

Ally-IL

From Casework to Community

Innovative Strategies for Measuring Connectedness
Among Illinois Department of Children and Family
Services (DCFS) Youth and Intact Families

Illinois Department of
DCFS
Children & Family Services

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Importance of Relationships

03

Why Do Relationships Matter in Child Welfare?

04

The Challenge of Measuring Connections

05

Measuring Engagement

06

Conclusion

10



The Importance of Relationships

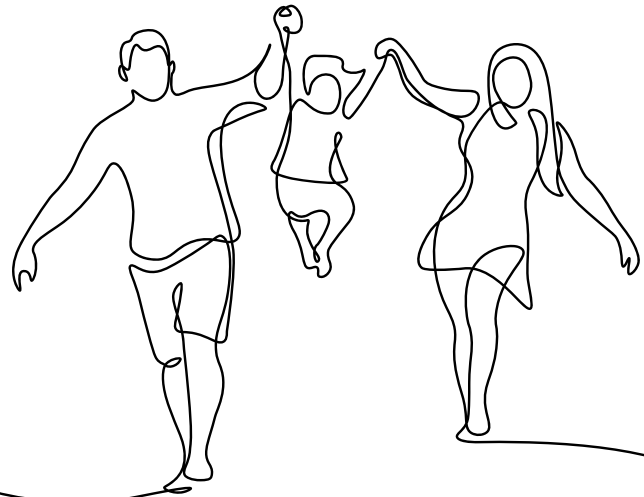
In 1938, a group of Harvard scientists set out to find the secret to living a long, happy and healthy life. Over the subsequent decades, they followed 268 Harvard sophomores in what would eventually become one of the longest studies of adult life, spanning over 80 years and expanding to thousands of subjects. The primary conclusion? Strong relationships are the foundation of happiness and longevity.

“

The surprising finding is that our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health,” said Robert Waldinger, director of the study. “Taking care of your body is important but tending to your relationships is a form of self-care too. That, I think, is the revelation.¹

”

No matter a person’s background or socioeconomic status, good relationships keep us happier and healthier. This may feel somewhat intuitive, however having insight into the science behind this simple principle allows us to apply the tools and behaviors needed to make this theory a reality across the range of relationships in our lives.



1

“Over Nearly 80 Years, Harvard Study Has Been Showing How to Live a Healthy and Happy Life.” Harvard Gazette, 11 Apr. 2017, news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life.

Why Do Relationships Matter in Child Welfare?

Consistent with the Harvard study, there is a significant body of research indicating that positive relationships are crucial to success in child welfare cases, both for youth and their families. Youth with strong, positive adult relationships have better well-being overall; they are less likely to encounter teen pregnancy, more likely to attend college, have improved job prospects² and are less likely to enter the justice system.³

In child welfare, youth and families who had strong relationships with their caseworker felt engaged in making their case plans, and youth experienced increased well-being and safer outcomes.⁴ Across studies, research showed that well-connected children had better permanency rates and a lower rate of system reentry.

Data indicates that there are two important types of connections, formal and informal, that improve outcomes for youth and their families during the lifecycle of an Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) case and beyond.

Formal connections are with a youth's caseworker, supervisor and foster parents (where applicable). These are connections that exist because of a youth's formal involvement with Illinois DCFS. **Informal connections** are with birth parents and siblings, teachers, mentors

and other positive supports. These connections would exist without any involvement from Illinois DCFS. Both types of connections provide different but important support to youth and families in need. According to social research studies, strong social connections and concrete support in times of need (social services, financial support, etc.) are key factors that lower the risk of child abuse and neglect.⁵ This shows that both formal and informal supports are crucial to protect against maltreatment and improve outcomes over time.

We know that strong, positive connections for youth in care are crucial. However, measuring the ways these connections occur, their quality and their quantity, is complicated. Relationships are personal, dynamic and multifaceted, making it challenging to understand their depth and nuance from a data-driven, scientific perspective. With successful measurement, we can better predict the needs of youth and their families, provide care and support where it is most needed and implement strategies to improve relationships for all youth in care.



2 Denby, Ramona, et al. Care and Connections: Bridging Relational Gaps for Foster Youth. Center on Children and Families at Brookings, 2017.

