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Innovations to Support Effective Family Finding and Engagement



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I. Introduction

When removal from the home is necessary, children and youth in child welfare experience better outcomes when placed within a support network of their relatives and fictive kin. An in-depth review of 120 research studies concluded that children and youth placed within kin networks experience more stable placements, have better mental and emotional outcomes, and have more intact family relationships[1].

Family Finding is the act of looking for relatives and fictive kin of children in or at risk of entering foster care. The goal of this process is to find and nurture healthy adult relationships for a child and identify placement opportunities where the child feels safe and loved. Family Finding is increasingly becoming the focus of government funding and legislation. From the 2018 Families First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) to more recent state legislation in Arizona[2], California[3], and Pennsylvania[4], the preferred placement option when a child is in the custody of the state is kinship care, with a concerted focus to move away from congregate care. These new pieces of legislation create funding opportunities for increased Family Finding staff, new search and tracking tools, and higher kinship caregiver stipends.

While the increasing attention and support for Family Finding radiates hope for better futures and outcomes for children in care, the reality is that impactful Family Finding requires significant investment. Today, conducting an exhaustive search is a time and labor-intensive process.

Binti interviewed 40+ agency and practice leaders across 10 states to learn the key components of effective Family Finding.

This whitepaper explores these promising practices and details innovations in software technology that can significantly increase the breadth and depth of identifying and engaging a child's extended support system.



II. Overview of the current state and challenges of Family Finding practices across the U.S.

The national kinship placement rate increased from 28% to 39%[5] between 2009 and 2024[6], due to increasing legislative funding and changes in case practice stemming from a growing body of research showing that child outcomes are better in kinship placements.

Most interviewed agencies have kinship placement rates exceeding 50%; many exceed 60%. In this section, we share our findings on some of the obstacles to increasing this number, along with insights from agencies on how to produce better outcomes for children everywhere.

Challenges in Family Finding Culture and Practices

1. Garnering buy-in across departments and roles

Perhaps the most challenging part of Family Finding and the biggest obstacle to its success in any jurisdiction is ensuring that there is stakeholder buy-in across all levels and roles of the agency. Family Finding specialists have stated despite their efforts to identify supportive relationship opportunities, there are instances where alternative decision makers, such as primary case workers or judges, may interpret the situation differently and impede the case plan, affecting the child's relational permanency. Garnering buy-in and agreement within an agency, from the agency director and supervisor level down to the actual case carrying workers and their Family Finding specialists is crucial, but it's not enough. Interviewed agencies stressed the importance of legislative and cultural buy-in through the judiciary and state levels.

2. Having a narrow definition of "family"

Many agencies shared the importance of maintaining an expansive definition of "family" or "kin" to also include fictive kin[7] or adults who are not related by blood but have standing positive relationships with the child in care. Expanding the definition of kin allows caseworkers to identify and locate many more connections to provide support for the child and their caregivers. Whether a neighbor, a teacher, a coach, or other community members, these connections can provide accountability and support for the family and the child.

3. Measuring success by placements only

Agencies that excelled in Family Finding shared first that Family Finding is not solely about finding placement opportunities for the child, but about establishing an expansive network of supportive pillars and figures for a child during their time in care. That network of supportive pillars can include a placement, but should also include those willing to drive the child to after school activities, call the child on a periodic basis, spend holidays with the child, or even send a card on their birthday. Fostering a network of support figures in a child's life instills the truth that they matter, are cared for by many, and can have stable, trusting relationships.

4. Prescribing relationship "worthiness"

Another frequent challenge in Family Finding is bias around determining which relationships are "worthy" to pursue. The three frequent situations we observed:

a. **Bias against a child's family of origin**, stemming from the train of thought that "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" and that the child needs to be placed far away from their family of origin so that they don't repeat the same patterns of behavior. This can lead decision makers to prioritize community care over kinship care.

b. **Bias towards identifying and engaging maternal family members over paternal family members**, which significantly reduces the number of connections found.

c. **Overlooking key members who are critical sources of information, based on system involvement.** We heard multiple times in our interviews that incarcerated family members, who couldn't be a placement option themselves, ended up providing the most information about various connections and their relationship dynamics, even leading to successful placement options.

