



CONNECT OUR KIDS[®]

PILOT REPORT

Smart technology provides the path to find a permanent family and supportive network for every child in need.

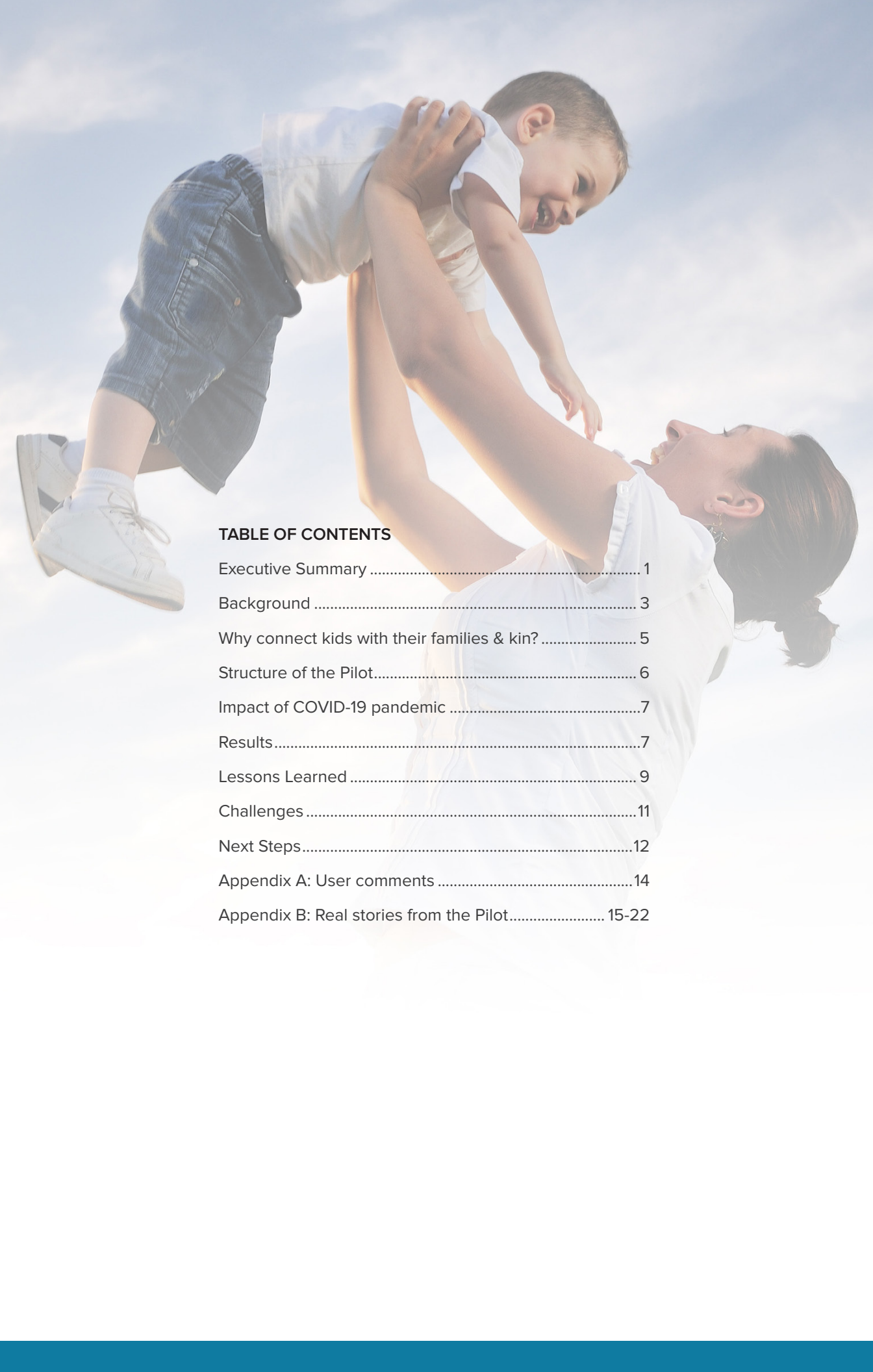


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Connect Our Kids conducted a pilot of its Family Connections software tool from February 2020 through March 2021. The Family Connections software is a secure cloud-based software platform designed to assist child welfare professionals in quickly building out family trees and support networks for foster and at-risk children and youth. A built-in Internet search function helps the user quickly identify contact information for people in the tree or network, and to identify additional relatives or connections who might be added to the tree or network.

This pilot included nine organizations, primarily private non-profits with existing kinship search programs, which the Family

Connection software is specifically designed to enhance. We also had participation from two public child welfare agencies, one at the county level and one at the state level.

Over the course of the pilot, testers used the software to serve 622 children and youth. We asked for feedback on the impact of the software on the number of connections found for each child or youth, and whether the software affected the amount of time needed to do the family search work.

On average, respondents reported back that they found just over six times more connections for foster children and at-risk youth, and that they were able to do this in a little less than half the time that it took them prior to using the Family Connections software.

The effect of the software on the rate of successful placements was more difficult

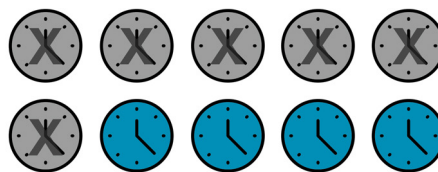
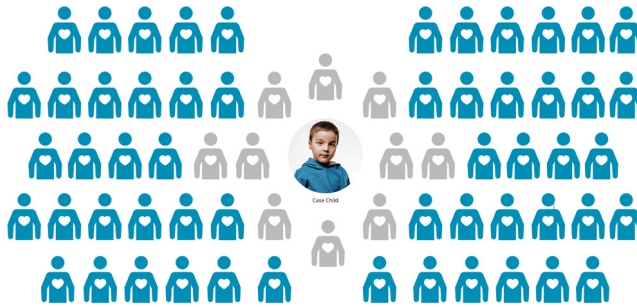
to measure, due to the extremely individual nature of what a successful placement might mean for each case, and the length of time often needed to both define and reach that success for a given case. In general, social workers reported that once they knew what success would look like for a given child's

