

## Topic 13 Matching

### Key Messages

- Matching a child with a foster carer or adopter is one of the ‘turning points’ (Schofield et al 2011b) in a child’s life. Successful matching depends on good assessments, clear support plans, careful decision making and a high level of information sharing between professionals.
- Matching should be viewed as a process to be worked at together, rather than a single event. The quality of the relationships between everyone in the team around the child is likely to impact on the outcomes for the child. Understanding each other’s roles and perspectives during this process is essential.
- Relationships with people who care for them are the ‘golden thread’ running throughout a child or young person’s life. Whatever the route to permanence, professionals must work to match the developmental needs of the child with the caregiving required to meet them. There are many criteria to be considered but these should be viewed through the ‘lens’ of the quality of the child’s relationships.
- Children should be fully involved in the decision-making process – they rarely are, however, and this is particularly true for disabled children.
- Lack of information is a pervasive theme in the literature and has implications for the success or failure of a placement. Children, birth parents, foster carers and adopters need more information and involvement in the process of matching and decision making (Boddy 2013; Schofield et al 2011c). Identifying what information is needed and the best way to communicate it should be a priority.

This briefing considers some of the challenges when making judgements and important decisions with and on behalf of children and young people about where and with whom they will live. A particular challenge is that there are wide variations in practice, so it is hard to make comparisons. Matching practice varies between local authorities (Schofield et al, 2011a) and depends also on the anticipated length of placement. Some processes are more formal than others; long-term or permanent fostering is more likely to follow an adoption-matching model.

### Picking up the ‘golden thread’

*Relationships with people who care for and about children are the golden thread in children’s lives, and ... the quality of a child’s relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do. (The Care Inquiry, 2013)*

Although there is little research that links specific elements of matching practice to successful outcomes, there are studies that identify the factors involved in disruption: age, behavioural problems, over activity, attachment problems (Quinton, 2012) and mismatching (Randall, 2013). There is also general agreement about the parenting

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characteristics that help to support children and young people: sensitivity, boundary setting, tolerance and resilience (Quinton, 2012). (See Briefing 5 on '[Early childhood trauma and therapeutic parenting](#)'.)

In the studies on fostering, personal chemistry (a 'good fit') between carer and child and whether the child wanted to live in the placement were predictors of success (Sinclair et al, 2005; Sinclair, 2005). Stability is also more likely when children and foster carers feel involved in the placement decision (Farmer et al, 2004).

### Involving children and young people in decisions

*Children and young people should be fully involved in decisions about where, and with whom, they live, and their views must be taken into account. (The Care Inquiry, 2013)*

The Care Inquiry (2013) emphasises the significance of children and young people's relationships with their social worker and carers. And clearly, the better a child's relationships with the professionals who represent them, the more likely it is the child will be involved effectively in decision making. Children and young people who trust adults and who feel they are listened to are more likely to give voice to important feelings.

Involving children and young people in decisions about where and with whom they live requires active listening. Other than when it is impossible to do so (e.g. when they move in an emergency), children and young people should visit or try out a placement before a final decision is made (The Care Inquiry, 2013). The Care Inquiry also highlights the need to work together with birth parents throughout the care process (See Briefing 16 on '[Working with birth parents](#)').

A study of a communication tool for disabled children found that social workers were often surprised by the children's ability to express their views (Cousins and Simmons, 2011).

### Carers' attributes and matching criteria

Looked after and adopted children need to be cared for by well-trained, supportive and actively engaged adults with whom they can develop appropriate attachments and build positive relationships. Carers need to be able to recognise coping behaviours and support the child or young person to move on from these (Howe, 2009). They need the qualities of security, attentiveness, friendliness, and empathy so that they can build and sustain relationships with traumatised children (Cairns, 2002). Resilience is another important attribute, as some behaviour and circumstances may trigger distressing feelings for carers (NSPCC, 2013).

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Temperament is also important in terms of parenting a particular child. Carers need to understand different temperaments as this will affect how a child and carer get on, which in turn will affect the stability and security of the placement (Schofield et al, 2011a). The child's emotional, behavioural, attachment and health needs must be balanced with the carers' parenting style and skills. Children look for 'stuff in common with the carers' and foster parents who will love and accept them as their own (The Care Inquiry, 2013). High value is placed on positive attitudes of openness, honesty and trust (Schofield et al, 2011a).

