



OUTCOMES MATTER:

Enhancing Practice-Transforming Lives

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FROM THE DIRECTOR: Family Search and Engagement

This issue of Outcomes Matter focuses on Family Search and Engagement (FSE). You will learn about the Beech Street pilot and hear from front line staff implementing FSE. There is a practice article as well as data that highlight the need to support children and youth in their connections and to work on getting them to permanency. As we continue to roll out all of our OM practices and strategies I encourage you to read, learn, question and participate in this unique opportunity to transform our child welfare system.

Our approach to implementing FSE was to pull it out as a distinct practice so workers could focus on learning specific tools and approaches through a pilot focused on children and youth in care for three or more years. But the principles, values, philosophy and practice skills support all functions in DFS. FSE dovetails perfectly with RDS, Safety Organized Practice, Team Decision Making and FAIR because all of them are family engagement strategies. Research shows that all child welfare outcomes are improved when families and youth have opportunities to engage in planning for safety, well-being and permanency. Family Search and Engagement therefore is relevant to every OM strategy and indeed is the glue that holds it all together.

Nationally, there is a paradigm shift in Child Welfare from a legalistic, forensic CPS approach by which family members are viewed only as a placement resource; to an approach that sees families via the lens of strength through connections. The new paradigm recognizes that children need as many people to care about them as possible and extended families have real meaning and significance in children's lives regardless of whether or not they are a placement resource.

Family search and engagement requires us to get out of our regulation mind set and use all our skills and judgment as child welfare professionals. We have to view each child's sense of safety and family connections individually. A child's world is much richer and more complex than a placement. We used to believe that when a child moved to adoption, the past was done; and perhaps some children were able and ready to move on. But many of us need that information about ourselves. We understand it's not a one size fits all approach for our youth, but we don't want to foreclose on the possibility that some of our youth need those relationships and access to their past.

For many years the vision and tag line for our department was think of the child first. Many of us hated that because it suggests that children live in a vacuum without their parents. Most of our children would say, when asked what they want, "I don't want to be hurt but I want to be with my family". Family engagement challenges us to remember where children came from and what they need. Even children who move on to adoption benefit if they can make peace with their lives. We can't separate out their past from their future. The majority of children served by foster care are reunified with their parents. There has to be a range of options for kids. The majority across the country goes home and we need to help strengthen families so they can protect their children. FSE supports reunification as the most likely outcome for our children and offers practice strategies and tools that support reunification from the beginning of a family's involvement with DFS. Whatever happened to make that child come into care, the parent's ability to stabilize, heal and prepare to parent again is contingent on the support they get from their extended family. FSE sets the stage for working with extended family and helping birth families build their safety network.

Foster families play a key role in building that extended family support and connections. They are the ones caring for our children and who know our kids in a way that most of us will never will. While we plan with a parent to receive their children back home, foster parents provide a great source of information about what a child needs and what works in the parenting of that child. If we can take that time and focus to place foster parents on our team they can be a great resource to us and a mentor and support to birth families. At the end of the day OM is about creating collaboration, developing relationships and building stronger teams so we can work together to impact outcomes for children and families in our system.

JUST AROUND THE CORNER

Family Search and Engagement will soon be implemented statewide. The Beech pilot project wraps up in June and once completed, we will have train the trainer sessions in FSE to help support the statewide roll out.

DFS is also looking to develop a contract with a marketing specialist who will work with the Foster Home Coordinators in developing a statewide marketing and recruitment plan to increase the number of foster parents in Delaware. This will allow our Foster Home Coordinators to do what they do best – support our foster families, while exploring new avenues in recruitment.



Practice Matters: Family Search and Engagement

The practices, tools and strategies that constitute family search and engagement support the goal of youth exiting care with enduring family relationships and lifelong connections to caring adults. In addition, when we practice with a view toward keeping children and youth in foster care connected to the adults who care about them, permanency outcomes are almost always improved. Casey Family Services (A Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood) defines achieving permanency as having an enduring family relationship that is: safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual well-being; and that assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history, traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language.

