



A Guide to Finding and Involving Relatives at Every Stage of the Child Welfare Process

Acknowledgements

Over the years, we have met countless youth and numerous relative caregivers who have bravely shared their stories. The stories are as diverse as the families themselves: they are stories of hope when relatives have been able to provide safe harbor for children living in turmoil; stories of frustration over relatives not having the resources to give children the things they need to thrive; and stories of sadness and grief over missed opportunities to stay connected, to share family joys and sorrows, to be in each other's lives.

It is the latter story, the story of missed opportunities, which prompted the publication of this guide. It is our hope that there is something in this guide that will spark the implementation of a strategy, a program, or an initiative that will connect children with loving family connections earlier, faster, and more thoughtfully than current practice allows.

We first became aware of this groundbreaking work when we heard a presentation from Kevin Campbell, whose inspirational speech about Family Finding provided us with an understanding of the possibilities of family search. Indeed, Kevin's leadership has had an enormous impact on the future of untold numbers of families, and he has helped numerous child welfare systems replicate the Family Finding model. First initiated out of Western Washington Catholic Community Services and now replicated through the Seneca Center for Family Finding and Lifelong Connections, Family Finding inspires hope.

This guide would not have come to fruition without Susan Robison and her diligent search for the best practices and policies to support good relative search. Susan exemplified the work of a good "family finder" by leaving no stone unturned and no lead un-followed. We continue to be grateful for her analytical approach, her collaborative spirit, and above all else, her good humor and patience.

The following individuals gave generously of their time and expertise, and we thank them for their commitment to children and their families:

Thanks to national experts: Bob Lewis, Consultant; Pat Reynold-Harris, California Permanency for Youth; Mardi Louisell, Consultant; Stephanie Boyd Serafin, National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning; Mary Stone Smith, Western Washington Catholic Community Services; and Steve Christian, National Conference of State Legislatures.

Thanks to the state and local agency representatives who shared their wisdom about relative search: Karen Gunderson, California Department of Social Service; Nadine Carter, Clark County Nevada Department of Family Services; Carol Wahlgren, Colorado Department of Human Services; Yvonne Sletta, El Paso County Colorado Department of Human Services; Barbara Bach, Hennepin County Minnesota Human Services and Public Health Department; Mary Sue Morsch, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services; Karen Powell, Maryland Department of Human Resources; Kris Johnson, Minnesota Department of Human Services; Alexandra Lowe, New York City Administration for Children and Families; Ray Sawyer, Olmsted County Minnesota Department of Social Services; Dawn Bertotti, Tennessee Department of Children's Services; Pam Kramer and Michael Lukay, Washington Department of Social and Health Services.

Special thanks to relative caregivers who shared their perspectives: Sharon Olson and Pat Owens with GrandFamilies of America.

Thanks also to Pam Wilson for helping us with the arduous (and sometimes tedious) task of editing, design, and overall management of the Guide. And to Rob Walsh of Walsh and Associates for web application. Together they are bringing ChildFocus™ into the 21st Century.

Last, but never least, we thank Gretchen Test and Wanda Mial of the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their continued faith in us and in our work, and of course, for their generous support. We feel privileged to be a part of their Team.

Mary Bissell and Jennifer Miller, ChildFocus™

Making “Relative Search” Happen: A Guide to Finding and Involving Relatives at Every Stage of the Child Welfare Process

Relatives and caring adults provide important lifelong connections for children involved in the child welfare system. Recognizing the critical support that relatives can provide to children in foster care, child welfare agencies are taking unprecedented steps to identify, locate, and engage kin to support children. Across the country, new strategies are being developed to find relatives – many of whom can become critical lifelines for children living in unsafe situations.

In many jurisdictions, intensive [relative searches](#) were developed on behalf of children who had been in care too long. As a result of these searches, youth living in residential treatment placements, often having experienced multiple placements, have been able to find the lifelong connections they need to transition more smoothly to adulthood. In some cases, they have found permanent homes with caring adults. Initiatives such as [Family Finding™](#), initiated out of Western Washington Catholic Community Services and expanded across the country by Kevin Campbell, have achieved remarkable success in finding relatives who can play significant roles in the lives of children whose family connections have gone untapped. Strategies for finding relatives include training workers on the questions to ask youth and families about who is important to them in their lives, the use of Internet Search firms, and use of team decision making techniques to identify relatives.

What If?

The successes that have been achieved for children who have been in care for too long have led child welfare professionals and advocates to question their practices for searching for relatives earlier, more intensely, and more consistently throughout a child's involvement in the child welfare system. *What if*, many have asked, these extended family members had been found *before* a child stayed in a residential placement for 2-3 years? *What if* a grandparent or cousin had been located who could have committed to nurturing relationships between siblings? *What if* extended family members who initially said “no, I can't care for this child” later discovered that their circumstances had changed, or that their connections with the child ran deeper and stronger than they initially realized?

This Guide is intended for those who want guidance on how to find and involve relatives at every stage of the child welfare process.

It is for those who are committed to doing everything it takes to connect children and youth with adults who can have a positive influence on their lives. The guide highlights practical approaches to overcome existing challenges to expanding relative connections at the policy, agency and worker levels. By focusing on strategies and tools that committed workers and child welfare agencies have developed in recent years, it outlines a realistic set of options for agencies committed to effective relative search.

The Guide Answers the Following Questions:

1. What are the principles and values that should guide a strong relative search process?
2. How can we build a strong policy framework to support effective relative search?
 - o Relative search standards
 - o Expansive definition of relative
 - o Key decision making points
 - o The court's role
 - o Safety guidelines
 - o Documentation requirements
3. How can we make relative search manageable in already overburdened child welfare systems?
 - o Structuring internal & external staff for relative search activities
 - o Technology supports for internal & external staff
 - o The cost of relative search: Making a case for redeploying funds
4. How can workers best value family connections?
 - o Challenges to bringing staff on board
 - o Strategies for making relative connections a staff priority
 - o Demonstrate agency commitment to relatives
 - o Provide workers with the tools and strategies to work with extended family networks
5. How can we effectively use internet searches?
 - o Personal contacts
 - o Government databases
 - o Public databases
 - o Internet search tools
 - o Considerations for choosing a service
 - o Using fee-based search services

WHAT IF?

A Kentucky grandfather recognized his grandchild in a Wednesday's Child television program about children who are free for adoption and looking for permanent homes. When he contacted the agency, he learned that the child's parental rights had been terminated along with his legal ties as a relative. By that time, the only option was to adopt his own grandchild or become a foster parent.

"WHAT IF", most would ask, this relative had been found before the child had spent years in care?

"It is my dream that the expanded use of family finding will literally dry up the foster care system."

The Honorable Leonard P. Edwards, Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge, from remarks upon receiving the William H. Rehnquist Award of the U.S. Supreme Court, November 18, 2004

1. What are the principles and values that should guide a strong relative search process?

Connecting kin with children who need them and expanding the role that relatives can play in children's lives require a shift in child welfare philosophy, policy and practice. Policies at the federal level and in almost every state provide support for relative location. Yet, attempts to find relatives for children involved with the child welfare system fall short. Too often, searches aren't being conducted early enough, broadly enough, or consistently enough. In some instances, relatives are sought as placement resources, failing to capitalize on the many other roles that kin can play in supporting children. In most cases, searches are limited to relatives who can be easily identified, instead of searching for a larger network of kin.

For relative search to be effective, agencies must embrace a set of principles and values about children and their extended families and set expectations for their workers and partners to reflect these principles and values in their everyday practice. The practice of finding relatives can be guided by a [checklist](#) that workers must go through to ensure they've taken all potential steps to find important connections for children. But unless these steps are backed up by a belief that extended families really matter in the lives of children at risk, these steps will be meaningless.

At every step, the following clearly-articulated values and principles are paramount:

Family connections are critical for healthy child development.

