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Matching the general or the specific child with a foster home?

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Abstract

Matching a child with a foster home is a professional practice with considerable room for discretion since there are no specific guidelines in Sweden. The aim is to describe what knowledge do social workers' assessments build upon in the matching process. The material consists of matching investigation files of 116 children from 6 municipalities in Sweden. A data form was used to assemble excerpts of descriptions of the child's needs and how the family would be expected to meet the child's needs. The findings show that social workers describe the child's basic needs in line with the theory of Maslow and the ability of foster parents to form attachment and take a child perspective. Specific needs of the child are motioned regarding medical diagnoses and challenging behaviour of the child. This focus on basic needs is due to several circumstances, a shortage of available foster homes and that the matching social worker seldom meets the child, hence the child's interests and wishes are seldom known. Implications for practice concern the right for children to be involved in the decision-making process and for the social worker to take in to account the specific needs of the child.

Keywords: children in care; foster home; matching; placement child protection; professional practice

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Introduction

When a social worker in child protection assesses that a child needs to be placed in foster care, this decision is followed by the act of finding the child an appropriate home, so called 'matching'. 'Matching' is described in the Zeijlmans et al. (2017) literature review as a process in which the social worker selects a foster family that is assessed as the best fit for the child. Matching is also defined as the result of the fit between the carers and the child(ren) (Hayes 2014; Haysom et al. 2020). Matching is then often connected to measures of stability or disruption of the placement. The outcome of matching is viewed in terms of providing children stability in a home environment and positive relationships between children and carers (Haysom et al. 2020). Pösö and Laakso (2016: 307) study matching as a decision-making process where there is balancing of 'professional discretion, legal norms and principles, subjective views of the children and their parents, as well as the economic and bureaucratic conditions of the service provision administration in the municipality'. In this article, we explore matching as a process in which the social worker assesses the fit between the child and the carer as described by Zeijlmans et al. (2017: 257). The process of matching is thus a professional practice of assessing 'the fit'.

As a professional practice, the social worker has to consider several variables that influence the assessment. First and foremost, the needs of the individual child are supposed to be met. Children who are placed in out-of-home care often have long-term experiences of neglect and maltreatment and trauma (Greeson et al. 2011; Clark et al. 2020). A systematic literature review (Steenbakkers, Van Der Steen, and Grietens 2018) on the needs of foster children based upon Maslow's (1943) theory on needs concludes that foster children often have extensive needs due to their experiences, which can be identified in the four categories: medical needs, belongingness needs, psychological needs, and self-actualization needs. Furthermore, the decision of placing a child in a foster home is a decision with long-term consequences, in that it will inevitably have an impact on the child's remaining childhood and often adult life of the child (Vanderwill et al. 2021). Hence, it is of great importance that the matching provides a stabile fit between the family foster home and the child.

Even though a family foster home may present a safe home environment, many placements end up in disruption leading to the need to change foster homes (Sinclair and Wilson 2003; Thoburn 2016). Reported figures reveal that between 20 and 50 percent of placements of children in foster care end with a breakdown (Oosterman et al. 2007; Skoog et al. 2012).

In the matching process according to the Zeijlmans et al. (2017) scoping review, there are several factors that weigh in on the matching

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process, such as aspects of the organization, context, and the decision-maker, which all influence decisions of placement, in addition to the specific case-related factors. Organizational factors relate to a lack of foster families that forces the social worker to prioritize the child's different needs and a lack of time in cases where the child needs another placement urgently, as well as the heavy work-loads of social workers that do not allow them to work too much on each case. Zeijlmans et al. (2017) further point to contextual factors such as the competition with other organizations for foster families, and the fear among social workers of not following the law. Lastly, the decision-maker factors relate to personal values that influence how the professional views foster parents' sexual orientation and cultural background.

Haysom et al. (2020) found in their scoping review that earlier research on matching factors is dependent on the time period, with IQ and class being of importance in the early 1920s, while today the factors reflect the priorities and theories of scholars such as the importance of well-being. The authors reflect upon an absence of objective, consistently applied factors and a missing focus on trauma and attachment.

