

Increasing Kinship Care Placements and Support through better Family Finding and Engagement



With an overwhelming evidence base that kinship care placements are better for children, states, counties and private providers seek to increase their kinship placement for youth in foster care as well as engage kin in other support roles.

While the goal is clear, success is challenging. Based on interviews with more than 40 agencies across 10 states, the following issue paper outlines the key challenges and success factors to increasing kinship care placements and summarizes how technology can help practitioners better identify and engage kin and save worker time.

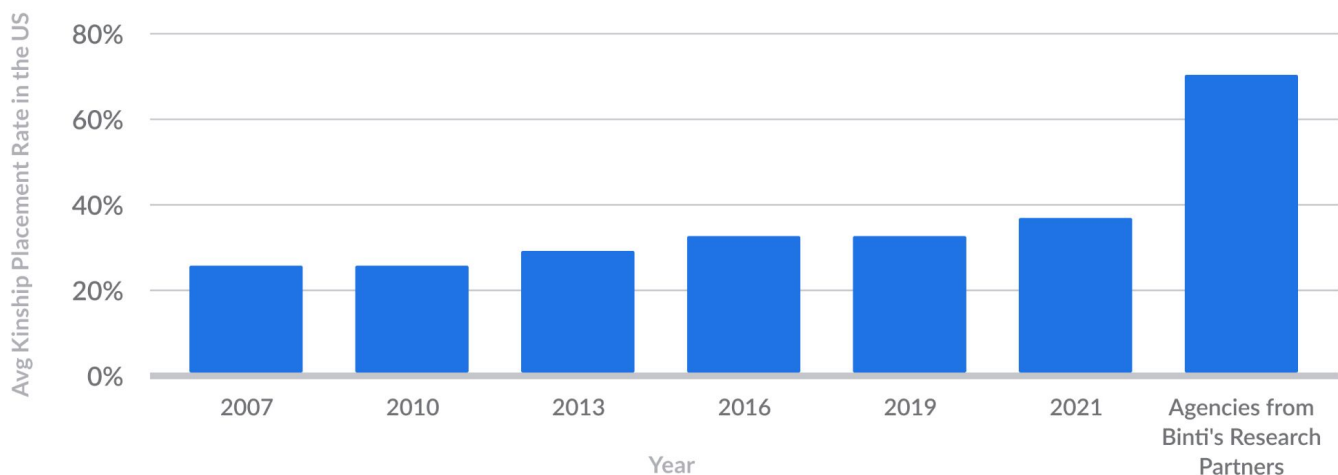


Overview of the current state and challenges of Family Finding practices across the U.S.

An in-depth review of 120 research studies concluded that children and youth placed within kin networks experience more stable placements, have better mental and emotional outcomes, and have more intact family relationships ¹. According to a study done in 2017 ², children who are able to gain kinship supports during their time in care were statistically less likely to re-report maltreatment and re-enter care after exiting, and generally had more favorable exit outcomes resulting in a higher rate of reunification or permanency with kin than their peers without kinship support.

The national kinship placement rate increased from 28% to 35% ³ between 2009 and 2019 ⁴ due to practice changes, new legislation, and additional funding for Family Finding and Engagement Services. While slow progress is being made nationally, the significant disparities across states and within states offer an opportunity to accelerate improvement by identifying barriers, best practices, and technology solutions curated to overcome those barriers and enable effective and efficient practice.

Child welfare has the potential to dramatically increase kinship placement rates based on promising pilots



Family Finding is the act of looking for relatives and fictive kin of children in or at risk of entering foster care. The goal is to find and nurture healthy adult relationships for a child and identify placement opportunities where the child feels safe and loved. Family Finding is increasingly becoming the focus of government funding and legislation including Families First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and recent state legislation in Arizona ⁵, California ⁶, and Pennsylvania ⁷.

While the increasing attention and support for Family Finding radiates hope for better futures and outcomes for children, effective Family Finding requires significant investments today because the process is labor-intensive.