Time and again, youth involved in child welfare systems talk about the importance of family connections to their sense of belonging and well-being. Family connections help children and youth maintain the racial, ethnic, cultural and community ties that are critical to their healthy development. Separation from family connections leaves children and youth feeling alone and confused about their identities.

Children need many kinds of family connections -- not just relative placement. Caring kin have many roles in a child's life and can provide many forms of support that children need. Some may be willing to have children placed with them. Others can provide respite for parents or other caregivers, temporary care, personal contact through visits, letters, phone calls, and email, encouragement and emotional support, connections with siblings and other relatives, mentoring, lifelong relationships, connections with and knowledge of cultural traditions and practices, financial assistance, employment resources, and more.

"A permanent connection is someone you can talk to, someone you can laugh with, and someone that can help you through a problem. It is someone who tells me, 'Never be afraid of where you came from,' and 'Don't be afraid to move forward with your life.' People come in and out of our lives but a permanent connection is forever."

A former foster youth
From: Finding Permanency for Youth,
Resource Handbook, Fresno County
Department of Children and Family
Services and California Permanency for
Youth Project,
[http://www.fresnohumanservices.org/
childrenandfamilyservices/
YouthPermanencyHandbook.pdf](http://www.fresnohumanservices.org/childrenandfamilyservices/YouthPermanencyHandbook.pdf)

Relative search should begin the moment a child is at risk of placement through a comprehensive permanency planning process. Often, parents are asked about extended family members when children first come to the attention of the child welfare agency, and the question is not revisited after the initial contact. Continuous relative search ensures that no stone is left unturned, and acknowledges that family circumstances change, as do the needs of youth in the system. Someone who is not able to help the child today, for instance, may be a source of support in the future.

Father's extended family networks matter. Even when fathers are not actively involved in their children's lives, their family members can be important sources of support for children and youth. Effective relative search includes paternal family resources as an integral part of the process. Beyond paternal networks, meaningful relative search recognizes the importance of casting a wide net to explore all possible connections for children.

Family members have a "right to know." All families have the right to know the fate of their relatives. This is an aspect of international humanitarian law referenced in the Geneva Convention. Applied to the child welfare system, relatives have a right to know that a member of their family system needs help, just as the child has a right to know his/her family.

Family members deserve opportunities to restore hope. Child welfare intervention in the lives of families can lead to feelings of shame and loss of hope for family members. The goal of relative search is to build on the inherent strengths of families, restore the dignity of each family and individual by telling the truth about family circumstances, and giving each relative an opportunity to help the child in the most appropriate way possible. Specific techniques help family members determine how they can contribute to the lifelong support and love the child needs.

Children demand a sense of urgency. The entire process of identifying, locating, and engaging relatives must be driven by a sense of urgency. It is of urgent importance in the child's life, requires urgent response by family members, and calls for urgent agency action to pursue every lead and respond rapidly to every indication of familial interest.

Consultant Bob Lewis tells the story of a young girl who did her own relative search at age 20 and ultimately, through persistence, found a stepmother with whom she continued to have a relationship. "What if" a relative search had been done earlier?

"Youth have a right to many lifelong, permanent relationships. All connections that serve to anchor the youth are important throughout their lives and need to be strengthened."

A social worker
From: *Finding Permanency for Youth,*
Resource Handbook, Fresno County
Department of Children and Family
Services and California Permanency for
Youth Project,
[http://www.fresnohumanservices.org/
childandfamilyservices/
YouthPermanencyHandbook.pdf](http://www.fresnohumanservices.org/childandfamilyservices/YouthPermanencyHandbook.pdf)

2. How can we build a strong policy framework to support effective relative search?

Existing state and federal policies provide a foundation for finding family. Both federal and state policies – statutes, funding requirements, administrative policies, and regulations – articulate a preference for placement of children with relatives and require relative searches to reinforce the preference. Many existing policies, however, lack the teeth needed for ensuring that preferences are carried out in practice, and that relative searches are thorough and consistent throughout the agency's involvement with the child. Stronger policy frameworks can communicate the value of family connections and help ensure that every child involved in the child welfare system has strong, nurturing connections to relatives or other adults who care about them.

The policy framework below suggests ways in which legislation, agency policy and administrative rules can be more explicit about how to carry out relative searches. These suggestions reflect the values and principles outlined earlier, and signal a commitment to the importance of kinship connections throughout a child's life. The framework outlines more specific requirements around the following:

- Relative Search Standards: Ensuring Comprehensive and Thorough Searches
- Expansive Definition of Relative: Casting a Wide Net
- Key Decision Making Points: Locating Relatives at All Stages in the Process
- The Court's Role: Providing Oversight and More
- Safety Guidelines: Assessing Relatives' Ability to Protect Children
- Documentation Requirements: Leaving a Trail For the Future

Relative Search Standards: Ensuring Comprehensive and Thorough Searches

Strong legislation and agency policies can specify the steps for a diligent relative search and define reasonable efforts to locate and engage relatives. Clearly defined standards provide guidelines for agencies to develop strategies, a yardstick for courts to assess agency efforts in individual cases, and benchmarks for overseeing state and local progress.

*[Click here for an example of a **Diligent Search Checklist** that outlines key elements of an effective relative search.](#)*

“All around the world, children who are happy and well-adjusted look alike. They are deeply connected. They have 50 or so people they’re connected with over time.”

Kevin Campbell,
Seneca Center for
Children and Families

Expansive Definition of Relative: Casting a Wide Net

To identify as many potential resources as possible for children, formal policies should use a broad definition of kin for the purposes of relative search. The goal is to identify, locate and engage as many caring individuals as possible to provide support for the child. Policies can provide flexibility for making relative connections that are in the child's best interests.

Expanding Definition of Relatives. Limiting searches to blood relatives can reduce the resources available for children. A broader definition should also include fictive kin -- individuals who have an emotionally significant relationship with the child, including Godparents, neighbors, close family friends, spiritual advisors or congregation members, and others identified by the child or his parent. Several states have expanded their definition of relatives to include fictive kin.

Exploring Many Types of Connections. Many existing state policies focus location efforts on individuals who may be options for placement, either temporary or permanent. Expanded policies can direct agencies to conduct a more comprehensive search for a network of relatives who can provide a range of connections and support that are in the best interest of the child.

Click here for [***It's Not Just about Placement: Exploring All the Roles that Relatives Can Play***](#)

Identifying Paternal Relatives. The omission of fathers and paternal relatives unfairly denies many children of important kinship connections. Effective policies help to ensure that searches give equal weight to absent fathers and paternal relatives as they do to maternal kin.

Click here to read more about [***Identifying Absent Fathers and Paternal Relatives***](#).

Asking Young People. Youth who have left foster care with no permanent connections will be the first to tell you that too often, they were completely left out of the permanency planning process. Connections that can make a difference can be identified by asking young people who is important to them, where they spend holidays, and where they feel safe.

An adolescent had a long history of running away from placements, drug use and truancy. She found a sense of belonging in a new relationship with her biological father, whose whereabouts had been unknown for years. The security and hope that came with this connection helped her get back into school and regularly attend classes. This young woman has shown signs of hope and a sense of future orientation for the first time.

After group home staff discovered that a silent, depressed teen who had been suspended from school was secretly visiting her father, they successfully helped reunify her with her father. He was living a stable life with a new wife and home. He had presumed he could not bring his daughter home because of a near-decade-old neglect petition.

Alameda County Children and Family Services,
Group Home StepUp Project: Moving Up and Out of Congregate Care (Final Report)
<http://www.cypyp.org/Files/StepUpProject/FinalReport.doc>

Key Decision Making Points: Locating Relatives at All Stages in the Process

Rationale for On-going Search

Relative location is not a one-time activity. Efforts to identify and engage caring adults should be ongoing, and contacts and search results should be documented for future use. Ongoing efforts are important for the following reasons:

Family situations change. Children have changing developmental needs over time that can be met by different family members. Similarly, the needs of parents also change. Parents who have been reunified with their children may need additional support from family connections to ensure safety and stability for their children, and prevent further child welfare involvement.