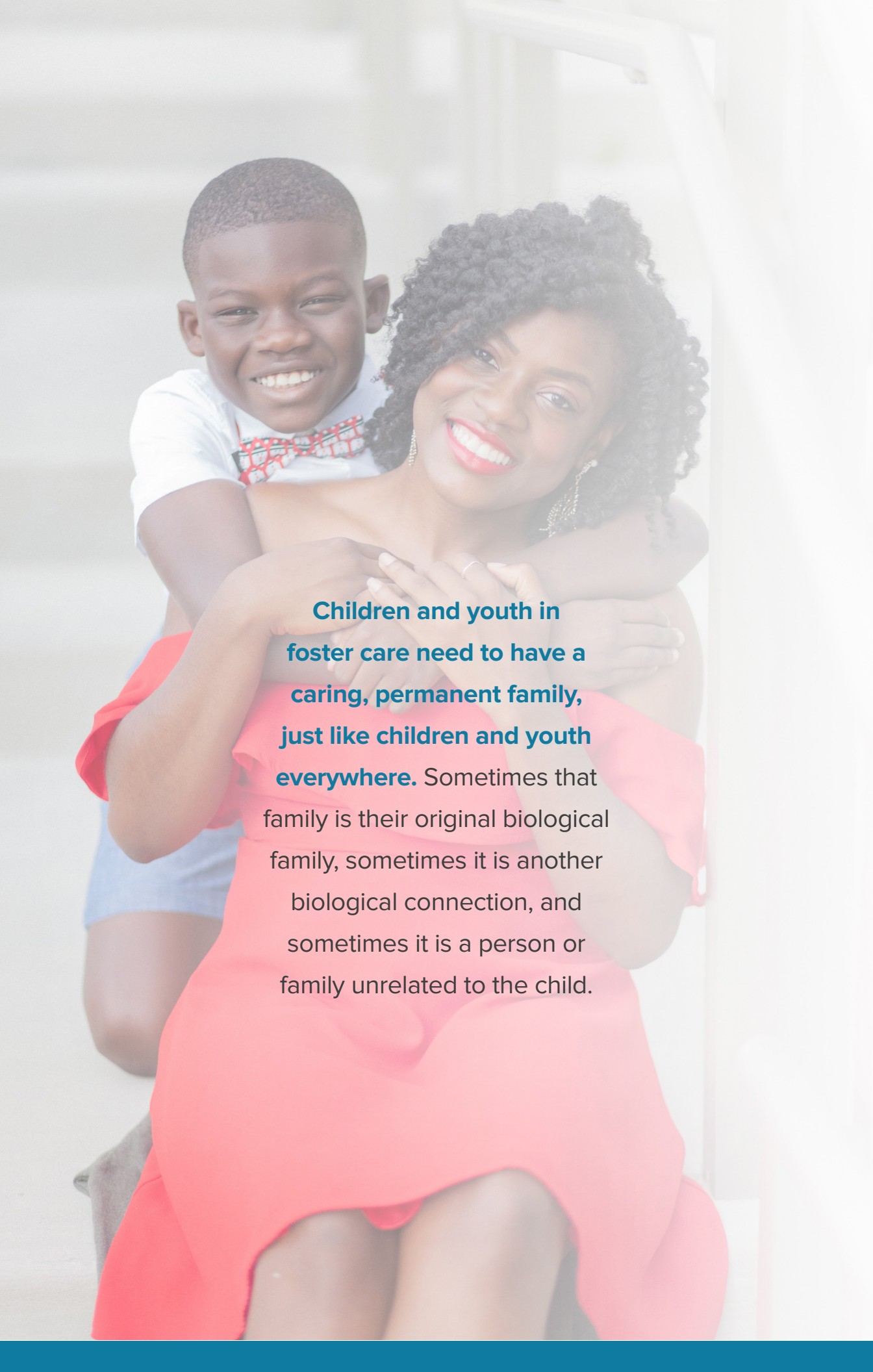
case, they found that the Family Connections software helped them reach that objective more efficiently.

The COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine impacted this pilot by causing us to allow broad access to beta testers, beyond the confines of the formal pilot. The result was an incredibly active year for Connect Our Kids, as well as a greatly enriched feedback experience. That

feedback, along with our formal pilot tester feedback has led to some clearly desired next steps, including a "Guide Me" step-by-step software feature as well as a trauma-awareness video series paired with the software, to help begin to address the adverse childhood experiences most foster children have faced.

Conclusions of this pilot study are that the Family Connections software can greatly empower existing kinship search programs, while allowing organizations without programs to improve their services in this area. We also found a great need for increased availability of youth-accessible trauma-awareness materials. But technology does not work alone. The most impactful results came where dedicated child welfare professionals were paired with aggressive use of the software, in cross-organizational teams, where appropriate.



A photograph of a young boy and a woman. The boy is sitting on the woman's shoulders, wearing a white shirt and a red and white patterned bow tie. The woman is wearing a red dress and has her arms around the boy. Both are smiling. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

Children and youth in foster care need to have a caring, permanent family, just like children and youth everywhere. Sometimes that family is their original biological family, sometimes it is another biological connection, and sometimes it is a person or family unrelated to the child.

BACKGROUND

Children and youth in foster care need to have a caring, permanent family, just like children and youth everywhere. Sometimes that family is their original biological family, sometimes it is another biological connection, and sometimes it is a person or family unrelated to the child. Children and youth in foster care also need supportive connections, which could be additional family members or others.

Child welfare professionals know how to find these connections and permanent family. They look intensively outward from the child, searching out relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches, spiritual or religious connections, or others. They scour the internet for contact data, and they send emails, letters, messages, and make many phone calls. They meet in person and they have difficult conversations about difficult circumstances. They also collect missing information about the child and the child's family, such as stories, pictures, and timelines. The result is a greatly increased rate of success in finding the child or youth a permanent family, building a network of supportive connections, and providing the child with stories and pictures of their own history.

The challenge is that this work is so resource intensive that only a relatively few foster children are able to receive this sort of intensive support each year. A handful of specialized programs exist across the country,¹ serving children in their care or referred to them. But over 420,000 children and youth are in foster care in the United States, with 20,000 aging out annually.² As a result, only a tiny fraction are served by an intensive family search and connections building program.

To scale up this work so that all children in foster care can one day have access to permanent caring families and supportive connections, Connect Our Kids, a nonprofit technology company focused on at-risk children and families, built a software tool called Family Connections.