Challenges in Family Finding Workflows

1. Lack of resourcing, tools, and skills

We also heard agencies voice their lack of resources - of time, skills, or funding - as a reason for not being able to better conduct Family Finding. Social workers often have extremely full plates managing the numerous cases that they're assigned, which makes it difficult to also dedicate time to search and engage dozens of relatives of a child for uncertain return. Furthermore, many agencies do not have the funding to hire dedicated full-time Family Finding staff. **Even with staffing and time, caseworkers often don't have the access to technology or the right skillset to find those connections.**

2. Navigating family dynamics in engaging relatives

The engagement of relatives and kin is often viewed as one of the most challenging parts of Family Finding. It is already a sensitive topic to be approaching a family member about a young relative of theirs being removed from their home. Pairing that news with an abrupt or urgent ask for their support as a placement provider, which opens them up to assessment by the child welfare system, is an intimidating and weighty decision to make. **Legal, time, and resource constraints often lead to an abrupt, impersonal approach that deters involvement from connections who would otherwise be willing and able to support a child in other meaningful ways.**

4. Prescribing relationship "worthiness"

a. **Poor communication flows.** For agencies who have a separate Family Finding unit, there is often a wall between the case carrying worker and the Family Finding specialist that siloes both parties and hinders communications. The Family Finding specialists encounter difficulty in obtaining access to case information and engaging in conversations with relevant parties. Conversely, case-carrying workers face challenges in accessing the work and documentation undertaken by the Family Finding specialists. We observed that detailed notes from investigative efforts are often collapsed into a single case note and stored as unstructured data, which often gets lost or buried over time.

b. **Multiple work and documentation flows.** Agencies shared that the current Family Finding process is fragmented across many tools and platforms. Case workers utilize a plethora of tools to conduct investigative searches, document the relationships, create a genogram, notify and engage relatives, and to document all of these combined efforts somewhere. On top of it all, case workers often have to document all of this in multiple places for compliance and collaboration. Having both a fragmented workflow and documentation flow makes for a time and labor intensive process.

III. Overview of the most promising Family Finding practices

In interviewing top-performing agencies and thought leaders in the space, we also synthesized the most promising Family Finding and engagement practices. Fittingly, these practices directly address challenges discussed in the prior section.

Promising Practices Shaping Family Finding Culture and Policy

1. Having a cultural shift towards prioritizing relational permanency with a child's relative and kin is crucial to improving your agency's Family Finding practice

Kinship caregivers are often more resilient and committed to enduring through hardships with the youth[8], resulting in greater permanency and feelings of safety, better mental and behavioral outcomes and more positive feelings towards the placement[9]. Agencies can promote this cultural shift by first ensuring that there exists leadership buy-in throughout the state and organization, then by providing training to better agency practices, and lastly making policy and practice changes to keep each other accountable.

a. **Leadership buy-in**

   i. In 2009, Westmoreland County, PA worked with their local American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law Permanency Barriers Project to make changes to agency policies that removed barriers to kinship care and elevated the importance of kin. In the 10 years since then, they've seen the use of kinship care increase 281% while traditional foster care decreased 30%.

   ii. Allegheny County also shared their experience creating a strong culture of families first among their caseworkers and judges that resulted in an 82% decrease in the use of congregate care and a 45% increase in kinship placements.

b. **Trainings to combat personal biases and make trauma informed decisions**

   i. Bias Training is important for all decision makers involved from the case workers, to the agency director, and even judges to ensure that they are reflecting on and identifying their own implicit biases and not making decisions for the child based on those biases.

   ii. Making trauma-informed decisions by understanding and leveraging Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores is crucial for reducing further trauma and producing healthier outcomes for the child.

c. **Establishing policies & practices to keep each other accountable**

   i. New Mexico has implemented a policy that requires a Director to sign-off on any placement with non kin, which has contributed to an increase from 3% to 40% kinship placements[10].

2. Removing barriers to allow for a broader set of kin to support children in care

Many states have already shifted towards a more broad definition of kin to include non-blood related relatives that have a pre-existing positive relationship with the child, and implemented policies to always ask about Indian tribal ancestry. In the state of Arizona, there has recently been legislation crafted to increase kinship caregiver stipends, which has historically been a huge barrier for kinship supporters. By removing these barriers and supporting kin in their journey as relational supports, states give children the best chance at relational permanency.

