

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

How Are Children Involved? Participation of Children in the Process of Matching With Foster Families

Ann-Sofie Bergman¹  | Miia Bask²  | Kristina Engwall³  | Ulrika Järkestig Berggren⁴  | Maria Eriksson⁵ 

¹Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden | ²Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden | ³Department of Social Work, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden | ⁴Department of Social Work, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden | ⁵Department of Social Sciences, Marie Cederschiöld University, Stockholm, Sweden

Correspondence: Ann-Sofie Bergman (ann-sofie.bergman@socarb.su.se)

Received: 18 November 2024 | **Revised:** 13 June 2025 | **Accepted:** 30 June 2025

Funding: This work was supported by Forskningsrådet om Hälsa, Arbetsliv och Välfärd (2020-00755).

Keywords: children's participation | foster care | foster children | foster parents | matching

ABSTRACT

Children have the right to be informed and to express their views on all matters affecting them. When children are placed in foster care, social services are responsible for ensuring that the child receives 'good care'. This requires a matching process. Matching means that children and foster families must 'fit together'. Matching can be understood as a multistage process in which the child has the right to participate. With Sweden as the case in point, this article examines children's participation in the matching process and addresses the following research questions: What factors are associated with children's participation? How and when are children involved in the matching process? When children are involved, which aspects of matching are important to them, according to the professionals? Data was drawn from case files in six municipalities ($n = 90$) and interviews with professionals ($n = 50$) working with foster care. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were combined to provide a comprehensive understanding. Quantitative analysis shows significant associations between child involvement and certain child characteristics, including gender, age, and whether the child has a diagnosis. Qualitative analysis shows that children's involvement is limited, and when they are involved, it is generally at a late stage in the process.

1 | Introduction

Children's rights have been strengthened in society in recent decades, with implications for their right to participate in the investigations and efforts of social services. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have the right to be informed and to express their views on all matters that concern them, and their views must be given weight according to the age and maturity of the child (art. 12 and 17). The right to information is fundamental to participation, which means that lack of access to information is a barrier to participation. The UNCRC also draws on the care perspective, which emphasizes children's needs and their right to protection and care based on their individual needs (e.g., UNCRC, art. 19 and 20).

When a child is placed in foster care, the social services are responsible for ensuring that the foster carers are able to provide appropriate care for the child. Careful preparation and planning are required for a placement to be suitable and stable. The preparation includes a matching process in which a foster family is selected to fit the individual child (Zeijlmans et al. 2017). Matching is important for the quality of care, as the carers need necessary resources to meet the child's needs. Inadequate work put into matching can be a possible contributor to placement failures, such as what is known as a 'breakdown', leading to a change of carers (Bergman et al. 2024; Sinclair and Wilson 2003; Thoburn 2016). Failure in the pre-placement planning can also mean that children are exposed to new risks, as in a lack of care (Biehal 2014; Biehal and

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Child & Family Social Work* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Grant 2022). The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions taken by social services in relation to children (UNCRC, art. 3). In order to assess what is best for the child, professionals need to have general knowledge of children's needs, specific knowledge of the individual child's needs and knowledge of the child's perspective. This means that when searching for a foster family that suits the child, the child needs to be involved in the process.

There are many studies based on the perspective of children in care that emphasize the importance of participation (Balsells et al. 2017; Bessell 2011; Fylkesnes et al. 2021; Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; van Bijleveld et al. 2015; Wilson et al. 2020). Foster children have often experienced feelings of powerlessness in their previous life situation, which makes it even more important to involve them in issues about their future. However, despite the fact that children have the right to participate and that the children themselves see participation as important and beneficial, studies repeatedly show that there is a gap between the official discourse and how children's participation is implemented in practice (Delgado et al. 2023; McTavish et al. 2022; Toros 2021; van Bijleveld et al. 2015). It is common for children to describe shortcomings in the preparation for placement, such as a lack of information about why they are being moved from their home, what foster care is, who their foster carers will be, and how contact with their birth family will occur during their time in care (McTavish et al. 2022; Mitchell et al. 2010; Mitchell and Kuczynski 2010). Without adequate preparation, placement can be a traumatic (McTavish et al. 2022; Mitchell et al. 2010) or confusing (Wilson et al. 2020) experience.

This article focuses on the involvement of children in the matching process. Matching means that children and foster families must 'fit together' (Haysom et al. 2020). Matching is not a single event in which a foster home is selected to suit a child; rather, it can be understood as a process in several steps in which the child has the right to be involved.

1.1 | Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the article is to examine the participation of children in the matching process. The study is based on a review of case files and interviews with professionals in Sweden. The following research questions are addressed:

- What factors are associated with children's participation?
- How and when are children involved in the matching process?
- When children are involved, which aspects of matching are important to them, according to the professionals?

1.2 | The Swedish Context

In Sweden, the social services in the municipalities are responsible for ensuring that children in vulnerable life situations receive the support and protection they need during their childhood. According to the Social Services Act (2025), if the welfare

of a child is threatened, the social services have the responsibility to intervene in order to provide protection and support to the child, with these services offered on a voluntary basis. The law is supplemented with the Care of Young Persons Act (1990), which regulates compulsory care. If it is not appropriate for a child to live with one's parents/custodians, the child can be placed in a foster home or in a home for care or residence. The most common form of out-of-home care is foster care. In the year 2023, 18 800 children and young people lived in foster care in Sweden; the majority were voluntary placements (The National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) 2024). The first option is that a relative or someone close to the child, if deemed appropriate, will take care of the child (kinship care). If that is not possible, the child will be placed with new caregivers. In most cases, the aim is to work towards reunification between the child and the parents. Foster carers are expected to complement the parents/custodians, not replace them. However, if a child has lived in a foster home for more than 2 years, transfer of custody to the foster carers should be considered (SSA, 22 chap., 14§).

