

## Matching children with foster carers: A literature review



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 3 September 2016  
Received in revised form 16 December 2016  
Accepted 16 December 2016  
Available online 23 December 2016

#### Keywords:

Family foster care  
Matching  
Out-of-home care  
Placement success  
Decision-making

### ABSTRACT

Matching in family foster care is a form of complex decision-making influenced by more than case factors alone. Organizational, contextual, and decision-maker factors also contribute to the process. This scoping review has synthesized the empirical literature on matching decisions in family foster care. The 12 included studies reveal that a diverse, broad range of case factors is considered during matching. Organizational factors can limit practitioners' ability to choose a desired placement. Furthermore, policy-related influences affect matching practices, as do personal viewpoints of decision-makers. We conclude that matching in foster care is a very complex process. Two interrelated topics can guide future research: outcomes (knowledge of case factors when making matching decisions) and processes (understanding the different organizational, decision-maker, and external influences that might hinder or promote good matching practice). Bringing both together in one comprehensive model could help to improve matching practice.

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### 1. Introduction

Children in family foster care are vulnerable. They often have been exposed to troublesome experiences, such as prenatal drugs and alcohol, premature birth, failure to form adequate attachments, unstable living arrangements (Vig, Chinitz, & Shulman, 2005) or persistent maltreatment (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010) before being placed out-of-home. Furthermore, out-of-home placement almost invariably implies a disruption in the child's primary attachment relationships (Stovall & Dozier, 2008) and existing social networks (Perry, 2006). Family foster care has the potential to provide these vulnerable children with a safe placement in a family setting (Horwitz, Balestracci, & Simms, 2001; Perry, 2006). However, foster care does not always have a positive effect on foster children's developmental trajectories (Goemans, Van Geel, & Vedder, 2015), and children entering foster care can be retraumatized when experiencing unplanned and negative placement endings, leading to poorer physical and behavioral well-being (Villodas, Litrownik, Newton, & Davis, 2015). To improve the well-being of foster children, it is important to understand the dynamics of foster care placements (Goemans et al., 2015).

The difference between a positive and a negative foster care placement is primarily determined by the foster child's characteristics, the quality of the foster carer, and the interaction between the foster carer and the foster child (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003). Therefore, predicting a beneficial interaction between child and carer characteristics can diminish the negative impact of an out-of-home placement (O'Gorman,

2013). This process of selecting a foster family, which is the best fit with a child, is called *matching* (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001; Quinton, 2012). Matching is a complex decision-making process (Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015) that is most likely influenced by case, organizational, external, and decision-maker factors (Baumann, Dagleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011).

Since matching constitutes the beginning of a placement and has the potential to influence the chance of favorable and advantageous placements, it is important to understand how these decisions are being made and what research has been conducted. Using an exploratory scope, this review critically examines the existing empirical literature on family foster care matching and aims to answer the following research question: *What is known about decision-making in the family foster care matching process?* Scientific literature on matching is synthesized to gain understanding of factors influencing this decision-making process and to improve future research.

### 2. Method

This study followed the scoping review guidelines provided by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and enhanced by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010), which comprise a methodology to synthesize all relevant literature related to a specific topic. A systematized approach was used to increase this study's transparency and replicability.

#### 2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The search criteria were determined after an iterative process. We started by including all references that could contain information on matching, which led to an extensive list of references, most of which

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were not relevant. Based on these search results, we composed initial inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria were specified after a more critical examination of the literature and consultation with other researchers from the field of family foster care, as recommended by Levac et al. (2010).

This study includes empirical studies on the decision-making process of matching in family foster care, published in journals, books, or reports between 1980 and 2015. Long-term, respite, and specialized foster care were included, but monothematic literature on adoption or kinship care was excluded due to the distinction in children's characteristics between those placements (Beeman, Kim, & Bullerdick, 2000; Triseliotis, 2002) and the different placement rationales for these types of care (Meiksans, Iannos, & Arney, 2015; Pösö & Laakso, 2016). Articles on foster care in combination with other types of care were included.

## 2.2. Search strategy

The approach for the English-language references consisted of searching the databases ERIC, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, and Web of Science for literature published after 1979, using the keyword “foster care” combined with “match”, “placement”, or “decision.” Since the first author's native language is Dutch, the English search words were translated and used in the database Picarta to include Dutch empirical articles. The search led to 8681 results, which were filtered, in a step-wise manner,

for their fit with the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Fig. 1). First, we looked at the titles and, subsequently, at the selected abstracts. The next step was to combine the searches of different search engines, delete the duplicates, and locate the full texts for the remaining references. After multiple efforts to retrieve the text, one full text, published in 1982, could not be found. Full texts were retrieved for the remaining 37 references. After reading these full texts, we excluded 25 references that did not include an empirical study (10), focused on another decision-making process (7) or on a more general matching issue in child welfare (3), did not take the fit of a child with the carer characteristics into account (3), or did not provide enough information on matching (2). Twelve references fitted the inclusion criteria.