Adult attachment styles and parenting capacity can be analysed by trained staff using standardised tools. Foster carers who have experienced challenge themselves during childhood can bring strength to some fostering situations through exhibiting high levels of sensitivity and awareness of the feelings of others (Bifulco et al, 2008).

A range of other matching criteria to consider is indicated across the literature. These include: the age of the child, dis/ability, contact needs, gender, carers' extended family arrangements, location, educational continuity, siblings (in terms of being placed together, or in terms of continued contact), ethnicity, heritage, language, community, impact on birth children, the fostering experience of the family, and any other factors specific to individual children and carers.

### Information sharing and communication

We don't need research to tell us that matching can only be as good as the information on which it is based. There is evidence that information sharing, and indeed the quality of the information itself, is often poor at the matching stage (Quinton, 2012; Cousins, 2003). Poor information and analysis means specific needs are either minimised (Sinclair, 2005) or not identified (Quinton, 2012). Successful matching relies also on having a sufficient pool of foster carers and adopters to meet the diverse needs of looked after and adopted children (Thomas, 2013; Clarke, 2010).

Children (Boddy, 2013; OCRD, 2013a), birth parents (Schofield and Ward, 2010), foster carers and adopters commonly complain about a lack of information. All need more information and involvement in the process of matching and decision making. A frequent complaint for foster carers and adopters is the lack of information with regard to children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (Sinclair, 2005; Thomas, 2013). If carers are not prepared for difficulties – with behaviour or in relation to contact, for example – then the placement is vulnerable (Quinton, 2012; Farmer et al, 2004). Placement officers and supervising social workers say they often also receive insufficient information from the local authority to inform matching or brief the potential foster carer adequately (Randall, 2013). Research also shows that

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omissions and inaccuracies are not unusual in Child Permanence Reports for adoption (Thomas, 2013).

Focus group discussions which informed this project (October 2013) suggest that a skilled worker will have detailed and empathic knowledge about a foster or adoptive family and will be able to see where potential conflicts might arise. They will also have a good idea of the impact on the rest of the family, including any birth children of the foster carers or adopters. The child's social worker will not necessarily have this holistic perspective and may not instinctively think about seeking out or handing over what might turn out to be vital information. These information gaps are likely to be compounded by the lack of face-to-face contact and communication through emails or often a third party (the commissioning officer). Abstract concepts and labels do not help foster carers understand the likely impact the child will have on their lives, so clear descriptions and detailed accurate information are important (Sinclair et al, 2005).

For children, the process of placement is 'fraught' (Sinclair, 2005). In order to reduce their anxiety, children should have prior information about the carer (Schofield et al, 2011a) – this includes in an emergency placement where that is possible (The Care Inquiry, 2013).

### Ethnicity

There is an ongoing debate about the place of ethnicity in matching children and foster carers or adopters (DfE, 2012). Social workers need to take account of a child's ethnicity, along with other significant factors, in all decisions about their future. However, they often struggle with how to think about mixed ethnicity children (Selwyn et al, 2010). Social workers tend to view mixed ethnicity children as 'black', even when the ethnicity of the father is not known, or when the child has been brought up within a white culture. This means long-term placements with white foster carers and with white adopters were seen as 'trans-racial' and thought to be detrimental to a child's future development, especially with regard to developing a healthy 'identity' (Selwyn et al, 2010). The focus on finding a 'perfect match' can lead to a delay in children being adopted or for the permanence plan being changed from adoption to long-term foster care (Selwyn et al, 2010; Farmer et al, 2010).

Research suggests that 'trans-racial' placements do not influence stability or produce psychological or behavioral problems in children (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2008; Quinton, 2012; Thoburn et al, 2000). However, where a child is adopted across ethnic boundaries, they and their families can face a range of challenges, which need to be addressed when matching children with families. With appropriate selection and support, some white families can successfully parent ethnic minority children, especially those living in ethnically diverse communities (Thoburn et al,

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2000). Guidance (DCSF, 2010) points towards the assessment of the capacity of carers to support a sense of positive ethnic identity or religion and it is important to consider the child and birth parents' views. A recent consultation with young people showed that children had a wide range of views about this subject (OCD, 2013b) so the importance of involving the child or young person in this discussion is clear.