Family Connections is a free cloud-based software-as-a-service visual-based family tree

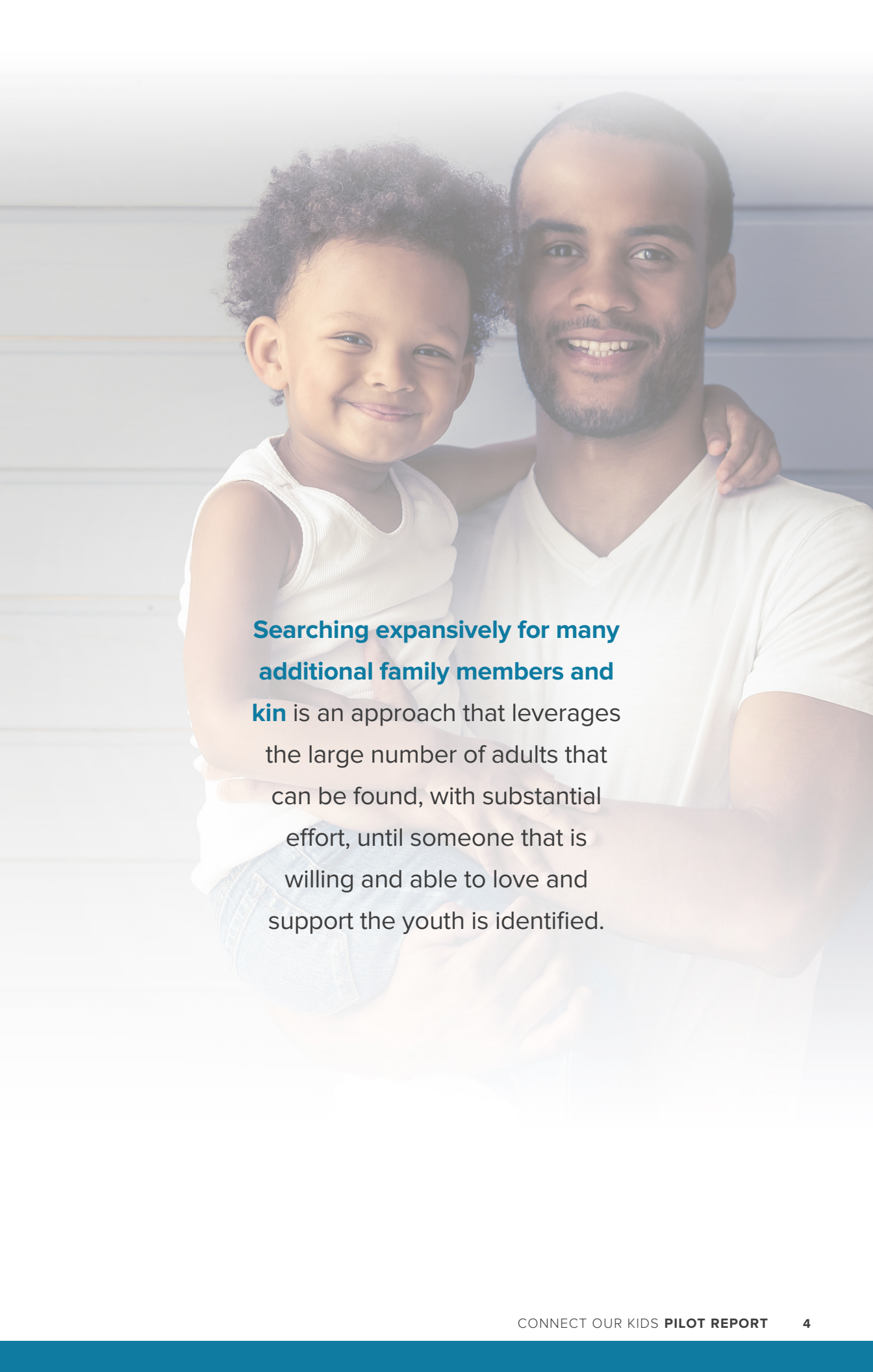
and connections builder. Teams can collaborate on cases, choose from a collection of helpful internet search services, or use the built-in search and import tool, People Search. People Search is another Connect Our Kids tool that finds online matches for information users enter about people in a case. People Search searches over 300 publicly available data sites and returns email addresses, phone numbers, physical addresses, social media accounts, and additional potential relatives. It allows the user to import all of the information discovered directly into that individual's details within the Family Connections software. Users can also use the Connect Our Kids Chrome Browser plug-in to make a pdf of any website they find relevant and attach that pdf to the relevant person within a child's case. For example, users might choose to make a pdf of a relative's Facebook page, LinkedIn page, work website, or other information that would be helpful to quickly find again later.

Family Connections also has an engagement center in which users and team supervisors can record and track their outreach to family and potential supporters as they identify these individuals. Data can be searched and sorted as needed and various color-based filters provide visual work tools for the user.

Because Family Connections is a multi-user platform, supervisors and organizational leadership can have transparency into their team's work for the children in their care. This transparency includes the ability to see a team member's efforts to find relatives and kin, engage with those individuals, and work towards a successful outcome for the child. This increased transparency also allows a supervisor to better assess who may need additional training or increased support on a difficult case. Reporting capabilities allow any user with permissions to download an activity report for a selected time period, assisting individuals and organizations with their reporting requirements.

1 Programs such as Wendy's Wonderful Kids, Family Finding, 30 Days to Family, Permanency Partners Program (P3), and local kinship search programs within organizations dedicated to this purpose.

2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "The AFCARS Report." Preliminary FY2019 Estimates as of June 23, 2020 - No.27. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport27.pdf>.

A photograph of a man and a young child. The man, on the right, has a beard and is wearing a white V-neck t-shirt. He is smiling and has his arm around the child's shoulder. The child, on the left, has curly hair and is wearing a white tank top and blue jeans. They are both smiling warmly at the camera. The background is a light-colored wall with horizontal lines.

Searching expansively for many additional family members and kin is an approach that leverages the large number of adults that can be found, with substantial effort, until someone that is willing and able to love and support the youth is identified.

WHY CONNECT KIDS WITH THEIR FAMILIES & KIN?

When we began our work, our focus was to empower programs that specifically served youth at risk of aging out of foster care. For these youth, no one in the existing circle of known family and kin had stepped up to become their permanent, supportive family. Searching expansively for many additional family members and kin is an approach that leverages the large number of adults that can be found, with substantial effort, until someone that is willing and able to love and support the youth is identified. Our goal was to make this process faster and less resource-intensive so that more children and youth could benefit.

Over time, many child welfare professionals have recognized that it makes sense to conduct this extensive kinship search earlier in the foster care process--often concurrent with other paths--rather than waiting for all other avenues to fail, and adding years of trauma for the youth. The Family Connections software can be used just as easily for a young child as for a teen, so this approach is supported as well.

Federal law³ now requires that states must exercise due diligence in finding and notifying grandparents and other adult relatives of a child removed from parental custody (with exceptions for domestic violence) within 30 days of removal. Many state laws also require relative notification and some give legal preference to relative placement.⁴ The Family Connections software can help states and counties meet these legal requirements.