There are several values and principles upon which FSE practices, strategies and tools are based. These are: permanency for every child and youth who enters our care; inclusion in the planning process; individualized services and plans; honoring existing relationships, viewing each child/youth through their strengths; empowering children and youth through engagement and developmentally appropriate and trauma informed practice.

All children and youth have the right to be connected to their families and to have a sense of permanency. Permanency may be the most important outcome for children and youth in foster care. No child or youth should ever transition from foster care without permanent connections to family. In Delaware, the Child Welfare Strategy Group (CWSG) is supporting the implementation of FSE throughout the state. The first step was to roll out a pilot at Beech Street that focused FSE on the most vulnerable children and youth in our care: those who have been in out of home placement for 3 or more years. The implementation approach is based on the following steps:

Develop a search and engagement mindset

A search and engagement mindset represents a shift in thinking and practice which balances physical and psychological safety with well-being. The focus is on gathering information about extended family members and how they support and interact with the family vs. finding a placement. Particular attention is paid to exploring the paternal side of the family and adults are ruled in based on what they can contribute vs. ruled out if they can't be a placement. Lastly, there is an emphasis placed on clarifying history and life events for the children and youth in our care.

Identify significant adults

Significant adults are identified through interviews with parents, discussions with children and youth, through mining the case records, searching public records and databases and through formal internet searches.

Outreach/engagement strategies and building relationships

Once family members are identified outreach is critical. Adults need time to work through their issues about the system in general, their particular experience, and the parents of the children in care. It is important they have space and or time to work through their issues so they are able to focus on the needs of the children or youth involved. During this phase it is important for the child welfare professional to acknowledge where the child welfare system may have handled things badly in the past, take responsibility and help the family members focus on the task at hand. This is an opportunity for the worker to help the family build bridges from past to present relationships.

Facilitate team planning and decision making

Although there is no prescribed teaming model for the pilot, providing a venue for ongoing planning and decision-making is critical. Once adults are identified and engaged it is time to include them in planning for the child or youth. Planning is usually done in the context of a team meeting. Whenever possible the youth should be present at this meeting; but always their voice should be represented. Teaming promotes the sharing of information about current needs and provides opportunities to explore a variety of roles adults might play in the life of the child or youth. Teaming also provides an opportunity for the group to learn about changes in caretakers' circumstances and capacity and supports informed decision making. According to the American Humane Association teaming models result in increased child safety, expedited permanency, improved child and family well-being and enhanced family and community support networks. (AHA Protecting Children, vol. 23). This practice article was based on information obtained from the National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness. For more information go to <http://www.senecacenter.org/familyconnectedness>



VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

Interview with **Christine Montgomery, an early adopter of FSE in the Beech Street Pilot**

OM: Christine, tell us about your history with DFS.

CM: I have been with the Department for 21 years, starting in prevention and behavioral health. I have been with DFS for 8 years. My job is Family Service Assistant, and I am assigned to the adoption unit at Beech Street.

OM: What does your job entail?

CM: I assist the case workers with such tasks as providing transportation, supervising visits and taking children to appointments. I do anything and everything the workers need me to do. I support all the workers in the adoption unit and sometimes workers in treatment and investigation.

OM: What do you like about your job?

CM: I like the variety of the things I get to do. I have travelled all over. I have taken a child to Arizona to be placed with an adoptive family. I picked up a child in Oklahoma and brought her back here. I went on the Channel 10 morning show to talk about adoption, worked on Wednesday's child tapings and Heart Galleries as well.

OM: How did the FSE training change your work and shape your practice?

CM: It makes me really excited about reconnecting kids with their families. When I first came and was working with a young boy of 5, every time I took him somewhere he looked for the kind of truck his "pop-pop" [Grandfather] drove for work and asked if he could visit him. I asked the worker why this little boy wasn't allowed to see his "pop-pop" and was told that because of TPR the man was no longer related to this little boy and that connection no longer existed. It didn't sit well with me, but I accepted it because that was the way it was. Since the training, and nearly 8 years later, I am now getting ready to contact "pop-pop" to set up a time for him to see his grandson, who is now 13 years of age. They are going go-cart riding together.

