



## **Finding and Engaging Families for Youth Receiving Residential Interventions: Interviews and Examples**

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*The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views, opinions or policies of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration nor the Department of Health and Human Services.*



## Introduction

This document summarizes interviews and examples of youth and families who experienced and benefitted from family finding and family engagement activities during residential interventions. These examples highlight several realities of finding and engaging families. First, the family “finding” component is the easiest part of the work. The most critical aspect is family engagement- initially engaging the family members and keeping them engaged over time. The examples provided in this document also highlight that finding and engaging families is often a non-linear process, with times of successes, challenges, and disappointments.

Some of the examples illustrate how family members may struggle to address a youth’s complex needs and to manage challenging behaviors that the youth has learned over time, often due to experiences of trauma. This underscores how important it is for providers to stay actively involved throughout the process, to prepare the family by being honest about potential challenges up front, and to work with the family to develop comprehensive safety plans and transition plans that promote long-term success. The examples illustrate that while permanency and family reunification is often the key goal, it is not the only goal. Youth may still benefit from developing connections with family members and natural supports over time, and from learning more about their family of origin. The examples highlight the potential for youth to benefit from family connections, which can be especially healing for youth who have been disconnected from loved ones for long durations of time while in foster care or residential.

First, we present the summary of an interview a Building Bridges Initiative consultant conducted with a youth who experienced foster care and residential services and his older sister, who were reunited through the process of family finding and family engagement conducted at the Plummer Home in Salem, Massachusetts. Next, several family finding and family engagement examples are provided from Hillside Family of Agencies in Rochester, New York and Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington. All names and identifying details have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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### **Family Interview: Rashida and Jerome’s Story Courtesy of the Plummer Home**

Jerome and Rashida were reunited through family finding and family engagement services through the Plummer Home. Jerome is nineteen-years-old. He



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lost contact with his older sister, Rashida, when he entered the foster care system. Jerome and Rashida were reconnected several years ago, and have maintained close contact by phone and through in-home visits. At present, Jerome is planning to transition from an independent living program to living with Rashida.

Jerome and Rashida's mother passed away when Jerome was just twelve years of age. Jerome was sent to live with a relative, and he was soon removed from her home by child welfare and placed in foster care. Rashida and numerous other family members were unaware of Jerome's placement in foster care.

As Jerome explained, his social worker at the Plummer Home inquired about family relationships and connections. Jerome was interested in being reconnected with his sister and uncle. As Jerome explained, *"I let my social worker know, and she helped me to reconnect to the family that's closest to me- that's my sister and my uncle."* When the social worker contacted Rashida, she was very upset to learn that Jerome was in foster care: *"It was so abrupt, and it came out of the blue."*

After the initial contact by the social worker, Rashida and Jerome began speaking over the phone. As Rashida explained, *"I wanted to understand what happened from his perspective."* They were able to reconnect and reengage through these early phone contacts. Eventually, a visit was scheduled at the Plummer Home with staff present. Jerome explained that, *"Honestly, the visits weren't anything special, but it was so helpful to talk to people I actually felt comfortable with. My sister and uncle also helped me to reconnect with other family members."*

The visits between Jerome and Rashida were scheduled for a couple of hours at the office initially, and Jerome was able to eventually visit his sister in her home. Jerome explained, *"The Plummer Home gives me passes and money for transportation to visit my sister."* Rashida explained that the visits were sometimes difficult, as it was upsetting when Jerome had to leave. *"It was really difficult for me when he left. It was terrible, I couldn't stop crying. He was like my baby [when we were younger], I brought him everywhere with me."*

At present, Jerome and Rashida speak over the phone and visit one another at least monthly. Jerome has also reconnected with his uncle, whom he describes as a father figure. Jerome is planning to soon move in with Rashida, which they are both looking forward to. Jerome explained, *"I'm older now and she trusts my judgment and I trust hers. If there are certain things she's worried about, she'll let me know. I grew up to be respectful, respectful to elders. If I got my work done, I would be rewarded. If I did the opposite, I wouldn't be. That's how it is with my sister since she took my mother's place."*

