

Contact between children in care or adopted and their families: six key messages from research

Briefing paper

Essential read

This briefing paper distils and reflects on the key points from three evidence reviews in an eight-minute read.

September 2020

Introduction

Decisions about contact are crucially important for children and families when children are placed for adoption, removed from home through care proceedings, or voluntarily looked after by local authorities.

Contact is important for children when they are first separated from their birth families, and throughout childhood, whatever their placement. Decisions about contact may be related to supporting children to return home, helping them to maintain or build relationships with family members, helping them to manage loss and separation, or to make sense of the past. But often there is a lack of awareness or clarity among those involved in making decisions (social workers, lawyers, Cafcass workers and judges) about

what the research into contact tells us. This means that key findings that could lead to better outcomes for children—such as tailoring and regularly reviewing plans for each child—are overlooked, and decision-making can remain unchallenged and unchanged.

This briefing note highlights the evidence emerging from three reviews commissioned by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO):

- Iyer, P., Albakri, M., Burridge, H., Mayer, M., and Gill, V. (2020). [The effects of digital contact on children's wellbeing: evidence from public and private law contexts.](#)

- Iyer, P., Boddy, J., Hammelsbeck, R., and Lynch-Huggins, S. (2020). [Contact following placement in care, adoption, or special guardianship: implications for children and young people's well-being.](#)

- Neil, E., Copson, R., and Sorensen, P. (2020). [Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch?](#)

The briefing also raises points for reflection and discussion about potential areas for change and improvement. It does not contain references to the individual studies included in each of the reviews. We would urge readers to look at these in further detail.

Key messages

Focus on the quality of contact

Good quality contact can benefit children by helping them to: return home where this is in the interests of their welfare; manage issues of loss and separation; maintain family relationships; and make sense of the past. In this way, good quality contact supports the development of identity. Poor quality contact on the other hand can contribute to poor outcomes for children.

Good quality contact means: the child should be physically and psychologically safe; there should be a level of collaboration or working together between the family caring for the child and birth parents, ideally the adults should each support the child and recognise the child's membership of both settings/families; the contact should align with the child's short and long-term needs, and their wishes and feelings; and it should be rewarding. Poor quality contact is when: a child is unsafe, or feels unsafe; a child is exposed to conflict between adults; contact is unrewarding or not enjoyable; or if contact does not happen reliably.

The factors that facilitate good quality contact are:

- an approach that takes account of the views and wishes of children
- an approach that recognises the complexities of family and friendship relationships
- clarity about the purpose of contact among all of those involved
- an approach that is tailored to the needs of each individual child, is flexible, is not formulaic and that takes account of changing circumstances and relationships over time
- an appropriate level of support provided for the child, the carers and the family members or friends involved in contact.

Facilitating good quality contact requires skill and an investment of time, resources and imagination. Such investment is essential because it will support the positive experiences of contact that are associated with well-being in the short and long term,

and it will reduce the risk of adverse outcomes that can ensue as a result of poor quality contact.

The evidence that the quality of contact is more important than the quantity or frequency of contact for children's well-being does not mean that the latter are not important. Rather the quantity and frequency of contact alone will not determine whether a child can maintain positive family relationships or whether poor family relationships can improve. Quantity and frequency are particularly important when children are likely to return home and to build or maintain sibling relationships.

Points for reflection

What would indicate that the plan for contact is likely to lead to good quality contact?

What needs to change to ensure a greater focus on the quality of the contact?



Six key messages

- Focus on the quality of contact.
- Listen to the views of children and young people.
- Recognise the significance of siblings, grandparents, wider family and friends.
- Ensure that all involved are clear about the purpose of contact.
- Ensure that contact plans are tailored to each child and regularly reviewed.
- Ensure skilled professional support is available.

Listen to the views of children and young people

Children, and particularly older children, want to have some choice about who they see, and how contact takes place. While enshrined in legislation, the research indicates that children's wishes and views about contact—whether that is for more contact, for contact with particular people, or for a reduction or cessation of contact—are not always taken into account, particularly as they grow older. There is also evidence to suggest that when children are permanently placed at a young age, for

example for adoption, their short and particularly long-term needs for birth family connections can be overlooked because they are too young to express a view about contact. This may be one reason why the option of direct contact with siblings and wider family is rarely seen with adoptive placements. The reviews also note that there is a general lack of direct evidence from children in research studies about their experiences of contact.

