

Contact following placement in care, adoption, or special guardianship: Implications for children and young people's well-being

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Introduction



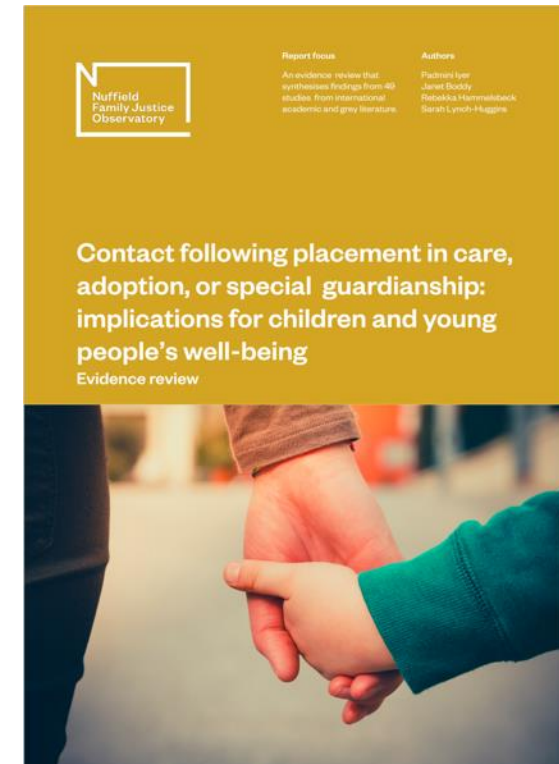
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Two evidence reviews

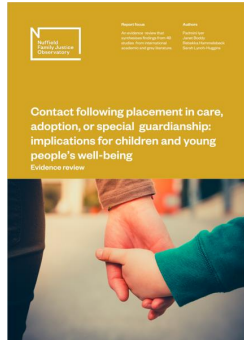
- Both reviews focus on implications for children and young people's well-being
 - Other research on contact was **not** included
- Digital contact review encompasses private and public law contexts
- Main review is focused on children in care, adopted or in special guardianship

Conducted by NatCen and the University of Sussex in collaboration



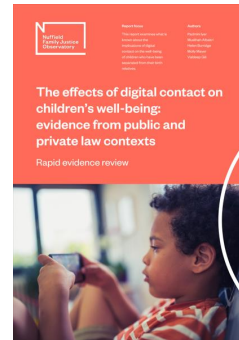


Scope of the evidence reviews



What is known about implications of contact for the well-being of children and young people who have been separated from their birth parents in public law contexts?

- Mixed-methods review
- Findings synthesised from 49 studies



What is known about the implications of digital contact for the well-being of children separated from their birth relatives in public law contexts?

- Rapid evidence review
- Findings synthesised from 16 studies

Both reviews:

- Included international, academic and 'grey' literature, published 2000 – 2020
 - Academic papers (studies or reviews) ; research-based books (including edited collections); research reports
- Use a broad, multi-dimensional conceptualisation of 'well-being' for children and young people
 - Accounting for subjective feelings, and individual and relational aspects
 - Encompassing mental health, emotional well-being, physical health, behaviour, safety, identity, satisfaction with contact arrangements, and the quality of relationships with both birth and placement families.

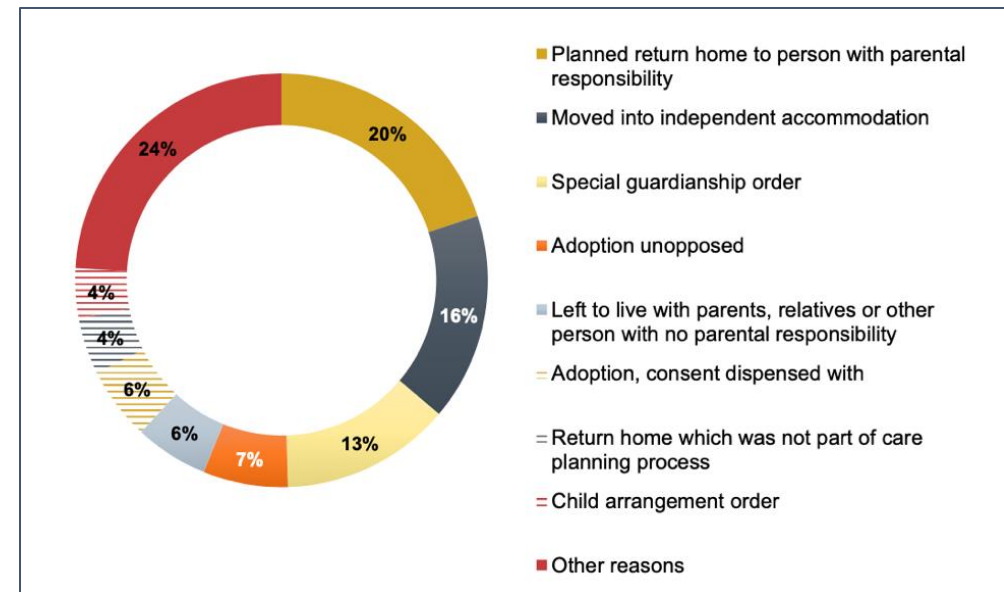


Key considerations

‘Contact takes place within the context of [...] variable and complex relationships. To isolate it from its context or see it as a simple variable with invariable effects is to misunderstand it.’
(Wilson and Sinclair 2004: p166)

