

Rapid Review: Contact

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Contact:

How can contact be managed virtually and what are the implications for foster carers, adoptive parents, family members (e.g. siblings, divorced parents) and children?

Context:

'The importance of maintaining contact between children temporarily or permanently looked after away from their birth parents is now believed to be so important to their psychosocial development as to be written into the Children Act' (Quinton et al., 1997).

A review was conducted on the evidence base regarding contact between looked after children in out-of-home placements (e.g. foster, kinship and residential placements) and their parents, siblings and wider networks (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). The review found that good quality contact with family members alongside positive professional interventions could promote positive outcomes for children regarding successful family reunification and/or placement stability. Moreover, they state that social workers play a central role in influencing the pattern and quality of contact for children. Other research suggests that a significant number of children placed outside parental care desire contact with 'foster siblings', friends and carers from previous placements (Ofsted 2009), suggesting the need for social workers to listen to children and

young people when designing contact plans (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011).

There is also a need for social workers to consider what the purpose of contact is for the individuals they are working with (Moyers et al., 2006). Establishing contact between young people and their families could be for a variety of reasons, including to support a plan for reunification, maintain a young person's network, or to improve relationships between young people and family members.

In the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, there is a desire by local authorities to ensure that contact between family members is maintained, but that, wherever possible, it does not pose an increased infection risk.

Findings

Contact between social workers and service users

The relationship and interaction between social workers and service users is a key aspect of the social work relationship (Lishman, 1994; Munro, 2011). With contact being carried out via technology, there will be less likelihood of: 1) picking up on non-verbal cues (Lishman, 2009), 2) engaging in communications that involve deep emotions and empathy since these are prone to disruption when carried out via technology (Parkinson, 2008), and 3) strengthen the cooperation and rapport felt between dyads of individuals due to increased coordination of bodily



movements, which (Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009; Lakens & Stel, 2011). How can social workers ensure that contact with service users continues to be smooth and consistent in the absence of in-person interactions?

While contact between social workers and service users is typically limited by office hours and availability, ensuring smooth contact may involve increased flexibility in contact times, for example allowing service users to initiate contact at times that suit them, e.g. carers may contact social workers when children are sleeping (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). However, as pointed out by Tregeagle and Darcy (2008), it is also important to strike the balance between on and offline communication, ensuring that privacy and individual preferences for ICT is being respected. More generally, attention should be given to guidance for social workers on how to successfully maintain their boundaries and professionalism during this time.

Contact between service users and others

In the context of social care, there is a lack of rigorous evidence on how contact between service users and members of their network (e.g. family members, friends) can impact outcomes. Individuals from families where child maltreatment is an issue report having smaller network sizes and less contact with relatives and friends (Coohy, 1996). One study conducted a review of factors such as social support on foster children, and established that while the research in this area is scant, potential supporter-givers which could directly impact outcomes may include immediate family members as well as other relatives, teachers, and other adults, e.g. neighbours (Orme & Buehler,

2004). They established that it is unclear how and when these supports can impact on outcomes for foster children.

Social companionship support in the form of positive events (e.g. going to see a movie, going out to lunch) can buffer against stress (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). However, such social interactions can also be detrimental depending on the context (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), for instance if parents are abusing alcohol around children (Freisthler, Holmes, & Wolf, 2014).

A review of 246 studies indicated a positive, albeit small relationship between social support and well-being for children and adolescents (Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that family support as opposed to other forms of support such as peer contact can protect against youth problem behaviors (Barrera & Li, 1996).

In terms of how social workers can assess risk of contact between service users and members of their networks, there is also a lack of evidence regarding this. A small qualitative study conducted with nineteen UK social workers found that factors in risk assessment of contact include: 1) the importance of maintaining contact with parents, which can impact on a child's self-esteem; 2) how reliable the individual is (e.g. a parent not showing up for a call could be detrimental to a child's progress); and 3) messaging content (e.g. a parent could communicate unrealistic expectations to a child about reunification, which can be damaging).

Use of technology in contact

Technology (e.g. mobile phones) plays an important role in family members'



management of their daily interpersonal relations with one another (Christensen, 2009). Moreover, while technology can be important in helping relatives to stay connected, when communication is negative and hostile, it can increase conflict, and children suffer as a result (Miller, 2009). In social services, there is a lack of rigorous evidence on how contact can be established and maintained via technology (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). Social work currently lags behind other fields such as healthcare which is also person-centric but is far ahead in terms of its applications of ICT to maintaining relationships (Langer, Eurich, & Guntner, 2019). Social services can look to other sectors such as healthcare for strategies on how to effectively use technology to increase contact, e.g. the use of social media to promote networking across geographical boundaries, and knowledge/information sharing (Anikeeva & Bywood, 2013).