Also, in assessing a matching, there are always uncertainties of what will happen in the future, as the placement of a child often is long-term. Trauma, violence, and neglect that the child has experienced earlier may play out later and then pose challenges for the foster family that they were not prepared for (Pösö and Laakso 2016). During long-term placements, the foster family can possibly go through some challenges that were unforeseen, such as a parent's ill health, divorce, or problems if biological children in the family do not adjust to the new child in the family. These challenges may lead to disruptions in placement. Re-occuring disruptions pose risks for children to develop problems in social relationships, school, and their self-esteem, as well as impair children's trust in caregivers and other adults (Rock et al. 2015; Konijn et al. 2019; Van Holen et al. 2021).

Children who are subjected to placement out-of-home have rights according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which is ratified as law in Sweden. Article 12 states that children capable of forming his or her views are to be given the right to express themselves freely in all matters that affect the child, and 'the views of the child are to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. The child shall 'in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child'. In article 20, certain individual traits of the child are mentioned that are to be taken into account when a child is placed out-of-home by the state. 'When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background'. However, Delgado, Carvalho, and Alves (2023) found in their scoping review that there is a

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lack of participation for children in foster care. Children still have little impact on the decisions made in the childcare system. The authors further criticize the use of an age cut-off point that reserves participation in social services to children over a certain age.

On top of all these aspects to consider in the assessment, there is often a shortage of foster homes, and therefore the social worker must prioritize among the needs and maybe wishes of the child, and their professional knowledge of what they believe would work, as well as organizational aspects that set boundaries.

Two literature reviews about matching conclude that research is sparse on matching a foster care family and a prospective child, and professionals are relying on intuitive practice experience rather than on evidence or a coherent framework (Haysom et al. 2020). Zeijlmans et al. (2017) further point out that there is a need for in-depth knowledge and awareness of what influences matching.

Aim and research question

This article studies the practice of matching through social workers' written assessments in the matching investigation. The aim of the article is then to describe and discuss what is guiding the social workers' assessments in the matching process.

The research question to be answered is:

- What knowledge do social workers build upon in their decisions and what factors are assessed as important for providing a good foster care placement?

The matching practice in Sweden—organizational and knowledge perspective

The act of finding a new home for children who cannot stay with their family has been a professional practice in Sweden dating back approximately a hundred years, from when the children's welfare boards became mandatory through law in the municipalities in 1926. During the first decades of the twentieth century, inspectors of foster homes focused on material resources, whether the foster family could provide food, shelter, a bed for the child, a clean home, and training for the child for a working life. These basic needs were the same for all children. Later on, focus was partly shifted towards a more individual perspective on the child's psychological health, education, time to play, and a room of the child's own (Bergman 2011). This retrospective analysis shows that the

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view on what is a good foster home and a good matching is ever-changing through time.

Turning back to the professional practice of today, the matching process is one part of the child protection practice. When the situation is assessed to be not appropriate for a child to live with his or her custodians, the child can be placed in a foster home, which is most common, or in a group home for care or residence, which is less common. The first step of assessment is the mandate to document if the child has a relative or someone close to the child that can be the foster family (kinship care). The placement can be voluntary with consent from the parents and the child (depending on age) according to the Social Services Act. When the placement cannot be under consent, the Care of Young Persons Act regulates the compulsory care.

The practice of matching foster children with suitable family foster homes is carried out either by the local municipal social services by employed social workers or a contracted consultant. Nowadays, it has become increasingly common to contract out the investigation to a private enterprise (Järkestig Berggren, Arnesson, and Bergman 2021). The final decision in both cases, to place the child in a family foster home, is taken by the Social Services Welfare Board.

As stated above, the child has the right to be heard during the investigation, although it is found in several reports that children are often not heard in regards to their situation. A recent report found that 59 percent of the children investigated in child protection were not heard (Heimer and Pettersson 2023). Another report found that social workers dedicate 2 percent of their time to direct communication with children (National Investigator 2017).