The Children and Families Act (2014) provides guidance on the roles and responsibilities of different professionals, including in relation to balancing ethnicity with the ability to meet a child's needs.

[An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling delay](#) and [Further Action on Adoption: Finding more loving homes](#) set out the government's proposals to reform the adoption system, including matching children with adopters.

### Balancing priorities, benefits and risks, and taking avoidance of delay into account

The potential quality of the relationship or the 'golden thread' is the crucial factor in placing a child, with weighting given to other criteria dependent on each individual child, family and their circumstances. It may be unrealistic to find a perfect match, so professional judgement and clear support plans are needed to boost 'good enough' options. Factors that may limit the choice of carer include timing, specialist needs (eg sibling groups), age of children and placement costs.

Delay in finding a family for a child placed for adoption is often associated with a local authority's reluctance to seek a family outside of their own approved adopters (Farmer et al, 2010). One reason for this is a belief that the inter-agency fee is too high. However, research shows that when overheads are taken into account, inter-agency placements cost virtually the same as in-house placements (Selwyn et al, 2009).

Quinton (2012) also warns that where focus is on the *event* of matching rather than the *process*, social workers are often drawn into minimising needs or exaggerating capacity in order to gain a match. Working closely as a team around the child helps to ensure that the process is seen as a whole and that there is a range of means to engage and support children, young people and carers in the journey.

[Adoption Research Initiative](#) has interviews with researchers on matching, ethnicity and the inter-agency fee (Dr Julie Selwyn and Elaine Farmer). The site also has links to research briefs.

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## Research

- Does matching make a difference to outcomes?
- Limits to data / difficult to design studies that could accurately measure this.
- Variations in practice across LAs and types of placement.
- Current knowledge based on practice experience / opinion and studies of stability and disruption.

(The Care Inquiry 2013)

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## Research

- Weight of opinion is that the relationships with people that care about and care for them are considered to be the '*golden thread*' that runs through children's lives
- All plans we make for children should be seen through 'the lens of the quality of the child's relationships'

(The Care Inquiry 2013)

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## Catching the golden thread

Children want '*stuff in common*' with carers and prospective adopters who will love and accept them as their own. High value is placed on positive attitudes of openness, honesty and trust.

- Matching carer capacity / strengths to the needs of the child.
- Quality of relationship is the most important factor.
- Personal chemistry / good fit is a predictor of a successful placement.
- How can you assess this?

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## Involvement

- Children should try out a placement before they move there and even in an emergency have information about the family (The Care Inquiry 2013)
- Children's views about where and with whom they live should be taken into consideration.
- Birth parents (in most cases) foster carers and prospective adopters should be involved in the matching process.
- How can we improve involvement for these three groups?

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## Information Sharing / Working Together ?

- Lack of information is a pervasive theme for children, social workers, foster carers and birth parents and prospective adopters.
- Impact:
  - Children = higher anxiety levels
  - Social Workers = impedes matching
  - Foster Carers = unprepared for challenges/so placement is vulnerable
  - Birth parents = alienation
- A better understanding of others' perspectives might help us to identify the information they need.
- What improvements can we make?

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## Other potential challenges

- Economics - is cost a criteria for matching?
- Delays / waiting for a better match / when is it good enough, can we fill the gaps?
- Limited choice for special needs / siblings etc.
- Weighting criteria such as ethnicity.
- Lack of face to face contact to build professional relationships.
- Time for social workers to build relationships with children.

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## Key messages

- Relationships with people who care for and about children are the *golden thread* in children's lives.
- The quality of a child's relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do.
- Children and young people should be fully involved in decisions about where and with whom, they live.
- Their views must be taken into account. This involves active listening.

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## Key messages

- Other than when they move in an emergency, children and young people should visit or try out a placement before a final decision is made.
- Matching should be viewed as a process to be worked at together rather than an event.
- Support plans should be a key part of the process.

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## Key messages

- Working together, understanding others roles and perspectives during this process is essential.
- The quality of the relationships between everyone in the team around the child are likely to impact on the outcome for the child.
- Lack of information is a pervasive theme and has implications for the success or failure of a placement. Identifying what information is needed and the best way to communicate it should be a priority.

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## Key messages

- Children, their birth parents, foster carers and prospective adopters need more **information** and **involvement** in the process of matching and decision making.