Relative situations change. A relative or other caring adult who is initially unable to care for a child or take an active part in the child's life may later become able to do so. For example, a relative may find a larger home, complete an education program, or retire.

An adult may be able to provide temporary, but not permanent care. While agencies try to avoid moving a child by identifying permanent placements from the outset, these situations do occur. For example, a grandmother cared for her infant granddaughter while the child's mother participated in substance abuse treatment, but found that she was unable to take on permanent responsibility for raising the child.

Standby relative resources may be needed. Some jurisdictions continue working to locate and engage kin even after a child is with a relative caregiver. Like all children, young people in kinship care need standby arrangements in case a caregiver dies or becomes unable to care for the child.

Click here for the Minnesota Department of Human Services, [***Relative Search Best Practice Guide***](#).

Minnesota policy requires the agency to conduct a "reasonable and comprehensive search lasting up to six months (following the child's first placement) or until a fit and willing relative is identified" – even if the child's current placement is already with a relative.

In 2004, the Minnesota Legislature made significant statutory changes to improve timely location and notification of relatives and to more clearly define the scope of the search. The Legislature also required the child welfare agency to develop a best practice guide for relative search and to provide specialized training. The Guide is a model for other states to consider. The Guide reflects the fact that the Minnesota child welfare system is county-administered and state-supervised; practices may vary among counties.

*Relative Search Best Practice Guide,
Minnesota Department of Human
Services, 2005.
http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/publications/documents/pub/DHS_id_052669.pdf*

When to Locate Relatives

Some policies help to ensure ongoing efforts to locate and connect relatives by specifying incidents that trigger searches. They also list key points in child welfare decision making when search efforts should be reviewed, including:

- When a child is first identified by the child welfare system;
- Immediately before or upon removal;
- Throughout the permanency planning process and at specific decision points, such as changes in placement; and
- When children have been in foster for a certain period, such as ASFA timelines.

In Washington State, the child welfare agency may conduct a relative search at any and all of the following times:

- *Original placement;*
- *Family team decision meetings;*
- *Shared planning meetings (permanency planning meetings);*
- *Anytime a placement changes or staff has any contact with child/family; and*
- *When a case file is reviewed.*

Grandparent Notification Laws

Some states, such as Connecticut and New York, have enacted Grandparent Notification laws that require the public child welfare agency to provide written notice to grandparents when a child is taken into state custody. Notification laws send a signal that the agency is serious about identifying relatives as early as possible, and ensures that grandparents have an opportunity to play a role in the child's life. Connecticut legislation requires written notice within 15 days. New York legislation requires the agency to tell grandparents that they are eligible to become foster parents or legal guardians. Proposed federal legislation, not yet enacted at the time of this report, also includes provisions that would make grandparent notification a requirement in every state.

Connecticut legislation enacted in 2006 requires the Department of Children and Families to provide written notice to grandparents within 15 days of the child's placement out of home. (Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 17a-10b)

Click here to see the proposed federal [Kinship Caregiver and Support Act](#)

The Court's Role: Providing Oversight and More

The court can take a direct role in reinforcing the importance of relative search as it exercises its authority over parents and its oversight role of the agency. Guidance to the court can be in agency policy, court rule, or statute. The following are the several ways the courts can help strengthen relative search activities:

Requiring Parents to Identify Relatives. Child welfare staff report that parents who are resistant to identifying relatives are more likely to cooperate with a court order than an agency request. Several states require parents to submit relatives' names and contact information to the court.

Ordering the Agency to Conduct Relative Searches. While individual courts may exercise their authority to directly order and monitor relative searches, explicit policy in state statutes can strengthen and spread the practice.

Reviewing Agency Activities. Specifying the court's responsibilities at various hearings and decision points helps to clarify expectations regarding relative searches. If the court makes expectations for continuous relative search strong and clear, it helps to reinforce it as a standard practice for each child.

Determining if Diligent Searches Have Been Conducted. Policymakers can increase the clout of relative search mandates by requiring a court determination that the child welfare agency has made diligent or reasonable efforts to locate a relative to care for the child. Integrating written findings of diligent search in reasonable efforts documentation helps to consistently solidify these activities into agency practice.

*In **Utah**, the court may order the child welfare agency to conduct a reasonable search for relatives and require parents to cooperate. A Utah statute makes the court directly responsible for determining if there is a relative who is able and willing to care for the child. (Utah Code Ann. Sec. 78-3a-307)*

***Arizona** legislation enacted in 2006 requires the court, at the preliminary protective hearing, to review evidence that the agency is attempting to identify and assess placement with a grandparent, other relative, or adult who has a significant relationship with the child. (Ariz. Rev. Stat. Sec. 8-824)*

*According to **Florida** law, if the court does not commit a child to the temporary legal custody of a relative, legal custodian, or other adult willing to care for the child, the disposition order must state the reasons for the decision. The order also must include a determination as to whether the department made diligent efforts to locate these individuals and present them to the court as placement options. (Fla. Stat. Ann. Sec. 39.521)*

Safety Guidelines: Assessing Relatives' Ability to Protect Children

Evaluation of a relative's ability to ensure the safety of children should include, at a minimum, background checks and relative assessments. Policy frameworks should articulate what steps need to be taken to ensure that child welfare agencies have sufficiently assessed relatives for their ability to keep children safe. It should be noted that background checks and other assessments are most appropriate for relatives with whom a child is going to live.

Background safety checks -- the parameters of which are outlined in state and federal law -- must be conducted for every relative who is being considered for temporary or permanent placement. Background checks include fingerprinting, as well as checks against the state's child abuse registries and national crime databases. Requirements should further include guidance as to how the results of background checks should guide agency decision making. Assessments should include an evaluation of each child's needs, the relatives' abilities to meet these needs, and the safety of specific settings and situations.

Agencies may need additional resources and policy support to ensure timely and appropriate background checks and assessments. For instance, some agencies might purchase their own fingerprinting machines to speed up results or develop agreements with local law enforcement agencies for efficient background check activities.

[Click here to read more about the Adam Walsh Act](#) which outlines the latest background safety check parameters.

Documentation Requirements: Leaving a Trail for the Future

Legislation and agency policy can require documentation of search efforts to ensure that records are available for future use by caseworkers, the courts, families, and other agencies. Documentation requirements can include people interviewed, files reviewed, databases examined, relatives and others identified, their contact information, the efforts to engage them, and the outcome of those efforts. Incorporating documentation into the child's electronic case file ensures that it is available in the future.

**The Adam Walsh Act --
New Requirements of the Law:**
The 2006 legislation amends previous background check requirements that were enacted 10 years ago under the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Under the new provision, states must conduct checks for all placements, whether or not the foster or adopted child is eligible for federal support. States still have discretion about whether or not to place the child, but cannot draw down federal funds if they decide to place the child with a caregiver who fails the background checks. In addition, they cannot draw down funds for a child placed in a foster or adoptive home where the child abuse and neglect registry check is not conducted within that State, or requested of another State as required under the new law.

Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety
Act of 2006:
Issues for Child Welfare Agencies
Prepared by ChildFocus™

Resources and Tools for Question 2:

How can we build a strong policy framework to support effective relative search?