Every child and every family is different, and we do not pretend to know the best resolution for any individual case. But we do know that neurobiology has shown that the toxic stress of adverse childhood experiences (known as ACEs) such as family separation, abuse, or not feeling cared for or valued by your family, actually causes harmful physical changes in the developing brain.⁵ These

changes can significantly impact health in adulthood. These impacts can range from increased risk of heart disease or cancer, to greater prevalence of depression, or to a greater likelihood of being violent or being a victim of violence. Toxic stress in childhood can affect the body so severely that it causes epigenetic changes, altering the DNA functions and potentially causing these impacts to be passed down to the next generation.⁶

Connecting children with safe, supportive family and kin is one way to reduce some of the trauma associated with family separation. Whether a child is placed with relatives or with a caring and supportive teacher, neighbor, coach, or someone else, knowing—or knowing about—one's biological family is often important to an individual's sense of self. This arises from the psycho-social concept that...

knowing who we are requires knowing how we came to be...the knowledge of oneself requires knowledge of where one's characteristics and traits came from.⁷

This may be the case for one person, but not for the next. Or it may be the case for one person at age 15, and another not until age 50. Nevertheless, evolutionary psychology tells us that the family unit, the clan, has been the basis for human survival for many years, and this seems unlikely to change anytime soon. But family can mean different things to different people.

Whatever placement occurs, it needs to be paired with support for the family. It's not sufficient to just connect a child with their family, with kin, or even with a wonderful foster family. The child needs to be supported through their trauma, and the family needs the same. And whatever family ends up supporting the child as a permanent family, that entire family system needs the support of a village in order to raise that child.

3 42 U.S.C. § 671, (a)(29), Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, State plan for foster care and adoption assistance, https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0471.htm.

4 Nina Williams-Mbengue, "Supporting Kinship Caregivers," National Conference of State Legislatures, March 26, 2020 <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/supporting-kinship-caregivers-tabbed-page.aspx>.

5 "Adverse Childhood Experiences," Vital Signs, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>

6 Aces Too High, "PACES Science 101," Accessed April 11, 2021, <https://acestoohigh.com/aces-101>.

7 Ravitsky, Vardit, "The right to know one's genetic origins and cross-border medically assisted reproduction," Israeli Journal of Health Policy Research, (Jan 16, 2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5240377/>

STRUCTURE OF THE PILOT

During the design and development of the Family Connections software tool, we interviewed and sought feedback from hundreds of social workers and other child welfare professionals nationwide. These feedback sessions included showing early designs to social workers, identifying pain points in current operations and seeking feedback from former foster youth to get their perspectives on finding and interacting with their families and supporters.

From these conversations we identified nine operational organizations that directly serve children and youth in foster care and were currently conducting, or attempting to conduct, family search work manually. These organizations were primarily private organizations contracting with their local county child welfare agencies; however we also had direct participation from two public child welfare agencies, one at the county level and one at the state level.

We purposely selected organizations for the pilot that had existing kinship search programs, or a strong desire to improve their effective kinship search even without a defined program. Our goal for this pilot was to test the ability of the Family Connections software to increase the impact of these existing efforts to find relatives and kin, or to facilitate expansion of modest efforts where there was no family search program already in place. The Family Connections software works within these programs to make their results even stronger. We understood, however, that not all organizations have such programs or a strong desire to improve their kinship search capabilities. Because software works in partnership with humans motivated to use that software, we recognize that the impact of Family Connections is intrinsically linked to the dedication of child welfare professionals to actually find families and connections for the children in their care.



IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

We formally launched our pilot in February 2020. Our plan included in-person launches with each organization, and hands-on instruction for each of the child welfare professionals who would be using the software. We expected our pilot to continue for 6-9 months, depending on the volume of cases the organizations received during this time period, the type and degree of feedback received, and our ability to make the needed changes to the software and then test and receive feedback on the changes.

By mid-March 2020, we had conducted in-person kick-off sessions for all but one of our pilot organizations, with the final organization's kick-off scheduled for the third week of March. The COVID-19 related shut-downs in mid-March caused us to switch this final kick-off meeting to a virtual setting. Along with the rest of the world, we were unsure how this transfer to an all-virtual setting would work, but we were pleased to find that it actually worked very well. Our final site was able to begin their pilot without difficulty.

However, within weeks of the near nationwide pandemic shutdown, we began receiving calls from many of those from whom we had

sought input during the design phase of the software development. These service providers were limited to working primarily from their homes, but those they were responsible for needed assistance more than ever. They asked us, "Could they have access to the Family Connections software we were testing?"

Although our internal plan called for a restricted user group during this pilot phase, we found that given the drastic change in circumstances, this restriction no longer served our mission. Additionally, our software was functioning well, with no crashes, data overloads, breaches, or other such incidents. We felt that we could not in good conscience withhold access to those who could use this software to assist those in need during the pandemic. As a result, we amended our usage during the pilot phase to allow beta tester access to any who asked, provided they were serving children or youth in or at-risk of foster care. This decision caused our user base to quickly grow from approximately 50 to over 1000 in about 9 months. This allowed us to test and evolve our virtual onboarding and training program with a wide variety of users during the pilot phase.

RESULTS

Aggregated user responses to key metrics are shown in the table below.

Total number of children served within pilot	622
Reduction in time required for family search activities	60%
Multiplier in number of connections found	6.5

We had initially expected to include a quantitative evaluation of the rate of successful placement in our results metrics. However, in working with users during the pilot, we found that the definitions of success vary so widely from one case to the next that this metric ultimately did not make sense. Additionally, if the goal was in fact adoption or a permanent guardianship, the length of time involved exceeded the length of this pilot. The time required for adoption and permanent guardianship doesn't just reflect the time the social worker needs for searching and outreach, but instead includes necessary time for reunification efforts, court proceedings,

and other important processes, including helping the child or youth adjust expectations to a possible new reality for their future.

Feedback from pilot testers indicated that, while adoption or permanent guardianship might be the goal for one case, in many cases it is simply to increase supportive connections prior to upcoming independence or to decrease trauma during the current phase of the child's life.

Harm reduction was often a key agency goal. Given that a child with child welfare involvement has almost always already experienced some kind of trauma, and additional trauma of family separation is likely ongoing

ing, social workers look to the goal of harm reduction, particularly in reducing trauma, so as to minimize the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences. Pilot tester feedback was universally positive that the Family Connections software supported their efforts at harm reduction by allowing them to more quickly find more potential supporters of the child (and possibly supporters of the family) helping them to organize and track their efforts towards this goal more effectively, and facilitating immediate collaboration with team members and supervisors as needed.

Cross-organizational collaboration seems to be a particularly effective implementation approach. For example, if both public and private agencies are involved in a case, inviting members of both agencies to participate in a case (whether editing or viewing) within the Family Connections software is an effective way to ensure that all involved team members have the latest information on the case, see what the connections or challenges are, and are able to weigh in on decisions in a timely and transparent manner.

Users noted a number of additional aspects of the software that they found beneficial in their work. Some of the most commonly noted were:

- *Real time access to collective work*—anyone on the team with permission to view a case can do so and see updates and changes in real time. This allows team members to support each other with little to no data transfer required, and allows supervisors greater transparency as they work to better support their teams.
- *Engagement documentation*—team members and supervisors can see what outreach has occurred, or has been attempted, and the outcomes or ongoing status of those outreach efforts.
- *Grouping for easy mapping of non-relative kin*—because family trees and support maps are not governed by genealogical rules, non-relative kin can easily be added as needed.