We did not exclusively search for literature written in English, because we hypothesized that matching results might be published on a national level to improve practice and policy. For references from other countries, researchers from the field of family foster care were contacted through the International Foster Care Research Network (see: <https://www.uni-siegen.de/foster-care-research/index.html.en?lang=en>). Researchers from this network were asked to check for relevant articles in their country. Colleagues from Spain, Portugal, Finland, Italy, South Korea, India, Croatia, Lithuania, and Norway responded, but no further references were included.

The search strategy was expanded by scrutinizing the reference lists of the included references (“snowballing”) and by conducting a “cited by” search on Google Scholar (see Fig. 1). For five references, which

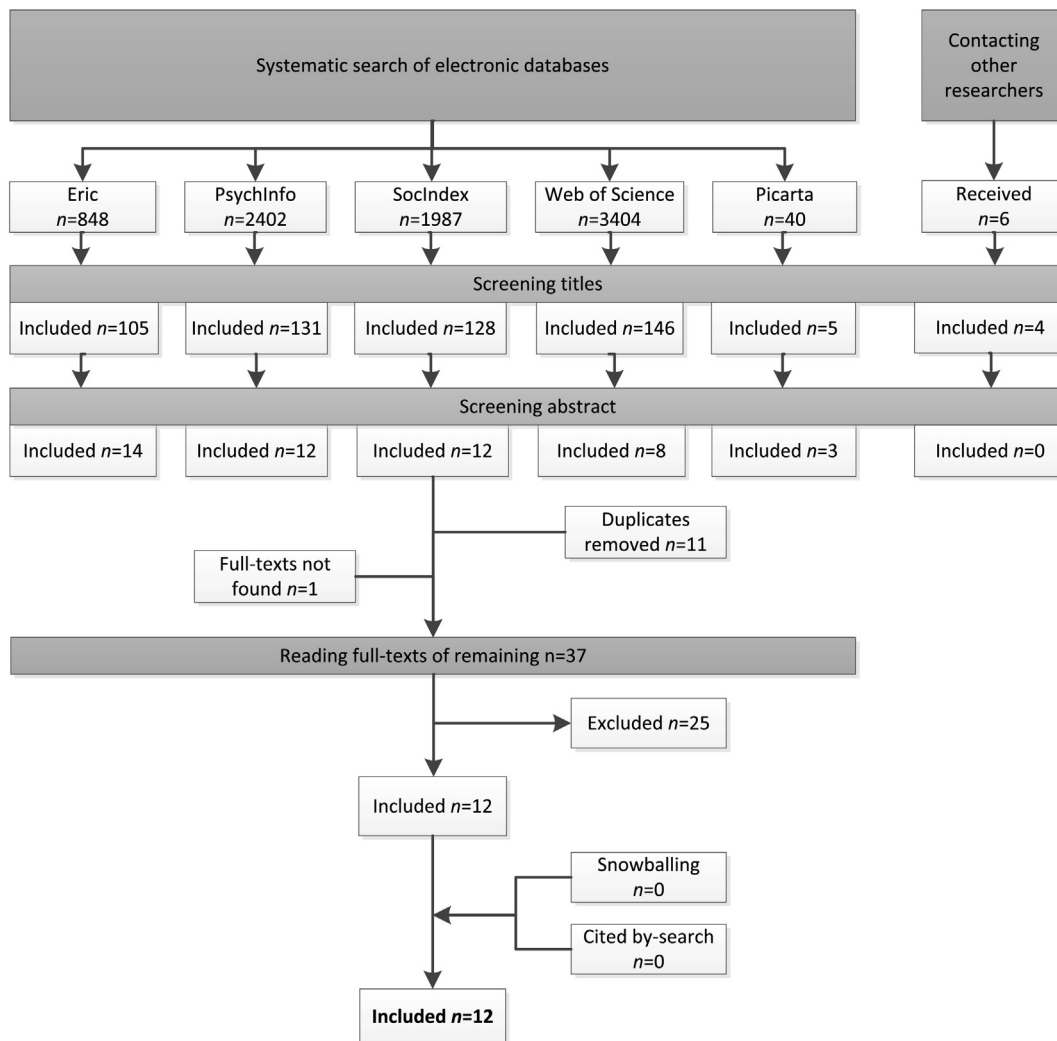


Fig. 1. Overview of systematized search strategy.

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