3. Be open-minded and empathetic when approaching kin

Jennifer Townsend, Director of recruitment programs at FosterAdopt Connect says: "...one-third of our work is finding a person who is willing and able. The other two-thirds is developing a relationship with them and delivering the support and information that gets them to [supportive engagement]"[11]. Conversations with relatives and kin about their involvement in the child welfare system can be daunting and can easily scare relatives away from being involved. However, by taking a more empathetic approach that builds trust, allows them the flexibility of engaging with the process in ways most comfortable to them, being patient, and offering support services, agencies have a better chance of engaging supportive relatives and kin.

4. Consulting the youth when mapping out meaningful adult relationships

Youth are often overlooked as a resource to identify the meaningful relationships in their lives and their preferences for care. Recognizing this, Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) recruiters focus on engaging children and spend time with them to build a trusting relationship. From there they engage the child to draw an ecomap[12], identifying the connections that matter most to them, and continue to follow up on this each meeting.

a. Indiana is piloting a practice of asking child welfare workers to provide the youth's input when calling the placement desk.

b. Rhode Island adopted a practice of speaking with each youth in group home facilities to discuss their placement options that resulted in moving many youth from group homes into kinship placements[13].

Promising Practices to Improve Family Finding Practice

5. Having a dedicated Family Finding team

provides specialized skills and resources that will allow your agency to truly invest in finding relational opportunities that lead to better outcomes for children. California recently funded grants in February 2023 for Family Finding and engagement that will allow agencies to invest in making their processes and teams more robust[14]. With a specialized unit, agencies can achieve more robust data, a more efficient use of resources, and ultimately achieve better outcomes for both the children and the agency.

6. Understanding the levers for relational permanency and utilizing them

a. **Visualizing relationship maps** is a common practice across most agencies as they conduct Family Finding and engagement efforts including ecomaps, life books[15], and genograms[16]. By visualizing these relationships, workers and key decision makers are able to see which relationships have been identified, how they're willing to support the child, and what the family dynamics are like.

b. **Make plans to utilize the supportive relationships identified.** Many states have started implementing policies to invite or even require volunteer connections to attend family meetings. By having these trusted adult figures at these critical meetings, children feel more supported during their time in need and that there are adults who care about them.

   i. Some counties in Ohio who have Youth Centered Permanency Round Tables ask the youth to bring a support person to those meetings. In the YCPRT, the team discusses permanency and support options for the youth[17]. One youth asked his manager from the fast food job he worked to come to his meeting, where the manager learned for the first time that the youth was even in foster care and eventually adopted the youth!

   ii. Hawaii implemented a similar type of initiative that includes working with youth to identify supportive adults who are invited to these youth circle discussions[18].

   iii. New Hampshire implemented the Permanency Pact[19] through Foster Club that invites and sends supportive materials to the adult supporters identified (up to 45 people) to be a part of goal setting meetings.

These practices have seen success throughout various implementations and have opened the doors to better practices and outcomes for many agencies. The importance of timely and strong Family Finding practices that are able to produce this broad network of support cannot be understated. According to a study done in 2017[20], children who are able to gain kinship supports during their time in care were statistically less likely to re-report maltreatment and re-enter care after exiting, and generally had more favorable exit outcomes resulting in a higher rate of reunification or permanency with kin than their peers without kinship supports.

IV. How technology can address inefficiencies in Family Finding and scale your impact

Changes in practice can be facilitated with the use of technology tools designed specifically to support Family Finding. Binti's Family Finding & Engagement module is designed in partnership with leading Family Finding experts across the nation and is tailor-made to complement these promising practices. Our module will include the following capabilities:

1. Exhaustive in-app search

Conduct diligence searches across multiple online databases and social media websites to find relatives and kin without ever leaving the Binti platform. This feature significantly reduces the time and manual effort spent on family finding by empowering every case worker to easily find relatives and kin and seamlessly import their information directly into Binti.

2. Dynamic and nuanced relationship mapping

Families can be complicated and relationships are complex. Our proprietary genogram software generates documented relationships into a family tree, saving your caseworkers precious time while mapping out opportunities for relational support and highlighting areas that need more attention.