Once the initial investigation is completed, and it is concluded that the child needs a foster home, the case is forwarded to the unit that assesses matching between a child and a foster home. At this stage, the social worker responsible for placement can either find possible foster homes to assess for matching or contract the finding of suitable foster homes to a private enterprise. As common practice, neither the social worker nor the private consultant meets with the child, although this varies among municipalities. Rather, the social worker or private consultant relies on the information given in the first investigation. In large municipalities and when involving enterprises, often the process involves several professionals.

According to a handbook about foster home placement by the National Board of Health and Welfare (2023: 144), social workers must consider the principles of closeness and maintained contact with the foster child's birth family. The principle of closeness should be applied, meaning that care should promote the child's relationships and other important persons. Furthermore, the principle of closeness can be interpreted to relate also to geography, language, culture, ethnicity, and

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religion. The process of how the investigation is done is described in the handbook in steps, but the content of the information collected and how it should be assessed is not regulated, and therefore the matching is a process involving considerable discretion on the part of social workers or consultants. The social worker being a street-level bureaucrat needs room for discretion in order to carry out the assignment (Lipsky 2010); however, when there are no regulations, the profession creates a local culture and collective memory of how certain problems are to be assessed and what interventions are to be implemented (Höjer and Forkby 2011). Social workers use several knowledge forms in their daily work. They have academic knowledge through education, their personal experience that most professions try to control but exists nevertheless, the organizational knowledge of regulations, laws and routines, and finally their work experience. Together, these knowledge forms make up the social workers' professional knowledge (Drury-Hudson 1999). Professional knowledge builds upon all the other knowledge forms when the social worker exercises discretion in professional practice, accordingly prioritizing among choices and weighing pieces of information in assessments as required.

Method

Sample

The material is made up of case files of matching investigations from six medium to large municipalities in Sweden with a geographical spread and socio-economic differences. One criterion of the selected municipalities was that their organization included special units with several employed social workers to handle the cases. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2021–00886; 2022–03017-02).

The selection of files consists of twenty children from each municipality who have ongoing family foster home placement. The investigation in the sample is for the coming placement. The children in the case files are sixty girls and fifty-six boys. There are thirty-eight children in the ages between zero and five, fifty-five children between the ages six and twelve, and twenty-three children in the ages between thirteen and sventeen. Most children are born in Sweden (ninety-seven), but fifty-five mothers are born outside Sweden.

A data collection form was constructed in order to collect descriptive quantitative data concerning age, gender, time in placement, number of break-downs, etc. The second part of the form was designed to assemble qualitative data, collecting excerpts of descriptions about the child's needs, the resources of the potential foster family, how the family would

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be expected to meet the child's needs, and any foreseen risks with the placement.

These case files are confidentially sensitive as they contain private information. We therefore read the documents on site at the social services offices. The data forms were anonymized, that is, we did not collect names, geographical data, or other identifiers such as date of birth. In order to prevent ambiguity during the recording process, two project researchers were involved in recording data from case files into the dataset. Any uncertainties were thoroughly discussed at research meetings.

Analysis

Data from the case files underwent qualitative thematic analysis in search for underlying ideologies or ideas at the latent level as phrased by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis of developing themes started from a literature search and we then used as a sensitising frame the variables influencing matching; contextual, organizational, and personal traits of the individual child as well as the decision-maker (Maslow 1943; Zeijlmans et al. 2017; Steenbakkers, Van Der Steen, and Grietens 2018; Haysom et al. 2020). We also considered the change over time in professional values of what is important factors when children are placed-out-of-home as a sensitising concept (Bergman 2011). However, in reading the data, we tried to keep a sensitive mind open for the unforeseen. For this article, we focused on the qualitative data, where the social workers describe the needs of the child and the assessment of how the proposed foster family is expected to meet the needs of the child. The first step of the analysis was carried out on a case-by-case basis. Thereafter, the analysis focused on the entire material, and overarching themes were developed. Excerpts from the case files were selected to illustrate the themes. The themes were discussed among the researchers which contributed with a more detailed description of each theme. The analysis of developing themes was a back-and-forth process between reading, discussing and writing about the data and existing theories and previous research about the assessment of foster children's needs and decisions in matching. Finally, we also analysed what was missing in the data that appears to be present in research.

