



Results from a family finding experiment



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of family-finding, a child welfare practice approach that provides intensive search and engagement efforts for children in foster care and their families with the objectives of strengthening family connections and permanency. We used an experimental design with randomization to family finding or a control group. The family finding approach was more effective than standard child welfare services in engaging a larger network of family and kin, in facilitating a greater number of family team meetings, and in ensuring that every child in care has at least one supportive emotional connection with an adult. Children receiving family finding were more likely to be adopted by relatives and less likely to age out of care without permanency resolution, but other forms of permanency, number of placement disruptions, and subsequent substantiated maltreatment reports did not differ between groups. As a method for strengthening family connections, the evidence in support of family finding is clear; as a mechanism for physical permanency resolution, mixed results from this experiment indicate a need for further research on family finding for specific permanency outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Connection to family has long been considered important in facilitating permanency for children in out of home care. This phenomenon has been identified for children in family foster care (Davis, Landsverk, Newton, & Ganger, 1996; Leathers, 2002) as well as institutional care (Hair, 2005; Landsman, Groza, Tyler, & Malone, 2001; Lee, 2011). The growing recognition of the value of family as a placement resource is realized in the increased use of kinship care, a placement setting in which family connection is embedded. Relative placements comprise 27% of out-of-home placements (U.S. DHHS, 2011), but as Geen and Duerr Berrick (2002) noted a decade ago, official statistics understate the actual use of family caregivers in child welfare. Furthermore, the surge in the use of family group conferencing/team decision-making in current child welfare practice further highlights the value attributed to engaging family and kin in planning for the welfare of children (Crampton & Jackson, 2007; Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010; Raultis, McCarthy, Krackhardt, & Cahalane, 2010; Sheets et al., 2009).

This movement toward increased family connectedness during out of home placement has been further expanded by the *Fostering Connections to Success & Adoptions Act* (2008, Pub L. No. 110–351). State child welfare agencies are now required to identify and engage immediate and extended family members of children in foster care, notifying adult relatives of a child's placement within 30 days of removal and explaining how they

might become involved in the child's care. Recognizing the importance of sibling connections, there is now an expectation that siblings be placed together, or if not feasible, to ensure visitation rights similar to parents and children. To develop knowledge about approaches in strengthening family connections, the legislation authorized funding for four types of demonstration projects testing various models: kinship navigator, intensive family finding, family group decision making, and residential family treatment. The goal of intensive family finding is to identify, locate and engage family and informal supports in planning for children's permanency. In this paper we present the final results of an intensive family finding project funded from 2009 to 2012.

1.1. Intensive family finding

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Administration for Children and Families (2009) describes intensive family finding as an approach in helping children and youth who are in care or at risk of being placed in care to reconnect with their family members. Intensive family finding projects use search technologies, family engagement strategies and other ways of locating biological family members. After identifying these individuals, intensive family finding projects work toward reestablishing relationships and facilitating permanent placements with family for children in care.

Typically intensive family finding has focused on children who have been out of their homes for extended periods of time and who have lost connections with many of their family and kin (Children's Defense Fund, 2010). The assumption is that the longer that the children are in

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out-of-home care, the more difficult it is to sustain connections with family and the higher the likelihood that children will age out of foster care without having a sufficient support network.

Despite the intuitive appeal of the intensive family finding approach, to date there is next to no published research regarding its effectiveness in achieving permanent connections and family focused placements. The published literature includes a description of the approach (Wentz & Beck, 2012) and a conceptual application of family finding crossing international borders (Northcott & Jeffries, 2012). However, aside from the one peer-reviewed publication of preliminary results from the first year of our experimental study (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011), the empirical literature on intensive family finding consists of non-peer-reviewed research briefs and final reports produced by other family finding projects (i.e., Allen, Malm, & Williams, 2011; Aultman-Bettridge & Selby, 2012; Bringewatt, Allen, & Williams, 2013; Maike, Benner, & Scarsella, 2012), and a newly produced cross-site evaluation of federally funded family connection grants, including several family finding projects (JBA, 2013). Although the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (2012) acknowledges Family Finding as highly relevant to child welfare, they have been unable to provide an effectiveness rating for the program due to the paucity of rigorous published research. Our study represents one effort to build the evidence base around the strengths and limitations of intensive family finding.

