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ACHIEVING STABILITY: HOW FAMILY-MATCH IS IMPROVING STABLE PLACEMENT FOR THE HARDEST TO PLACE CHILDREN IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

A SUMMARY



Introduction

Family-Match, an innovative platform developed by Adoption-Share, leverages a sophisticated matching algorithm to help child welfare professionals create stable and successful placements for children in foster care. This algorithm analyzes key attributes of both children and prospective families, using research-backed insights to recommend placements that minimize the risk of disruption. In a sample of 696 placements by child welfare professions using Family-Match for adoption matching, the disruption rate was up to 60% lower than estimates of disruption for a similar population of children seeking adoption (13.6% compared to 34.4%). By improving placement stability, Family-Match offers promising solutions for child welfare agencies, leading to better outcomes for children at high risk for remaining in foster care without being adopted.

Each year, thousands of children in foster care, who have a termination of parental rights, hope for a permanent, stable home. Unfortunately, for certain children, these placements are highly likely to disrupt. Placement disruption, the ending of a placement prior to an adoption finalization, has strong and negative impacts on the child. In the short term, it increases trauma and reduces the likelihood of a future placement being successful. Over the long term, children who experience disruptions are more likely to face homelessness, poverty, and incarceration after aging out of the system, creating both personal and societal costs. Reducing disruptions is paramount to ensuring that children in foster care find lasting stability and a successful future.

Rigorous academic research has uncovered many reasons for disruption. Among them are characteristics and experiences of the child, such as age at placement, history of trauma or abuse, behavioral issues, and the number of previous placements. There are also characteristics and experiences of the family such as parenting style, flexibility, and realistic expectations for a placement that predict disruption. Finally, there are certain combinations of children and families that are more or less likely to disrupt. For example, children who are shy are less likely to disrupt if the family has high attachment sensitivity.

Despite the efforts of dedicated professionals, traditional placement processes struggle to take advantage of these insights because they do not have access to the right data or a platform that can synthesize and leverage this data properly to match children with the best possible families.

Family-Match is a data-driven platform that integrated this research and helps caseworkers identify families that offer a child the highest likelihood of a successful placement. It assesses the characteristics and experiences of children and families that are the best predictors of placement disruption and uses them to find which pairings have the lowest likelihood of disruption. Caseworkers can then explore profiles of the highest potential families and determine which placement they should pursue.

Over time, the matching algorithm has been revised based on new research and additional learnings. This white paper examines how Family-Match works, its impact on adoption outcomes, and its potential to improve child welfare systems nationwide across the first two versions of their algorithm (hereby called V1.0 and V2.0).

Key Findings:

- Significant Reduction in Disruptions
- Improved Adoption Success Rates for Hard-to-Place Children
- Improvement Over Time

Methods

We followed a total of 696 children from across the state of Florida who had their parental rights terminated and there were no identified kin willing to adopt. These children had been placed by child welfare professionals from over 45 agencies for a total of 746 times. A small minority of children were placed multiple times using the Family-Match platform. These were all the matches made using Family-Match from August 11, 2018 to July 22, 2024. Working with the caseworkers we were able to determine the outcome for all placements made using Family-Match. In addition, if, after a disruption, a child was placed using a different service we were able to track the eventual outcomes for all but one child.

These children averaged 9 years old at the age of placement; which has previously been shown, in the extant literature, to have a disruption rate of 17.2%. However, this set of children were at significantly higher risk for disruption than the average 9-year-old because they had experienced high rates of abuse and neglect, had substantial rates of physical and mental disability, had averaged four foster placements and most importantly, were being placed into families they had not previously known. All of these risk factors significantly increase the likelihood of disruption. Based on existing research that investigated the impact of these risk factors on the likelihood of disruption, we estimated that the expected disruption rate would be twice as high, or 34.4%. National estimates show that disruption rates—placements failing before finalization—range from 2% to 50%, with older children and those placed with unfamiliar families being at significantly higher risk. For example, disruptions occur in 4.7% of placements for children aged 3–5, compared to 26.1% for teenagers aged 15–18, and are twice as likely (19% vs. 39%) when children are placed with families they did not previously know. (Barth et al., 1988, Lanham, 2022, Barth & Berry, 1990).

Key Findings



Significant Reduction in Disruptions

The disruption rate for both V1.0 of the algorithm (20.9%) and V2.0 (13.6%) were significantly below our expected disruption rate of 34.4%. The most recent version of the algorithm represented a 60% reduction in the disruption rate compared to the national average.



Improved Adoption Success Rates for Hard-to-Place Children

Nearly 90% of placements made using Family-Match have either finalized an adoption or are progressing toward it. Of the remaining 10%, a vast majority (8.3%) had disrupted but were in the system and had the potential to be placed again. Only a very small minority (2.1%) had aged out of the system without reaching adoption.



Improvement Over Time

Improvement Over Time: Iterative enhancements to the platform's matching model resulted in a 33% reduction in disruption between versions 1 and 2.

The Broader Impact of Family-Match

Lower Foster Care Costs

Reducing the number of placements per child lowers the administrative and foster care costs associated with managing each child's case.

Reduced Societal Costs

Placing children in stable homes reduces their risk of homelessness, poverty, and incarceration, leading to lower costs in social services, criminal justice, and public health.

Enhanced Family + Community Stability

When children find permanent, stable homes, they are more likely to grow up with the resources they need to become contributing members of society.

Conclusion: Transforming Child Welfare through Innovation

Research backed matching system + user friendly technology

Family-Match's data-driven matching system offers a transformative approach to child welfare. It combines a research-backed matching system with a practical, user-friendly application for caseworkers to help them identify families with the highest potential for success for each child. By using a relational fit score to match children with prospective families, Family-Match has reduced placement disruptions, increased adoption success rates, and improved long-term outcomes for children who would otherwise face the uncertainty of foster care.

The early success of Family-Match highlights the potential for further innovation in child welfare. As child welfare agencies and policymakers look for ways to improve outcomes for children in foster care, Family-Match represents a powerful tool in creating a brighter future for vulnerable children and the communities they call home.

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For more information about Family-Match or to request the full white paper, please contact:

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