Results

The investigations

In the matching investigations, the social worker writes a concluding assessment with underpinning arguments for the matching that describe

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the needs of the child, what the carer family can provide for the child, and how the foster parents will meet the needs of the child. These assessments have been analysed and sorted into themes that relate to what is valued in the care that the family is to provide. The argument presented reveals the underpinning source of knowledge for the matching. The presentation of the child in the investigation is most often not in detail. The overarching themes of general needs and specific needs of the children became obvious through the analysed themes underpinned by theory. Overall, the themes represent a description of the needs of a general child. In some investigations, the needs of the child are more precise and present specific needs. Below we present the themes of the general child in Table 1.

Basic needs with rules and routines

All investigations present a matching of what could be called basic needs, such as basic care regarding food, sleep, and provision of healthcare when needed, and safety and stability in family life. The excerpts below are typical examples of the focus on basic needs:

> *Their ability to give (the child) basic care and a good upbringing matches the needs for care, stability and a positive upbringing that have been presented in the investigation of the needs of the child. (1)*

> *(They) have knowledge and ability, and they are actively engaged to provide the basic needs for the child. (85)*

A related theme is rules and routines that describe predictability and the foster family's routines and structure in everyday life. In this theme, there is also emphasis on boundary setting concerning behaviour in family life.

> *The family has everyday routines concerning meals, sleep, school, homework, activities, and playtime.* (8)

Boundary setting for behaviour is always described connected with emotional warmth rather than on its own. Boundaries and rules can then be interpreted as means to create a safe environment for the child's upbringing.

> *The assessment is that they have the ability to create a safe and predictable everyday life with structure. They are capable of empathy and can give the child a safe upbringing with warmth, rules, and boundaries. (6)*

Resources

A third theme is concerned with the resources that the family has that can provide care in a developmental environment. Resources are ample

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Table 1. The general child.

Maslow first level	Maslow second level		Maslow third level	The child perspective		Professional knowledge
Basic needs	Rules and Routines	Resources	Support from the child's social network	Child perspective, theory of the mind	Attachment	previous successful experiences of foster family
Providing basic needs; food, sleep, shelter, health	Boundary setting for behavior	Ample time, often the care mother	Supporting contact with the child's family	Taking/understanding the child's perspective	Form secure attachment	Social worker has previous experience of successful placement in the family
Safe environment, Stability in the family	Routines and structure in everyday life	Spacious housing, a room for the child	Supporting social network, friends	Mentalizing, showing empathy	Emotional closeness, expressing warmth and affection	Parent's professional occupation involves working with children
		Extended family	Support in school activities	Focusing on the children and family life	Humorous social interaction	

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living space, often in a house with a room for the child. Time is also a resource; often the mother works part-time and takes care of the child or the children. Other resources mentioned are social networks and extended family that can incorporate the child in a positive environment. Resources are also viewed as an active life outdoors, involvement in sports and such activities in their free time that will include the child.

> *The family can offer the child a room of onés own, a safe and secure environment, and an engaging leisure time for a youth. They are healthy and have the ability to give care and guidance to a youth. They are prepared to cooperate with social services and to support the youth's contacts with school, health care and dental care. (5)*

This excerpt also points at the care givers' ability to cooperate with professionals that are responsible for the placement and the child's health. The support and readiness to uphold a social network relates to the next theme.

Support the child's social network

The fourth theme focuses on the care givers' support in upholding social relations, most importantly with the biological parents and siblings, but also possibly with grandparents. Support also refers to helping the child with school contacts and finding leisure activities.