OM: That's a great story. Can you give additional examples of how you are using the FSE approach in your work?

CM: One of the biggest take-aways from the training is straight talk and being honest with families. Now I want to make an apology to the family that the Department cut them out of this child's life because they were not a placement and that it took so long for us to bring them all together to plan for their involvement in his life. When I was able to say that to the family I could see them relax and let go of their anxiety and frustration and move on to have a great discussion about the future of this child.

I also want to talk with youth more about their family relationships and help them do some sense making and develop realistic expectations around what they can expect from those relationships. I see the importance of supporting the youth in exploring those connections and providing some controls over the process. Taking baby steps is really important. If it doesn't work with one youth, still try it with others. In one case I tried it, maybe too fast, so I learned each case needs to be individualized. It is also important to prepare both the youth and the adults for this reconnection work, to learn about their hopes and fears and to help them understand that their greatest expectations may not be realized.

OM: What advice would you give to workers who are skeptical or who just don't believe this is the right approach?

CM: I would ask them to look at what happens to kids that age out? Do they go back to family or have no one? Just think about that child's future. People don't like change. They think it's going to be more work for them.

OM: What are your hopes for FSE in Beech Street and the rest of the State?

CM: That it happens earlier in a case, so we don't have to apologize as much as we do now, that we find ways for people to stay connected with children and youth even if it's not as a placement. We now have to send out letters to relatives every year giving relatives an opportunity to be involved in a case, but that isn't enough. We need to continue to reach out to family, make phone calls and ask the child who might be able to provide support to them. I just think this is a great concept and I hope workers do as well along with Administration. Change can be hard but this is good for kids.

MEET OUR PARTNERS - Interview with Dr. Lynn Moyer

OM: Lynn, tell us about where you work and what you do.

LM: I work for Children and Families first (CFF), a statewide non-profit agency offering services throughout the state of Delaware. CFF provides community based services to people at all ages and stages of life including Nurse Family Partnership, Healthy Families America, Foster Care & Adoption, Eastside Community Schools, Adolescent Resource Center (ARC), Strengthening Families, Functional Family Therapy, Intensive Out Patient (therapy), Seaford House (residential for youth), Child Care referrals, Elder Care referrals, Just in Time Care, Grand Time Off and more. CFF has been around for more than 125 years.

I have been there 2 ½ years, in the Strengthening Families and My Life programs. I am now doing Family Search and Engagement and have been assigned cases in the Beech Street pilot. My title is Social Worker II.

Before I came to CFF I worked with children and adolescents with severe disruptive behaviors. I have a doctorate in special education with an emphasis on behavior analysis. I stayed home to raise my children and worked with folks in the community as an advocate for IEP's (Individualized Education Plans. I have facilitated Love and Logic Parenting classes and anti-bullying workshops too. I have four sons through adoption, one international and the others domestic; from ages 13-21. I am from New Jersey but spent most of my adulthood in Philly. We moved to DE 20 years ago.



OM: Tell us about the grant CFF received to do FSE.

LM: Laffey McHugh, a local foundation, gave us a one year grant to do family finding. We met with the department and worked out a contract; at about the same time the FSE pilot was getting started at Beech Street, so we decided to partner and refocus the original family finding focus of the grant to a broader FSE focus. CFF has ten cases in the Beech street pilot.

OM: What is FSE in your experience?

LM: FSE is a way to help children re-connect with people who they have lost in their journey through foster care. It can include birth family or other important people in their lives. It is a way to reengage with those relationships in a healthy and appropriate manner and it builds a safety net of supportive others who can follow them throughout their life.

OM: How does viewing the case through a FSE lens change the life of the case?

