

# Family Connections and Networks - Practice Tips

Family connections and networks are the building blocks for long-term relationships and support in children and young people's (child) lives.

For a child in the Permanency Support Program (PSP), relational permanency is about having positive loving, trusting and nurturing relationships. This can include relationships with family, carers, community members and significant others.

Permanent relationships last a lifetime – long after you stop working with a child or the child is no longer in the PSP. Long-term relationships offer a child stability and a sense of belonging and as their life changes, these relationships give them access to support and help them to be more resilient in the face of adversity.

While you may find it hard at times to identify, develop and nurture family connections and networks, this work is critical for the child.

## Identifying Family and Other Important People

- Always engage and talk to the child to help you understand who is in their family and network. Explore their understanding through age appropriate conversations and drawings. Resources such as [Circle of Safety](#) can help you do this.
- Use language that is easy to understand and age and developmentally appropriate. Be curious and genuinely interested. Use exploratory questioning such as:
  - Who is in your family?
  - How big is your family?
  - What things are important to your family?
  - Who in the family always helps others?
  - Where are the places you have lived?
  - Who were the people around when you were growing up?
  - Who were the people that were there to help you?
  - Who are the people who know everything about your family?
  - Who is the knowledge holder in your family?
  - Who is the Elder/s in your family and community?
  - Who in the family knows everyone's business or knows the family gossip?

- When a child identifies a family member or other person, ensure you explore their name, nick name, the relationship, how old they are and where they live. Speak with them about what sort of relationship they have with the person and what they want that relationship to be like.
- Read the child's file for any names of people who have been a part of the child's life. Read all file volumes and look for details for both maternal and paternal family.
- Talk to carers to understand if the child has mentioned anyone. Children usually talk about their family in general conversation.
- Do online research, you could look at social media to identify further family members.
- There are a number of tools to support you with this work. Tools include ecomaps, [Genograms](#) and family trees and can help you describe a person, relationships and current connections.
- Always document all conversations and any research you have done on the child's file.

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"Joel hears what I want and makes it happen. Like the Family Group Conference when he called everyone on both sides of my family to make sure they came. I was a bit nervous, but Joel was there to support me. I felt like I had a voice, and everyone got to hear my ideas. I hadn't seen some of my family for a few years before Joel found them for me. He told them that we really need their help. Things are really good living with my aunty May. Now I get to just be a kid again." - Jalil, 14 years old

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## Children Have the Right to Honest Information About Their Family

Whether it is good or bad, this information is core to their identity and understanding of their story. Think about what information should be shared with a child, how it should be shared and who should share it. Even when attempts to find family connections and networks are unsuccessful, children will appreciate that someone at least tried to find family for them. Document all your attempts at finding family, this will help other caseworkers who follow you and the child as they grow into an adult.

## Initial Contact with Family and Other Networks

- Speak to family members if you have their contact details. This may include parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Ask them about their relationship with the child and what they would like it to look like.
- Speak to previous carers, teachers and any other relevant people.
- The stage where you are beginning to form relationships with potential members of the child's network is critical.
- Always explain who you are and why you have contacted them. Make sure the focus is always on a child's needs and wellbeing and how connections can be developed and maintained.
- Be open and actively listen to the person's story and thoughts. It's important to validate their feelings. Allow time for the person to share their story, don't cut them off. Develop a safe space for sharing so you can develop a relationship to build connections for a child.
- Remember some families may not have had positive interactions with child protection services. They may find it difficult to open up at first.
- Allow yourself to be vulnerable. If needed apologise for any previous interactions that may not have been positive.
- You need to be able to walk alongside the person and provide support. It needs to be an equal relationship. Never use your role as power.
- Answer any questions honestly. If you are unable to answer a question just say so.
- Make a note of important information such as the person's name, where they live, and if they are interested in becoming a part of the child's network.
- Talk about the child's needs for connection, culture and identity. Explain what the next steps would be if they wanted to develop a connection with the child and become a part of their network.
- Share your contact details and invite them to stay in contact, also ensure you maintain contact.
- Always document all conversations you have had on the child's file in a professional and strength-based manner.
- Make sure you do what you have told a family and child you would do. This is essential for building trusting relationships.