> *The foster home is supporting in all other contacts, and they find it important to make sure that he has a positive contact with his network and next of kin. (88)*

These four themes could be compared to the first three levels of Maslow's classical hierarchy of needs (Steenbakkers, Van Der Steen, and Grietens 2018) and furthermore also be related to the matching practice of the beginning of the 20st century (Bergman 2011). The focus of matching then was also on basic needs, and the standard was described as the child had his own bed. With an increasing standard, today the child has a room of his own. There was also a focus on rules, tidiness, and obedience in the families. Obedience may have been rephrased as upholding boundaries for behaviour in a family context rather than obeying the foster parents in an adult-child power relation. These general needs being the focus for foster care thus have a legacy dating back a hundred years.

More recent theoretical underpinnings related to the child perspective

The fifth and sixth themes represent more recent thinking of what makes up a good foster home, where these themes are underpinned by the

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theory of attachment (White et al. 2020) and theory of the mind (Midgley and Vrouva 2012). Theory of attachment concerns the relationship between the child and the foster parents, in which there is the assessment whether the parents are able to form a close relationship with the child and become the attachment persons. The theory is also used in the emphasis on upholding relationships with the child's biological family.

> *The foster parents are able to support the child in having contact with her social network, in her need for attachment, and to keep her contact with next of kin./…/The child can be the focus for care in the foster home, get emotional care, and build attachment in the daily care. (44)*

The theory of the mind is present in assessments of the foster parents' ability to take on a child perspective, to understand the impact of events on the child, and to provide emotional support. The foster parents' ability also involves having respect for the perspective of the child. Social workers express this view in the excerpts below:

> *They (foster parents) take on a child perspective, and they see the needs of the child. (6)*

> *They have emotional competence in abundance and a reflecting mind. (22)*

> *They have great emotional engagement; they are calm and stabile persons with knowledge and patience to fulfil the child's needs. In conversation, they show that they complement each other, that they are able to talk about everything, and that both of them have great ability to mentalize.* (73)

Professional knowledge

Lastly, the seventh theme rests on the professional knowledge of the family. When the family is previously known as a foster family who successfully—meaning without disruptions—has taken care of children, this is an argument for placement in the family. Also, if the foster parents have professional occupations involving working with children, such as being teachers or social workers, this is a favourable argument for placement. In this way, the professional knowledge of foster parents is then viewed as increased competence to understand the child, take the child perspective, and meet any special needs that may exist.

> *Married couple with long-term experience as a foster family. The woman has professional experience working with children with special needs/…/ They have succeeded with previous placements. (3)*

> *They have been a home for emergency foster care and have the ability and resources to take this child. The office has experiences using them as an emergency home. (79)*

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All in all, the general matching criteria are that the foster care family should meet the requirements of the child's basic needs. Furthermore, the foster parents' values and views of children should include focus on forming attachment with the child and the child's network, and they should be open to cooperating with social services and other professional services concerning the child. They should be able to show warmth and give emotional care to the child. Lastly, an argument for a good match is if the foster family has had experience with a previous placement.

Specific needs of the child?

There are not often specific descriptions of the child's needs beyond the above-mentioned general descriptions. The child's specific needs are addressed on a few occasions in the material relating to three themes: (1) when a child has a diagnosis such as autism, asperger syndrome, or another disability or medical condition, (2) when the child shows behaviour problems, and (3) in some cases, when cultural background is taken into account. These specific needs are referred to as problems rather than needs as pointed out by Steenbakkers, Van Der Steen, and Grietens (2018).

Disabilities and diagnoses

When the child has a medical diagnosis, this is noted in the assessment and discussed. The matching is then tailored preferably with care givers who have previous experience or have their own professional knowledge of that specific diagnosis. Also, care givers are preferred that can provide extra time and devote their attention to the child. The preferred placement is also one in which a family has few children or where the child can be the only child.