When a child is to be placed in foster care, the social services are responsible for investigating and assessing the suitability of foster carers for the task of providing the child with 'good care' (SSA, 22 chap., 8§). Prior to the decision on placement, an assessment must be made to determine whether the conditions in the foster home will meet the needs of the child (NBHW 2023a). In many municipalities, social work is organized in specialized units (Steive et al. 2024). The practice of assessing and matching foster children with suitable families is carried out by employed social workers working in teams led by a manager, usually an experienced social worker. The final decision to place the child in a foster home is made by the social services welfare board. In recent years, private consulting companies (for-profit organisations) and foundations (nonprofit organisations) have come to play an increasingly important role in the recruitment of foster carers. They sell services to the municipalities, partly by providing foster homes and partly by maintaining contact with assigned foster carers to offer them support and guidance. Since 2017, in order to carry out such activities, permission from the Health and Social Care Inspectorate is required (SSA, 26 chap., 1§, p. 5).

1.3 | Theory of Children's Participation

Children's participation involves several aspects or steps: being informed about different options, being supported in expressing their views and wishes, understanding the importance of the decisions made, and being able to influence decisions taken (e.g., Bouma et al. 2018). Participation can lead to better decisions and increased safety for children, for example, when they have experienced violence or neglect (Heimer et al. 2018; Vis et al. 2011). Participation can also contribute to positive health outcomes. Informing children and supporting them to articulate their thoughts and feelings can help them to feel more in control of what is happening in their lives (Jørgensen et al. 2024). Being involved and able to influence one's situation has a positive impact on self-esteem (Saarnik 2021), while lack of participation can lead to a feeling of being ignored with a negative effect upon a child's self-esteem and sense of dignity (Bessell 2011). To ensure meaningful participation, it is important to make sure that

children feel secure and that they are in a safe place to speak (Mitchell et al. 2023; Wilson et al. 2020).

Lundy (2007) has developed a model for realising children's rights to participation. The model includes four separate factors that are interrelated in a process: (1) space—children must be given the opportunity to express their views in a place that feels safe and inclusive, where they do not have to worry about rebuke or reprisal; (2) voice—children must be facilitated to express their views; (3) audience—children's views must be listened to by someone responsible for the decisions; and (4) influence—children's views must be acted upon as appropriate, and they should be told what decision was made and how their views were regarded. The model is a generic model developed within educational research. Henze-Pedersen and Bengtsson (2024) further adapted the model to Child Participation in Child welfare (CPC model). The model is expanded to include time and space, voices, direct and indirect audiences, influence and statutory power and the context. Together with space, time is central to participation, as professionals need to create space for children's participation at different times throughout the casework process. Voices emphasizes that there are several voices in the case and that the child's voice is dependent on other voices. Direct and indirect audiences are relevant concepts because there may be several professionals involved in the case, even if not all of them meet the child directly. Statutory power reflects the power and responsibility of professionals in decision-making processes supported by the legal framework. The context relates to the structural conditions of child welfare, such as the organisation of social work practices, as well as the social and relational conditions that a child is part of. This model is used for the qualitative analysis in this article.

2 | Methods

For this article, analysis of qualitative and quantitative data is combined and integrated for the purpose of developing a broad and deep understanding. The use of multiple methods and sources can lead to richer insights (Johnson et al. 2007). The study was conducted in six medium-to-large municipalities with a geographical spread and socio-economic differences in order to obtain variation, as professional practice may vary between municipalities. One criterion of the selected municipalities was their organisation with special units with several employed social workers to handle the cases. The article is based on analyses of case files ($n=90$) and interviews with professionals ($n=50$) working with foster care. Case files are confidentially sensitive and contain private information. Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2021-00886; 2022-03017-02).

2.1 | Quantitative Data and Analysis

The dataset utilized for the descriptive quantitative analyses was compiled from information found within the case files. Case files are documents where social workers involved in the cases document their assessments and decisions. Given the highly sensitive and confidential nature of these documents, we opted to review them on-site at the social services offices. We used a

structured template to record information about the child and the foster family, deliberately excluding any identifying details such as names or dates of birth. When ambiguity arose during the data-recording process, our team engaged in discussions to determine the most appropriate documentation and coding. At least two researchers were involved in extracting data from the case files for each case in the dataset.

While most entries were straightforward, we specifically deliberated on cases with unclear or ambiguous information. The early involvement of multiple researchers in data collection and documentation, along with proactive discussions to reconcile differing interpretations, ensured a thorough and reliable recording of variables extracted from the case files. A more detailed description of the data collection process is available in Bergman et al. (2024).

We were interested in scrutinising which factors were associated with the child's involvement in his/her placement process. The involvement was recorded as the opportunity to express one's own views on different aspects of the process. The dataset included case files regarding children of all ages; however, for exploring child participation, we chose the age limit of 5 years old. In previous research, social workers have reported that they interview children from the age of 5 years (Woodman et al. 2023). Information materials developed to support social services (NBHW 2023b) state that from that age, children's stories tend to be more spontaneous, detailed and elaborate. This resulted in 90 cases with children aged 5–17 in the dataset. The dataset included three indicators about the child's opportunity to express his or her views and opinions related to the situation: (i) the child had the opportunity to express an opinion about problems, (ii) the child had the opportunity to express an opinion about placement and (iii) the child had the opportunity to express an opinion about the foster home. All three indicators were coded with three options: yes (1), partly (2) and no (3). "Partly" means partial documentation exists, for example, that a conversation with the child took place, but not what the child said, or that a joint conversation with siblings took place, but not that the individual child expressed his/her opinion.