Challenges in Family Finding Culture and Practices

1. Garnering buy-in across departments and roles is one of the most crucial yet difficult aspects of Family Finding.

A practice change to prioritize kinship placements requires the hard work of changing agency culture. Interviewees reported that stakeholder buy-in across all levels of the organization and the stakeholders outside the organization presented a challenge and required purposeful change management practice to achieve. Family Finding specialists have stated despite their efforts to identify supportive relationship opportunities, there are instances where alternative decision makers, such as primary case workers or judges, may interpret the situation differently and impede the placement.

2. Policies that narrowly define family and exclude fictive kin, or adults not related by blood, narrow the search and pool of adults available for placement and to provide other supports.

Expanding the definition of kin allows caseworkers to identify and locate many more connections to provide support for the child and their caregivers. Whether a neighbor, a teacher, a coach, or other community members, these connections can provide accountability and support for the family and the child.

3. Measuring success by kinship placement rates alone disregards a child's need for relational and cultural permanency.

The most successful agencies were focused on both placement and establishing an expansive network of supportive adults and an engagement strategy that meaningfully connected children across the life of the case. That network of supportive pillars can include a placement, but should also include those willing to drive the child to after school activities, call the child on a periodic basis, spend holidays with the child, or even send a card on their birthday.

4. Prescribing relationship “worthiness” introduces bias that often leads to missed opportunities.

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

- a. **Bias against a child’s family of origin**, stemming from the train of thought that “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” and that the child needs to be placed far away from their family of origin so that they don’t repeat the same patterns of behavior. This can lead decision makers to prioritize community care over kinship care.
- b. **Bias towards identifying and engaging maternal family members over paternal family members**, which significantly reduces the number of connections found.
- c. **Overlooking key members who are critical sources of information, based on system involvement**. Multiple interviewees shared that incarcerated family members, who couldn’t be a placement option themselves, ended up providing the most information about various connections and their relationship dynamics, even leading to successful placement options.

5. Agencies often lack the proper resourcing, tools, and skills to invest in better Family Finding practices.

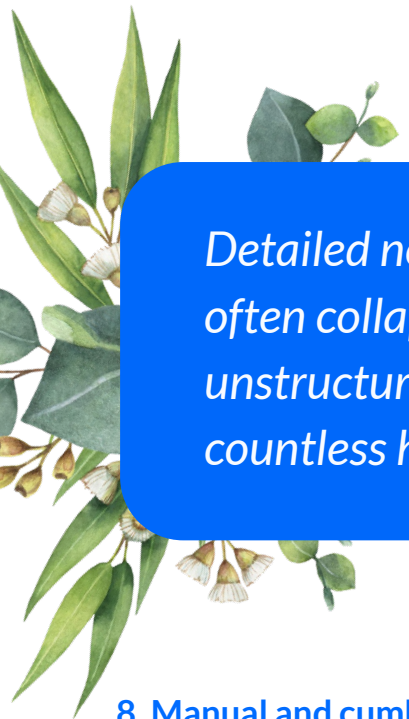
Without adequate staffing and funding for tools and services, agencies struggle to train staff, carve out time for Family Finding, and invest in the tools and services to enable effective and efficient services. The most successful agencies have dedicated, well-trained staff that have the technology services (to search for kin) and tools (to manage the data and enable the workflows) to succeed.

6. Navigating complex family dynamics to engage relatives and kin is one of the most challenging parts of Family Finding.

Legal and resource constraints and short timeframes frequently lead to an abrupt, impersonal approach to engaging kin that deters involvement. The sensitivity around child removal within a family network and the significant commitment required for placement make these engagements difficult, requiring training to equip workers and adequate time for an appropriately empathetic conversation.