3 Yi, Youngmin, and Christopher Wildeman. "Can Foster Care Interventions Diminish Justice System Inequality?" The Future of Children, vol. 28, no. 1, 2018, pp. 37–58.

4 "Engaging and Involving Youth: Court Processes - Child Welfare Information Gateway." Engaging and Involving Youth: Court Processes - Child Welfare Information Gateway, www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/youth/engagingyouth/court-processes

5 Center for the Study of Social Policy. ABOUT STRENGTHENING FAMILIESTM AND THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

Understanding that youth with strong formal and informal connections are healthier, happier and have better outcomes, Illinois DCFS has developed an innovative strategy to measure these connections to promote long term success for youth in care.

The Challenge of Measuring Connections

Human connection is not something that can be easily captured with data. How does one quantify their relationship with a parent? A beloved mentor or teacher? Their siblings or extended family?

Measuring human connections in the child welfare space is especially complex, as there are so many individuals involved in a youth's case. Each adult's relationship with the child is crucial, but the adults' relationships with each other can be just as important. We could measure logged phone calls and in-person visits; however, it is extremely difficult to understand the quality of these interactions and how these relationships evolve over time. Additionally, there are dozens of means of communication that a caseworker might use on a given day to communicate with youth and families, representing different styles of communication, varying quality of the interaction and widely different measurability. It is easy to count the number of texts in a chat. It is difficult to deduce what those texts say about the relationship between two people.



How Illinois DCFS Measured Human Connection

While measuring human connections is difficult, Illinois DCFS recognizes that doing it successfully is critically important, particularly in a child welfare setting. Illinois DCFS has tackled this challenge by introducing a new engagement strategy: Ally-IL. Ally-IL is an innovative tool, built on Microsoft Teams, that facilitates easy and efficient virtual connections. Ally-IL not only helps improve virtual communication and collaboration for everyone involved in a case, but also provides the department with crucial data to examine how those connections impact a youth's outcome.

Ally-IL enables secure communications quickly and easily from a phone, computer or tablet by creating channels and chats to facilitate conversation among "Alliances." An Alliance is any participant who is part of a youth's Ally Team including members, (e.g., assigned caseworkers, their supervisors) and guests, (e.g., the child, the family, teachers, doctors, counselors). Instead of a series of phone calls, a caseworker, for instance, can communicate with the entire Alliance with one chat message and receive replies from anyone in the chat group.

Ally Team members can send photos, documents and ask questions to the entire group or send chats to smaller groupings of the Alliance. Ally-IL allows children and families to connect virtually with their professional and personal supports,

promoting the development of stronger relationships among members of a case team and more case involvement. Ally-IL also acts as a record-keeper, allowing team members to review information and provide caseworkers and supervisors with a record of conversations.

Ally-IL provides a wealth of communication data that can be used to help measure connections. While the tool does not measure every form of connection that occurs within an Illinois DCFS case, it does provide an overall indicator of engagement by case participants. By acting as a proxy for broader engagement, Ally-IL provides a window into the communication between all Alliance members.

Though the preferred form of communication for youth and Alliances is in-person, that is not always possible. Ally-IL is able to fill the gap, not replace it. This assessment indicates that engagement through Ally-IL (defined in additional detail below) provides one aspect of measurable insight into an individual's engagement with the case. Of course, there are instances in which a member of a child's support network could be very engaged in-person but disengaged over Ally-IL, and vice versa. Ally-IL produces quantitative data that can provide insight into an individual's involvement and level of engagement within a child's Alliance.



In addition to introducing Ally-IL, Illinois DCFS engaged the Deloitte Assessment Team to analyze the tool's function. The Assessment Team took a two-step approach to measuring virtual connections:

1. ENGAGEMENT DEFINED

In this research, engagement is defined using a series of factors, including but not limited to the number of chats sent in Microsoft Teams (Teams), speed of replies, reactions and virtual meeting attendance. Engagement looks different for each Alliance member. For caseworkers, engagement is measured by factors such as creating teams for new cases, inviting Alliance members to Teams and message responses and reactions. For personally involved Alliance members (e.g., birth parents, youth, teachers, etc.), engagement is measured by chat participation, virtual meeting attendance and replies to direct mention messages.