We first created an additive index of child involvement varying between 3 and 9 ($M=6.39$, $SD=2.18$). Thereafter, we recoded the involvement index into three categories: index values 3 and 4 into the high involvement group (approx. 21% of the cases), index values 5–7 into the medium involvement group (approx. 44% of the cases) and index values 8–9 into the low involvement group (approx. 34% of the cases). We conducted descriptive analyses using chi-square tests to identify aspects that are significantly associated with children's involvement. All analyses were conducted with SPSS.

2.2 | Qualitative Data and Analysis

The qualitative analysis was based on the case files and interviews with professionals. The following data related to children's involvement was collected from case files: (i) How is the child consulted about the matching? (ii) When during the matching process is the child consulted? (iii) What are the child's preferences in terms of matching? Regarding interviews

with consenting professionals, we interviewed one manager and two social workers from each municipality. As the participating municipalities often used consulting organisations when placing children in foster care, we also conducted interviews with consultants. We contacted the organisations used by the participating municipalities and interviewed the consultants who agreed to be interviewed. The article is based on interviews with 12 social workers and six managers in municipal social services and 13 consultants from seven consulting firms and two foundations. In addition to individual interviews, we also conducted group interviews with social workers in the six municipalities with three to six participants in each group ($n = 26$). Seven social workers participated in both individual and group interviews. In total, 50 professionals were interviewed. The interviews were recorded on audio files and transcribed verbatim. The length of the interviews was approximately 1 h per individual interview and 1.5 h per group interview. The interviews focused on the respondents' work with matching, and one question was how children are involved. In the narratives, the interviewed persons described experiences from different cases they have worked with.

In the analysis, we used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2023), which means reading and re-reading the data, making initial notes on what might be relevant in relation to the research questions, coding to capture important aspects, generating initial themes, reviewing, developing, refining and naming themes and selecting excerpts that represent these themes. In the analysis of participation, we used the concepts from the model developed by Lundy (2007), further adapted by Henze-Pedersen and Bengtsson (2024). Case file excerpts are referenced as follows: municipality (M) case number (C).

3 | Results

3.1 | Factors Related to Children's Participation

To investigate the factors that are related to children's participation, we tested several attributes that could be associated with child involvement. The findings of the nonsignificant analyses are not reported, which included the stability of the placement,

whether the child has siblings, the child's birth country, the size of hometown, the legal ground for the placement decision, the municipality (where the decision was made) and different operationalisations capturing the reason for the placement. We found significant associations between child involvement and certain child characteristics such as gender, age and whether the child has a diagnosis.

Boys are overrepresented in both the high and low involvement categories, whereas girls are more concentrated in the medium involvement category. While boys have a higher proportion in the high involvement category compared to girls, their most frequent involvement level is low. In contrast, girls exhibit a more centred distribution, with the majority falling into the medium category. This suggests that for boys the pattern of involvement was more polarized, while girls' involvement is more evenly distributed around the middle level. $X^2(2, N = 90) = 6496, p = 0.039$. The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Despite the fact that children have the right to be involved in decisions regarding their placements, the results clearly indicate that not all children's perspectives are solicited or documented. As shown in Table 2, involvement is higher among older children. $X^2(4, N = 90) = 27081, p < 0.001$.

Previous studies, both within this project (Engwall et al. 2024) and elsewhere (e.g., Bask et al. 2017), have highlighted the

TABLE 2 | Child's involvement in relation to child's age. *N* and column percentage.

Child's involvement	5–7years	8–11years	12–17years	Total
High	1 3.4%	7 21.2%	11 39.3%	19 21.1%
Medium	8 27.6%	18 54.5%	14 50.0%	40 44.4%
Low	20 69.0%	8 24.2%	3 10.7%	31 34.4%
Total	29 100%	33 100%	28 100%	90 100%

TABLE 1 | Child's involvement in relation to child's gender. *N* and column percentage.

Child's involvement	Girls	Boys	Total
High	7 15.6%	12 26.7%	19 21.1%
Medium	26 57.8%	14 31.1%	40 44.4%
Low	12 26.7%	19 42.2%	31 34.4%
Total	45 100%	45 100%	90 100%

TABLE 3 | Child's involvement in relation to whether the child has a diagnosis. *N* and column percentage.

Child's involvement	No diagnosis	Diagnosis	Total
High	14 22.6%	5 17.9%	19 21.1%
Medium	32 51.6%	8 28.6%	40 44.4%
Low	16 25.8%	15 53.6%	31 34.4%
Total	62 100%	28 100%	90 100%

special vulnerability of children facing multiple challenges, such as medical diagnoses. This study also confirms these findings. As the descriptive statistics in Table 3 indicate, children with diagnoses are less likely to be in the high involvement category. $X^2(2, N=90)=6,825, p=0.033$. Diagnoses are defined here as having a documented or suspected disability or diagnosis under assessment in the case files, including neuropsychiatric conditions (e.g., ADHD and autism), physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities or psychiatric diagnoses.