When asked about their perspectives on the family finding and family engagement process, both Rashida and Jerome emphasized how it allowed them to reconnect, and how it is important for all residential programs to explore. Jerome explained, *"It worked well because it brought me and my sister a lot closer than we were. I was able to get those connections back and we were able to talk about the*



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*things that happened after my mother passed. We supported each other. We have always supported each other- I look out for her and she looks out for me. Family finding is important because if you really want that family member in your life, you can strive to grow that relationship.”* Rashida agreed and described the family finding process and continued engagement with the Plummer Home as especially helpful. *“The social worker calls me once every week or so instead of just when there is an issue, so I stay involved in what’s going on.”*

Jerome and Rashida also reflected on advice they would provide to youth and families regarding the family finding and family engagement process. Referring to youth, Jerome said, *“If they really want to reconnect with a family member, they should do everything in their power to go for it. Keep in mind that because of DCF regulations, the process will take a long time if you want to reconnect with family members. Take it with a grain of salt- you don’t want to rush into it, because a lot can happen. That person may not be who you thought they were, so keep your options open. It’s different for different family members and different youth.”* Rashida concurred with Jerome about the importance of tempering hopes and expectations: *“From my perspective and what I’ve been through, be realistic and don’t have expectations- baby steps- take it as it comes.”*

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### **Family Finding and Family Engagement Examples: Courtesy of Hillside Family of Agencies**

Hillside Family of Agencies provided the three examples below. Nika’s story highlights how the family finding and family engagement process does not always end in reunification, but how the information provided by family members can answer important questions for youth that promote a sense of family and cultural identity. Lisa’s story describes how adoptive and birth families were able to work together to ensure that she had the opportunity to develop relationships with a number of family members while in residential. Finally, Alex’s story describes how meeting his birthmother allowed Alex to obtain answers to important questions, which facilitated the healing process.

#### *Nika’s Story*

Nika had been living in an orphanage in another country after her parents died. An American family adopted her when she was 10-years-old. Nika struggled with the move to a new country, having to learn a new language, and trying to adapt to a new culture. Although her adoptive parents were very supportive, she was extremely distressed, and had a difficult time living with them.



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Nika was 17-years-old and living in a residential treatment program at the time family finding services were initiated. She had one request: *“Can you get me a picture of my birth parents? I used to remember what they looked like because I had a picture of them in my head, but now I have lost that picture and I can’t remember what they looked like.”* Hillside contacted the overseas adoption agency and the orphanage. Staff were able to talk with a nun at the orphanage whom Nika remembered as being very good to her. The nun provided Hillside with the address of an uncle with whom she had lived prior to the orphanage, and Hillside staff sent him a letter providing Hillside’s contact information and a request for a picture. After receiving this letter, the uncle immediately contacted Hillside by email and sent staff a wedding picture of Nika’s deceased parents. When Nika saw the picture of her parents she exclaimed *“Now I can remember them again!”* Nika was able to start a regular email correspondence with her uncle, who was able to answer many of the questions she had about her parents, how they had died, and what their birthdays were so she could specially honor them on those days. Nika got answers to questions that had troubled her for years. The pictures, the email contact and the information proved very healing for Nika. She has now been discharged and is living with a family in the community.

### *Lisa’s Story*

Lisa is a 15-year-old girl who spent several years in foster care, and was eventually adopted at age 8. The adoption was an “open” adoption, allowing annual visits between Lisa and her birth mother. Lisa’s adoptive parents struggled to manage some of Lisa’s challenging behaviors, and eventually Lisa was placed in residential treatment.