7. Poor communication channels and fragmented workflows add to the time and efforts needed to conduct Family Finding.

Agencies with dedicated Family Finding workers face challenges exchanging data and communicating among workers doing family finding, placement, and carrying ongoing cases. Family Finding specialists encounter difficulty obtaining access to case information and engaging in conversations with relevant parties. Conversely, placement and/or case-carrying workers face challenges in accessing the work and documentation undertaken by the Family Finding specialists.



Detailed notes from Family Finding & Engagement efforts are often collapsed into a single case note and stored as unstructured data, which then get buried or forgotten - losing countless hours of work and critical information.

8. Manual and cumbersome workflows require duplicative efforts.

Agencies shared that the current Family Finding process is currently very manual, fragmented and requires entering the same information in many systems because workers utilize various tools and systems of record to conduct investigative searches, track the relationships, create a genogram, notify and engage relatives, and to document all of these combined efforts somewhere.



1. Create a cultural shift towards prioritizing relational permanency with a child's relative and kin

a. Obtain leadership buy-in to advocate for and implement family finding practices and outcomes

- i. In 2009, Westmoreland County, PA worked with their local American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law Permanency Barriers Project to make changes to agency policies that removed barriers to kinship care and elevated the importance of kin. In the 10 years since then, they've seen the use of kinship care increase 281% while traditional foster care decreased 30% ⁸.
- ii. Allegheny County created a strong culture of "families first" among their caseworkers and judges, resulting in an 82% decrease in the use of congregate care and a 45% increase in kinship placements ⁹.

b. Offer trainings to combat personal biases and make trauma informed decisions

- i. Bias training is important for all decision makers involved from the case workers, to the agency director, and even judges ¹⁰ to ensure that they are reflecting on and identifying their own implicit biases.
- ii. Making trauma-informed decisions by understanding and leveraging Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores is crucial for reducing further trauma and producing healthier outcomes for the child.

c. Establish policies & practices to keep each other accountable

- i. New Mexico implemented a policy that requires a Director to sign-off on any placement with non kin, which has contributed to an increase from 3% to 40% kinship placements ¹¹.

2. Remove legal, social, and financial barriers to allow for a broader set of kin to support children in care.

Many states have already shifted towards a broader definition of kin to include non-blood related relatives that have a pre-existing positive relationship with the child, and implemented policies to always ask about Indian tribal ancestry. In the state of Arizona, there has recently been legislation

crafted to increase kinship caregiver stipends, which has historically been a huge barrier for kinship supporters. By removing these barriers and supporting kin in their journey as relational supports, states give children the best chance at relational permanency.

3. Engage kin more successfully by using a more empathetic and open-minded approach.

Conversations with relatives and kin about their involvement in the child welfare system can be daunting and sometimes scare relatives away from being involved. Taking a more empathetic approach that builds trust and allows them the flexibility of engaging with the process in ways most comfortable to them (not solely focused on placement) can yield more successful engagements.

4. Consult youth to map out meaningful adult relationships that matter to them.

Youth are often overlooked as a resource to identify the meaningful relationships in their lives and their preferences for care. Rhode Island adopted a practice of speaking with each youth in group home facilities to discuss their placement options, resulting in moving many youth from group homes into kinship placements ¹².

5. Invest in a dedicated Family Finding team with specialized skills and resources.

A team dedicated to family finding provides a proficient, skilled workforce that can provide timely services without interruption because of emergent health and safety priorities. California funded grants in February 2023 for Family Finding and Engagement that will allow agencies to invest in making their processes and teams more robust ¹³.

6. Use visuals to better understand the relationships in the child's life.

Using an online genogram or other visualization tool (e.g. ecomaps, life books) enables workers to identify and engage additional kin, including identifying gaps in parts of the family tree with less kin identified that deserve more research.