3.2 | How and When Are Children Involved in the Matching Process?

According to the Henze-Pedersen and Bengtsson (2024) model, which builds on Lundy's (2008) work, the following aspects are central to children's participation: time and space, voices, direct and indirect audiences, influence, statutory power and context.

3.2.1 | Time and Space

Examination of case files and interviews with professionals shows that when children are involved, it is often at a late stage of the matching process. By the *time* children are involved, social services have in many cases already made their assessment that the selected foster home is suitable for the child:

[Children's involvement] that is after, first we have been out [to the foster family's home]. The investigation is more or less finished, where you feel that 'yes, they are suitable'.

(Social Worker 5)

Children's involvement often takes place in close proximity to the move:

Not too long in advance to avoid creating anxiety, but [it is] perhaps better a few days prior to them [moving]. 'This Wednesday you will move, and then you will move to this house, to this family'.

(Consultant 13)

One argument for involving children late in the process is to 'avoid creating anxiety', that is, to protect them. Respondents describe that they often wait to involve younger children as they have a different time perspective in comparison with adults and older children: 'A few weeks can be an eternity for younger children' (Social Worker 4). By the time the children are involved, the foster carers have already agreed to care for the child. There is no room for them to say 'no' after they meet the child:

We always say that to our foster families, that one has the opportunity all the way through the process to say that 'this is probably not something for us', all the way until one is about to meet the child. Then you can't

– then we say that it is unethical to say that 'we don't want this child'.

(Social Worker 9)

Some respondents however describe cases where children can be involved earlier in the process, as when professionals want to understand their views and ask them questions. One challenge regarding the timing of children's involvement is that the process can sometimes move quickly when the situation is urgent. Then, children may not be involved or even informed due to time constraints, and instead, they are simply 'taken to a foster home' (Social Worker 11).

In terms of *space* for involvement, this study reveals that few children were involved to a high degree. The documentation often contains information *about* the children rather than *from* the children. Regarding *place*, the social workers used different places for meetings with children: emergency foster homes, social services offices, the birth parents' home, in a car, at school or in another institution in the community. In many case files, there was a lack of documentation about which place. The most common place for children's involvement was in emergency foster homes. Older children are sometimes allowed to visit a foster family that the social services are planning to move them to:

The child can come along and – well, also go [to the foster family] and look, 'what is it like here then?' and get an impression of the atmosphere and perhaps ask questions.

(Consultant 2)

Participation in the form of foster home visits can sometimes be limited by geography. When there are long distances, professionals can arrange a digital meeting where the foster carers can introduce themselves. The child, who in these cases is often a teenager, has the opportunity to see what kind of family they are and 'check them out' (Consultant 7; Consultant 4).

3.2.2 | Voices

The right to information is fundamental to participation. In the interviews, the respondents give examples of situations where they involve the children. Some respondents describe that they strive to give the child *information* about the foster family, sometimes using photographs to facilitate the child's understanding:

We usually ask the family to take photos. Some are really good at compiling these nice folders, with photos of themselves, the house, the room where the child will live, and pets and such. And the social workers take this folder with them when they meet the child, and say, 'This is the family you will live with'.

(Social Worker 11)

The respondents describe that when they meet the children, the children can get the opportunity to ask their questions:

[The child] can ask us questions: 'What does this mean? If one goes to live with this family, what's the situation then? What does it look like?'

(Consultant 9)

Some respondents talk about asking questions directed to the children to get information about what is important to them:

If you would move to a foster family, how would you like it to be?

(Social Worker 9)

Although professionals have the obligation to involve all children and take their views into account, in relation to the child's age and maturity, they are aware that in practice the older children are the ones who are mainly involved:

The older they are, the more they can actually be involved in what they think and want themselves. Then they also understand more about why they can't live at home with their mum or dad.

(Manager 3)

However, the age at which children are considered to be ready to be involved varies. One manager mentioned a limit of around 6–7 years old (Manager 3). Other respondents express that teenagers or children after 12 years of age can be more involved:

Teenagers, they can be a bit more involved themselves in the process, like what they want and don't want, then they can't always choose. But even so they can, the older they are, the more they will sort of be able to say/ ... /It mostly comes after the age of 12, that they start to understand more and are able to say what they want and think. Which perhaps young children are not able to do in the same way.

(Social Worker 6)

One reason for involving older children more is the experience that teenagers can 'be contrary' and 'run away' from a foster home they do not want to be in. With younger children, there is more opportunity to 'bring them gradually into the family' (Social Worker 5). However, there are examples from case files of younger children being enabled to express their views. Some social workers have documented that they used 'child-friendly' tools to facilitate communication, thereby increasing opportunities for participation. The communication tools used were 'bear cards' (M1C11), 'three houses' (M1C11, M5C9) and 'taping' (M1C18).¹

3.2.3 | Direct and Indirect Audiences

Audiences means that children's voices must be heard in decisions affecting them. Some respondents express concerns about professionals' shortcomings in listening to children's views:

Unfortunately, I think/ ... /It is just a lot of adults who make decisions above their heads about what

will happen/ ... /They are listened to far too little, the children.

(consultant 12)

One social worker describes how she tells the children that she wants to listen to their opinions, but that this does not mean that things will turn out exactly as they wish, for example, due to the lack of foster homes to choose from:

I usually say that 'this is your opportunity to actually say what you think. It doesn't mean that we can do as you think and want, but it is still an attempt to listen to you'.

