



Family Finding & Engagement

By Mike Mertz

Family Finding and accompanying permanency strategies are all about networks of natural supports for youth in the foster care system. Tactics to discover and initially engage these supports are clearly delineated in the practice model. Building upon the identification, notification and initial outreach process, the question remains: How can we effectively embrace and involve those that we are required to notify and offer/suggest their involvement? This piece explores effective engagement practice that utilizes narrative approaches in order to respectfully include the contributions of an often unrecognized group of connections.

A core construct of NIPFC's teaching and coaching of engagement work is constructed from practices that emphasize authentic and respectful curiosity. This wondering position is the cornerstone of work designed to discover and engage meaningful connections within the lives of youth in foster care. One aspect of practice within the Narrative Therapy literature offers a way to 'discover' lost relationships and re-engage in ways that are important to the youth and/or family. This practice was derived from the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1982) who was a cultural anthropologist who studied an elderly Jewish community in Venice, California. She discovered that one of the ways people in this community experienced themselves as alive was through connections with those who had passed on. They would gather and tell stories that included memories of important relationships that continued to shape them long after the loved was had died or moved away. Michael White took this work and applied it to a therapy context as a means to address the grief that people experience when important relationships come to an end in a physical sense. He refers to a club of life that people have that includes members who have contributed in some ways to their life. Membership status can be up-graded, down-graded, added or deleted depending on the person's preference. This work seems to fit nicely with the creation of natural support networks for youth and families who find themselves isolated within the foster care system. White called this work 're-membering' as it is the practice of creating a membership for one's club of life. White (2007) offers that there are multiple stories of identity available to people instead of a fixed notion of an essential self. By bringing forth preferred versions of identity we allow the youth to be seen in ways that they appreciate. From this territory of identity it becomes easier for the youth to want to connect with others. The people who hold these appreciative stories about the young person need not be around but their 'voice' can be represented.

One of the discovery strategies in Family Finding is the use of Mobility Mapping. In this work, the youth is walked through a process where they remember where they have lived and who were the important people in those locations. This inevitably elicits memories of the relationships that can be captured in order to help build a team of supportive adults. Many questions borrowed from 're-membering' practices can help to re-incorporate these lost relationships in ways that reduce the pain of isolation. When a youth identifies a caring supportive relationship from their past, the worker can use some of the following questions derived from narrative practices (adapted from the Dulwich Centre article Remembrance: Women and Grief Project):

- Are there things about the person that you still carry on?
- Are there particular values, or dreams, or ways of being you wish to continue?
- Who in your life would not be surprised to hear that you are connected to these values, dreams, ways of being? How do they know this about you?
- Are there ways in which you are already doing this? If so, could you share a story about this?
- What things do you think that person would want you to continue in your life?
- What stories about him/her do you think he/she would want passed on?
- When you think about this person what difference did they make to your life?
- What did you bring to their life that made a difference to them?
- What do you think this person would want for you at this point in your life?
- If they could consult on your situation would you want their advice/guidance?

These types of questions can be asked about people from the past who might join a team of natural supports for the youth or about people who have passed on but can still contribute to the direction of the youth's life. When re-incorporating these relationships the experience of going through the world alone is reduced. The youth can be re-connected to important people around shared values, hopes and dreams. They can stand on the knowledge that there are (were) people who knew them in the ways that they would like to be known. The fact that both the life of the youth and the other has been impacted by the relationship can open up doors for the youth to try to connect with a network of people.

Beth Root, a child protection worker from Minneapolis, has described her work as “mattering” people. She engages with caregivers and youth in a manner that helps them to feel as though they matter. Including lost relationships in the building of natural support teams is another way for people to experience themselves as mattering in the world. The fact that others have cared enough to contribute to the youth or caregivers lives in meaningful ways positions them as care-worthy. Inquiring about how the youth and/or caregiver contributed to the lives of the re-membered person invites an experience of successfully participating in a meaningful two-way relationship. Both of these experiences can assist the person to open up about connecting with others. This is more than a look on the bright side approach as it can allow the person to stand in a version of their identity that reduces the fear of connection.

Re-membering practices also bring in conversations about local culture, family culture. As people re-engage with these relationships discussions about history and traditions become more available. This can assist helpers to see what the family holds (and has held) as important over the years. This information becomes counter-stories to the likely current stories of trauma and, perhaps, failure. For child protection workers and family finding staff the stories they typically hear can be horrific and lead to compassion fatigue. When inviting the telling of these counter-stories the experience of the professional staff can be altered in ways that are sustaining of us.

This is a very brief summary of re-membering conversations in a Family Finding and Engagement context. The actual practice exists within a complex set of understandings that is narrative ideas. It would be important to provide coaching/supervision around engaging in these types of conversations. Those who are interested in more detailed reading around re-membering conversations can contact Mike Mertz at mike@senecacenter.org.