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### References

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## Topic 13 Matching

### Key questions

### Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

### Learning Outcome

To review the interpersonal characteristics that help to build and maintain positive relationships.

### Time Required

30 minutes review and 30 minutes reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

### Process

Think of a recent case where positive relationships have been built and maintained and answer the following questions:

- What are the signs of personal chemistry?
- What are the indicators of success or otherwise that you might observe between the prospective carer and child on visits or at meetings?
- What questions could you ask the child afterwards? (Think of questions that would be appropriate at different ages and stages in the process.)
- What methods can you use to build an understanding of the child's views – for example, through a learning mentor or friend of the child?

## Topic 13 Matching

### Key questions

### Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

### Learning Outcome

To review the interpersonal characteristics that help to involve children and young people in discussions.

### Time Required

30 minutes review and 30 minutes reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

### Process

Think of a number of recent cases where you have involved/or had difficulty involving children and young people in discussions and answer the following questions:

- What helps or hinders the development of a strong relationship between the child and their social worker?
- What approaches have enabled you to involve children and young people in discussions?
- What can you or your service do to make sure social workers are able to invest in these relationships?

## Topic 13 Matching

### Key questions for information sharing and communication

#### Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

#### Learning Outcome

To review how information can be shared and effectively communicated.

#### Time Required

30 minutes review and 30 minutes reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

#### Process

Think of a number of recent cases where information has been successfully/less successfully shared and communicated and answer the following questions:

- What do you and your agency perceive to be child-friendly information?
- What might children and young people want to know?
- Bearing in mind that children who are anxious may find it difficult to listen, how can you and the other professionals involved ensure that information is heard and retained by children and young people?
- How can children, young people and foster carers be supported to prepare – including in an emergency?

## Topic 13 Matching

### Group discussion points for the team around the child

#### Methods

Suitable for a group discussion as part of a team meeting or facilitated session for the team around the child.

#### Learning Outcome

To identify and clarify the roles of each team member.

#### Time Required

30 minutes discussion.

#### Process

Discuss the role of each member of the team around the child in the matching process including the child's social worker, the supervising social worker, the independent reviewing officer, the foster carer and the birth parents.

- What are the roles and responsibilities of each of the team members?
- How can you facilitate a better understanding between team members?



## Topic 13 Matching

### Meeting the placement needs of children

#### Method

Suitable for a small group discussion in a team meeting or as part of a facilitated workshop.

#### Learning Outcome

- To identify the child's or young person's needs in relation to placement.
- To explore priorities of need.
- To work out how best to address gaps in meeting children's needs in existing placements.

#### Time Required

60 minutes (40 minutes in pairs with 20 minutes whole group feedback).

#### Process

Working in pairs, read the introduction and think about a child or young person you know who has been, or is in foster care.

Use the hand-out to identify the child's or young person's needs under each of the headings and:

- prioritise those needs,
- identify your reasons for prioritising particular needs,
- consider what difficulties there may be in meeting those needs.

Be prepared to feedback your ideas to the whole group.

#### Introduction

*Longer staying foster children want normality, a family which accepts them, respect for their origins, an important voice in decisions about them and a springboard to a better life. Most probably need an experience of 'good enough parenting', support for developing or maintaining attachments, encouragement to enjoy school and do well there, and support for developing a sense of identity.*

Fostering Now: Messages from Research (Sinclair 2005: 57)<sup>i</sup>

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### Key Points to consider

- The complex nature of the matching process/finding the right placement.
- Attention paid to individuality and detail (e.g. over the precise nature of contact).
- The voice of the child – listening to what the child wants.
- Involving family members.
- The importance of relationships.
- How important these issues are in discussions with social workers.

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### Hand-out

What children want	Specific child or young person's needs	Are needs being met? If so, how? If not, what are the gaps?
Relationships with foster carers AND parents and siblings		
Not to feel the odd one out in the family, to belong		
Warmth and encouragement		
Discipline that they see as reasonable		
Appropriate contact with close and extended family, and other adults they are close to		
Appropriate contact with friends		
Knowledge of their care plan		
Respect and attention for their origins and identity including ethnicity, religious beliefs and practice		

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What children want	Specific child or young person's needs	Are needs being met? If so, how? If not, what are the gaps?
To be treated as normal, not singled out as different		
A clear sense of identity, and understanding about their situation		
An opportunity to grow and develop in a safe environment		
A good education and a chance to acquire skills, including skills in later life		
An opportunity to grow and develop in a safe environment		
To keep in touch after the placement ends		

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### Meeting Needs

#### Methods

Suitable for a small group discussion in a team meeting or as part of a facilitated workshop.