It takes a piece of what we do in My Life and it expands it and digs deeper. Part of the focus in My Life is to help children make sense of their past. But in FSE we take that piece one step further to actually establish those re-connections. What I am finding is that most kids do have those connections and are trying to make those relationships work on the sly; this is actually a way to bring everything into the light of day so we can support the kids as they are doing this work. This helps everyone to come together and be comfortable with these connections.

OM: So many people are afraid of this for kids. Can you speak to that?

LM: People are afraid because they don't have a lot of information about this process. Care givers might be afraid the relationships are not safe, or the child will go back to an environment that is not healthy. They fear child behaviors will escalate and become unmanageable. But when FSE is done in a thoughtful, managed way where appropriate boundaries and parameters around both physical safety and psychological safety are established it can be a vehicle for healing which ultimately supports a child in moving on. It is a very individualized case by case process based on child goals and current levels of connections.

OM: What are some of the key components of FSE that might be common to each case?

LM: You want to meet the child and learn their thinking around connections and reconnections. You generally want to mine the case file. Mining the file is about going back and reading that file with a fine toothed comb. We are looking for people who may have been involved in the child's life as an identified relative or a support person to the family. Also looking for lost others: coaches, teachers, and a counselor, anyone who had a connection with a child. We look for any type of expression of caring for a child or family. We are going to talk to the adults that are in the child's life currently to see what they know about lost connections. Once we have the information we start reaching out to those people and determine what kind of interest they might have in supporting this child and reengaging in the child's life. When we have identified a core group of supports, we start to have meetings about how this group of folks is going to be able to support the child. Sometimes the process results in one of those people providing permanency and other times it's about identifying the role the people will play. It always helps the youth get a clearer picture of his or her future. The end results look different for every child.

OM: What do you say to other professionals who think FSE in some fashion, isn't appropriate for all kids?

LM: Well to quote Darla Henry [the creator of the 3-5-7 model]: When we know better we do better. As the field changes, we learn new practices and realize that some of the traditional outcomes don't work for the kids. We know we need to change what we are doing to get a different outcome. Change can be bumpy and scary but we need to do what is best for the child. And that means we look at each child individually rather than taking a cookie cutter approach. But the goal remains the same: get kids to permanency as quickly as possible and in better shape than when they came into care. Historically we have focused primarily on physical safety but moving forward we know how important psychological safety is as well. Psychological safety depends on how self-identity and how the children make sense of their past, what happened to them, how did they get there where are they going and when and how will they know they belong. These are the five questions that are answered in the My Life Program that is based on Darla Henry's 3-5-7 model.

OM: What is it like to work with a youth around FSE?

LM: Sometimes when you first start working with children they are skeptical and untrusting. They put up many boundaries and barriers between themselves and adults in their life. Time needs to be spent gaining their trust and helping them see what benefits they will get out of the program. Once the child realizes what the focus of the program is in most cases he or she takes it very seriously and is fully engaged. Occasionally, there will be a child who is just not ready for this kind of work.

OM: What kinds of reactions are typical from youth who are doing this work?

LM: On the positive side children are finally given a voice and are better able to speak up and learn to advocate for themselves. They begin to speak about their past and engage more deeply in therapy around loss and attachment issues. But sometimes we see an increase in maladaptive behaviors; particularly when children are unable to express their emotions verbally and instead demonstrate their grief and loss through their behavior as they process.

OM: What would you say to a social worker who says I don't have time?