> *Married couple, the child has ADHD. They can fulfil his needs regarding health, education, emotional and behavioural development, and social relations. There are pre-conditions for safety and predictability, the foster family has a son of their own with the diagnosis, and they know how to create the structure in everyday life that is important because of the diagnosis. (80)*

> *A married couple, the child has a need for a safe environment and care for severe epilepsy. It is good that the foster mother is an assistant nurse and works at the emergency room. They live near the hospital and have medical competence. (108)*

However, often there is a lack of foster homes that can provide these resources. Then, the matching is compromised, and priorities need to be set. Engwall et al. (2024) point out that social workers would benefit in

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their professional practice of a deeper knowledge of disabilities in order to provide support for foster care families, specifically in taking care of a child when there is no progress.

Challenging behaviour

The specific needs of the child are also related to challenging behaviour of the child, such as that involves and affects all members of the foster family. In the investigations, it is obvious that showing aggression is often a cause for disruption, especially when it affects other children in the family (Bergman et al. 2024a). Below is an excerpt from an investigation of a boy 9 years old who is now being relocated for the fifth time.

> *The problem is his need for surveillance by the care givers around the clock, his destructive behaviour to destroy furniture and clothes, and his unpredictable emotional outbursts that still occur. He has a great need for support, structure, and predictability to be able to function in daily life. He needs care givers with patience and time to devote only to him./…/ They have previous experience as a foster home for children with problems and diagnoses. They give a warm and kind impression, and they have patience, stability, and wisdom. There is warmth and a sense of humor in the family. The office has a long-term, positive experience of them as a foster care family. (18)*

Another behaviour that is difficult for foster care families to address is inappropriate sexual behaviour that can cause need for surveillance of a teenager that goes out and exposes oneself to personal risks, sexually and physically. In some investigations, the child has shown inappropriate sexual harassment towards the children in a foster care family, which then led to disruption of the placement. A boy who had shown sexual interest towards teenagers of the same sex that was deemed inappropriate by his foster family was assessed for a new placement:

> *The foster parent is a single man with knowledge of children and ability, and he is committed to making sure that (the boy) will have his basic needs fulfilled. He is there and provides warmth and safety—it is important that the boy is allowed to reflect over his sexual orientation with his family. (112)*

Cultural background

In a few assessments, the child's cultural background and native language are mentioned as an additional focus for matching the child with the family in question. Children are sometimes placed in families that have the same cultural background or speak their language, but not always. In the excerpt below, the foster family has a background from an

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African country which is the case also for the foster child, although not from the same country.

> *The family has previous experiences of children with diagnoses and with another cultural background. (53)*

Overall, the cultural background of the child could have been mentioned and assessed as an important need to take into account more often than it is, since 19 children are born in another country and 55 of the biological mothers come from other countries. According to the UN Convention, the right to ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic background of the child seems to be a value that is often overlooked.

Discussion—why so general and what is missing?

Why does the description of the child's needs so often stop at the general needs forming the basis for decision in matching? First, describing the most common needs of a general child seems to be less dependent upon time era than previously noted (Haysom et al. 2020). The basic needs are still in focus even though there is adjustment to the standard of today; there is a change towards incorporating the psychological theory of attachment and theory of the mind, where there is focus on relationships and emphasis on the psychological development of the child.

However, the legal agenda on children's rights to have a voice in issues that matter to them is not that obvious in the matching investigations. Children are most often not heard before there is a family that they are expected to meet; hence, the general description of the child is the common basis for decision (Delgado, Carvalho, and Alves 2023). The organization of the matching process often involves several professionals, which thus could be described as professionally fragmentized. The social worker responsible for the matching investigation often relies on the first investigation of the child's situation without meeting the child. The first investigation also often lacks the information about the child's own perspective and wishes (Heimer and Pettersson 2023). As a result, the matching investigation thus contains little information about the specific child. The matching investigations in this study from six municipalities all show the same pattern of describing basic needs of any child and specific needs only in a few cases; the implication is that differing cultures or a community memory influencing differences in assessments is absent. The general description of children's needs and lack of specific data about children placed in foster homes seems to be the overall practice.