Legislation requires that courts and professionals balance a respect for children's views with the need to promote and protect children's welfare now and into the future—a requirement supported by the evidence, which points to the importance of avoiding placing responsibility for decisions onto children and also avoiding making assumptions about what children want. Important points to note from the research are:

- even when contact is challenging and painful it may be wanted and valued—this needs to be distinguished from contact that is harmful to children
- the needs and views of children will change over time
- where children are too young to express their wishes and feelings it is especially important to consider their potential long-term contact needs
- some children may express their feelings about family contact through their behaviour, for example, appearing happy and relaxed in contact—or conversely fearful and disturbed
- relationships are dynamic
- family and friendship networks are complex for all of us, but particularly for children separated from their families, and contact with relatives in the wider network can be greatly valued by children.

Points for reflection

How have children been involved in discussions about their wishes?

With babies and very young children, is there evidence that their long-term needs for family connections have been properly considered?

What plans/systems are in place to keep checking on children's views?

Do children know who to speak to if they want to see a particular person? Or if they want to stop seeing someone?

Are sufficient systems in place to support teenagers leaving care or adopted young people reaching the age of 18 to review their needs in relation to family contact?

Recognise the significance of siblings, grandparents, and wider family and friends

There are clear messages from the research about the benefit of contact with siblings, grandparents and extended family members. It indicates the positive impact on relationships, identity, on coming to terms with the past and, in the longer term, the role that relatives can play in providing support when children leave care. There is also increasing recognition of the importance to children of being able to maintain relationships with friends, and former carers or other adults who have provided them with support. However, the research also indicates that within both practice and research, there is still too often a narrow view of ‘family’,

with a continuing focus on parent—and specifically mothers. There is evidence that contact with siblings is closely related to placement type and less likely to be facilitated or promoted for adopted children.

It is very important to think about contact when there are established relationships but identifying and promoting other links should also be considered to enable the child to have those links into the future—for example with grandparents who had no opportunity to build a relationship before the child was removed, or half siblings, or siblings placed for adoption before the child was born.

Points for reflection

What needs to change to ensure that children are able to keep in touch with people they have formed relationships with?

What will help ensure that all potential family and wider family connections are identified?

Are there members of the child's extended family that the child does not yet have a relationship with but might benefit from contact with in the short and long term?

Ensure that all involved are clear about the purpose of contact

Clarity about the purpose of contact is recognised as an important contributor to good quality contact. The purpose of contact will vary depending on the circumstances of each child and the long-term plans for the child's future. Skilled professional support in making sure everyone involved is clear about the purpose is key, and in helping people come to terms with any changes in purpose over time. There is evidence that where adults are clear about the purpose of contact—and thus about their respective roles in children's lives—this contributes to positive contact experiences for children, even when the adults do not like each other.

Whatever the specific purpose of contact in the short term, it will also be important to take a long-term view of the child's well-being given the

evidence about the support that family networks can provide for care leavers and young adults, and the potential contribution of contact to a sense of identity and well-being for people who have been adopted.

There are particular challenges in relation to clarity of purpose of contact during care proceedings when the local authority may be planning for permanence away from the family but where this plan is contested and a final order has not yet been made. Different perspectives on the purpose of contact at this time may mean that there is a lack of attention to the opportunities to provide intensive support in relation to parenting and to focus on supporting the child and parent and/or relatives to enjoy family time together.

Points for reflection

How can we ensure that the quality of contact immediately after the removal of a child, and before plans are settled, can be of the highest quality?

How can we ensure that there is a focus on the longer term as well as the immediate future when planning contact?

Can everyone involved say what the purpose of contact is for this particular child with this particular relative or friend?

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Ensure that contact plans are tailored to each child and regularly reviewed

Arrangements for contact should take account of each child's age and developmental needs as well as the plans for permanence, which will affect the purpose of contact. Important here is recognition that arrangements will very likely need to change as a child grows older to reflect changing relationships and changing placements. Contact plans should never be static, hence the need for opportunities to review arrangements. Plans should be based on the analysis of each child and family rather on the 'usual' formula for contact in particular circumstances—for example contact 'three times a week' with their mother for babies under an interim care order, or letter box contact 'once or twice a year' with a limited number of relatives for children who are adopted. While such arrangements may be the right ones for some children, there is no 'one size fits all'.

The impact of lockdown as a result of COVID-19 during 2020, and the sudden switch from face-to-face to digital contact, has highlighted the opportunities for flexibility in relation to the timing and duration of contact, and has provided positive examples of supporting parents and carers with suggestions of how to enliven contact. It is also clear from this experience that digital contact is not suitable for all children or parents, and is particularly problematic for infants, younger children and some disabled children. There are clearly opportunities for mixing face-to-face and digital contact to increase flexibility, but the research indicates that even where digital contact has worked well, it should be used to enhance rather than replace face-to-face contact in most cases.

Points for reflection

What systems support dynamic and flexible contact arrangements?

How can we avoid a formulaic approach to contact plans?

