

DECIDING WITH CARE: QUALITY STARTS BEFORE PLACEMENT

An ecological reflective tool for matching children and residential units

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Background:

- Placement instability remains a critical concern in Residential Care (RC) for children, with repeated placement breakdowns associated with relational discontinuity and poorer developmental outcomes
- RC contexts vary widely in terms of intervention models, organisation and practices
- Quality and stability must be supported from the outset through appropriate child-unit **matching**, yet this remains one of the least formalised stages of placement decision-making



RQ: Which elements should be considered when matching children with RC units?

The principle of appropriateness

GUIDELINES FOR
THE ALTERNATIVE CARE
OF CHILDREN



Characteristics of an appropriate placement:

- **Tailored to the individual needs of the child:** the question isn't only if the child can fit the RC unit, but also how that context can adapt to the child?
- **Participatory**
- **Continuity-preserving**
- **Reviewable**

(UN, 2010)

Theoretical foundations of quality in RC

- **TRC:** the whole living environment as a vehicle for change (Whittaker et al., 2016)
- **Family-centred care:** Family involvement in the child's care planning and everyday life + RC staff provide parental support (Geurts et al., 2012)
- **The RC unit as an ecological niche:** the interaction between the child's characteristics and all levels of the ecological environment creates conditions conducive to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Palareti & Berti, 2009)



What does the evidence tell us?

Some results from a Scoping Review (Monti, 2026)

Matching is still underdocumented
7 databases | 3 studies on matching in RC

- **Assessing the fit:** compatibility with the group of youth (age, issues, resources); staff skills; internal relational climate; RC's ability to collaborate with the social services (SS)
- **Difficulties in knowing the RC unit and assessing its quality;** caseworkers' reliance on past experience and *collective memory*
- **Participation gap:** children and family's views remain often unconsidered
- **Limits:** SS' time and workloads, RC's costs and availability

An Ecological Tool: guiding questions to orientate the matching process

Examples of questions (Monti & Palareti, 2026)

MICRO

RC as an environment for daily life and relationships

- EX1) Does the RC context offer specific resources suited to the child's needs?
Has it supported children in similar situations before?
- EX2) Does the staff provide an exclusive relational space for each child? How?

MESO

RC as a bridge between the child's different spheres of life

- EX1) How does the staff intend to work with and strengthen the child's existing bonds?
- EX2) Does the RC setting provide new relational, social, and cultural opportunities, including external ones?

EXO

RC intervention as a relational social work

- EX1) Can we (SS & RC) agree on a shared vision of the goals to be achieved, both in the short term and looking ahead?
- EX2) How will we manage the relationship with the other stakeholders?

MACRO

Cultural, regulatory and values-based framework guiding the intervention

- EX1) Does the staff schedule moments for shared reflection? For supervision? How often?
- EX2) Is the RC setting sensitive to cultural and religious differences?

CHRONO

Time as a developmental and care-planning dimension

- EX1) Does this RC setting recognise transitions for each child (e.g., admission and discharge) as meaningful events?
- EX2) Is relational and planning continuity provided aftercare? How?



SCAN ME
for the complete tool
and references



Best match

≠ absence of limitations

It's an ecological fit between the child's and family's needs, strengths and views, and the RC unit's resources and constraints, where identified limitations can be addressed through feasible, agreed adaptations

Using the tool:

- 1 Build a shared picture of the child's and family's needs, strengths and perspectives
- 2 Explore the residential ecology through pre-placement dialogue
- 3 Assess ecological fit: compatibilities, concerns and adaptability
- 4 Agree feasible adaptations, responsibilities and strategies
- 5 Review the fit over time and at significant transitions



Implications:

- A shared conceptual language for different professionals;
- A structured basis for pre-placement meetings;
- A framework for ongoing monitoring of placements and for SS' visits in RC