- *Easily accessible contact info for all relatives*—search tools make finding and keeping track of contact information much faster and easier.
- *Documenting relative exploration*—searching for family and kin requires some detective work. Users found the software to be helpful in assisting with tracking this work.
- *Creating reports with all relatives/kin that want to support and sharing that with placements*—information in the software can be exported to Excel, thus allowing for individualized reports of any set of data.
- *Reducing time in the office or without placement*—more connections, faster, means more options for potential placement when that is what is needed. In an era of children sleeping in offices and hotels, being able to quickly find a safe, supportive home for a child in foster care is crucial.

While most of our pilot testing organizations were already committing substantial resources to kinship searching, and we were able to increase their efficiency and effectiveness in doing so, one organization indicated that they are normally not able to conduct an extensive kinship search. In their case, the software allowed them to undertake family search and engagement work that they would otherwise not have done at all. This has led to the organization being able to better serve the children in their care. Additionally, one supervisor noted that the software also gave her staff information they needed for other compliance reports needed within their agency—so Family Connections was reducing time on adjacent tasks also.

LESSONS LEARNED



Proactive how-to-use training

When we designed the Family Connections software, we put extensive focus on making the software intuitive and user friendly. As a result, we found that many of our users are able to get started with only a quick introduction, either individually in 1-hour virtual training sessions, or through a short “How to Get Started with Family Connections” video, paired with additional short videos addressing different aspects of the software.

However, we found that for less tech-comfortable users, additional training is desirable. We quickly adjusted to offer multiple training sessions for those needing further training. However, in the busy lives of social workers, we have found that a proactive approach to providing additional training is valuable, rather than simply providing additional training on request. We also found that many users were not independently discovering the training supports available to them—a YouTube channel with training videos, key reference resources and a direct messaging capability embedded within the tool itself. We are improving our communication of these resources to users through multiple paths. A desirable future software feature will include proactive help assistance that anticipates a user’s assistance needs.

Proactive how-to-search training

During our training sessions with users on how to use the software, we also found that among organizations without existing kinship search programs, users often did not have a clear understanding of how to actually search for and engage with family and kin. This lesson learned was a particular benefit of having included a broad set of beta testers in our user base during the pilot phase. Most of our formal pilot testers were part of organizations with existing family search programs, so they did know how to search for family—but many beta testers did not. We realized that scaling up the impact of existing kinship search programs was not enough—instead, we would need to scale up the knowledge of how to search and engage family and kin.

To accomplish this, one of our post-pilot objectives is to build a “Guide Me” feature. This feature will help a social worker who does not already have a clear process to follow in searching for family and kin. It will also assist those who have been trained in a family search and engagement program, but who struggle to remember and implement the steps they have been taught in an isolated training session on that program. Our vision is that the Guide Me feature will complement and bolster existing kinship search and engagement programs by providing a general platform by which to implement those programs. It will also support those social workers who have not had the opportunity to attend a specialized kinship training.



Trauma awareness

Throughout the pilot, we had many requests and conversations around providing access directly to youth in independent living programs and young adult alumni of foster care. We are excited about the potential for increasing connectedness and belonging for these youth and young adults, and empowering them to drive this outreach themselves. At the same time, we also recognize that the majority of the foster care population has experienced trauma, and that this trauma is often not only unaddressed, but is actually unacknowledged. This trauma can significantly impact a youth's attempts to build lasting, healthy relationships.

While we want to accelerate supportive connections and relationships, we do not want to accelerate rejection, particularly for someone who has not had the chance to build the soft skills needed to maintain relationships and handle potential rejection. Therefore, we are developing the Connections Matter Academy—a virtual learning platform targeted towards the 14-26 age group of youth with foster care experience. We have partnered with the gaming community to create a series of trauma awareness videos that will make up the content of the Academy. With guidance from professionals within independent living programs, The Connections Matter Academy is being developed by leading trauma experts. This Academy will teach youth how the brain works, how the brain is impacted by trauma, how trauma impacts relationships, and how positive relationships and support networks can help heal trauma. Using our Family Connections tool they will learn to build out their own support network and learn how to engage that network to request help as they move into adulthood.

Adjacencies

The widespread access that we allowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a wide variety of applications for the software. In training and talking with these users, we found that there are a number of adjacent uses for the Family Connections software tool. Some of these other usage areas are from the fields of mentoring, education (particularly supporting students facing special needs challenges or other special circumstances such as homelessness), juvenile justice and combating human trafficking. We are learning more about how each of these fields might best be supported by Family Connections, and whether a field-specific modified version of the original software might be valuable.

In the field of mentoring in particular, we already have a number of users who are finding the software to be valuable to their work. The ability to visually map out and enhance a youth's social capital is an area of existing need. These users are contributing crucial feedback to our design of a mentor-specific version of the Family Connections software.

School programs have expressed interest in using this software to increase the visibility and transparency of their services to children and youth, as well as to help mentoring teams update and coordinate with each other, reducing hours of weekly collaboration time. These programs may be working to provide services to students with special needs, or may be seeking to ensure that at-risk students and their families are actively connected with community providers of food security, support for household needs, or spiritual support.

CHALLENGES

Many child welfare professionals and volunteers understand the role of connectedness to family in a child's life and development. Separation from those to whom a child is attached creates trauma, regardless of whether that person was performing adequately in providing for the child's needs. The child welfare community has increased its understanding of this dynamic in recent years. This evolution is reflected in recent legislation, such as the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018. We anticipate seeing an increase in efforts to perform adequate kinship due diligence as the financial consequences of the Family First Prevention Services Act begin to take effect.⁸

However, there is still some cultural resistance to keeping children in foster care connected with safe family members and seeking more safe family and kinship connections. There are several reasons for this resistance. First, some social workers may feel that the family is "bad" and therefore anyone who is part of the family is "bad" by association. They may seek to remove the child from this "bad" family, and place them in a completely unconnected, "good" family--as if the child were a struggling sapling simply in need of replanting to better soil. What this metaphor forgets, of course, is that damaging the roots of a young tree can be devastating to the overall health of the tree for many years.

A second reason for resistance to a thorough kinship search by social workers is the time required. This includes both upfront time invested in locating and reaching out to family and kin, as well as the time and energy required to address the more complex relationships found within the existing family when a child is placed with a relative. For example, grandparents may find it more difficult to limit the access of the parent to the child, even when the parent is court-ordered to have only supervised visits. These arrangements may be logistically simpler for a social worker to manage if the child is placed with an unconnected foster family.