#### Learning Outcome

To review how needs are assessed and identify ways of measuring if they have been met.

#### Time

30 minutes plus 10 minutes feedback, if the discussion is part of a facilitated workshop.

#### Process

Consider DfE Guidance, Standard 15 and work in a small group to discuss the questions below.

#### Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards (DfE 2011) Standard 15

*The fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered.*

- What do we mean by needs?
- What might influence our assessment of needs?
- What do we mean by meeting needs and do we all have the same idea?
- How will we know if we have succeeded in meeting needs?
- What criteria could we measure this by?

Questions from David Quinton (2012) *Rethinking Matching in Adoptions from Care*<sup>ii</sup>

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### Information Sharing – the perspectives of carers and children

#### Methods

Suitable for a discussion in a team meeting using information on a BAAF Form E relating to a known child. Alternatively it can be used in a facilitated workshop with the facilitator preparing a Form E, as a hand-out for participants, drawing on phrases and statements that are commonly used. Flip chart paper and pens are required for small group discussion.

#### Learning Outcome

To promote understanding of what prospective carers and children need to know.

#### Time Required

40 minutes (includes 20 minutes for small group discussion).

#### Process

Divide the larger group into two and give everyone time to read the Form E (10 minutes).

- One group should consider the content from the perspective of a foster carer.
  - What other information or clarification would they need if the child were coming to live with them next Monday?
  - If they have other children living with them, what additional information may they need?
- One group should consider the content from the perspective of the child.
  - What would the child want to know about the family and their household?
  - What will be important to this child?
  - What would they need reassuring about?
- Whole group discussion to consider key learning points from exercise. (10 minutes).



## Topic 13 Matching

### Involving children and parents in placement decisions

#### Method

Suitable for a small group discussion in a team meeting or as part of a facilitated workshop. Additional prompts to discussion are provided for a longer session.

#### Learning Outcome

To review your everyday practice and identify actions that could improve children's involvement in planning and decision-making.

#### Time Required

40 minutes or 60 minutes if the prompts for further exploration are used.

#### Process

Consider the findings of The Care Inquiry in relation to involving children and parents in placement decisions.

Work in a small group to discuss:

1. The practice in your team.
2. What is working well in involving children in decisions about their life?
3. Where are the gaps or barriers and how can these be overcome?
4. What steps can be taken in your team to promote and support children's involvement in planning and decision-making?
5. Use the prompts (below) for further exploration if longer sessions are planned.

#### The Care Inquiry 2013 - Making not Breaking: building relationships for our most vulnerable children

##### RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT INVOLVEMENT

##### Involving children in decisions about their life

Everyone involved in decisions about children in care must value the active contribution that children and young people can make to decisions about their life. This requires a willingness to promote and support that involvement.

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Before any placement with carers who are unknown to the child, including in an emergency, children and young people should receive child-friendly information about the family and home to which they are moving, provided by the carers.

Children and young people should be fully involved in decisions about where, and with whom, they live, and their views must be taken into account. For example: local authorities should identify more than one suitable placement and should involve the child or young person in identifying which is best for them, and other than when they move in an emergency, children and young people should visit or try out a placement before a final decision is made.

### Involving parents

Save in exceptional circumstances, parents should be helped to be involved constructively in planning and decision-making for their child. This will enable children to have continuing relationships with people who are important to them.

### Prompts for further discussion

*In a consultation<sup>iii</sup> children said they would prefer placements to be open-ended not initially thought of as permanent so they could try them out. Discuss the implications of this.*

*How much weight is given to a child's view about a placement?*

*If all other parties were in agreement would you try and persuade a child to give it a go if they said they didn't want to?*

*What message does this give the child?*

*What would a child need to say or what behaviour would they present that would make you rethink the match?*

*Birth parents have said they want **information**, **involvement** and **understanding** (Schofield 2010.)*

*Discuss how you could involve a birth parent in matching decision, what difficulties might arise and how can these be overcome?*

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