1.2. Project site and target population

The Families for Iowa's Children (FIC) project was implemented by Four Oaks, one of Iowa's largest non-profit agencies serving children and families, in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS). FIC was designed to use search technologies and family-centered practices to reconnect children entering foster care with family members and natural supports to provide support during the reunification process, either for temporary placement or for potentially permanent placement in the event that reunification was ruled out. FIC was implemented in two IDHS Service Areas and both were a mixture of urban and rural communities. The Ames Service Area comprised 12 counties located in the central part of the state, and the Cedar Rapids Service Area included 14 counties located in the mid-southeastern part of the state. These two areas of the state were selected for their high rates of foster care placement and in particular, their disproportional use of placement for minority children.

Four Oaks had previously conducted a pilot project using family finding techniques for adolescents and teenagers who were expected to age out of care (Malone). For the current demonstration project, FIC elected to broaden the range of children served by intensive family finding to children ages 0–17 who were referred to the state's centralized foster care placement matching program managed by Four Oaks. In Iowa, IDHS has contracted with Four Oaks to manage all requests for foster care placements and placement changes through a centralized system (Iowa KidsNet). The expectation was that some children would be entering foster care for the first time; others would have been in foster care longer with less connection to parents or relatives; some might have serious and complex mental health or behavioral health issues with no family connections beyond their often overwhelmed parent(s); and some would be the more traditional population of older adolescents who are expected to age out of care with weak connections to parents or other significant adults. FIC sought to test family search and engagement with this more heterogeneous population than is typically served by family finding programs. The rationale was that search and engagement strategies would be beneficial to children in out of home care under a broad range of circumstances.

We note that because all children in the study were active child welfare cases, both the experimental and control groups received DHS case-work services and other therapeutic and supportive services based on individual needs. FIC services were viewed as an enhancement, not a

substitute for other child welfare services. In examining program effectiveness, the key question was whether the addition of this search and engagement component resulted in stronger engagement, permanency, and safety outcomes.

1.3. Description of the program model

The theory of change underlying family finding and engagement asserts that by focusing efforts on identifying and nurturing a natural support network for each child in care, meeting frequently to sustain a sense of urgency around permanency, providing opportunities for relationship-building, and providing post-placement support, this expanded support network will result in shorter time to permanency, a greater likelihood of permanent placement with family, and improved child safety.

Development of the FIC model was informed by previous work on intensive family finding, primarily the Family Search and Engagement model developed by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children and Family Services (2008). CCSWW provided staff training and ongoing consultation throughout the demonstration project. FIC was conceptualized in five key components: Referral; Information Gathering, Documentation and Search and Identification; Contact, Assessment and Engagement; Family Ties; Transition to Family; and Documentation.

The goal of the Referral stage is to expedite family finding through a seamless randomization process, with quick turnaround times for approving and assigning cases. At the Information Gathering stage, the focus is on identifying and searching for all potential relatives and kin and creating an individualized team and a process for facilitating permanency. The Contact, Assessment and Engagement stage seeks to work with family and supports on relationship building and to prepare the child and family for successful visits with family. By the Family Ties stage, the emphasis is on transitioning decision-making to the family and strengthening plans for sustained family connection after case closure. Documentation represents the provision of ongoing feedback and continuous assessment of process and outcomes. Although these stages are presented as discrete and sequentially related, they occurred simultaneously and in an interrelated way. Since we are seeking to build the evidence base for a model with limited published literature, we provide an overview of the model components and practices in Table 1.

1.4. Purpose and research hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the family finding and engagement intervention in achieving a specified set of short-term and intermediate outcomes. For definitional clarity, relational permanency refers to evidence of sustained, loving relationships with family and kin supports as described by Stott and Gustavsson (2010). Physical permanency refers to an outcome in which the child is living in a home intended to be lasting, whether through family relationships, adoption, or legal guardianship. We test the following hypotheses, of which the first two pertain to short-term outcomes and the remaining three to intermediate outcomes.

H1. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have a greater number of family team meetings than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

H2. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have a larger number of family and informal supports engaged in service planning than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

H3. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will be more likely to achieve relational permanency than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

Table 1
Components of the family finding and engagement model with key practices.