Family Connections software helps to reduce the initial search and engagement time significantly (pilot testers reported a 60%

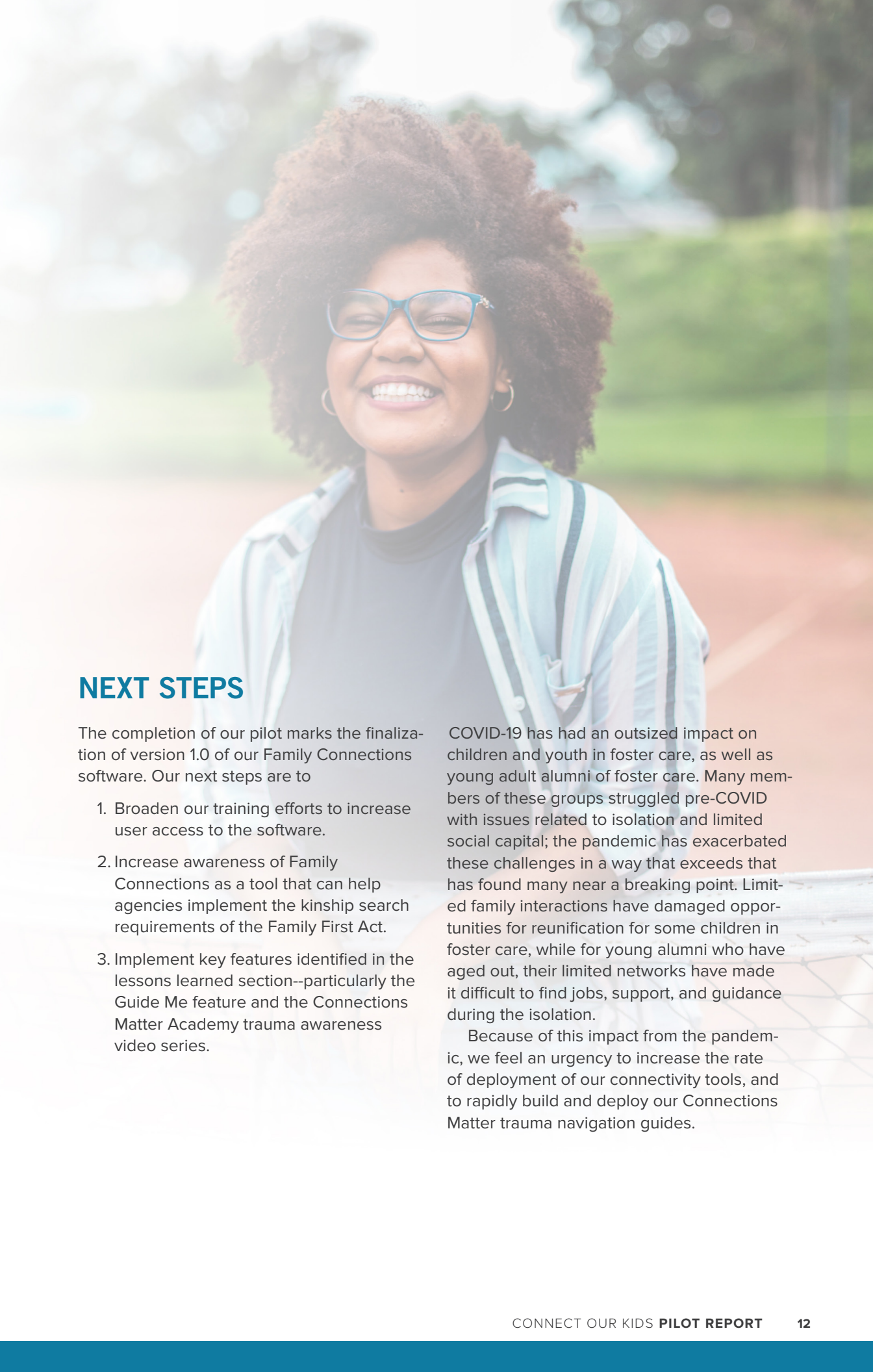
reduction in time required for search and outreach actions) but if a social worker currently does not engage in any substantive kinship search activities, then offering a tool to reduce the time need for an additional activity is still an overall increase in their short-term time demand. The team aspect of the Family Connections software also provides a social worker with assistance in managing the more complex family dynamics involved with a kinship placement--but again, if the social worker or the organization is unwilling to devote any time to this activity, then reducing that time would still be unsatisfactory for that organization or social worker.

Kinship placement has been shown to lead to fewer placement moves for a child.⁹ Decreased trauma in childhood leads to better overall health outcomes in life. Focusing on the cost of the short-term time and energy investment upfront ignores these long-term dividends that such care yields. And ironically, taking the quickest path to finding a "bed" for the child upfront sets the social worker and their organization up for more work over the long term as the child moves through multiple placements and struggles with increasing behavioral health and other negative impacts of continued childhood and separation trauma. In some organizations, social workers are so overwhelmed with unreasonable caseloads that they feel they simply have no options. These are local government issues that beg for a longer-term, care-focused perspective. The good news is that agencies that choose the path of helping children and their families to stay connected and supported also reap substantial benefits for their citizens in creating stronger families and healthier communities.

The requirements of the Family First Act may shift organizations' priorities towards conducting more diligent kinship search activities because of the financial consequences of not doing so. The changing cultural understanding of the impact of adverse childhood events (ACEs) on overall health may also help to shift priorities. Family Connections software can help agencies meet these legal and ethical requirements.

8 More detail on state legislation related to the Family First Prevention Services Act is summarized by ncsf.org at <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/family-first-updates-and-new-legislation.aspx>.

9 Helton, J., "Children with behavioral, non-behavioral, and multiple disabilities, and the risk of out-of-home placement disruption," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 35 (2011): 956-964.



NEXT STEPS

The completion of our pilot marks the finalization of version 1.0 of our Family Connections software. Our next steps are to

1. Broaden our training efforts to increase user access to the software.
2. Increase awareness of Family Connections as a tool that can help agencies implement the kinship search requirements of the Family First Act.
3. Implement key features identified in the lessons learned section--particularly the Guide Me feature and the Connections Matter Academy trauma awareness video series.

COVID-19 has had an outsized impact on children and youth in foster care, as well as young adult alumni of foster care. Many members of these groups struggled pre-COVID with issues related to isolation and limited social capital; the pandemic has exacerbated these challenges in a way that exceeds that has found many near a breaking point. Limited family interactions have damaged opportunities for reunification for some children in foster care, while for young alumni who have aged out, their limited networks have made it difficult to find jobs, support, and guidance during the isolation.

Because of this impact from the pandemic, we feel an urgency to increase the rate of deployment of our connectivity tools, and to rapidly build and deploy our Connections Matter trauma navigation guides.