7. Make plans to utilize the supportive relationships identified.

Implementing policies to invite (or even require) volunteer connections to attend family meetings can help children feel better supported and help meet gaps in service. Examples include Ohio where some counties employ Youth Centered Permanency Round Tables where youth invite a support person to participate in discussing permanency and support options for the youth ¹⁴. New Hampshire implemented the Permanency Pact ¹⁵ through Foster Club that invites and sends supportive materials to the adult supporters identified (up to 45 people) to be a part of goal setting meetings.

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

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

1. Exhaustive in-app search reduces the number of tools needed and saves case workers from manual entry.

Conduct diligence searches across multiple online databases and social media websites to find relatives and kin without leaving the Binti platform. This feature significantly reduces the time and manual effort spent on family finding by empowering caseworkers to easily find relatives and kin and then seamlessly import their information into Binti. The in-app search is integrated with the rest of the family finders' workflow, which means the workers do not need to manually enter information from the search tool into another tool to document their efforts as they currently do.

2. Cloud-based, mobile friendly software allows for effortless collaboration between workers anywhere, anytime.

























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

3. Automated outreach, documentation, and reminders simplify workflows while ensuring data quality and timely engagement.

Our templated bulk outreach feature allows caseworkers to quickly and easily notify dozens of relatives and connections with a single click. Workers can send bulk emails and texts or print letters en masse, with all outreach efforts automatically logged in the system. Workers can also set periodic reminders to follow up with specific connections. Having an automated and digitized outreach system keeps your caseworkers organized while saving them time and effort.

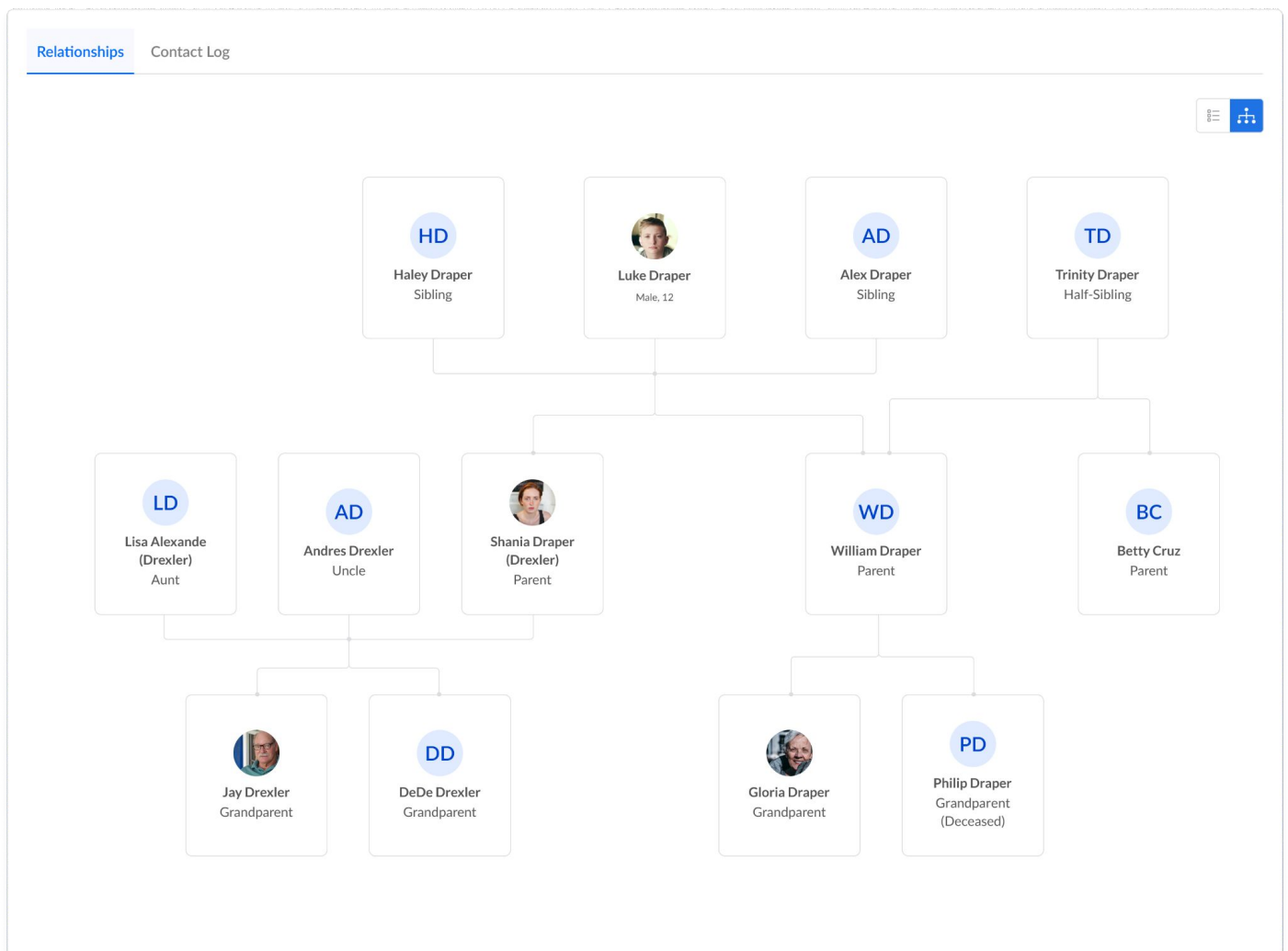
4. End-to-end documentation in a single tool streamlines your agency's workflows and saves case workers time and effort