Model component	Practices
Referral <i>Goals: Expedite family finding and seamless randomization process</i>	Referral triggered by DHS request for a foster care placement match Random number used to determine assignment to FIC or control group DHS notified of selection into FIC, 1-day turnaround to enroll or exclude. Exclusion criteria very limited and specific (see Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011)
Information Gathering, Documentation and Search and Identification <i>Goals: Identify and search for all potential relatives/kin and create team and process for facilitating permanency</i>	Search & Engagement Specialist (S&E) assigned within 1 day of DHS approval S&E met DHS case manager to locate non-custodial/absent parent, search DHS file for family information, and discuss S&E contact with parent & child S&E met with child/family to identify others important in child's life S&E used internet to expand search for relatives and locate known relatives S&E used other sources of info: obituary records, social networking sites, public records data bases, prisoner locator services, birth certificates, family history records, etc. S&E and DHS case manager developed team (family/kin, case manager, parents, child (when old enough), foster parents, GAL, parents' attorneys, current service providers) Family Team Meeting held within 20 days of FIC enrollment to review placement reasons, family strengths/needs, and then begin case planning. FTMs held quarterly to review changes and progress toward goals
Contact, Assessment and Engagement <i>Goals: Engage family and supports and prepare child and family for successful visits</i>	S&E contacted relatives/supports with 2 days of DHS approval S&E met with each relative to assess current relationship, interest in the child, and barriers to participation, invite to FTM, and continue to interact to strengthen involvement S&E scheduled meeting between child & relative to explore relationship and provide pleasant experience to encourage further engagement S&E prepared child, relative, and foster parents for the meeting, explored expectations, and helped to avoid creating unrealistic expectations S&E coordinated, supervised and documented initial visit—short, fun, and structured to allow sharing of photos or fun family stories S&E remaining with child or within sight to continually assess child's coping and supported child following the visit S&E followed up with relative to discuss the visit and next steps
Family Ties: Transition to Family <i>Goals: Transfer decision-making to family, strengthen relationships and sustain connections</i>	S&E ensured that home study process was completed for placement with family, licensing for family to receive financial support S&E supported family in assuming decision-making responsibilities and in trial visits Child/family team anticipated future needs and provided supports to sustain permanency Preferred outcomes were reunification, guardianship, and adoption. If not possible, continued relative placement with ongoing family connections Preference for siblings placed together; if not possible, ongoing sibling connections
Documentation <i>Goals: Provide ongoing feedback to staff and assessment of process and outcomes</i>	S&E recorded initial family connections and goals for family finding S&E recorded files and databases examined to locate relatives S&E recorded family/supports contacted and engaged, child outcomes and changes

H4. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will be more likely to achieve physical permanency than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

H5. Children/families receiving intensive family finding services will be less likely to have a substantiated report of child maltreatment after the date of randomization than those receiving standard child welfare services alone.

2. Methods

2.1. Design and sample

We used a randomized experimental design to examine the effects of providing intensive family finding and engagement services to children and families in the foster care system. The experiment was carried out over a three year period with the date of randomization beginning May 3, 2009 and ending February 23, 2012. Randomization to either the experimental (FIC) condition or control condition was triggered by a DHS request for a foster home. However, siblings were automatically assigned to the same condition representing an exception to randomization procedures. Although we recognize that this violates the assumption of equal probability of assignment to either condition, the need to keep siblings together is fundamental in maintaining family connections.

Fig. 1 depicts the case flow process for the two groups. From an initial pool of 139 children assigned to FIC, 125 were included in this study. Of the 14 excluded children, eight were not enrolled in FIC because they were either never removed from home or reunified within days; one

was excluded because an adoption was in progress, another had moved out of state; and four children were disenrolled from FIC. In the control group, from an initial pool of 123 children, 118 were

