



Virtual 'family time' between children in care and their birth families during lockdown

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Main research questions

How is birth family contact for children in care, children in kinship care, and adopted children being facilitated?

What experience do people have of using digital media to facilitate contact, and how well is this working for everyone involved?





Methods & sample

23 telephone interviews with:

- 16 social work/social care professionals
- 4 birth parents
- 2 foster carers
- 1 adoptive parent

- Online survey (n=197): 63 foster carers; 56 professionals; 37 Kinship carer/ special guardian; 15 birth parents/other relative; 14 Other carers 11 Adoptive parents; 1 Young person



'Face-to-face contact has been cancelled until further notice'

Video calls

- Mediated or unmediated
- Just talking or play/activity based
- Same frequency or more often
- Not used much in adoption

Phone calls & messaging

- Teenagers with own phone
- Carers sending photos/video to 'fill the gap'
- Some concerns about sharing numbers

Face-to-face family time

- Very rare
- Teenagers may 'vote with feet'
- Compelling needs
- 2 metres 'social distancing'

Experiences of Children

- A means of maintaining connections with family and peers – ‘a reasonable alternative under the circumstances’.
- Responses to the change dependent on age of child, individual needs, previous experiences, existing relationships.
- Babies – limited benefits, less effective and appeared confusing – ‘The baby doesn’t really understand why he can hear Mummy but can’t work out where she is’.
- Teenagers – A more familiar form of communication – ‘They are so used to doing everything not face-to-face anyway. It’s the way they communicated with their friends’.

- Lack of the sensory experience – ‘It left him feeling the loss of her hugs’.
- Children with disabilities – difficult for some, surprisingly beneficial for others.
- ‘Safe space’ – could be a cause of distress but for others
‘[It’s] taken the emotion out of contact’.
- Integration of both families – sharing of space and important relationships.
- More time to build relationships with carers, less disruption to routines.
- Keeping children engaged – creativity is key!

Experiences of Carers

- Increased demands and responsibilities – adapting but struggling at times.
- Carers generally focussed on the wellbeing of the child.
- Lack of support and guidance from professionals and ‘being left to it’ – particularly kinship carers and some adoptive parents.
- Relationships with parents – ‘It has also enabled us to have a little ‘window’ into their life, environment and lifestyle and given us and contact workers a chance to see how they are living and interacting with each other.’

- Maintaining confidentiality and managing risks, particularly when not supervised.
- Some liked having more control, or wanted more but were frustrated by professionals preventing this.
- Managing children's reactions.
- Managing contact alongside other pressures e.g. family commitments, home education, work etc.

Experiences of Parents

- Increased anxiety and distress – ‘I’m always scared. I can’t sleep and some days I can’t even eat. I’m constantly thinking what if they get sick’.
- Understanding and acceptance ‘It keeps everyone safe doesn’t it?’ – but some angry and frustrated.
- Pleased to see children via calls, but missed physical touch – ‘I miss him more than ever. I didn’t think it could get much worse’.
- Access to wifi and equipment – ‘digital poverty’.



- Lack of face-to-face contact impacting on the outcome of assessments and care proceedings.
- Foster carers being involved in calls, finding this inhibiting (though some valued this)
- Difficulties in engaging their child – ‘it is good to see [her] but very hard to keep her attention for the duration of a call. She understandably wants to play and run around and struggles to remain focussed on the screen even where I play games, sing to her and bring toys home to play with on screen.’



Key recommendations

- An urgent need to consider the impact of a lack of face-to-face contact on babies in temporary care
- Contact during lockdown should learn from the follow key principles that underpin successful contact.
- The usefulness of digitally mediated contact should continue to be developed.
- Value of looking across different placement settings: raises questions about whether we always focus on children's needs
 - Amount & type of contact differs esp in adoption
 - Parents/carers/adopters – control and support differs
 - Role of foster carers in working with parents