Tool	Source	Link
Highlights of Recent Kinship Care State Legislative Enactments	The National Conference of State Legislatures	http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/kinshiphigh.htm
Selected State Kinship Care Legislative Enactments 1997 – 2005	The National Conference of State Legislatures	http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/kinshipenact.htm
2006 Kinship Care Related Legislative Enactments	The National Conference of State Legislatures	http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/2006legislativeenactments.htm
State Policies at a Glance	American Bar Association, Kinship Care Legal Resource Center	http://www.abanet.org/child/placement.pdf
Statutory Preferences for Relative Placement	American Bar Association, Kinship Care Legal Resource Center	http://www.abanet.org/child/summary-memo.pdf
Relative Search Best Practice Guide	Minnesota Dept. of Human Services, 2005	http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/publications/documents/pub/DHS_id_052669.pdf
Relative Search Checklist	Washington State Dept. of Health and Family Services Children's Administration	WA Relative Search Checklist
Steps Completed by Caseworker Prior to Search by the Diligent Search Service Center	Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services	Steps Completed by Caseworker
Certificate of Diligent Search of Child Protective/Permanency Worker for Temporary Custody Hearing	Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services	Diligent Search Certificate Temporary Custody Hearing
Certificate of Diligent Search of Permanency/Case Worker	Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services	Diligent Search Center Certificate
Locating Absent Fathers and Extended Family, Guidance Paper	New York State Office of Children and Family Services, September 2005	https://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/policies/external/OCFS_2005/INFs/05-OCFS-INF-05%20Locating%20Absent%20Fathers%20and%20Extended%20Family%20Guidance%20Paper.pdf
What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers	The Urban Institute for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006.	http://www.urban.org/publications/411316.html

3. How can we make relative search manageable in already overburdened child welfare systems?

Agencies consistently point to the fact that child welfare systems are overburdened with too many cases and too few resources. Although relative search conducted *before* children experience lengthy stays in care should take less time and effort, workers report that it is often difficult to tease out family dynamics and conduct thorough assessments during these times of crises, particularly given the myriad of court and agency related requirements already on their plates.

If agencies are truly committed to consistent and thorough family search, there is no way around it: finding, contacting and engaging relatives takes time and money, and resistance to adding responsibilities to already overburdened caseworkers is considerable. To overcome the challenges to caseworker burden and the cost of relative search, it is critical to consider the following:

Relative search can ultimately help relieve the burden for agencies and staff. In many cases, relatives are easily identified, and workers are able to immediately contact them in person or by phone. With guidance and support, older children often make the contacts themselves to ask for the help they need. Most kin want to offer assistance of some kind when they understand that a child or their family urgently needs help. By engaging relatives as part of the permanency process, parents often feel less worried about their children's safety. Most importantly, the transition for children can be eased, and they can gain a sense of family connectedness and identity.

Relative search should not be the sole responsibility of front line workers. If responsibility for finding family is considered solely the caseworker's, the perceived challenge is great. However, if it is considered everybody's job – workers, community agencies, court officials, attorneys, CASA volunteers and others – the work of engaging relatives can be shared. As a shared responsibility with the broader child welfare community, relative search is both more manageable and more productive.

One CPS social worker from Washington State said, "Once you get a kid in the system, there are so many things to do, I don't think there is as much institutional or an attitudinal resistance to placing with relatives as people believe. I think it is just that you don't want to add more work."

Karin Gunderson,
Kinship Practice in Washington State:
A View from the Freed.

"Every person you talk to in the search, you're doing something for. You're letting them know something about what happened to that child, and in doing that you're giving that family the opportunity to heal and develop trust with the government and honor relationships between family members."

Kevin Campbell
Quoted by
Martha Shirk, "Hunting for Grandma",
Youth Today, February 2006,
<http://www.ussearch.com/others/consumer/reunion/youthtoday.html>

Structuring Internal & External Staff for Relative Search Activities

Strategies for organizing relative search and engagement are in early stages of development. Agencies allocate staff to connect children with caring kin, and some contract with private organizations to share the work. Many agencies use a combination of strategies.

A first step is to consider the steps involved in connecting children with kin and determine how they can best be accomplished within the agency, a network of partners, search firms and others. Strategies to consider include designating specific staff or staff units, integrating the function into the role of existing staff, and contracting with the private sector. Considerations also include how to integrate relative search into specific steps in the child welfare process, such as team decision making.

Options for Organizing Internal Staff

Designated Search Staff. A number of states and large local jurisdictions use designated staff to conduct relative searches. This approach relieves caseworkers with heavy workloads and helps to ensure that relative searches receive the required attention. It also limits the number of individuals who need to obtain the time-consuming security clearances required to access government databases, which differ from one agency to another and from one state to another.

Specialized Search Units. Search units focus on tasks that do not require clinical social work skills – database searches, preparing and sending letters to people who may be relatives, monitoring responses to written inquiries, and documenting efforts. In many jurisdictions, relative searches have been attached to well-established, pre-existing units that conduct searches for absent parents – especially prior to termination of parental rights. These units already have skilled locators with the necessary security clearances to access confidential databases.

Alternative Staffing: Clerical and Support Staff, Retired Workers, and Others. A growing number of agencies are using clerical, support and data entry staff or hiring retired social workers to conduct database and internet searches. These staff may be attached to specific programs (such as family preservation services or group homes) or conduct searches for the entire agency.

Kinship Care Units. In some agencies, specialized kinship care staff have been assigned to work with kinship caregivers. In many cases, these staff can assume responsibility for relative search and engagement.

Team Decision Meetings. Many agencies have regular team decision making meetings or other mandated decision making vehicles at critical child welfare decision making points. Agencies can make it an expectation for meeting facilitators that relative options are fully explored at these meetings.

In Clark County, Nevada (Las Vegas) and El Paso County, Colorado (Colorado Springs), designated staff units within the child welfare agency conduct electronic searches after case workers exhaust personal contacts.

In Sonoma County, California, 20 hours per week of a clerical worker's time is adequate to conduct all internet searches.

In Sacramento, one clerical staff is assigned in each of several programs (including Family Reunification, Permanency Placement) to conduct relative searches.

In Fresno County, interns have been used to conduct internet searches.

Los Angeles County uses a variety of approaches. One unit that focuses on moving children to permanency recently hired 80 retired social workers to work part-time on finding family. In another unit, one specialized search staff has access to a specific, fee-based internet search portal while clerical staff use other tools. A Runaway Outreach Unit conducts searches exclusively for relatives of runaways. Some partner agencies and contract providers conduct their own searches.

In Hennepin County, Minnesota (Minneapolis), the Kinship Unit is responsible for a broad range of activities, including conducting face-to-face and phone interviews, searching databases, contacting relatives, and securing emergency placement for kinship caregivers pending foster care licensing.

Options for Building External Partnerships

There are many ways that agencies can share responsibility for finding family with partners who already have a child welfare role and with new partners.

Contracts with Private Agencies or Search Services. Child welfare agencies can contract with a private organization for some aspects of the search – usually searching government databases and conducting internet searches after caseworkers have exhausted on-the-ground contacts.

Private Providers. Public agencies can include relative searches in their contracts with private agencies. Private providers often have greater flexibility in how they organize and assign tasks to their staff. They also can engage relatives who might otherwise be wary of staff from public child welfare agencies

Contract with Seneca Center. [The Seneca Center](#) provides a full range of consultation on the Family Finding™ model. Agencies can contract directly with them for search functions and/or engage them to train staff in how to conduct searches and engage relatives.

[Click here](#) for details on Family Finding training.

Foreign Consulates. Locating relatives in other countries can be especially challenging and time-consuming. Yet for many state and local communities with large immigrant populations, particularly Border States, it is critical to establish relationships with officials in other countries who can help locate extended family networks.

Court Support. Courts can order parents to identify relatives, notify relatives of hearings and other actions, review agency actions to conduct relative search, and provide other supports.

Data Sharing Agreements. It is possible to expand child welfare workers' access to other agencies' databases through specific interagency agreements, guidelines for use, and cross training for staff. These agreements cross state lines and extend to law enforcement, corrections, workforce and many other types of agencies. While each agency needs to examine possible legal barriers, partnership with other government agencies can save money and expend expertise.

Child Support Enforcement Agencies/Federal Parent Locator.