CONCLUSION

Family Connections empowers established kinship search programs by helping users remember and implement what they learned in their program training. Supervisors are able to better support their teams because of the transparency and cloud-based format of the software. These programs can easily see an increase in effectiveness by adopting the Family Connections software.

Outside of established programs, more training, guided features, trauma support, and cultural adaptation of the field is needed.

Change is hard, and innovation is more often initially resisted than embraced. However, without innovation and change, our nation will continue to send over 20,000 youth unprepared and unsupported into adulthood annually. We will continue to disconnect hundreds of thousands of children and youth from their families and all that they know each year.

It is clear from the results of this pilot that with modern technology tools, child welfare professionals can do more, in less time, for the children in their care. While hurdles remain, this data shows that providing child welfare professionals with information at their fingertips, time-saving organizational tools, and transparency among teams and supervisors, children in care can be much better served. Trauma can be reduced and families can be saved. Software does not do this alone; it must be paired with caring, dedicated child welfare professionals who know their craft. But with such software, these social workers can have the opportunity to actually focus on the work at which they are skilled—helping children and families thrive. As one Family Connection user said, “It’s like the future of child welfare has arrived.”

APPENDIX A. USER COMMENTS

“This has been an amazing tool and has really helped with the kinship searches. I am very grateful that we have had the opportunity to use it!”

“The family tree is an amazing tool and being able to put all the information in that format has been very helpful. It is also very easy to add to when I find additional information either in the Family Connections software or other places. I have also been able to locate more current phone numbers using the Family Connections software than anywhere else which has helped connect with relatives sooner.”

“I love that there is an app, which allows me to enter information when I am outside of the office. This ensures that my documentation is consistently up to date and on time.”

“The export feature allows me to share information with other team members quickly and efficiently.”

“The family tree option is a wonderful visual tool that highlights the connections that have been discovered for the children on my caseload. It quickly provides basic demographic information and the relationship to the child. It allows me to color code potential connections, which makes it easier to identify what stage they are in the relationship building process with the child. My favorite part is the inclusiveness of the family trees due to the designers presenting diverse options to match the diverse families we serve (biological, adoptive, blended, etc).”

“Staff are using Family Connections to complete other needed reports to stay in compliance which has been very beneficial.”

“The kids really like to help create the genograms/family trees and like to see it all laid out. The search tools are beneficial and can easily be picked back up after not working on a specific case for a few weeks. Love that they were able to incorporate the reports section to help in supervisions.”

“The tools that help find phone numbers and facebook profiles have saved me the most time!”

“Having a digital space to map out a family tree and have easy links to possible contact info is absolutely wonderful and is so much better than the old pen and pencil option for this!”

“This truly has been a great tool for us. It is extremely user friendly and the fact that it is web-based is very helpful. I am excited to continue training on it and to see how it continues to be used in our cases.”

“I believe it is very helpful in creating a visual of a family and supports. The people search tool is an amazing bonus.”

“Thank you all for your amazing work in creating a very useful tool that is available to those of us in child welfare and I believe it will be very impactful in the long run.”

“Once you master the program and apply it intelligently, then you can get connections out to the field in about two hours. Other search entities take a week(s).”

“Since I work with adults I am able to share the information I find with them so having the family tree so well planned out and visualized for them is very helpful.”

“This software is very efficient and helpful in collating information.”

“I feel that the creators of this software do a great job of keeping in touch with everyone taking part in and using the site and working to better the product at all times. You have done everything possible to ensure that we have a great working knowledge of how everything on the site can be utilized and how things have changed when changes are made!”

APPENDIX B. REAL STORIES FROM THE PILOT

We heard many incredible stories of connection during the pilot. While metrics are important, much of what is important about relationships and connections is difficult to measure. So we have included here some of the real stories of connection and new or renewed relationships that happened during this pilot. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

Hope for Kylie
BUILDING OUT HER FAMILY TREE WITH 23 CONNECTIONS

Connections Matter

Kylie was removed from her adoptive family and taken into foster care. Because of her location, the Dave Thomas Foundation provided Kylie with a Wendy's Wonderful Kids Family Recruiter who used our technology to make life-changing connections.

When they first met, Kylie's Wendy Wonderful Kids (WWK) recruiter did not know much about her biological family since the only available files had come from the adoption. In an effort to identify a permanent family and support network, this thoughtful recruiter built out a family tree starting with the only information she had available: the names of Kylie's biological mother and father.

That was all the information needed for the Connect Our Kids People Search tool. Once the recruiter entered Kylie's parents' names, 23 connections were found, including a cousin on Kylie's father's side who was willing to provide a great deal of critical information about her family.

The WWK recruiter is now building out Kylie's family tree in our Family Connections tool, so that Kylie can visually see her family, and know that there are many people in her network who care about her. Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters are... well, wonderful!

Knowing family history can help begin the healing of trauma.

Wendy's Wonderful Kids is a signature program at the Dave Thomas Foundation. This national program funds adoption professionals, known as recruiters, who use a child-focused model to find permanent homes for children in foster care.

Independent research has proven this model to be up to 3x more effective at serving children who have been in foster care the longest, including teenagers, children with special needs and siblings. We are honored that 56 WWK family recruiters are using our technology tools in the great state of Ohio and can't wait to see what 2021 brings as they continue to grow their outstanding program.



Olive's Opportunity **SHE NOW HAS AN AUNT & UNCLE**

 **Connections Matter**

Olive is a teenager who has been in foster care for a very long time. When a Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) recruiter received her case, the recruiter saw that the particular aunt and uncle could be valuable connections for Olive, but no one could find their correct contact information. It had been a frustrating experience for all those who had previously tried to track down this couple, especially knowing that they could potentially be in Olive's life permanently.

When the WWK recruiter used Connect Our Kids' People Search, the aunt and uncle's correct contact information popped up. Olive was able to connect with her aunt and uncle for the first time in her life. They now all speak to each other on a weekly basis and are in the process of building a relationship. It's been a very positive experience for Olive, who is happy to have her aunt and uncle in her life. Olive is looking forward to meeting them in person soon.



Jenny finds a family after all

 **Connections Matter**

Jenny has been in foster care for years. She has spent birthdays and holidays not knowing her biological family is or where they might be located.

When a family recruiter from the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) program received Jenny's case, she quickly began to build out a family tree for Jenny using our Family Connections technology. As she researched the names that popped up, her family recruiter soon realized that Jenny is related to another child on her caseload—living in the same county!

No one in the county agency had previously realized these two children were related.

The WWK recruiter is now collaborating with the county to connect Jenny with her cousin and continues to work toward finding Jenny a permanent home. Our smart technology tools paired with an amazing WWK recruiter, Jenny no longer has to wonder who her family is and where she came from.