(Social Worker 9)

In the actual practice, the social worker who meets and listens to the child is often not the one handling the match. The practice is often organized so that the social workers responsible for contact with the child are different from those responsible for matching children with foster carers. The social worker handling the matching comes in late in the process and may not know the child:

I would say that this is the difficulty, that one comes into the process late and does not know [the child] very well after all.

(Social Worker 5)

This means that professionals responsible for matching usually work with information *about the child* rather than with information *from the child* and that children's views can be lost in the process.

3.2.4 | Influence and Statutory Power

Influence means that children's views are taken seriously, acted upon and given due weight. Both the case study and the interviews indicate that few children had any influence on the process. Instead, children were usually involved late in the process, after the professionals had made their assessment and the birth parents and foster carers had accepted the placement. Many children were confronted with the fact that they would be moving to a new home within a few days. In one interview, however, a consultant gave an example of a child's influence when a girl had the opportunity to visit two foster families and thus had some choice:

It also happens that they can come along and visit the foster family, and they may perhaps even choose between two foster families. It has been like that and such, so that they feel 'this feels ok to me' / ... /I think it has been good in these instances when they have been able to [pay a visit]. I had a girl who visited a foster family. She was there to say, 'hi', and she was able to choose between two different ones, and when she was there, she said/ ... / 'I will come back'. And she did, so she came back, and chose that place then.

(Consultant 13)

Even if a child has been involved in a meeting during the matching process, the child's expressed wishes and the professionals' assessment do not always go hand in hand. Professionals responsible for the match may have different priorities from the children, which can lead to the children feeling unheard:

It is not always the case that the child's wishes go hand in hand with their best interests, as we see it. So there is a clash sometimes. / ... / Recently we had such a case where a boy was very disappointed, since he did not think that we had listened to his wishes at all. / ... / We thought that we had listened to his wishes. But he really did not think so. And then that gives you food for thought: 'Well, how will this be?'

(Social Worker 11)

Professionals have a legal responsibility to make an assessment in accordance with what is in the best interests of the child. The assessment should take into account various aspects, including the child's wishes.

3.2.5 | The Context

Children's participation depends not only on professionals but also on the social and organisational context. Throughout the work of the matching process, there always exists some degree of uncertainty. Even if the professionals have made an assessment that a foster home would be suitable for a child, new information about the child or the foster family may emerge later in the process that changes this assessment. Therefore, the professionals often wait to involve the children until they feel quite confident about the match. The child's birth parents or legal guardians are also parties to the case and have rights. In general, parents are involved before the child to have a say about how they 'want their child to live' (Group Interview 6):

The birth parents can be involved early on, so that they can meet the foster parents before the child does, so that they feel ... so that they feel secure that it is a good family and things like that.

(Social Worker 11)

The organisational context is of relevance for children's participation. In Sweden, the social services in many municipalities have a specialized organisation where several professionals are involved in the placement process. In the municipalities that participated in this study, a common model is that one or two social workers are responsible for investigating the children's needs, while other social workers are responsible for investigating the suitability of foster homes and matching the children with carers. Therefore, the professionals interviewed who work with matching are in many cases not the ones with the best knowledge of the child's individual needs. Instead, this knowledge is held by the child case worker who carried out the child protection investigation:

We do not see the children themselves. I have only done that on odd occasions, since we get information

from the child case worker, [who] gathers that information and talks with our team about our available foster families and what the children's needs are.

(Social Worker 12)

A respondent with previous experience of working in an integrated organisation described how this gave her a better idea of the individual needs of the children, making it easier to match children's needs with foster carers' capacity (Group Interview 2).

Finally, the lack of suitable foster homes to choose from is a challenge according to the respondents. Participation for children in the matching process should not be reduced to the issue of choosing a foster home, but the lack of families to select from may mean that aspects important to the individual child cannot always be met:

It is rarely the case that you have the situation with several good [foster families] to choose from. What we wish for was a bank of foster families with several different qualifications, where they could be regarded in relation to each other, what is the best fit in this particular case, but that is rarely the situation.

(Manager 4)

With so few foster families to choose from, it can be difficult to make good matches that also consider what is important to the individual child.

3.3 | Matching Aspects of Importance for Children

When children have the opportunity to express their views and are listened to by professionals, the aspects they highlight as important are continuity, familiarity and trusting relationships, according to documentation in case files and interviews with professionals.

3.3.1 | Continuity

Many children are placed in emergency foster homes. This may be because of the urgency of the situation at the time of placement. It may also be because there is a shortage of foster homes, and children are therefore placed in emergency homes while they wait for social services to find a suitable home for them. This arrangement is intended to be a temporary solution, and according to the law, children should not stay in an emergency home for more than 6 months (a maximum of 2 months after the child protection investigation has been completed) (SSA, 22 chap., 4§).

In the case files, there is documentation about children who wish to stay in their emergency homes. The plan was for the children to move to foster homes, but at least 10 children in the study express that they want to stay in their emergency homes:

[The boy] states that he wants to stay with them [emergency foster carers] and that he likes to be with them.

(M1C2)

[The girl] describes that she likes to be with [emergency foster carers] and wants to continue to live there.

(M5C18)

Even in interviews with professionals, children's desire to stay in their emergency homes is a common theme: 'Many children wish to remain where they are [in the emergency foster family]' (Manager 3). Some children may stay in emergency homes for a considerable amount of time. As such, they may come to perceive the home as a 'safe place' and may also start to feel attached to their carers. There are also children who express a wish to be placed in a foster home where they have previously lived. These examples show that children express a need for *continuity* in their lives.