Federal policy encourages child welfare agencies to work with their state's child support enforcement agency to use the [Federal Parent Locator Service \(FPLS\)](#). FPLS provides one-stop access to a large number of state and federal databases. Federal policy allows use of the FPLS by courts and child welfare agencies to locate absent fathers and relatives of children in foster care, but many states fail to take full advantage of it. Child support enforcement agencies are the state lead agencies for the FPLS, and child welfare agencies must collaborate with them to develop protocols for use of the database.

The Family to Family Initiative promotes the use of Team Decision Making before children are removed from their homes, and at other critical decision making points, such as placement changes. The purpose of these meetings is to ensure that families actively participate in decision making, and are able to invite other family and community members to support them as they consider what is in the best interests of the child. Relatives and other caring adults can not only be identified at these meetings, but actively participate in them. See www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFile/s/team%20decisionmaking.pdf

In Illinois, the State child welfare department contracts with a private agency to conduct database searches for both absent parents and relatives. Case workers collect as much information as possible from interviews and direct contacts with parents, children and others. If they are unable to locate relatives after these efforts, they submit a request for a database and electronic search to the contract agency.

The Washington child welfare agency worked with the state child support office (both of which are part of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services) to conduct a small pilot to test relative searches. The searches produced extensive information, and the two agencies are now negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding for ongoing searches.

The San Francisco Department of Social Services has developed a strong relationship with the local Mexican consulate, where one staff member acts as a liaison to help locate Mexican relatives. Having a single point of contact within the consulate is extremely helpful.

Stanislaus County, California, provides joint training for county staff who conduct searches for both parents and relatives.

Technology Supports for Internal & External Staff

Documentation. Many agencies have learned the hard way that documentation of search activities is a critical aid for workers, the courts, attorneys, and others involved in the child's case. Documentation avoids duplication of efforts and provides proof that the agency has made diligent efforts to contact relatives. It also ensures that a record is available for the court and for workers and others who may be new to the case. Particularly in a system in which caseworker turnover is high, creating a documentation system is critical to ensure that the effort that goes into the initial and on-going searches is not lost for future use.

Ongoing documentation is ideally incorporated into a child's electronic file and provides, at a minimum:

- a record of the people interviewed to identify relatives;
- a list of files reviewed;
- databases examined to identify relatives;
- relatives and others identified and their contact information;
- efforts to engage relatives and the outcome of those efforts.

Automation. In addition to internet and other electronic searches, agencies have found ways to use automation to take the burden off frontline staff. For example, when people who may be relatives are identified through records reviews and database searches, their relationship with the child must be confirmed before proceeding further. Searchers and agencies have developed protocol for contacting these individuals, inquiring if they are related to the child, and engaging them. Use of automated forms and email can save time for workers. [Click here](#) to access these tools.

Partnering with Child Support Agencies and Other Public Partners. Similarly, developing agreements for sharing staff time and access to databases with other agencies can be a cost-effective way to increase the information available about relatives.

Stanislaus County, California, uses an existing database to store information obtained from internet searches and make it available to workers. For large agencies or those that conduct a large number of searches, existing databases may not be adequate to store the amount of information generated.

In Illinois, much of the background work for these contacts is automated. When the diligent search contractor identifies possible relatives, the firm emails contact letters to the caseworker who sends them and follows up with phone calls. The letter includes the parent's name and the child's gender and age, but the child's name and information about his/her situation is not distributed.

In Humboldt County, CA finding family is an offshoot of the relative placement specialist's job, which is primarily assessment of relatives as placement resources. Recently the County's specialist has trained about ten workers to conduct internet and database searches.

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services is hiring 65 permanency specialists that will be stationed in regional offices throughout the state. Their jobs will focus on helping to expedite permanency for children. They will coach and mentor caseworkers who search for relatives, and in some cases, directly conduct searches and do follow-up work with families.

In Alameda County, CA from 12 to 30 family members often participate in family team meetings.

Illinois' diligent search contractor does database searches for both parental and relative searches. Stanislaus County, California, reports that separate staff share the same database.

The Cost of Relative Search: Making a Case for Redeploying Funds

Many of the strategies for addressing the additional mandate for relative search are low or no cost strategies that do not require additional resources. For instance, requiring that team decision making facilitators ask participants to identify any relatives who can play a role in the child's life does not cost additional money. Similarly, since relative involvement can speed permanency decisions, including performance expectations for relative search into existing private agency contracts should not cost significantly more.

Most importantly, the whole rationale behind relative search is that kinship placements, as well as relative involvement, can result in better long-term outcomes for children. Click here to read *The Center for Law and Social Policy's* brief "[Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?](#)" Agencies have relied heavily on extensive searches to find family connections for children in residential and group home placements, for example, and have been successful with identifying significantly lower cost placement options that are in the best interests of children. Savings associated with moving children from expensive congregate care settings can be deployed for a range of activities that haven't been well funded in the past, including funds for staff efforts to find family members.

New York City was able to close some congregate care facilities and reinvest the funding into child welfare services. Placement with relatives and other caring adults was one of the key strategies for moving children out of the facilities. For youth aging out of the system, relatives provided stability and connections through the critical transition to adulthood.

Contact: Alexandra Lowe,
Special Counsel, ACF Division, Family
Permanency Services
alexandra.lowe@dfa.state.ny.us

Alameda County, California's StepUp Project saved \$6.7 million in federal and state funds by assigning staff to explore connections with relatives and other caring adults for children in two group home units. Six child welfare workers were embedded for six months in the agency's two large group home units. With technical assistance and a supervisor, they focused on finding homes and permanent relationships for 72 children. At the end of the Project, 36 youth were placed or soon to be placed in the homes of five parents, 24 relatives, five fictive kin and two foster families. An additional 12 young people were connected with family who provided support while the youngsters remained in care – either to complete their final year of high school or to continue mental health treatment.

Alameda County Children and Family
Services, *Group Home StepUp Project:
Moving Up and Out of Congregate Care*,
[http://www.cyp.org/Files/StepUpProject
FinalReport.doc](http://www.cyp.org/Files/StepUpProjectFinalReport.doc)

Resources and Tools for Question 3:***How can we make relative search manageable in already overburdened child welfare systems?***

A range of tools and resources can help searchers and other workers connect children and families, including interview tools and techniques, phone call protocols, contact letters, and job descriptions for search specialists and coaches.

Tool	Source	Link
Creating a Family Network Diagram and Eco-Map for Your Family	Bob Lewis, Consultant	http://www.highpopples.com/images/March%202005/New_Folder/07HO%20Eco%20Map.doc
Family Information Sheet	Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services	Family Information Sheet
Family Contact and Family Tree	Washington State Dept. of Social and Health Services Children's Administration	WA Family Contact and Family Tree
Looking for Extended Family and Other Caring Adults with Positive Connections to the Child or Young Person	New York City Administration for Children and Families	NYC Child Questionnaire
Mobility Mapping and Flow Diagrams: Tools for Family Tracing and Social Reintegration Work with Separated Children	Brigette DeLay, Chief Technical Advisor, Children's Programs, International Rescue Committee	Mobility Mapping and Flow Diagrams
First Telephone Call Scripts with Relatives	Kevin Campbell, Family Finding: Lighting the Fire of Urgency	Phone Call Protocol
Initial Kin Contact Letter	Sacramento County Department of Social Services	Relative Contact Letter
Postmaster Address Information Request	San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services	Postmaster Info Request Letter
Staffing: Permanency Specialist Description	Stanislaus County Permanency Specialist	http://www.cpy.org/perm_descriptions.html

4. How can workers best value family connections?

Frontline staff are the critical link for connecting children with adults who care. To conduct relative searches effectively, they must see the value in relative connections and have the core competencies to nurture safe and healthy relationships. Yet significant challenges still exist to ensure that caseworkers on the front lines fully embrace kinship care as a promising option for children. In addition to competing demands for their time, deeply rooted staff attitudes and concerns about relative care can be deterrents for seeking and engaging kin.