Another reason for the general description of the child may be the lack of matching families that can cause compromised matchings (Zeijlmans et al. 2018; Bergman et al. 2024a). The more specific needs

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of the child there are, the more the different needs must be prioritized. In these cases, social workers at some point start to doubt the suitability of the placement, but they do not have any options. In this way, having fewer specific needs helps the social worker to have more suitable options, and possibly a better view of one's own work.

Now, if the matching investigations are sparse on data about the specific child, what could be overlooked that would have been valuable knowledge in the matching process?

Most children who are placed in foster care have experiences of traumatic events such as violence and neglect in some form, and for most children these situations have been ongoing for a while. Experiences of trauma have been found to pose a risk for disruptions in placements (Clark et al., 2020). Therefore, it seems that a focus on the child's experience of trauma and the effects of that on the child would have been helpful information for the foster family, since these circumstances may request special actions, time, and knowledge on their part that they initially did not expect.

Adding to the complexity, is that some of the issues and problems that children have experienced, and their related needs, might only first become obvious later on. For example, the consequences of the child's experience of trauma may be a problem after a while in the new foster home, although it was not obvious during the placement process.

Limitations

This study is performed on the written material in matching investigations only, and the professional written documents such as journals and investigations do not contain all data. There are professional discourses about how to write these texts, and social workers have done prioritizing and discretional assessments that are not written down, which therefore has an impact when studying the written matching investigations. However, the investigations do contain the data and decisions that will have consequences for the child.

Implications for practice

Social workers working with matching children to a foster home need to address several issues, that is, the process of placing a child in foster care is professionally de-fragmentized, the child is often not involved, and (therefore) knowledge about the specific child might be sparse. Other challenges social workers face are that access to possible foster homes is limited and the decision is uncertain due to it being a decision for the future placement.

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The first issue is concerned with the organization of social services and child protection. Social services responsible for the well-being of children in need of protection must reflect on the number of persons that the child meets in social services. The work division of child protection for children who are placed out of home must be re-considered. Here, a suggestion is a practice that builds on the specific child who will meet with one social worker through the whole investigation and placement process, rather than the current practice that builds on the organizational logic of work division. This would provide the child with a voice during the whole investigation and placement process. Furthermore, the obligation to talk with children and document their perspectives and to make sure that their perspectives are taken into account needs to be further emphasized in the guidelines and routines for social workers in child protection placements. As of now children are most often presented with the foster family once all decisions are taken.

The reports of children being described in general terms regarding needs is the most obvious result in this article. When related to the several reports that children are not being listened to and that assessments do not take the children's perspective into account, it follows that the risk for disruption increases due to little knowledge about the child. Social workers cannot foresee the future, and it is not easy to know how a child might develop in the foster home, but increasing the knowledge about each child could possibly shrink the gap of what is unknown. This is a crucial point to improve since children has legal right to be heard about their wishes and needs when moving to another family and to be able to influence the decision taken for them. Furthermore, adding information about the kinds of trauma that the child has experienced and actively providing this information to the assessment would prepare the foster family better as well as anticipating how these needs can be met.

The lack of foster homes is not easily addressed, and social workers therefore often end up in compromised situations when they have to prioritize among the child's many needs and weigh them against risks. Risk factors for unstable placements are often categorized as related to the child, the foster family, the biological family, and the childcare system as such (Oosterman et al., 2007; Skoog et al., 2012; Montserrat, Llosada-Gistau, and Fuentes-Peláez 2020; Bergman et al. 2024b). These risk factors are in a sense general, and in the prioritizing process, they are weighed against the foster family's resources to mitigate these risks and meet the child's needs. In this regard, knowledge of what factors relate to the specific child may not facilitate finding the matching home, but this information may facilitate the process of prioritizing.

In conclusion, knowledge used in social services for providing child protection is focused on general needs, often leaving the specific needs of the child out of the picture. The knowledge that we emphasize must be concerned with the actual needs of the child who is to be placed in a

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foster home, and this task is best fulfilled by meeting with the child, listening to each child's experiences and wishes, and taking children's legal rights to have a voice seriously.

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