3.3.2 | Familiarity

Documentation in the case files of meetings with children shows that several children have expressed a desire to live with people in their social network with whom they already have a relationship and with whom they feel safe:

He thinks it feels good to be placed in a foster family that he has a previous relationship to and with persons that he feels safe with.

(M1C6)

The relationships described in the children's documented wishes are with grandparents, aunts, uncles and adult siblings. There are also children who express that they want to live together with their siblings, in the same foster home:

[The girl] wants to live together with her sister; she cannot imagine not living with her.

(M5C15)

The location of the foster home is important for many children. Proximity may allow them to stay in their schools, maintain hobbies or remain close to their hometown. Another aspect of children's wishes, as documented in case files and expressed in interviews with professionals, includes the importance of the language spoken in the foster home. Speaking and understanding the same language make it easier to feel *familiarity*, while a lack of understanding can contribute to feelings of exclusion.

3.3.3 | Trusting Relationships

The importance of trusting relationships and family climate is emphasized by some children. A girl who has moved from one foster home to another expresses that she wants to be 'part of a family' (M3C16), according to the documentation. Respondents

describe that younger children may express that they want to live in a foster home 'where they don't fight', 'where they are nice to each other' (Manager 3) or 'where they eat dinner together' (Social Worker 3). One social worker expresses that 'children usually say that [they] want the people they move in with to be kind' (Group Interview 6).

4 | Discussion

This article contributes to knowledge about foster children's participation in the matching process, which has been studied only to a limited extent (cf. Zeijlmans et al. 2019). Matching is a comprehensive assessment of whether a child's individual needs can be met in a suitable and accessible foster home. It involves evaluating various factors, such as the child's background, preferences and specific support needs, to ensure a placement that is both stable and beneficial for the child's well-being. Despite the emphasis on individualized assessments, our findings highlight significant disparities in child involvement during this process, particularly concerning gender, age and diagnosis status.

Our results indicate that teenagers were predominantly involved in the process, suggesting that younger children often lack opportunities to participate, which is in line with previous research (e.g., Pålsson et al. 2024). While age-related differences in involvement are expected to some extent due to cognitive and emotional development, this pattern raises concerns about whether younger children's perspectives are sufficiently considered, even when they are capable of expressing their views. The observed gender differences may also be influenced by developmental and social factors (e.g., Kalin et al. 2022; Persdotter et al. 2024). Moreover, our findings suggest that children with a diagnosis are less likely to be involved compared to their peers without diagnoses. This situation is concerning, as children with disabilities or neuropsychiatric conditions are often among the most vulnerable in the child welfare system. Their lower involvement may reflect implicit biases, assumptions about their capacity to participate or structural barriers, such as communication challenges or a lack of tailored approaches to include them in discussions. This finding aligns with previous research emphasising that children with disabilities frequently experience limited agency and reduced decision-making power in institutional settings (Engwall and Hultman 2020).

Qualitative analyses show that when children are involved, it is at a late stage in the process (cf. Zeijlmans et al. 2019). A child's participation occurs after professionals have selected foster carers, involved birth parents and conducted an assessment. One explanation, given by professionals, is that they want to protect the children. They want to ensure that the children will not be rejected by the foster carers. Such reservations about children's participation are often linked to the image of children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection (McCafferty and Mercado Garcia 2024; van Bijleveld et al. 2015). Participation is often seen as conflicting with protection, but participation can lead to better decisions and increased safety for children (Heimer et al. 2018; Vis et al. 2011). When children are not involved, important information can be overlooked. When children have the opportunity to express their views and are listened to by professionals, they can provide valuable information about their needs

and wishes. In this study, continuity, familiarity and trusting relationships were important to children, according to documentation in case files and interviews.

Another explanation for the limited child participation may be that social workers often feel insecure about communicating with children (Dillon 2021). Training and the use of 'child-friendly tools' can facilitate the communication between professionals and children. A third explanation for the limited participation appears to be the organisation of social services. The matching process is fragmented in the municipalities studied. Different professionals are responsible for different stages of the process, which disrupts continuity and risks losing the children's voice. At the same time as many children are not allowed to voice their views, a high proportion of placements end prematurely. Inadequate work with pre-placement planning, where professionals consider the general needs but not the specific needs and wishes of the child, can lead to unplanned breakdowns (Bergman et al. 2024; Järkestig Berggren et al. 2025). Decisions about the care of children must include children's participation. Children's participation means that their voices are not silenced and that access to information and support in expressing their views must be part of the role of social workers (McCafferty and Mercado Garcia 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that many children face systematic disadvantages in their ability to participate. It is apparent that social workers' assumptions about children's maturity and abilities affect children's opportunities to participate. Similarly, social workers seem to focus on participation in deciding which home to choose, arguing that they want to protect children from being rejected. This approach means that they sometimes forget to look at the matching as a process with several opportunities for children to participate. Children have the right to participate throughout the process, which means children are to be able to express their views, be listened to, receive feedback on how their views were considered and be informed about what will happen next. Further research is needed to explore how child participation can be strengthened at different stages of the process and across different groups.

5 | Limitations

Since the dataset in this study is relatively small, it is not possible to conduct very detailed quantitative analyses, and some patterns that might be observed in larger datasets do not appear in this limited material. Thus, it would be worthwhile for future research projects to explore whether and how the organisational context influences the decisions made and the practices that emerge. The qualitative analysis is based on the perspective of professionals, and children were not involved as participants. A further project is planned involving children, in which the researchers will develop guidelines to support children's participation.