Streamline workflows by documenting everything in Binti's Family Finding module. Our relationships dashboard provides an easy-to-use interface for tracking search results, outreach and notification attempts, and relational information, keeping your caseworkers organized and informed. One centralized hub keeps your data up-to-date and accurate.

Name	Relationship Type	Contact Status	Level of Support	Placement Option	Relationship Status	Controls
 Jay Drexler	Grandparent	Successfully Contacted 3/13/2023	Placement Provider Supportive Relationship Visitation Support Childcare Support Transportation Support	Current Placement	Close	  
 Elsu Pompey	Cherokee Tribe POC	Successfully Contacted 3/13/2023	Placement Provider Supportive Relationship Visitation Support Childcare Support	Recommended	No Relationship	  
 Gloria Draper	Grandparent	Successfully Contacted 3/13/2023	Emergency Placement Respite Caregiver Financial Support	Willing	Close	  
 FD Lisa Alexander	Aunt	Successfully Contacted 3/10/2022		Unwilling	Contentious	  
 Matthew Draper	Uncle	Attempted to Contact 3/10/2022				  
 MD Manny Delgado	Neighbor	No Contact 3/13/2023				  

5. Dynamic and nuanced genograms allow for greater insights into family dynamics and history for everyone involved.

Families can be complicated and relationships are complex. Our proprietary genogram software generates documented relationships into a family tree, saving your caseworkers precious time while mapping out opportunities for relational support and highlighting areas that need more attention. This genogram also serves as a powerful relational resource for the child or youth in care.



6. Advanced insights and analytics empowers workers with business critical information and performance data.


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

7. Integrated Machine Learning (ML) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) capabilities help your agency advance their processes.

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

8. Data interoperability and quality via APIs allow seamless integrations with your CCWIS/SACWIS.

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



About Binti

Binti builds modern, mobile-friendly Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solutions focused on driving measurable results and promoting quality practice in Child Welfare to ensure that every child has a fair chance at life. Binti launched in 2017 and due to measurable results, has quickly expanded to work with over 400 agencies in 34 states (including 10 statewide implementations), serving 38% of the children in America's child welfare system. Binti's current modules are Licensing, Placements, and Case Management.

Binti is excited to launch its newest module, Family Finding, in 2023, incorporating each of the 8 ways technology can support family finding and engagement in this white paper. If you'd like to learn more about Binti's family finding research findings or software, please reach out to us at partnerships@binti.com.

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