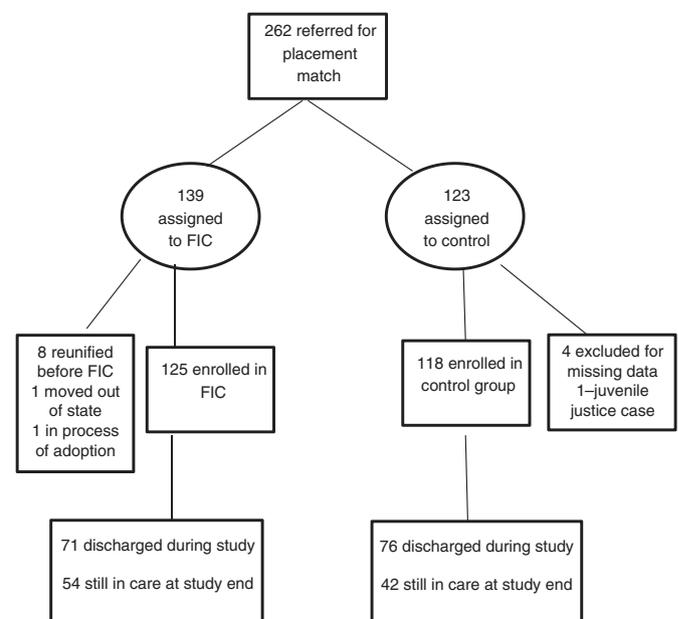


Fig. 1. Study flowchart.

included in this study. Four were excluded due to substantial missing data, and one was excluded because this was a juvenile justice case rather than a child welfare case. In total 243 children were selected for inclusion (FIC = 125, control = 118). Children in the FIC and control conditions were assigned a DHS worker and each received standard child welfare services. Children in FIC were additionally assigned a Search and Engagement Specialist (S&E specialist) who provided intensive family finding and engagement services. At the time the study ended, 71 (56.8%) of FIC and 76 (64.4%) control children had exited the child welfare system. Data collection for the project concluded on September 30, 2012.

2.2. Data collection

Data for this study were extracted from case records and a database that was specifically developed for this project to monitor random assignment procedures and model implementation. In addition, for children assigned to FIC the database served as the primary data source for documenting case progress and outcomes. DHS case files served as the primary data source for children in the control group. To extract data from case files of children in the control group the research team traveled to county DHS offices that were within the service area included in the project. Case file reading took place at two time points over the course of the three-year study period. We created a data collection instrument to ensure that the information extracted from the DHS case records was comparable to the data that was extracted from the project database. This instrument was piloted in one county office and revised. Case file reading was completed by two of the authors and two research assistants who were trained in the data collection procedures. In addition, inter-rater coding was used at each site, representing 15.25% of cases. Any discrepancies were discussed between the two raters and resolved.

Finally, we collected data on maltreatment and foster care placements from the DHS data management system. DHS provided electronic data containing the placement and maltreatment history of each child in the FIC and control groups. For placements, these data included the type of placement (relative, foster care, group care, etc.), the dates of entry and exit for each placement. For child maltreatment, the electronic data file included the dates and types of confirmed child maltreatment reports for each child. The DHS data were also used as an additional source to cross check the accuracy of case file data extracted from the project database and DHS case records. We used a careful strategy of comparing data from these various sources of data for each child in the study, and found few discrepancies between dates recorded in case files and those in the information systems. Data are presented on key outcomes related to family engagement, subsequent maltreatment, and permanency outcomes.

2.3. Measures

In addition to providing intensive searches to locate potential family supports, the FIC model emphasizes the use of frequent family team meetings to engage family in the case planning process. Case records and family team meeting notes were used to determine the number of family team meetings that were held for each child following random assignment up to the date a child was discharged or, for those who had not been discharged, the project end date. In the present analysis level of family engagement was determined by the number of family members and informal supports (e.g., family friend, fictive kin, mentor) who were involved in the case. A person was considered engaged if they were identified as a member of the child's team or a support in the child's case file or project database and there was a record of contact occurring with the child following random assignment.

Relational permanency was measured as a 1/0 variable and was based on qualitative data extracted from case records. A child was coded "1" if there was evidence in the case record of continued contact and emotional

support from at least one adult. A child was coded "0" if there was no evidence that the child had ongoing contact and emotional support from at least one adult consistently. We recognize the inherent subjectivity of this measure, but there was sufficient detail in the case records—including case notes, permanency plans, family team meeting minutes, and court reports—to make this assessment. To ensure reliability, two researchers examined the coding of this measure, with nearly complete agreement.

Physical permanency was determined based on the type of placement to which the child was discharged or where the child was living at the final observation period. To compare differences in the time it took for children to achieve permanency, the number of days that elapsed between the date of random assignment and placement in a setting that was planned to be the child's permanent home was recorded. We also calculated the number of placement disruptions from the date of random assignment through case closure or the end of the study. We used the child maltreatment data provided by DHS to identify whether each child had a confirmed maltreatment report following the date of random assignment.

Demographic characteristics of children measured in this study included gender, age, race and ethnicity. These data were provided at the time of referral and random assignment through a spreadsheet. Although missing data were rare, we were usually able to extract this information (i.e., a child's race) from other documents in the case files.

