

Founder of the Family Finding Movement

Interview: Part I

By Georgette Todd, March 31, 2014

Kevin Campbell developed “Family Finding,” a set of strategies being used throughout the United States and Canada to address the loneliness of children in foster care by creating lifelong supports for children and young people living in foster care and institutions.

Family Finding got its first federal funding in 2008, and was reauthorized for more funding in 2011. Campbell currently collaborates with Seneca Family of Agencies to provide training and technical assistance on the implementation of Family Finding.

I conducted an e-mail interview with Campbell to learn more about the origins and evolution of his work.

Q. How do you go about reuniting families? What are the steps involved?

A. Family Finding is a six-step model based on the Worldwide Family Tracing work of the International Committee of the Red Cross, headquartered in Arolsen, Germany, and the International Rescue Committee in New York, New York.

Family Finding was created to urgently respond to the loneliness children and young people experience when they are indefinitely separated from parents, siblings, relatives and others because of placement in the foster care, juvenile justice and mental health systems. A key innovation in Family Finding is to start the process believing that every child has a family (including a father) and they can be found if we try.

There are a number of advantages to searching for a large number of relatives and other adults who have a connection to the parent or youth. The single most important thing is to fill a room full of people who can be organized and empowered to care for and support the youth or family for a lifetime. When used, this process can bring relief to young people by providing critical information about their family.

Q. How many families have you reunited? And out of those families, how many of them have continued to stay together?

A. By now, tens of thousands of children and youth have had some version of Family Finding across the United States and several provinces in Canada. There is no national standardized data collection or reporting system to date that tells us how many have had ...placements resulting from search and engagement efforts.

There are a growing number of evaluations of Family Finding in the United States. Among these, placement rates have varied from significant rates in Hawaii and South Carolina to non-significant rates in other states. The one consistent finding has been that relatives and other concerned adults are found for the vast majority of youth who receive Family Finding.

Q. What are the common challenges in Family Finding?

A. The single biggest challenge to Family Finding has *not* been finding the family, tribe and community. It is the process of changing practice in systems to add chairs to the table for the people that have been located and want to participate in planning, decision-making and plan implementation.

As mentioned earlier, Family Finding is a six-step process. In several of the evaluations, public agencies were only willing to allow the first three steps of the process.

Q. Is there a quick way to connect kids to family members? If so, how? If not, why not?

A. The quickest way to connect kids to family members is to not disconnect them to begin with. The State of Hawaii and Epic O’hana Conferencing demonstrated in their evaluation of Family Finding and Family Conferencing that having a Family Finder accompany a child protective services worker from the first contact kept families together, or more quickly reconnected them, compared to a traditional approach.

In situations involving youth who have been separated from their families for several years or who have family members living outside the country, the process can take more time. However, the process has significance for youth whether or not it can be completed quickly.

Q. What can a foster youth do in order to increase his/her chances of being reunited with a biological family?

A. We want to encourage youth to speak out about their need for connection and support them in getting answers to important questions. Often youth hear feedback from case workers, foster parents and therapist that suggest they should accept their situation and move on. For many youth this feels like adults don’t want to hear from them about their past, but instead should focus on what they are doing now in foster care.

Today, agencies are learning more about trauma informed strategies and the importance of supporting youth grieving trauma and loss. This is an increasing recognition of the importance of supporting youth and their parents to tell and re-tell their stories as they uncover how to understand and integrate their experiences.

With Family Finding, we take this grief work even further. We work together with youth and parents to create action, to find and interview people who may hold parts of the story. A wonderful quote from Benjamin Franklin illustrates this age old truth, “Tell me I forget, teach me I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

Finally, if a youth feels they are not being heard, they should be encouraged to ask to talk to a supervisor, manager or director. We want to keep them talking and asking questions. If an area or state has a youth organization that advocates for them in the child welfare system, getting them involved or contacting them for added support is an important part of the process.

Check back tomorrow for Part Two of Todd’s interview with Kevin Campbell

Georgette Todd is also the author of “Foster Girl, A Memoir.” To submit questions for this weekly column, e-mail Georgette at: fostergirlwoman@gmail.com.

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