Challenges to Bringing Staff on Board

Lack of understanding about the value of relative connections for children. While a growing body of research supports the positive impact that relatives and other caring adults can have on the lives of children and youth, for some staff who have worked in the system for a long time, kinship care still feels like a relatively new phenomenon. While they are required to conduct relative searches by state or federal policy, the importance of kinship care has not been necessarily integrated into their practice values. [To learn more about the impact of relative care on children, read *The Center for Law and Social Policy's* brief: *"Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?"*](#)

Negative staff attitudes about relatives. These attitudes often reflect unconscious biases toward children's parents and relatives. Sometimes negative attitudes are the result of a supervisor's, manager's or director's lack of investment in kinship care. Those who believe that "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" feel little motivation to connect children with relatives. Some workers might have had a bad experience with placing children with relatives in the past. Or, experience with families in which multiple members are affected by substance abuse, mental illness or poverty might have unfairly biased ongoing case practice.

Concern about safety and relative capacity. Workers often lack confidence that relatives can ensure safety, particularly when the agency has had no previous experience working with the relatives or they have not yet been through foster parent training and education. Workers in some jurisdictions say that lack of strong assessment of kin as placement resources is a deterrent to any level of relative involvement. Lack of education for kin about how the system works, assistance dealing with children's special needs, or resources to support kinship caregivers also undermine workers' confidence.

"Effective social workers weave relative search and engagement into their daily practice... they miss no opportunity to ask 'Who is related to this kid?' One social worker told a story of driving by a house with a child when the child said, 'I know who lives in that house!' She went right up to the house and asked, 'Do you know this child, do you know who is related to him?'"

Karin Gunderson,
*Kinship Practice in Washington State:
A View From the Field*

Dealing with parental resistance. Some workers describe great challenges eliciting parents' cooperation in identifying kin. Parents may be ashamed for their family members to know about their problems or resent their family's involvement. Parental resistance also is attributed to adversarial relationships with the child welfare agency.

Dealing with complex family dynamics. Even when relatives are identified and brought into the process, many workers do not feel confident navigating the complex family dynamics involved in some extended family networks. Workers report that families often try to draw them into the middle of these tensions or use the situation to "get back" at a family member who has "wronged" them in the past. Keeping everyone focused on the best interests of the child, workers report, is uniformly difficult.

Lack of familiarity with the kinship system. Some workers report that placing children with foster parents who understand how the child welfare system works is easier and less time-consuming than exploring similar options with "uninitiated" relatives. Placing children with foster parents is administratively easier than placing them with kin; foster parents have already been assessed and trained; funding streams and payment processes are in place. In contrast, each potential relative connection must be individually forged. With pressure to move children quickly to permanence, workers sometimes feel that it simply takes too much time and effort to identify relatives.

Yet, those who are committed to true relative search have come to realize that even in the most dysfunctional families, there are relatives who are reliable and appropriate resources. Even in families in which there is no family member with whom a child can live, there is someone who can help the child understand where they came from, support them in understanding who they are, and guide them toward a better future. In the experience of those who are using relative search to its fullest, the more relatives that can be identified, the more likely that one of them will provide an important and sustained family connection for a child.

"There are parents who are not capable of parenting, but are not bad people. It makes it much harder when it becomes adversarial, when parents are condemned."

Sharon Olson
Grandmother and Legal Guardian,
Vice President, GrandFamilies of
America

Strategies for Making Relative Connections a Staff Priority

Strong agency commitment and clearly-articulated expectations can help staff understand and fully embrace the importance of relative connections. These expectations must also be coupled with opportunities for workers to build competence in finding and engaging extended family networks.

Articulate Agency Philosophical Commitment.

A strong and genuine philosophical commitment to relatives and the important roles that they play in children's lives should be at the center of all relative search and engagement efforts. To guide workers' actions, this commitment must be clearly communicated to staff and contract agencies. Workers must understand that relatives are not located simply because there is a lack of foster parents or funds. Rather the commitment must be born out of a true desire to improve outcomes for children by helping them stay connected to their families.

The agency's philosophical commitment is reinforced by helping child welfare workers and partners recognize the benefits of relative connections for children. These include relatives' roles in providing safety and stability, helping children maintain a strong familial identity, and connecting them to their racial and ethnic heritage. Workers also must recognize that every family is unique and that the roles of individual family members and friends vary. Agencies can reinforce for workers the many roles that relatives can play, including:

- Temporary resources for placement
- Supports for family preservation and reunification, including providing respite care
- Decision making partners with families about what is in the best interests of children
- Permanent caregivers for children who can't return home
- Sources of support and lifelong connections for youth "aging out" of foster care

Click here to learn more about the [Potential Roles of Relatives](#)

"When I first started working here, there was a pervasive attitude among workers that it was the parents' and relatives' obligation to find us. Now we understand that it is the department's obligation to find absent parents and relatives."

Christina M. Schneider
Special Assistant General Counsel
Illinois Department of Children and Family
Services

Demonstrate Agency Commitment to Relatives

Agencies and communities that prioritize relative connections for children can demonstrate their commitment by providing a continuum of support for kin. Identifying and locating relatives is not enough. Relatives who care for and about children must be valued, supported, and treated as partners. They need financial and legal assistance to care for children, help accessing public and community resources, guidance about child development, supports for health and education, connection to other relatives caring for children, and other assistance to fulfill their caregiving roles.

Build Expectations into Worker Responsibilities.

Agency policy and worker guidance can reinforce a commitment to relatives, but expectations can also be built into job descriptions, job interviews, hiring policies, supervision, performance management goals, and contracts and agreements with private providers and consultants. In addition, agencies can provide workers with the skills and knowledge needed to find and engage relatives through pre-service training, ongoing professional development, and supervisory support.

Make Workers, Agency Partners, and Families Part of the Solution.

Top-down commitment to family search and engagement helps, but agency leaders can also help instill this commitment throughout the agency and the community by giving others a voice in crafting solutions. Workers, parents, youth, relative caregivers, providers, attorneys and courts are important resources for understanding what might work to identify and engage relatives. For agency leaders, this means bringing people together, asking them what it would take to connect children with kin, listening to their proposed solutions, and empowering them to build a system that works.

Questions that need to be addressed include:

- What will it take to find and connect children to family?
- How can we partner with family members?
- What practice changes are needed?
- What support and tools do workers need to connect children to family?

Provide Relatives With the Support They Need.

Perhaps the strongest message that agencies can send about the importance of relative connections is to ensure that they have the support they need to play whatever role they can in a child's life. Public policy and advocacy efforts have focused on the financial needs of relative caregivers with whom children are placed. Many relatives need this financial support to meet the basic needs of the children in their care. In addition, agencies can demonstrate they are supportive of relatives by providing clear information about their rights and responsibilities, treating them with respect, communicating with them regularly about new developments in a child's situation, involving them in key decisions related to the child, and helping them gain access to information, services and supports needed for the child and for themselves.

“For years, we bought into the idea that many of these young people don’t have family. But when we search, we often find many family members, some of whom are very interested in making the connection with the young person, and maybe even becoming a caregiver.”

Family finding is “the kind of breakthrough that child welfare needs.”

Pat Reynolds-Harris
Executive Director, California
Permanency for Youth Project
From: Martha Shirk, “Hunting for
Grandma,” *Youth Today*, February 2006.
[http://www.youthtoday.org/youthtoday/
Feb06/story2_02_06.html](http://www.youthtoday.org/youthtoday/Feb06/story2_02_06.html)

Provide Workers with the Tools and Strategies to Work with Extended Family Networks

Agencies can provide workers with tools to overcome some of the most basic challenges to making relative search a priority, including ways to deal with parental resistance, dealing with complex family dynamics, building trust with relatives, and working in diverse communities.