6 | Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that there is room for improvement in involving children in decisions made by social services about

their lives. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should incorporate children's perspectives on the matching process, alongside larger quantitative datasets that would enable more detailed analyses.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ 'Bear cards' is a type of conversation cards used as a tool for expressing and talking about emotions. 'Three houses' is a tool from Signs of Safety, a framework for child protection social work practice <https://www.signsofsafety.net/>. 'Taping' is a technique used for playful conversations with children, developed by Martin Soltvedt, <https://boftejping.com/what-is-taping/method/>.

References

- Balsells, M. A., N. Fuentes-Peláez, and C. Crescencia Pastor. 2017. "Listening to the Voices of Children in Decision-Making: A Challenge for the Child Protection System in Spain." *Children and Youth Services Review* 79: 418–425. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.055>.
- Bask, M., T. Ristikari, A. Hautakoski, and M. Gissler. 2017. "Psychiatric Diagnoses as Grounds for Disability Pension Among Former Child Welfare Clients." *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies* 8, no. 4: 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.14301/lcs.v8i4.459>.
- Bergman, A.-S., M. Bask, K. Engwall, and U. Järkestig Berggren. 2024. "Factors Associated With Stability for Children in Family Foster Care: A Study of Case Files in Six Municipalities in Sweden." *Child & Family Social Work* 30: 377–386. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13176>.
- Bessell, S. 2011. "Participation in Decision-Making in Out-Of-Home Care in Australia: What Do Young People Say?" *Children and Youth Services Review* 33: 496–501. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.05.006>.
- Biehal, N. 2014. "Maltreatment in Foster Care: A Review of the Evidence." *Child Abuse Review* 23, no. 1: 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2249>.
- Biehal, N., and M. Grant. 2022. *Abuse in Foster Care: A Review of the Research. Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry*. Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.
- Bouma, H., M. López López, E. J. Knorth, and H. Grietens. 2018. "Meaningful Participation for Children in the Dutch Child Protection System: A Critical Analysis of Relevant Provisions in Policy Documents." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 79: 279–292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.016>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4: 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2023. "Thematic Analysis." In *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology: Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*, edited by H. Cooper, M. Coutanche, L. McMullen, A. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and K. Sher, 65–81. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000319-004>.
- Care of Young Persons Act. 1990:52. "Lag med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga".