3. One-stop documentation

Streamline your workflows by documenting everything in Binti's Family Finding module. Our relationships dashboard provides an easy-to-use interface for tracking investigative search results, outreach and notification attempts, and relationship verification, keeping your caseworkers organized and efficient.

4. One-touch engagement

Our templated bulk outreach feature allows caseworkers to quickly and easily notify dozens of relatives and connections with just one click. Workers can send bulk emails and texts or print notification letters en masse, with all outreach efforts automatically logged in the system. Workers can also set periodic reminders to follow up with specific connections.

5. Advanced insights and analytics

Binti's software leverages modern databases and advanced analytics tools to provide valuable insights into the impact of your Family Finding procedures. Our platform generates reasonable efforts reports that document outreach efforts to identified connections and relational supports, as well as management-level reports that track key metrics, such as response rates, engagement levels, and placement outcomes.

6. Integrated Machine Learning (ML) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) capabilities

Binti's advanced ML and NLP capabilities enable easy parsing of case files and documentation, allowing for automated identification of key connections in the past and present. We are currently evaluating use cases for analyzing sentiment and creating nudges towards best practices, such as outreach reminders or calling attention to missing connections, as other potential applications.

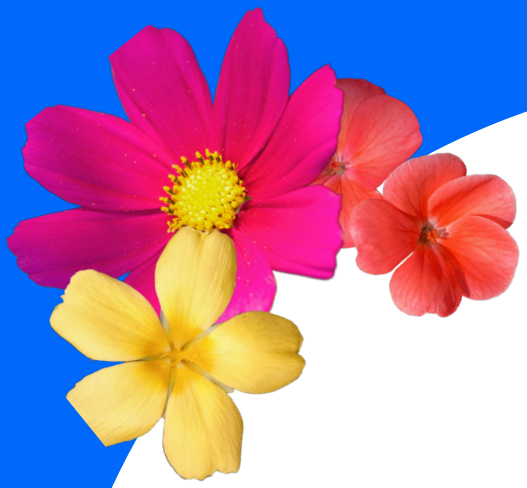
7. Data interoperability and quality via APIs

Binti's APIs offer secure and compliant data exchange with other systems, ensuring that sensitive data is protected and up-to-date across all platforms. With real-time data integration, manual data entry is eliminated and the risk of errors and inconsistencies is reduced, saving time and improving accuracy.

8. Effortless collaboration via cloud-based, mobile-friendly software

Our cloud-based platform offers easy access from anywhere in the world at any time of day, enabling effortless collaboration between your Family Finding unit and your child welfare teams. Permissioned access between various roles and modules allows for seamless collaboration between ongoing case workers, Family Finding specialists, licensing social workers, and placement social workers. Access and means of collaboration are fully configurable to your agency's particular use case.

Binti's Family Finding & Engagement module offers a comprehensive solution to streamline your workflows and improve collaboration across your organization. Our platform is specifically designed to support search and engagement without adding in unnecessary busy work. We have invested significantly in designing our under-the-hood data models to ensure that your data is organized and interoperable, unlocking powerful analytics for your agency. Our automated workflows and intuitive features will save your caseworkers time and eliminate the need for manual documentation across sibling sets and in their outreach attempts. With our module, you can identify more supportive relationships for the child, resulting in higher kinship placement rates, greater stability, and better outcomes for the child, family, and agency. Binti's Family Finding & Engagement module empowers you to transform your processes and maximize your impact for the children in your care.



About Binti

Binti offers a proven, modern, mobile-friendly Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solution focused on driving measurable results and promoting quality practice in Child Welfare to ensure every child has a fair chance at life. Since launching in 2017, Binti has grown quickly to serve over 550 agencies across 39 states and DC, including 16 statewide implementations, serving over 49% of child welfare in the US.

Binti was founded to transform the child welfare system and has built software to improve outcomes for children, ensure customer service excellence, save workers time, better collect and leverage data to provide insights that lead to better outcomes, and meet federal and state requirements, including Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) requirements.

Each Binti team member embraces our core values, including putting children first. **Over 37% of our staff have direct experience with child welfare–we are foster parents, children who have experienced foster care, former caseworkers, and CASAs.**



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