## Developing Relationships With Family and Other Important People

- Once you have made initial contact with any potential new members of the child's network, make a plan with them to maintain that contact. Be clear on what those plans are and how you will carry them out.
- This is a critical time to build rapport and trust. Remember trust takes time to build, and, depending on the person's experiences, a lot of effort. To help you build rapport, you could use the exploratory questions listed above in the identifying family and other important people section.
- Remember, identifying family connections and networks is always ongoing through the developing and nurturing stages.
- Be sure to share your progress with other people working with the child or who are in the child's life, for example their carer. Speak with them about how they can be involved in the process.
- Think about how you will share information with a child and who will share it with them.
- Work openly through any challenges that may arise.
- Again, don't forget to document your steps on the child's file.

## Nurturing Relationships with Family and Other Important People

- The nurturing stage of the child's network is ongoing and vital for the child's long-term outcomes.
- There should always be new members joining the network.
- Keep communication regular. Be open, transparent and respectful with all parties.
- Keep the child's needs at the centre of all conversations.
- You may need to navigate family relationships. This can be done through focusing on the child as adult relationship struggles are not a child's business. Speak with family about uniting around the needs of the child for connection.
- Work with family networks to set realistic boundaries, so everyone has ownership over them. Help families be clear about the purpose of family connections and their role in developing meaningful relationships.
- It's important you do not try to control the family and network, always walk alongside them and share your decision-making power with them.

## Reflecting On Your Practice When Working With Family and Community

Reflection will help you address assumptions, unconscious bias and stereotypes so they don't affect the relationships the child needs. Reflection will help you understand your bias and develop strategies to address them.

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Ask yourself: “Do you sometimes fear that children will be let down by family and do you think this impacts your attitudes to finding connections?” This is a reflection question that will help you to develop insight about your values about family connections and networks.

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In being reflective, you must challenge thoughts and assumptions, these include:

- the family do not care about the child
- the child does not have any family members or kin
- the parent's whereabouts are unknown, they need to contact the agency to establish family visit arrangements
- there is no father/mother
- the family refuse to work with the agency
- no one in the family want to have a relationship with the child as they would have come forward
- the family live too far away
- there is no attachment with family, the child is only attached to the carers
- they are difficult to work with
- they have had too many chances and have let the child down
- the family are all drug dependent, are troubled and violent
- they (family) do not put the child first as they are too worried about themselves.

Remember to:

- use reflective practice and supervision to explore methods of discovering and engaging family
- be open to challenging casework practice traditions where family was once considered to be just a child's parents and siblings, or looking for family and other important people in a child's life stopped when a child was in a stable placement

- consider how you have engaged the child in this process
- consider what roles family members and kin can provide to children even if they are unable to provide a placement.

For more information see [Reflective Practice](#) and [Family Connections and Networks - Overview](#).

## Tools To Support Family Connections and Networks

Regardless of the tools or models you use, it is your role to help ensure children have family and community networks.

### Kevin Campbell's Family Finding Model

Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) use Kevin Campbell's [Family Finding Model](#). Your organisation might too. To use this model, you need to be accredited.

Family finding deliberately de-links your role in finding family from finding a placement. These people can still play a significant role as part of the child's connection and be part of their lifelong network. And for some children, the network will ultimately help you to identify a permanent, loving home with extended family members.

### Family Group Conferencing

Use Family Group Conferencing as a way to bring you and the families you work with together to create a family driven plan about safety and wellbeing for the child. The system that can be used to support a child to safely stay with their family or to explore permanency options. Family Group Conferencing helps explore the roles different family members may take in supporting the child. Family Group Conferencing supports the PSP principals of family participation in planning and decision making.

### Group Reflective Practice

Use group reflective practice to help you explore any worries you may have about a child, family or other networks as well as identifying and addressing your assumptions and bias. It will help you share risk, consider alternatives and reflective on your power. Done well, group reflective practice can help you understand the experiences of a family and share decision-making with them.

Group reflective practice will help you make decisions about the most effective and ethical way to support them.

See [Group Reflective Practice](#) for more information.

### References:

Family Finding (2020). More About Family Finding. Available:  
<http://familyfinding.org/moreaboutfamilyfinding.html>