- Delgado, P., J. Carvalho, and S. Alves. 2023. "Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making in Foster Care." *Child Indicators Research* 16, no. 1: 421–445. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-022-09979-5>.
- Dillon, J. 2021. "'Wishes and Feelings': Misunderstandings and Missed Opportunities for Participation in Child Protection Proceedings." *Child & Family Social Work* 26, no. 4: 664–676. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12847>.
- Engwall, K., M. Bask, A. Bergman, and U. Järkestig Berggren. 2024. "Matching Process Concerning Children With Disabilities in Family Foster Care." *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13201>.
- Engwall, K., and L. Hultman. 2020. "Meet and Greet: Children With Disabilities Participatory Rights in the Assessment Process of Respite Care." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 22, no. 1: 187–197. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.693>.
- Fylkesnes, M., M. Larsen, K. Havnen, Ø. Christiansen, and S. Lehman. 2021. "Listening to Advice From Young People in Foster Care – From Participation to Belonging." *British Journal of Social Work* 51: 1983–2000. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab138>.
- Haysom, Z., G. McKibbin, A. Shlonsky, and B. Hamilton. 2020. "Changing Considerations of Matching Foster Carers and Children: A Scoping Review of the Research and Evidence." *Children and Youth Services Review* 118: 105409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105409>.
- Heimer, M., E. Näsman, and J. Palme. 2018. "Vulnerable Children's Rights to Participation, Protection, and Provision: The Process of Defining the Problem in Swedish Child and Family Welfare." *Child & Family Social Work* 23, no. 2: 316–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12424>.
- Henze-Pedersen, S., and T. Bengtsson. 2024. "Developing a Model for Child Participation in Child Welfare Services." *Child & Family Social Work* 29, no. 4: 1086–1095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13150>.
- Järkestig Berggren, U., K. Engwall, M. Bask, and A. Bergman. 2025. "Matching the General or the Specific Child With a Foster Home?" *British Journal of Social Work* 55: 839–857. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae203>.
- Johnson, R., A. Onwuegbuzie, and L. Turner. 2007. "Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research." *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 2: 112–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224>.
- Jørgensen, T., S. Seim, and B. M. Njøs. 2024. "How Children and Young People Understand and Experience Individual Participation in Social Services for Children and Young People: A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies." *European Journal of Social Work* 27, no. 3: 546–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2256490>.
- Kalin, T., T. Ahlgren, and B. Persdotter. 2022. "Gender Disparities in Child Welfare Services' Assessments of Referrals: Findings From Sweden." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 134: 105918. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105918>.
- Križ, K., and D. Roundtree-Swain. 2017. "'We Are Merchandise on a Conveyor Belt': How Young Adults in the Public Child Protection System Perceive Their Participation in Decisions About Their Care." *Children and Youth Services Review* 78: 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.05.001>.
- Lundy, L. 2007. "'Voice' Is Not Enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child." *British Educational Research Journal* 33, no. 6: 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>.
- McCafferty, P., and E. Mercado Garcia. 2024. "Children's Participation in Child Welfare: A Systematic Review of Systematic Reviews." *British Journal of Social Work* 54, no. 3: 1092–1108. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad167>.
- McTavish, J. R., C. McKee, and H. L. MacMillan. 2022. "Foster Children's Perspectives on Participation in Child Welfare Processes: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Studies." *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 10: e0275784. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275784>.
- Mitchell, M. B., L. Kuczynski, C. Y. Tubbs, and C. Ross. 2010. "We Care About Care: Advice by Children in Care for Children in Care, Foster Parents and Child Welfare Workers About the Transition Into Foster Care." *Child & Family Social Work* 15, no. 2: 176–185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2009.00657.x>.
- Mitchell, M., and L. Kuczynski. 2010. "Does Anyone Know What Is Going On? Examining Children's Lived Experience of the Transition Into Foster Care." *Children and Youth Services Review* 32, no. 3: 437–444. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.10.023>.
- Mitchell, M., L. Lundy, and L. Hill. 2023. "Children's Human Rights to 'Participation' and 'Protection': Rethinking the Relationship Using Barnahus as a Case Example." *Child Abuse Review* 32, no. 6: 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2820>.
- Pålsson, D., P. Leviner, and S. Wiklund. 2024. "Children's Right to Participation in Swedish Child Welfare – The Extent, Nature and Determinants of Child Interviews During Investigations." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 162, no. 1: 107000. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107000>.
- Persdotter, B., M. Eriksson, and A. Kassman. 2024. "SAVE-studien 2023 i en nationell kontext – ett forsknings- och utvecklingsprojekt om barnavårdsutredningar efter anmälan om misstänkt våldsatthet." [SAVE Study 2023 in a National Context – a Research and Development Project on Child Welfare Investigations After Reports About Violence]. Karlstad: Karlstad University, FoU Valfärd Värmland.
- Saarnik, H. 2021. "A Systematic Review of Factors Needed for Successful Foster Placements: Perspectives From Children and Foster Parents." *Child & Youth Services* 42, no. 4: 374–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2021.1926227>.
- Sinclair, I., and K. Wilson. 2003. "Matches and Mismatches: The Contribution of Carers and Children to the Success of Foster Placements." *British Journal of Social Work* 33, no. 7: 871–884. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/33.7.871>.
- Social Services Act. 2025:400. "Socialtjänstlag".
- Steive, K., P. Tham, S. Wiklund, P. Grell, and I. Kåreholt. 2024. "Social Work in an Assembly Line? The Development of Specialisation in Child Welfare and Further Internal Division of Work Between 2003 and 2018." *European Journal of Social Work* 27, no. 3: 650–663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2284669>.
- The Health and Social Care Inspectorate. 2017. "Children's Right to Good Quality Foster Care: Audit of the Exercise of Authority by Social Services Concerning Foster Children." [Barns rätt till familjehemsvård av god kvalitet: Granskning av socialtjänstens myndighetsutövning rörande familjehemsplacerade barn].
- The National Board of Health and Welfare. 2023a. "Placerade barn och unga: Handbok för socialtjänsten." [Children and Young People in Care: Handbook for Social Services].
- The National Board of Health and Welfare. 2023b. "Bedöma barns mognad för delaktighet: Kunskapsstöd för socialtjänsten, hälso- och sjukvården samt tandvården." [Assessing Children's Maturity for Participation: Knowledge Support for Social Services, Health and Dental Care].
- The National Board of Health and Welfare. 2024. "Statistics on Social Services Measures for Children and Young People in 2023 [Statistik om socialtjänstinsatser till barn och unga 2023]".
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). 1989.
- Thoburn, J. 2016. "Achieving Good Outcomes in Foster Care: A Personal Perspective on Research Across Contexts and Cultures." *Social Work and Society* 14, no. 2: 1–15. <https://ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/sws/article/view/478/983>.

- Toros, K. 2021. "A Systematic Review of Children's Participation in Child Protection Decision-Making: Tokenistic Presence or Not?" *Children & Society* 35, no. 3: 395–411. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12418>.
- van Bijleveld, G., C. Dedding, and J. Bunders-Aelen. 2015. "Children's and Young People's Participation Within Child Welfare and Child Protection Services: A State-of-the-Art Review." *Child & Family Social Work* 20, no. 2: 129–138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12082>.
- Vis, S. A., A. Strandbu, A. Holtan, and N. Thomas. 2011. "Participation and Health: A Research Review of Child Participation in Planning and Decision-Making." *Child & Family Social Work* 16: 325–335. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00743.x>.
- Wilson, S., S. Hean, T. Abebe, and V. Heaslip. 2020. "Children's Experiences With Child Protection Services: A Synthesis of Qualitative Evidence." *Children and Youth Services Review* 113: 104974. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104974>.
- Woodman, E., S. Roche, and M. McArthur. 2023. "Children's Participation in Child Protection: How Do Practitioners Understand Children's Participation in Practice?" *Child & Family Social Work* 28, no. 1: 125–135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12947>.
- Zeijlmans, K., M. López, H. Grietens, and E. Knorth. 2017. "Matching Children With Foster Carers: A Literature Review." *Children and Youth Services Review* 73: 257–265. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.12.017>.
- Zeijlmans, K., M. López, H. Grietens, and E. Knorth. 2019. "Participation of Children, Birth Parents and Foster Carers in the Matching Decision. Paternalism or Partnership?" *Child Abuse Review* 28, no. 2: 139–151. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2544>.