At-risk groups

Certain individuals may be less able or willing to use technology, e.g. due to socio-demographic factors which can increase the 'digital divide', e.g. age, educational level, income, or living in a rural area (Steyaert & Gould, 2009). The 'digital divide' describes the disadvantage of some groups relative to technology uptake, with reasons including a lack of computer skills, poor broadband connection or lack of awareness about its potential use. One study explored the use of an online fostering service and interviewed 205 foster carers from three local authorities about their experiences (Dodsworth et al., 2013). It emerged that foster carers 'rarely' used the service to communicate with social workers, and poor training and support provided in order to use the service was described as the

main barrier to uptake. Another study conducted interviews with sixty-two social work practitioners and managers across England and identified sub-groups of children who are more likely to not 'be seen' in the context of communications with social workers, including: disabled children; adolescents; children of cultures and faiths; and children in asylum-seeking and refugee families (Horwath, 2011). Children with learning disabilities in particular may be more reliant on non-verbal communication and less able to use technologies, including to report neglect or abuse (Malcolm-Carey & Doherty, 2018). Thus, additional consideration should be given to how contact is established and maintained with more vulnerable groups. New technological innovations that promote increased contact and communication could also be explored, particularly for more vulnerable, at-risk children, e.g. the use of a ShareTable system (Yarosh, Tang, Mokashi, & Abowd, 2013). Thus, more consideration should be given to training and support for technology use, particularly for at-risk groups.

Maintaining sibling relationships

'Sibling relationships in the foster care experience have historically taken a back seat to other issues, such as the child-caregiver relationship' (McCormick, 2010). However, sibling relationships are extremely important as they are often the longest lasting relationship in most people's lives. Herrick and Piccus (2005) note that 'apart from situations where sibling contact will cause trauma or disruption for the children, professionals should make every effort to maintain sibling relationships' (p.845). The influence of adults including carers, adopters, birth parents, and social workers can all have an important part to play in the



maintenance and development of sibling relationships for children in care. Macaskill (2002) found that the primary reason for the disintegration of sibling contact was due to 'the breakdown in relationship between different adopters or between adopters and birth relatives' (p.96). Macaskill (2002) also found that 'geographical distance between adoptive families, rather than the emotional aftermath of contact, is likely to be the greatest barrier to sibling contact' (p.97). Using administrative data (N = 35, 216) to determine the factors associated with intact sibling placement Shlonsky et al. (2003) found that placement in relative care was highly associated with intact sibling placement. This suggests that facilitating sibling contact for children in residential or foster care may be more of an urgent priority.

Family contact

An evidence review by Quinton et al. (1997) on contact between children placed away from home and their birth parents concluded that evidence on either the pros or cons of contact is not strong and that existing studies on this topic are weak, suggesting a clear need for high quality research in this area. Young people who have no family contact may benefit from an Independent Visitor, as identified by the Children Act 1989, 'and more use of this service could be considered' (Moyers et al., 2006, p.557).

Adolescents

A qualitative study by Moyers et al. (2006), includes sixty-eight foster carers, young people and their social workers who were interviewed at two points in time, 3 months after the start of a new foster placement and again at 12 months. The study found that 'contact for the majority of adolescents was problematic and had a

significant impact on placement outcomes' (p.541). Further, 'whilst social workers do a lot of work in relation to contact arrangements for younger children, it was apparent from this study that adolescents were often left to manage it themselves' (Moyers et al. 2006, p.558).

Implications

- There is a need for a more recent systematic review of the quality of evidence on contact for children in care with their birth family, which includes parents, siblings, and other extended family members
- It may help social workers to explore the main purpose of their contact with service users and use this to inform their assessment of the type and frequency of contact needed
- Increased contact between children and relatives could be beneficial or detrimental; more clear evidence is needed on this and social workers should assess on a case-by-case basis
- Contact via technology between service users and social workers may be two-way, whereby service users may also reach out at times that are convenient for them; however, the social worker should also establish boundaries to avoid burnout and maintain professionalism
- There may need to be more thought given around enabling families to facilitate video-calling during these times, particularly to people who are at risk of being technology-constrained, e.g. a campaign to recycle smartphones to local authorities.



- Training for social workers and carers on the need to support contact arrangements with adolescents
- Children placed in residential or foster care may be more likely to be separated from siblings, and therefore facilitating contact for these groups of children and young people should be prioritised.

Organisations with expertise in this area

Siblings Together is a UK based charity aiming to help young people in care initiate and continue to have contact with their siblings. Whilst the charity is unable to do any physical re-uniting presently, they are supporting online continued contact for all siblings.

Lifelong Links uses family group conferences to build support networks for children in care, bringing together family members and other adults who care about each child to make a life-long support plan with the young person.

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