Knowing that Lisa was lonely and isolated, the adoptive parents gave Hillside permission to learn what staff could about Lisa’s birth family. Hillside was able to reach out to the birth mother and husband, and Lisa’s grandmother, aunts and uncles. Recently, there was a groundbreaking meeting between Lisa, her adoptive parents and her birth family. Lisa reconnected with her 10-year-old brother whom she had not seen since he was a baby. Plans are now underway for Lisa to have regular and frequent contact with her birth family, as well as her adoptive family. Seeing her two families working together to make this happen, Lisa has been assured that her adoptive parents remain committed to her as ever, and that she will have the chance to experience commitment from both her adoptive and birth families who love her deeply.

### *Alex’s Story*

Alex is an 18-year-old who was living in a residential program at the time family finding was initiated. Alex had been freed for adoption at age 8 and was



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adopted by a wonderful family when he was 10, but he never forgot his birth family and asked if someone could help find them. The adoptive family gave Hillside the information they had, and staff were able to locate Alex's birth mother, his grandmother, and older sister.

All these birth family members lived a considerable distance away. Contact began with phone calls, emails and Skype, and then arrangements were made to meet Alex's older sister and then his birth mother in person. This reunion was extremely healing for Alex and his birth family. The contact allowed Alex to get some answers about how his family got separated over the years. When they spoke, he asked his birth mother, *"Why did you let this happen?"* She explained the traumatic circumstances of their life and said, *"I'm sorry for all I put you through."* Then a few minutes later, his birth mother asked, *"Will you forgive me?"* Alex replied without hesitation, *"I forgive you."* More healing happened during the conversation than happened in the many years of their separation.

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### **Family Finding and Family Engagement Examples: Courtesy of Catholic Community Services**

Catholic Community Services (CCS) provided the following two examples. Isaac's story highlights how family finding and family engagement is not always an easy or straightforward process. By continuing to reach out and facilitate contact between Isaac and different family members, he was eventually able to move in with an aunt, reduce some of his challenging behaviors, and regain a sense of hope and belonging. Aidan's story highlights how loss and trauma can profoundly impact youth, making family connections and reunification especially important. While Aidan was not able to reunite with a family member immediately, with repeated efforts, he was able to reconnect and live successfully with a caring aunt.

#### *Isaac's Story*

Isaac was referred to Behavior Rehabilitation Services (BRS) when he was 14-years-old. BRS provides stabilization and permanency to children who have had difficulty in the foster care system to help them reduce behavioral problems and reunify with their families or find other permanent homes. Prior to this referral, Isaac had lived with his mother and stepfather until he was removed due to abuse. He then lived off and on with his grandmother for a few years. However, she became exhausted and was unable to continue caring for him. His siblings continued to live with her.

Isaac had been in a few different therapeutic foster homes since his removal from his mother's home, and subsequently his grandmother's home. He



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demonstrated challenging behaviors in the homes; at the time of referral he was described as defiant of authority, had trouble understanding personal space, and often interrupted conversations. Isaac also had trouble with his memory at times, struggled with impulsivity and inattentiveness, and could become quite agitated.

Further complicating foster care placement, a few years earlier, Isaac had been convicted of sexual assault of a six-year-old child. As a result, he could not be alone with children under age ten until his probation ended. Due to the challenging behaviors as well as a history of unsuccessful foster care placements, Isaac was referred to BRS services and was temporarily placed into one of CCS's therapeutic foster homes.

When staff met with Isaac, they found him to be easy-going and they began talking with him to identify his needs and goals. Staff began working with him to address grief and loss, as he had lost connections with multiple family members. He was also experiencing some bullying at school due to his sex offender status, so staff worked with the school counselor and other staff members to address these issues. Relatedly, staff worked with Isaac's probation officer and sex offender treatment counselor to make sure Isaac remained in full compliance with these programs. Another goal was to help Isaac re-develop a healthy sense of identity by recognizing and building upon his strengths; he enjoyed swimming, baseball, camping, and was very personable and likeable. However, he also experienced self-harm issues, so staff helped him develop safety and coping strategies. While many of his challenging behaviors decreased after starting BRS services, he still struggled with memory loss, symptoms of depression, and impulsivity.