Dealing with Parental Resistance

When parents refuse to identify absent parents, relatives or other adults who care about their children, workers often stop there. By accepting the parents' initial refusal, they jeopardize the child's chance for important, often lifelong relationships. Strategies that agencies and searchers suggest for overcoming parental resistance include:

- Informing parents about the benefits to children of permanent connections with relatives and other caring adults and the harmful effects for children who do not have these supports.
- Being persistent and recognizing that sometimes parents (and others) are not ready to provide information when first asked. Their resistance may lessen as they see that other family members are concerned, participate in family preservation or reunification services, or reconsider their child's well-being.
- Asking children and youth themselves about who is important to them and who they want to contact. Click here for some helpful [techniques for interviewing children](#) provided by *New York City Administration for Children and Families*.
- Seeking individuals who may be resources for all kinds of support to children and parents – not just limited to placement options.
- Using designated search staff (whom parents may regard as neutral) to collect information rather than child protection workers or case workers.
- Partnering with the courts and attorneys to obtain court orders requiring that parents identify kin.

Navigating Complex Family Dynamics.

Workers need solid grounding to navigate family dynamics.

In addition to skills development, they may need help thinking outside the box to approach each family's unique situation in a fresh and creative way.

- Provide Training, Supervision and Support for Best Practice. According to one state kinship unit director, to help extended family members become networks of support, workers often need a refresher on the basics of social work practice. Training on the nuances of family engagement along with skilled supervision helps workers apply their skills to finding family. Sharing success stories can also help.
- Define and Engage Family More Expansively. Looking beyond traditional definitions of family expand the options for connections. Seeing other individuals step forward to help a child can help some family members overcome disagreements and conflict. Digging deeper instead of stopping at the first known relative often produces richer networks of support for the child.
- Stay Focused on the Needs of the Child. Often, workers can get dragged into tense family situations and may feel more comfortable with some family members than others. By helping to keep family members focused on the needs of the child, everyone can join together around a common goal.

Assessing Family Members' Interest by Building Trust with Relatives

Just because family members do not respond immediately to agency inquiries does not mean that they don't care about the child. Many people are frightened when any government worker tries to contact them, and they may be especially intimidated by the child welfare agency, particularly if they have had negative experiences with the agency in the past. Often, the agency fails to communicate the urgency of the child's situation. In other cases, relatives' own lives are busy and complicated, or they simply need time to consider the situation.

When workers take the time to build trust with relatives, it can go a long way to help them seriously consider the role they want to play in the child's life. Workers can help relatives see that they don't have to limit their roles to providing a place to stay, but have a variety of ways they can be involved in the child's life.

Strategies to build trust with relatives include:

- Persevere. Successful searchers provide many examples of kin who are grateful that the worker did not give up trying to contact them.
- Provide Room to Admit the Organization is Not Perfect. Special steps may be necessary to counteract family members' fears or reluctance based on negative personal experiences or the agency's poor public image.
- Provide Lots of Opportunities for Family Participation in Decision Making. Experts stress that it is important to let family members decide as much as possible about how they can help the child. Once the child's situation is clear, it is important to give relatives an opportunity to step forward. Family members often take the initiative to let others know about the child's situation. They often show their support in unanticipated ways – including traveling long distances at their own expense to participate in planning meetings.

Respecting Family and Community Culture.

Throughout the relative search process, it is important to honor families' culture and background and to integrate their cultural practices into plans for the child's care. In many cultures, family and community members have a range of supportive roles in caring for children. Families' cultural traditions can greatly enrich plans for child rearing, parenting and supporting children. At the same time, cultural dynamics and language differences can add a layer of complexity. To build rapport with relatives and engage them in developing workable plans, staff must be familiar with the family's culture and build on their unique traditions.

Tools that can help workers build cultural competence include:

- Ethnographic Interviewing. Ethnographic interviewing can help staff learn about the definition of family, child-rearing practices, the roles of family members, and familial relationships. The Minnesota Department of Human Services recommends this strategy for an increasingly diverse constituency. [Click here](#) for tips on conducting ethnographic interviews.
- Use of Indigenous Community Resources. Empowering staff to rely on those who understand a particular culture, such as indigenous organizations or trusted community or family members, can demonstrate to a family the commitment to honoring traditions.
- Access to Translators. In linguistically diverse communities, access to translators or bi-lingual staff is needed.

A successful family searcher says, "I've met a lot of people who were rejected initially or pushed away by the agency. It's important to admit our mistakes as a bureaucratic organization. It's a good 'in' with people to admit our mistakes. It's pretty disarming. People may still be angry but they are willing to move ahead."

Minnesota Department of Human Services
Relative Search Best Practice Guide
http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/publications/documents/pub/DHS_id_052669.pdf

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative recommends including "community people" in team decision making meetings. These often fall into three categories:

1. *Support persons who are invited by the family (as many as they like).*
2. *Formal or informal, community-based or agency-based, service providers whom the family invites or gives permission to invite.*
3. *Specific "community representatives" invited by the agency. While there is no easy definition for this kind of a community representative, it's often useful to ask, "Is the family likely to relate to this person as a member of their own 'community,' however they define that?"*

- Knowledge about cultural practices and traditions.
Instead of imposing pre-conceived ideas about the roles that relatives should play in a child's life, successful workers honor cultural childrearing practices and traditions whenever possible. This includes asking relatives how to best contact and engage other kin and being open to new ideas about the roles they can play.

Building in Requirements to Ensure Child Safety

Having an established and effective system in place for assessing the capacity of relatives to care for the child can help relieve workers' concerns about child safety. For example, before children in child welfare custody make unsupervised visits with kin, background checks must be conducted. Workers report that they need to have confidence that background checks and other assessments are routinely and effectively conducted.

Ensuring Supervisory Support

Workers need to know that they are not making decisions alone. Having reliable, accessible supervisors they can turn to helps increase workers' confidence in decision making. Supportive and nurturing supervisors can empower workers to utilize all the resources available to help make family connections for children. They can provide workers with access to the necessary tools and strategies to help them work more effectively with relatives. They can also communicate their own expectations that consistent and comprehensive relative search and engagement is a part of every worker's job.

Resources and Tools for Question 4:
How can workers best value family connections?

Tool	Source	Link
Tiffany Conway and Rutledge Q. Hutson, "Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?"	Center for Law and Social Policy, March 2, 2007.	http://www.clasp.org/publications/is_kinship_care_good.pdf
Relative Search Best Practice, 2005	Minnesota Department of Human Services	http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/publications/documents/pub/DHS_id_052669.pdf
"Declaration of Commitment to Permanent Lifelong Connections for Foster Youth"	California Permanency for Youth Project	http://www.cypyp.org/commitment.html
Finding Permanency for Youth, Resource Handbook	Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services and California Permanency for Youth Project	http://www.co.fresno.ca.us/5600/ChildrenandFamilyServices/YouthPermanencyHandbook.pdf
"The Contribution of Ethnographic Interviewing to Culturally Competent Practice," <i>Practice Notes</i> , Issue 10, Winter 2001.	University of Minnesota, Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare	http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?!dcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=id_016430
Team Decision Making, Involving the Family and Community in Child Welfare Decisions, Part Two	The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Family to Family Initiative	http://www.aecf.org/upload/pdf/famil_ytofamily/f2f_tdm_sept_02.pdf
"The Role of the Community Representative at TDM Meetings"	The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Family to Family Initiative	http://www.aecf.org/upload/pdf/famil_ytofamily/pdf/role_comm_rep.pdf

5. How can we effectively use internet searches?

Automated searches – and especially use of internet search services – can be an effective tool for identifying family connections for children. Automated searches are already used in child welfare to locate absent parents, and child support enforcement agencies rely on the [Federal Parent Locator Service](#) to search for and monitor non-custodial parents. Many low-cost search services are also willing to provide discounts to child welfare agencies who want to expand on their search capabilities.

It should be noted, however, that automated searches are often not necessary. Experienced searchers report that their best leads about relatives and their whereabouts come directly from the parents, the child, and other people who know them. One personal contact often leads to more interested kin, and the circle expands rapidly. In other words, automated searches help, but are not the sole answer for relative search. How heavily an agency relies on technology for relative search may be a function of the local community's capacity, mobility, and growth.