2.4. Data analysis

The analysis proceeded in several steps. First, we used chi-squares tests and t-tests to test for equivalence between the experimental and control groups. Next, we conducted a series of separate multivariate regression analyses to compare for differences in outcomes for the two groups. Logistic regression was used to examine categorical outcomes (e.g., type of placement) and linear regression was used to examine continuous outcomes (e.g., number of family members engaged). Finally, we conducted a Kaplan–Meier Survival Analysis to determine if there were differences in the length of time to achieve all types of permanency between the FIC and the control group.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive/sample characteristics

Sample characteristics for both groups are summarized in Table 2. Age at the time of enrollment for the total sample ranged from less

Table 2
Sample characteristics.

Variable	FIC (n = 125)		Control (n = 118)	
	n (%)	M (SD)	n (%)	M (SD)
Age		9.41 (5.24)		10.24 (5.71)
Gender*				
Girls	67 (53.6)		47 (39.8)	
Boys	58 (46.4)		71 (60.2)	
Race/ethnicity				
African American	12 (9.6)		9 (7.9)	
Caucasian	87 (69.6)		77 (67.5)	
Hispanic	11 (8.8)		7 (6.1)	
Native American	–		1 (.09)	
Multiracial	13 (10.4)		17 (14.9)	
Other	2 (1.6)		4 (0.3)	
Prior maltreatment		1.63 (1.55)		1.95 (1.71)
Physical abuse	19 (16.7)		17 (16.5)	
Psychological abuse	2 (1.8)		–	
Sexual abuse	7 (6.1)		8 (7.8)	
Neglect	77 (67.5)		75 (72.8)	
Prior placements		2.40 (3.13)		2.40 (2.83)

Note. Race was collapsed into dichotomous White/nonwhite categories due to low cell counts.

* $p < .05$.

than one year to 17 ($M = 9.81, SD = 5.48$). Fifty-three percent of the sample was male and 70.1% were white. Chi-square tests of association and t-tests revealed a statistically significant difference in gender between the FIC group and the control group, with a higher percentage of males in the control group ($X^2(1) 4.62, p = .032$). Children in both conditions were similar on all other variables including demographics, prior maltreatment, and the number of prior out of home placements.

3.2. Multivariate regression

We present results from multivariate analysis examining differences in outcomes in Table 3. Statistically significant differences were found for indicators of family engagement. On average, over three times as many family team meetings were held for children receiving FIC services compared to those in the control group. Twenty-eight percent of the variation in the average number of family team meetings held was accounted for by service condition while controlling for gender, and this difference was statistically significant ($F(2, 212) = 43.71, p = .000$). Thus the first hypothesis, that children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have a greater number of family team meetings than those receiving standard child welfare services, was supported.

With regard to family and kin engagement, on average children in FIC had more than twice as many family members and/or informal supports involved in the child's service planning compared to children in the control group. Approximately 41% of the variation in the number of family/informal supports engaged was accounted for by service condition while controlling for gender. This difference was also statistically significant ($F(2, 1651) = 80.05, p = .000$). The second hypothesis, that children and families receiving intensive family finding services will have a larger number of family and informal connections engaged in service planning than those receiving standard child welfare services, was also supported.

Results were mixed for permanency outcomes. Children in FIC were over twice as likely to achieve relational permanency compared to children in the control group (odds ratio = 2.39; $p = .004$), providing support for the hypothesis that children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have stronger relational permanency outcomes than those receiving standard child welfare services.

On measures of physical permanency, compared to the control group, children in the FIC group had eight times greater odds of being adopted by a relative (odds ratio = 8.63, $p = .005$). In addition, the probability of aging out of care without achieving permanency was significantly decreased by 65.2% among children in FIC compared to the control group (odds ratio = .348, $p = .039$). We found no statistically significant differences between the two groups in: other types of placement outcomes; number of placement disruptions; or likelihood of a subsequent substantiated maltreatment report. These findings indicate limited support for the hypothesis that children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have stronger permanent placement outcomes than those receiving standard child welfare services. There is no support for the hypothesis that children/families receiving intensive family finding services will have lower rates of subsequent substantiated child maltreatment than those receiving standard child welfare services.