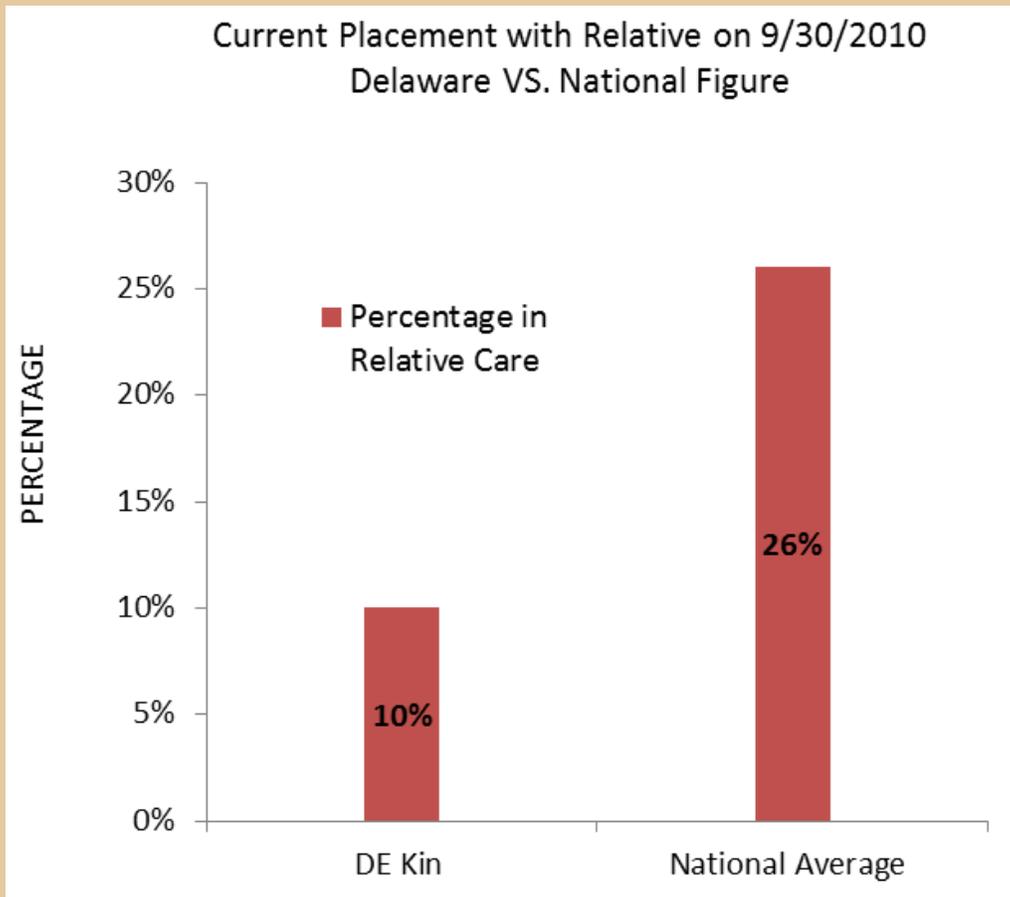
LM: When we make this shift in our practice it will actually save you time down the road because the child will be more engaged and open to meeting and working with you; their maladaptive behaviors will decrease and they will exit from care more quickly. Kids will be stepped down into family settings too. The shift to a family engagement focus will reduce work for everyone ultimately. The whole practice model is shifting to family connections and family engagement. It is deeper more meaningful work.

OM: So the Beech Street pilot focused on children in care 3 or more years. What will FSE look like as it moves closer to a child's entry into care?

LM: Instead of trying to re-establish connections, we will be focused on maintaining healthy supportive connections instead of having to go back and re-create them. The child won't go through the level of trauma, loss and grief that they go through now with our current practice model, which is basically to allow family and significant others to fade away. Family is let go. Sometimes workers believe family members don't deserve to stay connected to their kids because of the things they did. Visits need to be emphasized and maintaining connections is much easier than re-creating them later.

OM: What are your hopes for this work?

LM: My hope is that FSE becomes a routine part of our child welfare practice model from the beginning and that it can dovetail into the other family engagement practices such as My Life and TDM. As Darla says, now that we know better we are going to do better.



- Delaware is not fully accessing extended family as placement and support resources for children
- 10% of kids are placed with kin vs. national average of 26%
- Vast majority of kin placements are unlicensed
- Initial placement with relatives is low for all kids, especially older youth
- Only 20% of teens are placed with kin, either initially or during their foster care stay



WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Have a comment or question about Outcomes Matter? Please send an email to Eileen Welsh, eileen.welsh@state.de.us or call (302) 633-2657.