What can be learnt about flexibility from the experience of using digital contact methods?

What systems would support better opportunities for review and changes to arrangements?

Ensure skilled professional support is available

Skilled professional support is key to helping to manage challenges and facilitate good quality contact. Support is also needed in boundary setting and clarifying the purpose of contact. This is the case with both face-to-face and digital contact. The research also indicates that support is not always available to those who need it.

Parents involved in care proceedings frequently have underlying complex needs, which can affect their capacity to manage contact. Providing them with skilled support benefits their children as well as helping them directly. Support helps such adults to understand and manage emotions as well as how to make contact enjoyable. The switch to digital contact during the COVID-19 lockdown provides positive examples of this. For example, suggestions and advice around reading stories, singing songs and playing games with children.

Many children who have been removed through care proceedings will have experienced poor relationships with their birth parents. Skilled support in relation to contact can help repair these poor relationships and facilitate successful reunification or ensure that children who do not return home can maintain positive relationships with their birth parents.

Good relationships between foster carers, kinship carers (whether fostering or special guardians), adoptive parents and birth parents contribute to creating positive experiences for children, whereas conflict between carers and parents is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and behavioural difficulties in children. Support for carers, adoptive and birth parents in helping manage their complex relationships over time will be of benefit

to children. Research indicates that much more could be done to help the adults involved manage their relationships. As well as being true for foster and adoptive placements, this is also a particular issue with kinship placements where the research indicates real challenges in managing contact and a worrying lack of support.

There is evidence that the greater involvement of carers in contact can improve communication and relationships with birth parents. For example, in New South Wales where post-adoption contact is mandatory until the child is 12, adopters facilitate contact and accompany the child, which has been found to lead to greater transparency and some form of relationship between the adoptive and birth parents, which is in turn of benefit to the child. The sudden expansion of digital contact during lockdown resulted in much greater direct contact between parents and carers. This can greatly improve some parent/carer relationships. However, others (both parents and carers) experienced it as overly intrusive.

Contact can be upsetting for children for a range of reasons but research indicates that this may not always have a negative impact on a child's well-being, certainly in the longer term, providing there is support for them and their carers in managing this. It is important to distinguish 'being upset' from the direct risk of further harm or re-traumatisation arising from contact with a parent who has abused a child in the past, examples of which occur in the research. Here, listening to children, including through observation of their behaviour, and providing skilled support, should ensure that action is taken to protect the child either through changing arrangements or even terminating contact.

It is important that support to manage any risks connected with contact should be proportionate. Also important is the potential for professionals who monitor or observe contact to have the opportunity to think about how they might also contribute to facilitating positive experiences for all involved.

Support will vary, depending on the needs, the nature of the placement and the purpose of contact. It is important for all placements and throughout childhood but will particularly important while the child is interim care and decisions have still to be made about the longer term.

There is a need for more testing and evaluation of different types of support to improve understanding of what approaches might be most beneficial for which children and in which circumstances.

Points for reflection

What support is being provided for parents to manage contact?

Are they being given suggestions and advice about interactions with their children, particularly babies?

What support are carers getting in managing contact?

How will conflict between parents and carers be managed and resolved?

What support is being provided for children in relation to contact?

What systems should be in place to support adoptive parents and special guardians?

How can difficulties in relationships be resolved?



What we need to know more about

As well as highlighting what we know about contact, the evidence reviews indicate where gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding.

→ We need to hear more directly from children and young people in order to have a clearer understanding of their views and perspectives.

→ Where babies are subject to interim care orders we need a better understanding of how to ensure quality and attention to developmental needs in contact arrangements in ways that also enable parents to develop a bond with their child and to have support in parenting.

→ The systematic monitoring of contact arrangements and how they change over time, together with data collection and information about who the child is seeing, would assist our understanding of the overall picture.

Next steps

The evidence reviews on which this briefing paper is based provide a good basis for moving forward to help improve practice. Nuffield FJO is actively involved in the dissemination of the research messages, and is supporting discussion and debate across the sector around the activity needed to improve practice, and test new approaches.

The research messages are obviously important for social work practitioners and their managers, and for independent reviewing officers (IROs),

who have the responsibility for making arrangements, providing support, and reviewing the arrangements while children are in care. But knowledge and understanding of the messages is important for judges, lawyers and Cafcass guardians too.

By clarifying and sharing these research messages, we hope to help all those involved to understand—and where necessary question and challenge—proposed contact arrangements.

For further information or to get involved, please get in touch:

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About Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield FJO aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield

Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

Nuffield FJO funded the development of this briefing paper and the evidence reviews on which it is based. Any views expressed are not necessarily those of Nuffield FJO or the Nuffield Foundation.



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