- None of the reviewed studies attempted to test the causal impact of contact on well-being
- No simple linear relationship between contact and well-being
- Shaped by multiple related factors: variations in forms/purposes of contact; diversity within the care population; children’s varied pathways through care systems.
- Need for a broad and dynamic definition of ‘family’

Diverse pathways through (and beyond) care systems: Children ceasing to be looked after, in the year to 31 March 2019 (by reason episode ceased)



Key findings



1. Focus on the quality of contact

Child-centred

- Differentiated based on children and young people's rights, needs, and perspectives.
- Responsive to changing circumstances over time
- Taking account of the purposes of contact with important people in their lives.

Family-centred

- Thinking through what 'family' means for the child
- Working in ways that enable positive experiences and birth family involvement that is safe and meaningful in children's lives.

Supportive

- Enables by skilled support and adequate resources
- Facilitating effective, sensitive and clear communication and mutual respect between all those involved – both children and the key people in their lives.



2. Listen to the views of children & young people

Key messages from the reviews

- Young people want to have some choice about contact
- It is not always straightforward for adults to know how children feel about contact
- When young people's views and feelings are not taken into account, this has negative implications, such as:
 - A sense of disempowerment at being excluded from decision-making
 - Fear and stress before and during contact
 - Pressure to have unwanted contact with birth parents

Policy and practice implications

- Careful balance is needed – important that young people are not made to feel responsible for managing complex relationships
- Need to invest time and resource in order to understand and respond to young people's views and feelings about contact



3. Recognise the importance of siblings, grandparents, wider family and friends

Key messages from the reviews

Positive well-being outcomes for CYP include:

- A sense of belonging to birth family
- Stability and continuity
- Making sense of complex identities in relation to family
- Maintaining or improving relationships with siblings
- Positive relationships with extended family members
- Positive mental health outcomes

Implications for policy and practice

- Insufficient priority is given to facilitating contact with siblings
- Extended networks can provide an important source of support, especially when birth parent contact is problematic or not possible
- Important to respect children and young people's wishes in relation to these forms of contact – may vary for different people and change over time
- Crucial to support and facilitate contact when it is wanted (and safe)



4. Ensure all involved are clear about the purposes of contact

Key messages from the reviews

- Contact that has been facilitated by skilled professionals is associated with improved relationships between children and birth parents, placement stability, a return to parental care, improved emotional well-being and a better understanding of identity while in care and in adulthood.
- Positive experiences do not depend on the frequency of contact, and reviewed studies consistently demonstrate the importance of quality over quantity
- Decisions about frequency should relate to the overall purpose of contact
- Social workers play a crucial role in establishing the purpose of contact, and ensuring that contact is arranged accordingly

Policy and practice implications

- The purpose of contact should be to enable safe and meaningful involvement of important people (including birth family relatives) in children and young people's lives, through childhood and beyond.
- Establishing the purpose of contact depends on factors including:
 - The young person's age;
 - Short and long-term wellbeing needs;
 - Who contact is with; and
 - The nature of placement arrangements – including permanence and plans for reunification



5. Ensure contact plans are tailored to each child and regularly reviewed

Key messages from the reviews:

- Contact may impact differently on various dimensions of well-being – can be simultaneously positive and negative.
- Relationship between contact and well-being must be understood in relation to children's everyday lives, their time in care and into their adult lives.
- Contact can upset or cause stress for children. They may be exposed to further risk of harm.
- Issues related to birth parents' underlying needs can be associated with negative well-being outcomes for children and young people.

Implications for policy and practice

- Relationships are dynamic and change over time – e.g. as a child gets older, as a birth parent's situation alters.
- Contact plans should therefore be reviewed and updated regularly – they should not be static.
- Where contact may be (re)traumatising, practitioners should consider changing or pausing contact arrangements.



6. Ensure skilled professional support is available

Key messages from the reviews

Well-supported contact is associated with:

- Positive relationships with birth parents
- Placement stability
- Greater feelings of security
- Developing a sense of identity

Implications for policy and practice

Key areas for support and training include:

- **For adoptive parents and carers:**
 - benefits & challenges of maintaining contact (before and during adoption/placement)
- **For birth parents:**
 - expectations and management of contact
- **For children and young people:**
 - negotiating decisions around the frequency and nature of contact; managing relationships with birth parents, and potential tensions between birth and placement



Conclusions

- The key question is not whether or how much contact has a positive impact on children and young people's well-being, but **how best to facilitate positive experiences and the meaningful involvement of the people who matter to the child.**
- The evidence shows that **well-facilitated contact is associated with positive well-being outcomes** for children and young people in both the short and long term.
- Conversely, poorly managed contact is associated with risks to children and young people's well-being.
- **Support** for everyone involved in contact—children, carers, adoptive parents and birth relatives—is crucial, and **depends on the investment of time and resources.**



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