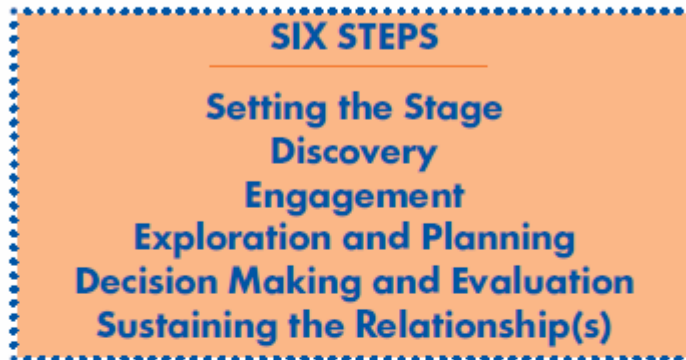


SIX STEPS TO FIND A FAMILY: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement (FSE)⁹

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"They're always talking about this permanency stuff. You know social workers. . . always using these big social work terms to talk about simple things. One day, one of them finally described what she meant by permanency. After I listened to her description, which was the first time anyone ever told me what the term meant, I said, "Oh, that's what you mean? Yeah, I want permanency in my life. I don't think I ever had that! When can I get it?"
-- Youth in foster care.



STEP 1: SETTING THE STAGE

GOAL :

The youth, social worker, supervisor, caregivers and professionals gain a clear understanding of the Family Search and Engagement (FSE) process and how to safely and successfully support these activities.

PRACTICE STEPS:

- A. Social worker and supervisor discuss the definition of permanency and philosophical and clinical issues regarding permanency.
- B. Social worker and supervisor determine the timing of the youth's initial participation. Only in rare cases of mental health concerns will the youth be unable to participate in the process from the beginning.
- C. Social worker and supervisor decide who is the best person to work with the youth on family search and engagement.
- D. Person designated to work with the youth introduces FSE to the youth and explores what the youth may want from connections.
- E. Youth and person designated explore youth's known family network (including fictive kin, siblings and half siblings in care).
- F. Youth and social worker identify and involve professional and non-professional partners. Social worker orients partners to the FSE process.

⁹ Developed by The National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPPP), Hunter College, and California permanency for Youth Project (CPYP)

EXPLANATION:

The supervisor and social worker assess any questions or fears they themselves have about beginning the process. Supervisor and social worker prepare the youth and the initial professional and non-professional persons involved with the youth for the family search and engagement process (FSE) and address clinical and logistical considerations.

STEP 2: DISCOVERY

GOAL:

Knowledge of a large pool of family members and significant adults, some of whom will establish connections and join the team to assist and support the youth's quest for permanency.

PRACTICE STEPS:

- A. If you haven't already talked with the youth about whom the youth knows, talk to the youth.
- B. Review the case for persons currently in the youth's network. Include known fictive kin, siblings and half siblings in care, step siblings and adopted siblings.
- C. Contact mother, father, and professional and non-professional persons who are part of the youth's life to obtain information on potential connections. Take special care to look for paternal relatives, who have sometimes been ignored in the past.
- D. Follow the agency's guidelines for due diligence, permissions and confidentiality.
- E. Mine the file and other important records.
- F. Use Internet search engines to find lost contacts.
- G. Document your findings.
- H. Start engaging connections immediately. You will continue to search for more connections but don't wait to contact those whom you've found. FSE isn't a linear process.
- I. Keep the youth, the team and contacts informed about progress.
- J. Talk with the youth again. The youth will remember more each time.

EXPLANATION:

Success is achieved when the family is extensively known. We look for a large number of relatives because:

1. Most families have dozens of relatives, even if they don't keep in touch.
2. With a large number of relatives, you're likely to find relatives who are currently raising children well, thus countering the attitude that "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."
3. "Reasonable efforts": You want to assure enough of the family was contacted to give the youth a chance for permanency with his family.
4. Because a youth may have serious difficulties, you need several persons to provide support.

STEP 3: ENGAGEMENT

GOAL:

Those who have an inherent, or historic, connection to the youth share information about the youth, are cleared on safety as needed, begin to establish a connection with the youth, and, if they are not already on the team, join the team.

PRACTICE STEPS:

- A. Develop an individual engagement strategy for how each person will connect with the youth and support permanency efforts.
- B. Prepare for the first in-person visit between youth and important adults.
- C. Keep the youth informed of the process.

EXPLANATION:

Persons who have been found are contacted, as appropriate, to begin the process of engaging with the youth and join the youth's permanency team. Because FSE is not a linear process, a social worker may have begun Step 3 as soon as a particularly suitable person was discovered, but will simultaneously be working on Step 2, Discovery.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION AND PLANNING

GOAL :

A functioning team composed of the youth, family, professionals, and important others explores options and takes responsibility for finding permanency for the youth.

PRACTICE STEPS:

- A. Merge the newly identified family members and others with the existing youth permanence team.
- B. Prepare self, youth (if not done already) and others for participation.
- C. Clarify the team's goal and what you expect of participants.
- D. Help the team explore options and assign tasks.
- E. Set timelines and monitor progress to assure that tasks are completed.
- F. In rare cases the youth may not meet with the team. Even so, keep the youth updated every step of the way.

EXPLANATION:

We may have begun the team in Step 1, 2 or 3. In Step 4, we begin active decision-making. Now the social worker is not the only person responsible for decision-making, but joins the team in exploring options and making decisions as a group.

STEP 5: Decision Making and Evaluation

GOAL:

The team, including the youth and social worker, develops an individualized plan for legal and emotional permanency, a timeline for completion, a process for ongoing monitoring of progress, and a contingency plan.

PRACTICE STEPS:

- A. Team evaluates the permanent possibilities for the youth.
- B. Team devises a primary plan and backup plans.
- C. Legal issues are explored specific to reunification, adoption, guardianship, kinship foster care and non-legal formal commitments.

EXPLANATION:

By the end of Step 5, the youth and the team will have a realistic plan for the youth's future and long-term support. Team members will have committed to doing their part to support permanence.

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STEP 6: SUSTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP(S)

GOAL:

The youth, family and team has a plan to support the young person and her family, has achieved legal or non-legal commitments, and has organized the necessary resources to maintain permanency.

PRACTICE STEPS:

- A. Review contingency plans.
- B. Review legal status and less formal commitments.
- C. Review formal and informal resources for family members and others to help support permanency.
- D. Prepare the team to be self-sustaining.

EXPLANATION:

The youth is now either living with family or on the verge of living with family who will support the youth throughout life. Without supports for the family and youth, the normal challenges of life and adolescence can disrupt the permanency. The long-term plan is reviewed to ensure that the contingency plan is sufficient. At this point, the social worker serves as a resource for the team.

Social worker:

"I had a case where a teenage girl was on the run. The police picked her up and called me at 7am on a day I could not cancel scheduled appointments. I needed help. I had used the time when she was on run to work with her two aunts, so, when this call came, I called her aunt at 7 am. "Eunice," I said, "I need your help." And she helped - she came, she took the girl! Before, I never would have done that but I had gotten to know Eunice as we worked on the case, so I felt that maybe I could call her and ask for help, even at 7am.

You do need a family to be involved as much as you are. I'm less stressed and anxious about having to do everything myself, less fearful that I'm making a mistake. I think maybe I'm more comfortable with my judgement because I have more tools and i'm not doing it all alone."