CCS knows that when youth have lost connections with family, the best mental health 'treatment' is often reunification with family, so staff immediately began working to reconnect Isaac with his family members. CCS staff arranged and supervised monthly visits between Isaac and his brother, and also took steps to involve his sister in visits whenever possible. Staff also arranged visits with Isaac's father, mother, and grandparents. Throughout the intervention, Isaac's father was inconsistent with visits and expressed that he did not want to fully connect with Isaac until he was 18-years-old. Visits with Isaac's mother were also inconsistent; however, they were able to establish more frequent phone contact. Throughout all of this, Isaac expressed unconditional love for his family – even when they had not reciprocated.

As staff continued to work with Isaac to develop further family connections, they found his paternal aunt through Isaac's Facebook page. Staff contacted the aunt, Sue, who had not had contact with Isaac for many years. Sue was excited about the possibility of reconnecting with Isaac, so staff worked with the state social worker to facilitate all necessary background checks for Sue and her family. Following the completion of background checks, Isaac began weekly visits with his aunt, uncle, and cousins. These weekly visits improved Isaac's mood and behaviors dramatically. With support from CCS and the state social worker, Sue took necessary steps to have Isaac





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come live with her permanently. Following the successful completion of probation and required sex offender treatment, Isaac was cleared to move in with his aunt and her family. During the Christmas holiday in 2014, staff helped Isaac smoothly transition to Sue's home. He transitioned well to a new school and feels very supported by the school counselor. Isaac is now 17-years-old and is very happy to be living with family. In order to continue to increase family connections, Sue is now taking steps to have Isaac's younger siblings come live with her as well.

### *Aidan's Story*

Aidan was referred to FAST services at age 10. FAST is an intensive in-home intervention providing the full range of mental health services and supports, with the goals of safety, stabilization, child well being, and permanency. In early childhood, Aidan experienced the loss of his mother. When he was six-years-old, he was removed from his father's home due to abuse in the household. A few months prior to referral, Aidan's older brother committed suicide. At the time of referral, Aidan had been asked to leave his long-term foster home due to disruptive behaviors; he had been displaying aggression toward others and was very distressed and sad, expressing suicidal ideation.

In addition to the services described above, FAST provides temporary therapeutic foster care (up to 90 days), so Aidan was referred and placed into one of CCS's foster homes. As soon as he was referred, FAST team staff began working with he and his foster parent on safety strategies and coping skills, and at the same time began talking with him about what he really needed. CCS looked for the unmet need – to discover what was the 'hole in his heart'. He clearly wanted his family back and did not want to live in foster care. When discussing suicide ideation, Aidan reported *"I won't hurt myself; I just don't want to miss people anymore."*

Throughout the intervention, staff found Aidan to be very charming and self-determined, with goals of going into law enforcement or the military. He was well liked by his peers and was doing well in school, but he was desperately missing his family. During this time, the FAST team worked closely with Aidan's therapist and the social worker to identify new family members, promote family connection, and to develop a permanency plan for him.

The FAST team first contacted his uncle in Texas. Though it looked positive initially, that plan fell through. Then Aidan told CCS staff about a maternal aunt he remembered. With help from the state social worker, CCS staff found her name in old records and were able to contact her. She had not seen Aidan since the age of 5 or 6 and was so anxious to hear how he was doing. The team then focused on building a connection between them and increasing positive interactions. CCS engaged with the aunt, invited her to be part of the team, supervised visitation, coordinated supports



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for the aunt to utilize, and worked with her on managing Aidan's challenging behaviors.

With FAST services, the aunt was able to manage these behaviors (which had dramatically decreased) and was willing go through the steps to have him come live with her. CCS worked with her on getting background checks and other necessary items completed in order for placement to happen. By the end of the intervention, Aidan was able to move in with his aunt. One of the staff who worked most closely with him ran into Aidan at the public library recently. She said he is very happy – everything is going very well with his aunt and he loves his family.

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