3.3. Survival analysis

We conducted a survival analysis to determine whether the addition of intensive family finding services resulted in expedited permanency. The primary advantage of survival analysis (also referred to as time-to-event analysis) is that it takes into account variations in the amount of follow-up time between cases that occur due to differences when an individual was enrolled into a study (Kleinbaum, 2011). Although there are different methods for estimating survival curves, in circumstances in which there are no covariates or only one, a Kaplan–Meier procedure is an appropriate method that allows for making statistical inferences about differences in survival times (time-to-event) between categorical groups. Initially, due to the inequality in gender distribution between the groups, we ran a t-test to determine if there was an association between gender and time to placement in a permanent setting ($t(152) = 1.131, p = .260$). Given that the two groups were found to be equivalent on all other variables we used the Kaplan–Meier method to estimate survival curves (Kaplan & Meier, 1958; Kleinbaum, 2011). The intervention (0 = control, 1 = FIC) was treated as the factor. Time was computed based on the difference between the dates of random assignment to FIC or the control group and when the child was either placed in a permanent setting, the case was closed without achieving

Table 3
Study outcomes for FIC and control (controlling for gender).

Variable	FIC (n = 125)		Control (n = 118)		B	SE	F	Exp (B)
	n (%)	M (SD)	n (%)	M (SD)				
Family team meetings		3.95 (1.71)		1.21 (1.71)	2.74	.30	43.71***	
Family/supports engaged		11.70 (5.78)		4.22 (2.48)	7.50	.60	80.05***	
Placement changes		2.20 (2.25)		2.28 (2.54)	-.13	.31	1.00	
Relational permanency	100 (80.6)		73 (64.6)		.87	.31	8.11***	2.39
Type of placement ^e								
Birth home ^b	36 (28.8)		39 (33.1)		-.19	.28	.46	.83
Relative ^c	22 (17.6)		10 (8.5)		.77	.41	3.58	2.17
Relative adoption	16 (12.8)		2 (1.7)		2.16	.77	7.93**	8.63
Nonrelative adoption	16 (12.8)		21 (17.8)		-.25	.37	.47	.78
Foster home	28 (22.4)		19 (16.1)		.32	.34	.90	1.37
Group care ^d	16 (12.8)		11 (9.3)		.45	.42	1.16	1.57
Aged out	6 (4.8)		14 (11.9)		-1.06	.51	4.24*	.35
Subsequent maltreatment report	26 (22.8)		19 (18.4)		.26	.34	.56	1.29

^a Analyses were not run on all placement types due to low counts. One FIC case was in independent living. Two control cases ran away and two others were in nonrelative/suitable other arrangements.

^b Birth home includes reunified cases, THV (n = 4 control), and aged out in birth home (n = 2).

^c Relative placements include relative adoptions.

^d Group care includes: residential treatment, PMIC, detention, and shelter.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

permanency, or the study period ended. Permanent placement was the event of primary interest.

An additional advantage of survival analysis is that distinctions are made between cases who did not achieve the event of interest for different reasons through a process called censoring. Cases are considered left censored if they did not experience the event during the study period due to another event or dropping out of the study. A case is considered right censored if the observation period of the study ended and the individual did not experience the event of interest but theoretically they still could. For our purposes, cases were coded as “0” if the child was placed in a permanent setting during the study period (experienced the event of interest). Cases were coded as “1” and considered left censored if the case was closed during the study period without achieving permanency (e.g., the child aged out of care or ran away); and were coded as “2” and considered right censored if the child was still in care at the time the project observation period ended on September 30, 2012. Approximately 9% of FIC cases and 15.3% of control cases were considered left censored and 32% of FIC and 25.4% of control cases were right censored. In total, ninety-nine observations were censored (FIC = 40.8%, control = 40.7%) and 145 cases were in a placement planned for permanency at the last observation (FIC = 59.2%, control = 60%).

Analysis of the survival curves (Fig. 2) shows that for both groups the probability of not entering a permanent placement decreased as days of service increased. Results of the Mantel–Cox (log rank) ($X^2(1, 243) = .196, p = .658$), Breslow–Wilcoxon ($X^2(1, .030) p = .862$) and Tarone–Ware ($X^2(1, .071) p = .790$) tests for differences in survival curves each found that the time (days) to permanent placement between the groups was not statistically significant. It should be noted that we also computed survival curves stratifying by gender. The results showed that there were no statistically significant differences in days to permanency among males or females in either condition (results not shown).

