uses ‘Ohana meetings to identify and engage extended families in a plan to help children stay safe and connected to family. EPIC ‘Ohana’s report, “[Maintaining Connections: The Values Behind Family Engagement Practices Within the Child Welfare System](#),” explains how they engage extended families for children involved in child welfare.
- ▶ Ohio has [Youth Centered Permanency Round Tables \(YCPRTs\)](#) running in several counties. For YCPRTs, the youth is asked to bring a support person to the meeting. It can be anyone: a caregiver, a friend of the family, a member of the family, or anyone the youth feels is supportive of them. The invitation can also initiate more conversations and discussion about permanency options and supports for the youth. One youth asked his fast-food manager to come with him, and the manager didn’t even know he was in foster care. The manager ended up adopting him!
- ▶ In Ohio, any youth aged 14 and over is able to have two support persons join the family team meetings and case plan meetings. Their inclusion helps to initiate discussion of any other support persons available to the child.
- ▶ Hawaii develops [Youth Circles](#) for each child, which includes working with each youth to identify the supportive adults who will be invited to the circle.
- ▶ New Hampshire identifies up to 45 of a youth's supports through Permanency Pact through Foster Club and involves them in meetings to accomplish specific goals, such as buying a first car, attending holiday celebrations after aging out of care, etc. As adults are identified, the agency sends those adults invites and supportive materials to support these goals.

#20: Use “Extreme Family Finding”

Child welfare systems have limited resources for kin-finding, and kin may be unwilling to talk to government officials like department staff. Extreme Family Finding puts a private investigator on the case of finding the members of a child’s full family tree, some of whom may be more willing to talk to a private investigator.

Children who are selected for Extreme Family Finding can enter with as few as no connections and a goal of creating a genogram of at least 125 adults. Extreme Family Finding also focuses on youth who are most at risk of aging out of care without permanency. While the primary goal of family finding is to find a permanent placement, this effort is also crucial for building up an entire supportive network for every youth.

How To Do This

Initial Extreme Family Finding sites were funded by a grant from the Children’s Bureau, but even absent an official grant, you can recreate parts of the program:

- ▶ Build extensive genograms for every child in care, with the goal of filling in at least 125 connections.
- ▶ Hire a private investigator to find and talk to family connections for foster youth with few known connections.
- ▶ Preserve known connections as soon as children enter care, using heart maps and making plans to stay connected to supportive adults.

What You Need

- ▶ Funding for a private investigator/detective

Inspiration

- ▶ Rhode Island reports a 95% success rate at making connections for its foster children with this program. Watch [this video](#) about Rhode Island’s Extreme Family Finding.
- ▶ Read about Missouri’s [success stories](#). They increased contact with relatives from 23% to 80% for children the department had found hardest to place.

#21: Create Life Books for Youth in Care

A life book captures a child's key milestones and relationships, and it should follow them throughout (and after) their time in care. A life book can help surface and maintain kin connections.

How To Do This

- ▶ Print a life book template (see below for examples).
- ▶ Make completing the life book a formal foster parent responsibility. Check on its contents during regular check-ins, such as monthly visits.
- ▶ Scan or photograph updates to the life books at regular intervals, such as during monthly visits, in case the physical versions are lost or damaged. Foster parents can also be asked to do this.
- ▶ Make copies of the life book for kin on a regular schedule. This should be at least quarterly.
- ▶ Make sure a child's life book follows them by including it in any move checklists, as well as in any permanency (e.g., aging out, adoption) checklists.

What You Need

- ▶ Templates
- ▶ Printer

Inspiration

- ▶ Frederick County, Maryland has three templates (in [Zig Zag](#), [Floral](#), and [Triangle](#) designs) that you can print and put in a three-ring notebook.

#22: Use DNA to Find More Family Connections

This idea is controversial, and it's important to consider a youth's privacy and wishes. However, DNA tools that can uncover more family members can be a useful tool for children in care with no or limited kin placement options or supportive adults.

How To Do This

- ▶ Develop a policy for when and how to use DNA services. You may want to limit this to youth with no viable kinship placements, or only older youth who can consent to participation, or only youth whose family of origin consents to its use.
- ▶ Couple counseling with the results. A DNA test might reveal unknown (or unexpected) parents, siblings, and other relatives. Strong supports need to be in place before a test so a youth can process the results.

What You Need

- ▶ Funding for testing
- ▶ Time to develop a thoughtful and privacy-protecting policy and practice

Inspiration

- ▶ Colorado uses Ancestry DNA as one tool in its family-finding office.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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