2. BUILD A LOGIC MODEL

Data by itself are just numbers – raw material. To find meaning, there needs to be structure through which we can understand what the numbers indicate. How do we combine data points in a meaningful way? And more importantly, how do we decide what is meaningful?

The Assessment Team worked closely with subject matter experts at Illinois DCFS, and collectively brought decades of strategic and technologic experience to develop a feasible approach to capture data.

First, the Assessment Team understood that the analysis had to be tightly tied to the Ally-IL tool. To ensure findings were not unduly influenced by external factors, the Assessment Team made sure to measure only what Ally-IL directly touches. For example, since Ally-IL is an online communication tool/smartphone app, it does not have a direct impact on the quality of an in-person home visit. While the quality of an



in-home visit can have a huge impact on engagement, it is outside the scope of this analysis. What can be understood using Ally-IL is how Alliance members communicate with each other, how often they reach out to each other, how quickly caseworkers respond, and so forth. From this data (the raw material) the Assessment Team combined data points to form small, logical conclusions, and then took several of those conclusions and combined them to form bigger ideas, until the overarching theory had eventually been proved or disproved. This series of logical conclusions is referred to as an **Objective and Key Results (OKR)** goal-setting framework. The Assessment Team developed three overarching objectives. This document focuses on just one: youth and intact families leave the program with strong professional linkages and strong personal connections.



Where do we want to go?

What do we need to get there?

How do we know we have it?

Four Layers of the OKR

1

Objective

Outline an overall goal of the Ally-IL tool.

What would it mean for Ally-IL to be successful?

3

Measures

Break down the target into even more specific goals.

How do we know if the target is true?

2

Targets

Break out the objective into more manageable, directional questions.

Is access to communication better with the Ally-IL tool?