Noah's Note

A LETTER LEADS TO A LONG LOST RELATIVE

 **Connections Matter**

Noah has bounced around the foster care system for a very long time. Noah's advocate had been working for more than two years on his case to find him a home. With each move, it becomes harder for Noah to achieve a healthy and stable relationship. Noah's advocate, diligent in her search, often hoped he could have at least one person in his life who will be there for him always.

She was having a very challenging time finding relatives for Noah when reviewing the county records alone. From those files, she managed to find a couple of names and the date of birth of Noah's mother. At first, this didn't seem like a lot of information but it was enough for Connect Our Kids' smart technology tools, which populate multiple phone numbers, emails and addresses. The phone numbers were all disconnected and many emails bounced back as undeliverable.

Disappointed but diligent, Noah's advo-

cate decided to send out letters to the addresses that showed up in the Connect Our Kids software. This strategy worked! Cheryl, a second cousin from Noah's maternal side, could not believe her younger cousin was still in foster care.

Cheryl was devastated over what happened to Noah, as they had lived together nearly a decade ago. She agonized that she lost track of him for years. But now that they are reconnected, she's determined to never lose sight of him again. Cheryl has a daughter Noah's age and they both want to play a big part in Noah's life. Cheryl is grateful to Noah's advocate for making this connection happen.

Child Welfare professionals and special advocates who perform family search and engagement activities are much like detectives; they leave no stone unturned and that's why they are so successful in making these life-changing connections.



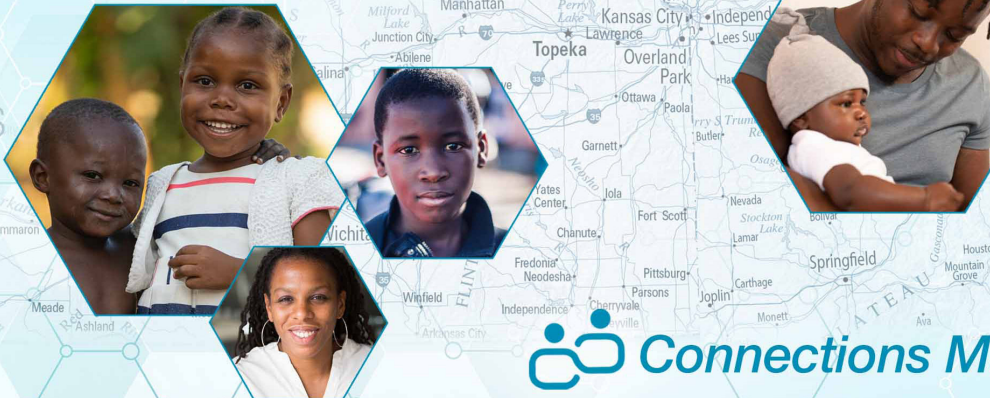
Cedric is a teenage boy who has spent the last few years in the foster care system. Fortunately, an attentive caseworker paid attention to a casual comment about an adult half brother named Michael, a brother Cedric barely knew.

The caseworker's diligence and use of our Family Connections tool led to a Facebook page, some addresses and Michael's adoptive mother. Through a video call, this amazing mother helped Cedric connect with Michael who fortunately lives only 30 minutes away. Additionally, she shared that she and her partner adopted four other children who were Cedric's half siblings.

Older brother Michael has asked about the steps he would need to take to foster Cedric. In the meantime, he is interested in having contact and being a supportive adult in Cedric's life. Through our technology, Cedric's caseworker was also able to reach Cedric's paternal grandmother, who did not even know Cedric was in foster care. This grandmother has since provided more information about her family and is another potential permanent placement option for Cedric.

Facing Uncertainty in Foster Care

SIBLING SET OF FOUR ARE NOW LIVING WITH RELATIVES



In the first week of 2021, four Kansas children entered the foster care system. Their mother, who is burdened with unhealed trauma, cannot care for them.

This half-sibling set of four children were able to avoid separation in the short-term as they live with a maternal aunt. However, their aunt can only commit to caring for the two older siblings because of her limited resources, space, and her own growing family.

Professional family finders used our technology to immediately find a home for the two younger children. While using our smart technology tools, it was also discovered that their mother has eight siblings — growing the

network of the right people to help care for these kids at a critical time. Other connections made led to the placement of a younger child with her paternal grandmother, who has a lot of support from the child's aunts and uncles. As for the youngest child, he has been reunited with his father in Missouri who, until recently, was very involved in his life.

Each child is now living with a biological relative and they are all being supported by other family members. This story would have had a more tragic outcome if it weren't for the diligence of committed workers using our technology to find families and making those lifelong connections.

COVID-19 Newborn Now Lives with Her Tribe

KANSAS: Baby Kai entered foster care in November 2020 while battling COVID-19 in the hospital. The only information given to a Kansas nonprofit were the names and last known contact information on her biological parents. Because Kai's mother is Native American, Kai would only be placed in homes that met Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) guidelines. ICWA is a federal law that seeks to keep Native American children with tribal families.

Thankfully, the nonprofit responsible for Kai's care used Connect Our Kids' Family Connections platform and quickly found Kai's family with tribal affiliations, which included seven great aunts and uncles and her maternal grandmother. Because of these findings, Kai had a family who met the ICWA standard at the time of release from the hospital.

Our tools were also able to help workers identify a network of 56 connections for baby Kai.

Baby Kai is now safely in a home with her biological father's family, where she is surrounded by two uncles, an aunt, six cousins, her great grandmother, step-grandmother, and step-grandfather. Because Kai's grandmother and grandfather come from different tribes, the nonprofit will also explore other family members with her Native American heritage to provide Kai with even more support and lifelong connections.

Runaway Teen Discovers Many Relatives Care About Him

Alone at sixteen, Kevin ran away shortly after entering foster care. No one knew where Kevin ran off to or how to locate him.

When a nonprofit in Kansas got the alert about Kevin, social services shared what they knew about his homeless mother and a maternal aunt and grandmother who once cared for one of Kevin's siblings. From there, a social worker entered those names and contact information into Connect Our Kids' People Search and Family Connections software.

The software quickly found Kevin's biological father, paternal grandfather, a second cousin, an uncle and many other relatives — all who live close together in Kansas. When contacted, Kevin's biological dad said he wanted a relationship with him and many family members made it known that they also wanted to be a part of Kevin's life. Shortly afterwards, Kevin was also found through our tools and the nonprofit's engagement with Kevin's immediate and extended family.

The nonprofit organization connecting Kevin to his family revealed to him that he has more than 45 relatives and connected adults who all care about him. This news made Kevin very invested in building out his own supportive network map in the Family Connections platform. Before, Kevin didn't know much about his family. Now, he sees he has many options, including a connection to his father whom he never knew.

To view more Connect Our Kids' Impact Stories, visit our [Connectivity Matters blog](#).