Personal Contacts

Information from personal contacts contributes to productive database and internet searches. The usefulness of information often depends on searchers' probing and record-keeping. Even bits and pieces of information can help with subsequent search efforts, including:

- Complete names (surnames, if complete names are unknown)
- Past and present addresses, phone numbers, jurisdictions of residence
- Birthdates or approximate ages of kin
- Social security numbers
- Tribal affiliation
- Places relatives work or worked in the past or the type of work they have done
- Whether relatives have served in the military or been employed by the local, state, or federal government
- Government services that individuals may have received
- Whether or not relatives have been in prison
- Where and when a relative died

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, for instance, which places a large percentage of children with relatives, reports that workers request only about 15 electronic searches per month statewide. In contrast, the child welfare agency in **Clark County, Nevada** (Las Vegas), where the population is rapidly growing and comparatively transient, considers electronic searches an essential tool for locating the large number of out-of-state relatives.

Catholic Community Services of Western Washington found that their average record review yielded information on three to five adult relatives, many of whom had been parties to a dependency proceeding in the past.

Government Databases

A second tier of resources consists of a host of government databases that are more targeted than broad internet search services. These can help identify people who are related to the child and can provide very detailed information about the location of known relatives. Most searchers mine public agency records within their own state, other states where relatives are thought to live or to have lived in the past, and federal databases. Agencies report little experience searching records of foreign governments.

Child Welfare Agency Records: For children and families with a history of child welfare system involvement, child welfare record reviews are a leading source of information about relatives.

Other Public Agencies and Databases: The databases of other public agencies and programs can help identify possible relatives or locate known kin such as:

- **School records** that may include emergency contacts.
- **Court records** that may contain information about absent fathers or other relatives.
- **Birth certificates** are a potential source of information about fathers.
- **Local and state clerks of record** and their databases may include marriage certificates, birth certificates, divorces, real estate transactions, business enterprises, and other public records.
- **Social services and health care agency records** may help staff locate relatives who have participated in a range of programs, including food stamps, financial aid, medical assistance, and other state or local assistance.
- **Local post offices** may have useful records and sometimes help connect searchers with post offices in other locations.
- **Law enforcement agencies** are resources for local information and connections with agencies in other places.
- **Departments of corrections** and individual correctional facilities can help connect with individuals who are incarcerated, and they in turn can help connect with other relatives.
- **Departments of motor vehicles and voter registration records** are sources for addresses of known relatives.
- **U.S. Social Security Administration** provides access to death certificates that can be helpful for piecing together families. It also has information on individuals who receive social security benefits.
- **The Federal Parent Locator Service** provides one-stop access to an array of federal and state databases. Federal policy encourages state child support agencies to work with child welfare agencies to help locate absent parents and relatives.

U.S. Search subscribes to databases of records on voter registration, marriage, divorce, criminal filings, credit records and other information. Its software broadens search terms to look for alternative spellings. In one study by Mr. Campbell, U.S. Search was able to find more than 85% of parents who were listed as "whereabouts unknown" in California court records.

The Wall Street Journal Online
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118782913521106016.html?mod=googlenews_wsj

Public Databases: Tips from the Field

Develop Partners. Searchers report that developing relationships with individuals in other agencies often helps them obtain information in a timely way. These relationships can even be developed with helpful people in other states.

Work with Your State Child Support Agency. Child support enforcement agencies have a wealth of experience when it comes to search for non-custodial parents, and many child welfare agencies are finding fruitful partnerships that build on this experience.

Be Prepared to Obtain Clearances for Access to Restricted Databases. Use of government databases is restricted to individuals who have obtained specific clearances for their use. These clearances can be time-consuming to obtain, and the requirements and procedures often differ from one agency to another and from one state to another. One advantage to having a diligent search unit or designated staff who conduct diligent search is that only a few people (or in the case of contract staff, no agency employees) are required to obtain the necessary security clearances. Interagency agreements and protocols can expand access to other government databases for child welfare workers.

*After conducting a small pilot that produced solid information at little cost (\$2.50 per search), the child welfare division of the **Washington State Department of Health and Family Services** is negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding with the state child support agency to conduct relative searches.*

Internet Search Tools

Internet resources are a fast-growing part of the search toolkit. The more details about possible relatives that have been obtained from personal contacts and other databases, the more effective internet searches are likely to be. Agencies should also be prepared for the enormous quantities of information that internet searches yield and dedicate the staff resources needed to sort through and follow up.

Considerations for Choosing a Service

Quality of information. Searchers report that quality of information can vary and that some services are providing less useful information than they did previously. For example, a long list of associates and neighbors without phone numbers is less useful than relatives' names with addresses and phone numbers.

Time required. Turnaround time typically ranges from 20-minutes to an hour, but some searchers report that as more people are using the services, results are slower – taking one or two days.

Access to personal help. Fee-based services offer help desks for suggestions with difficult searches and troubleshooting if problems arise. Availability and response time are issues to consider.

Cost. Child welfare agencies report search costs ranging from .25 cents to \$25 per search. Sacramento County pays a fee of \$125 per month for unlimited searches.

Los Angeles County Department of Social Services has monitored their relative searches for about a year. Each search is logged at the time it is initiated. A clerk later goes back to the person who requested the search and collects information about the search's accuracy and usefulness in identifying and contacting relatives. The agency found that sixty percent of searches by US Search have provided information that leads to a relative.

Using Fee-Based Search Services: Tips from the Field

Test several services. Although demonstration searches may be available on the search firm's website, an actual trial search is a good idea. Contact the company and ask them to walk you through a free search.

Compare results and rates. Follow through with the contacts provided to determine what percentage of people are relatives, neighbors and other associates; the accuracy of addresses and phone numbers; and how useful they are. Also consider the response time and monthly rates or costs per search.

Monitor performance. Because internet searches are a fast growing field, there may be great variation in timeliness and accuracy and changes over time. Instead of a one-time trial, periodic assessment or ongoing monitoring is suggested.

Resources and Tools for Question 5:

How can we effectively use internet searches?

Free internet search engines can be useful resources for obtaining basic information and for preliminary searches. Some provide phone numbers, dates of birth, locations and other information for given names. Others are useful for "reverse searches" when the searcher has a phone number or address but not the name of a possible relative.

Searchers report some success using generic search engines like Google, mamma, msn, and yahoo. Samples of more targeted sites are described below.

Website	Contents	Uses/Recommendations
www.411.com	White pages, yellow pages, email look up, reverse phone and address directories	
www.anywho.com	White pages, yellow pages, reverse phone directory	
www.blackbookonline.info	Federal and state-by-state databases, social security number validation, reverse phone and address look up, links to other search engines	Links to many fee-based search engines and services
www.dmdc.osd.mil	Defense Manpower Data Center	Recommended for locating military personnel
www.governmentrecords.com	Nationwide voter records	\$25 for a search of all states, \$11 for a single state search
www.obitlinkspage.com	State-by-state directories of newspaper obituaries and resources	Next of kin and places of past residence often listed
www.myspace.com	Locations and personal information about known individuals	Recommended for communicating with people serving in the military, runaway youth, and youth who are AWOL from placement
www.whitepages.com	Reverse phone look up	
www.ZabaSearch.com	Name look up by state	Recommended as preliminary tool for unusual names only

Fee-Based Search Services

Three popular online search services used by agencies are:

- www accurint.com
- www intelius.com
- www ussearch.com

Relative searches for child welfare agencies are a growing market for search services. Agencies can take advantage of their bargaining position to promote useful and timely results.

Florida's Center for the Advancement of Child Welfare Practice

This article was posted with permission from [Child Focus](http://www.childfocuspartners.com/). Please visit their website at <http://www.childfocuspartners.com/> for additional information.