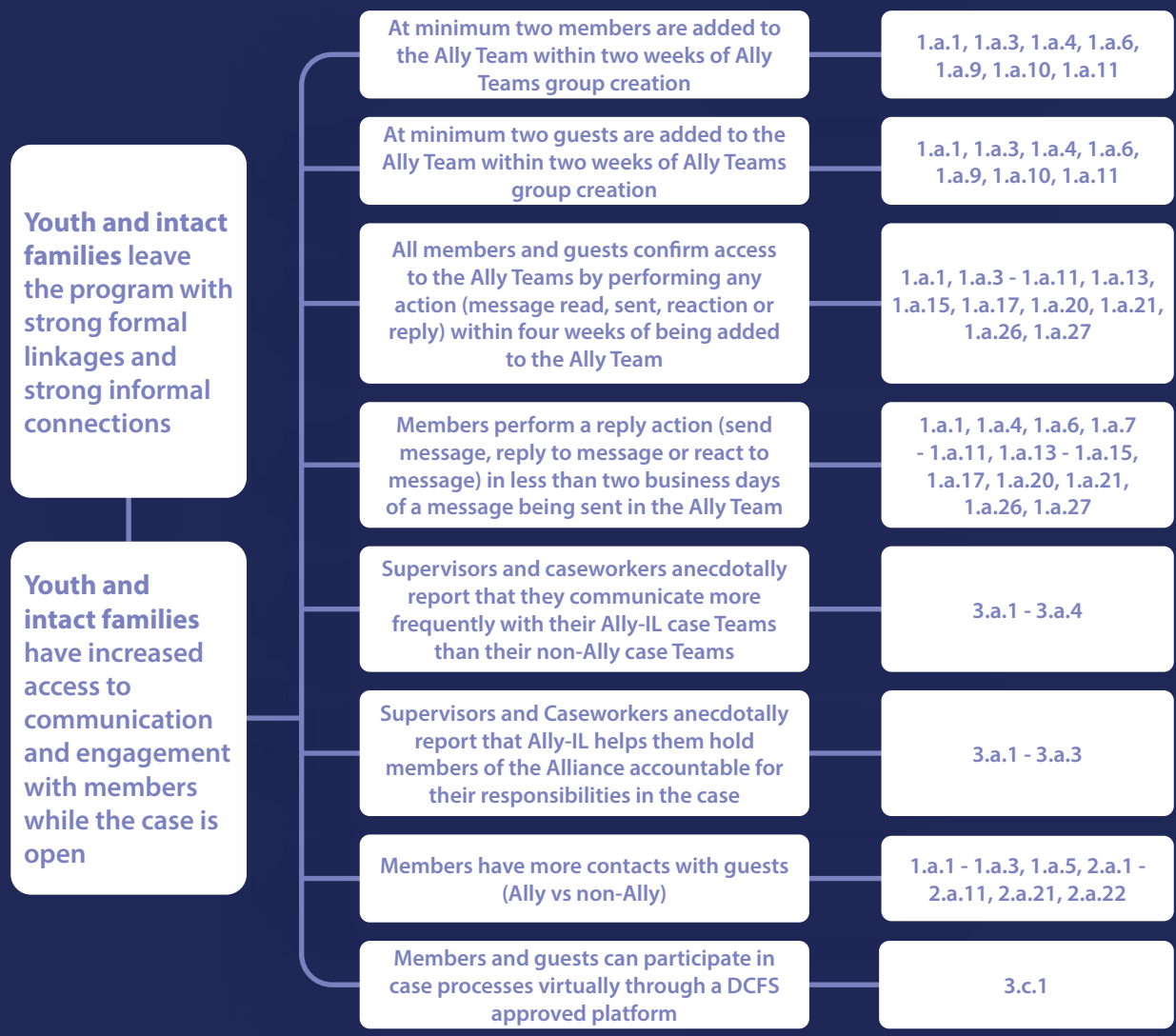
4

Data Points

Support the measures with quantitative data.

What individual data points combine to support the ideas presented in the measures?

The flow of data from individual pieces of information to an oversight into the connectedness of Ally-IL users as demonstrated below in the OKR model.



This branch of the model illustrates how we measure connections and engagement through Ally-IL and shows both current-state data that can be used today, and future-state data that will provide additional nuance to the findings, which we may access in the future.

By defining engagement and then applying that definition to the available data, the Assessment Team was able to create a structure that provides insight into how connections occur across all Alliance members in each case. As Ally-IL is made available throughout the state, increased Ally-IL usage will generate additional data, making our analyses even more nuanced and informed. Illinois DCFS is one of the only states in the U.S. that is working to develop new measurement strategies to understand the impact of connections in the child welfare space. **Illinois DCFS staff will further advance the department by continuing this innovative and important work by fully adopting Ally-IL as a communication strategy.** By utilizing assessments such as this and the Ally-IL strategy, Illinois DCFS will be equipped with the data necessary to continue to positively impact and improve the connections and the outcomes for youth, families, caseworkers and supervisors.

Conclusion

Human connections are valuable and crucial for many of us as they give us a way to understand, identify and relate to others. However, this commodity is one of the most difficult components in human nature to measure. Ally-IL enables case managers to better address the needs of youth and families by addressing the deficiencies in community-building and discovering patterns of positive engagement that continue to inform the best approach for the work of child welfare.





About Deloitte

Deloitte refers to one or more of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee (“DTTL”), its network of member firms, and their related entities. DTTL and each of its member firms are legally separate and independent entities. DTTL (also referred to as “Deloitte Global”) does not provide services to clients. In the United States, Deloitte refers to one or more of the US member firms of DTTL, their related entities that operate using the “Deloitte” name in the United States and their respective affiliates. Certain services may not be available to attest clients under the rules and regulations of public accounting. Please see www.deloitte.com/about to learn more about our global network of member firms.

This publication contains general information only and Deloitte is not, by means of this publication, rendering accounting, business, financial, investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice or services. This publication is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your business, you should consult a qualified professional advisor. Deloitte shall not be responsible for any loss sustained by any person who relies on this publication.

Copyright © 2024 Deloitte Development LLC. All rights reserved.

Deloitte.

About Illinois DCFS

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to reports received by the Child Abuse Hotline at childabuse.illinois.gov (non-emergency situations) or 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. In the event a child must be removed from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible (less than 4% of the time), DCFS is committed to pursuing guardianship and fictive kin as primary options.



60 E. Van Buren St., Suite 1339
Chicago, IL 60605

DCFS.Media@Illinois.gov

dcfs.illinois.gov