4. Discussion

We used a randomized experimental design to examine the effects of intensive family finding services (FIC) on increasing family connections

and permanency among children in the foster care system. Specifically, we hypothesized that children in the FIC condition would have a larger number of family and informal connections engaged in service planning and more family team meetings than children in the control group. We also hypothesized that children enrolled in FIC would have lower rates of subsequent substantiated maltreatment and stronger permanency outcomes compared to those in the control group.

Results from the experiment found support for the effectiveness of the family finding model in engaging a larger number of family members and informal supports in service planning and in convening many more family team meetings than standard child welfare services alone. These results suggest that focused efforts on searching for and engaging family and kin can successfully expand the social support network for children placed out of the home.

The effectiveness of family finding in achieving permanency is more ambiguous. In strengthening the support network, family finding was more successful in assuring that every child had a solid emotional connection to at least one adult, demonstrating stronger relational permanency than standard child welfare services alone. Children receiving family finding were significantly more likely to be placed in relative adoptive homes and less likely to age out of care without permanency than children who received child welfare services without the family finding enhancement. Other types of placement outcomes—including reunification, adoptive placement with non-relatives, or remaining in foster care—did not differ between groups. The survival analysis confirmed that the length of time from group assignment to achieving physical permanency did not differ between groups. Finally, the likelihood of a subsequent child maltreatment report was similar between groups, suggesting that finding and engaging relatives in service planning does not affect this indicator of child safety.

4.1. Implications for child welfare policy and practice

Current child policy mandates that child welfare agencies undertake concerted efforts to identify, locate, and engage family and kin in planning for permanency for children placed in out of home care. This family finding project demonstrates that a broad range of family members and natural supports can be identified and involved in a child’s life, but this

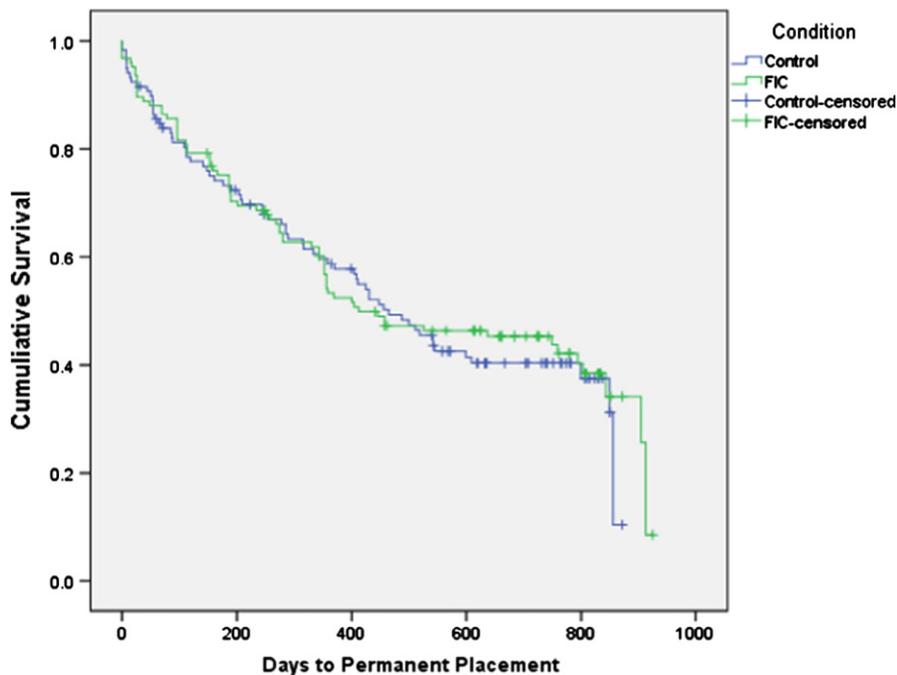


Fig. 2. Kaplan–Meier estimates of days to permanent placement for FIC and control (n = 243).

can take considerable time and effort to achieve. The FIC project used full-time Search & Engagement staff employed by a private child welfare agency working collaboratively with public agency caseworkers. With ever-shrinking state budgets, public/private partnerships might be the most promising means of accomplishing the work of family finding.

FIC was highly successful in finding and engaging families and in facilitating relational permanency for children. This is consistent with the programmatic literature on family finding, which while scant, identifies the key outcome as creating permanent family connections (Children's Defense Fund, 2010; Cromer, 2007; Wentz & Beck, 2012). With regard to physical permanency outcomes, the few extant evaluation reports provide ambiguous results. Two studies that measured physical permanency outcomes of family finding found results comparable to our FIC group; however neither contained a control or comparison group (Maïke et al., 2012; Marsh, 2005). Another program evaluation that limited cases to youth aged 11 and older study found that slightly more youth who received family connection services achieved permanency than those in a comparison group (Wakcher, 2010). The recently produced cross-site evaluation of 2009–2012 federally-funded family connections grantees reported mixed results across sites with regard to physical permanency outcomes (JBA, 2013).

In our experimental study, FIC children had a higher likelihood of adoptive placement with a relative and a lower likelihood of aging out of care without permanency; but other physical permanency outcomes did not differ between the groups. Relative adoptive placement appears to represent the strongest degree of permanency possible with family other than reunification. Youth aging of care without permanency is a population of great concern in child welfare, given the often grim outcomes for these young adults (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). The fact that family finding was significantly more successful than standard child welfare services alone in facilitating permanent family placements and reducing the likely of youth aging out of care without permanency speaks to the intervention's effectiveness for certain types of permanency outcomes. With hindsight, it might have been overly idealistic to expect that strengthening family connections and involvement would necessarily result in more expeditious physical permanency across the board. All children in the study were involved with a child welfare system in which decisions about placement are controlled by the child welfare agency and court and follow a series of decision points and hearings. And although the S&E was a part of this process, s/he had limited authority over decision-making.

Results regarding child safety were similar between groups, and we conclude that the expectation that children receiving family finding and engagement services would have fewer confirmed maltreatment reports was erroneous. With a greater number of family and informal supports involved with the child and more frequent team meetings to discuss issues, there may have actually been greater opportunities for mandatory reports to express safety concerns—a phenomenon that has been described in the literature as a surveillance effect (Chaffin & Bard, 2006).

In assessing what we have learned about family finding for child welfare policy and practice, the greatest “unknown” is whether or not there is a long-term benefit in finding and engaging families in facilitating permanency for children. Our study period was limited to the two and one-half years of FIC's service provision. Whether the family relationships established and supported will be maintained over the long-term and provide benefits to the child that cannot be imagined, much less measured in the short term, remain an unanswered question at this time.

4.2. Study limitations

We note several limitations of the current study. First, perfect randomization was not possible to achieve due to the sibling group exception; however this modification was necessary in light of the

family-focused nature of the intervention. Second, the data sources for the experimental and control groups were not identical. Some data, such as demographics, placements, and maltreatment reports, were provided through the same source. The experimental group had a database specifically designed to capture process and outcome measures, whereas data for the control group were extracted manually from case records. We cannot rule out the possibility of errors in either case or know with certainty the direction of those errors. However since the project was focused on enhancing family connections, the database for the experimental group may be more reliable and complete in terms of family engagement than the data recorded in DHS case records. The research team strived to achieve the most accurate data possible by reading all case notes, court reports, service plans, family team meeting and provider notes, but if family engagement efforts were not recorded anywhere, then these were not captured in this study.

A third limitation stems from the size and heterogeneity of the study sample. Children in this study represented a wide range of situations, from first time placements to children with serious mental health problems to older youth on the brink of aging out of care. Given this diversity of children within a relatively modest sample size, further examination is needed to evaluate whether family finding produces different results for specific sub-populations. Fourth, the window of observation for the entire study spanned two and one-half years, which did not allow us to observe outcomes for all children.

5. Conclusions

This randomized experiment testing a model of intensive family finding found that enhancing standard child welfare services with a family search and engagement component resulted in a greater number of family and kinship supports for children in out of home care, more frequent team meetings to discuss progress toward permanency, and a greater likelihood that a child would have at least one supportive emotional connection with a consistent adult. Intensive family finding also resulted in a higher likelihood that a child would achieve permanency through adoptive placement with a relative, and a lower likelihood of aging out of care with no permanency. The outcomes of reunification, non-relative adoption, and guardianship were no different for children who did and did not receive family finding services. As a method for strengthening family connections, the evidence in support of family finding is clear. As a mechanism for physical permanency resolution, the evidence from this experiment indicates a need for further research on the effectiveness of family finding for specific permanency outcomes.

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