



Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch?

Briefing paper

This briefing paper highlights the main findings of a rapid research project undertaken during April 2020 by Professor Elsbeth Neil, Ruth Copson, and Dr Penny Sorensen at the Centre for Research on Children & Families, University of East Anglia.

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On 23 March 2020 the UK government directed the public to severely restrict in-person contact and travel outside the home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This 'lockdown' presents significant barriers to children in local authority care, in kinship care, with special guardians, or adopted spending time face-to-face with their birth families.

Guidance issued in April by the Department for Education and the Welsh Government set out the expectation that family contact plans for children in care should continue but that contact would need to take place virtually. Where contact orders were in force the guidance suggested that the spirit of these should be followed with social workers making individualised decisions based on the circumstances of each case.^{1,2}

This rapid research project was commissioned in order to try to urgently understand what means agencies were putting in place to support children to keep in touch with their birth families, and how this was working—especially for children.

The use of digital forms of contact also offered the opportunity to understand more about whether these means of contact could be a valuable option for some care-experienced children, even after the pandemic is over.

The survey and interviews undertaken were UK-wide and did not specifically record where the participants were located. However, the findings are of relevance to professionals in both England and Wales.

Figure 1: Main ways of staying in touch during lockdown

| Medium | Key characteristics |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Video calls | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediated by professional, or by carers, or young person could manage the call. • Just talking or play/activity-based. • Same day/time as before or 'little and more often'. • Common for children in care and kinship care, limited in adoption. |
| Letters/cards/gifts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common in adoption. • Requests by agency or birth parents for adoptive parents to send extra letter. • Delays to existing letters for some. • Used by some across all settings as a preference or add-on to other forms of contact. |
| Phone calls and messaging | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common for teenagers who have own phone. • Used by carers to send photos and videos to parents to 'fill the gap'. • Some foster carers/adopters want to keep number confidential (withhold number). |
| Face-to-face meetings and family time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only happening very exceptionally. • Teenagers who may 'vote with feet' if not allowed. • Where need considered to be urgent. • Attempts to apply rule of two-metre 'social distancing'. |

Figure 2: Summary of pros and cons of video calls during lockdown

| Positives | Barriers and challenges |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred by some children: feels more relevant or safer. • For some parents and children, better than not being able to see each other at all. • Can create opportunities for better integration between a child's two worlds, though greater involvement of carers in contact. • Can be used flexibly. • Saves travel time. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties for babies, under-fives and older children with disabilities. • Fears about impact on parenting assessments. • Parents and children missing physical contact. • Raises new questions about risks. • Some additional stresses for carers. • Upsetting for some children. • Parents, carers and children may not have equal access to digital devices or the internet; some may not know how to use digital methods. |

Key research findings

This section presents the key findings of a qualitative analysis based on:

- an online survey that captured the views of 56 children's social care professionals, 63 foster carers, 37 kinship carers/special guardians, 11 adoptive parents and 14 other carers; and 15 birth relatives (predominantly mothers)—the survey had a number of open questions about what contact was happening, how this was working, and people's thoughts about the future of digital contact
- semi-structured telephone or Skype interviews with 17 professionals (from a range of settings/roles), four birth parents, two foster carers and one adoptive parent.

Facilitating birth family contact for children in care, children in kinship care, and adopted children

- Almost all face-to-face contact with birth relatives has been suspended for all groups of children.
- Those taking part in our study reported widespread use of video calls by and for children in residential, foster and kinship care.
- Some adopted children were also having video calls—but only in situations where these were already in place prior to lockdown, or where face-to-face contact was already happening.
- Letterbox contact remained the plan for most adopted children. Some additional letters had been sent in some cases—but in others, letters continued as previously planned or were delayed because of logistical problems.

How well is digital contact working?

... for children

- Familiarity and comfort with the medium is important. Generally older children and young people in our study were more likely to feel comfortable using digital technology, and for some it was a preferred way of communicating that felt more 'normal' than professionally

supervised contact. Some children did miss being able to be physically close to their parents: 'It left him feeling the loss of her hugs'.

- The age and ability of children is important. Video calls presented difficulties for babies and young children (predominantly the under-fives) in communicating with their families, as well as some older children with disabilities.
- Some were experiencing greater success with video calls when these were designed to be deliberately 'child-friendly'—fun activities (such as playing games, singing songs, reading stories, and doing crafts) helped children stay interested and engage with their parents.
- The quality of the child's relationship with birth family members was an important factor. Where the children in the study felt at ease with their parents (or other relatives such as brothers and sisters), they tended to enjoy the contact—though some missed the physical contact.
- Some children were reported to be unsettled or even frightened by video calls: this was mostly where children's relationships with their parents were not generally good and where children disliked having this contact in their 'safe space'.
- Some children were said to be relieved to have video calls as opposed to meetings with parents, as they found the video meeting less difficult or emotionally intense compared to a face-to-face meeting.

... foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents

- Foster carers especially reported having greater involvement in, and responsibility for, children's contact arrangements because these were taking place in the foster home rather than elsewhere. They were having to spend more time helping children prepare for and manage video calls. This was in a wider context of children being often out of school, and other stresses related to the pandemic.

- For some, being able to communicate with parents through emails, video calls or messages was experienced positively. Professionals often felt this could help children through the greater integration of different aspects of their lives. But some carers experienced feelings of intrusion into home life through having parents ‘virtually’ present in their home. Some carers and kinship carers were also finding it hard to manage boundaries with parents.
- Some carers/adoptive parents reported unmet support needs, particularly in relation to having more responsibility for managing contact, including managing boundaries and confidentiality. Carers and adopters also sometimes highlighted their lack of confidence with using digital technology. Some did not have computers or smart phones, and some incurred additional costs such as buying a new sim card to protect confidentiality. It was noticeable that kinship carers in particular felt that they were not being adequately supported, either with contact issues or wider stresses.

... for parents ...

- While many parents understood the reasons why face-to-face contact with their children had been paused, the pandemic had increased their worries about their children, and their feelings of loss and separation.
- Video calls were seen as ‘better than nothing’. But many missed physical contact, and were keen that video calls did not substitute physical contact in the longer term.
- Parents struggled when children found video calls difficult. Parents found it hard when their children (particularly young children) could not focus for long in video calls, but this was easier when parents had realistic expectations, and where different ideas were tried out to make calls more fun for children.
- Parents of children (especially babies) in interim care expressed high levels of concern about the loss of physical contact, which was seen as detrimental to developing or sustaining a

relationship, and to demonstrating their parenting capacity. The concern was that this could reduce the chances of their child returning home.

- Some parents found it helpful to communicate with their child’s carers more than they would usually, while others found it challenging or intrusive.
- Some parents had received good support, and others less so. As well as needing help with the issues described above, for some parents, the most basic problem was digital poverty—not having access to a smart phone, computer, data or good Wi-Fi, for example.

What guidance is available to help manage digital contact?

Practice appeared very variable around the country. Some agencies had developed their own guidance (for professionals, foster carers and/or birth parents), other professionals had shared examples of guidance with each other, or found useful sources online. Positive examples of guidance addressed both risk prevention and management as well as making positive suggestions to help digital methods work well. Guidance for carers and parents could include suggestions based on the age and developmental stage of the child, and ideas about helping parents and carers work together.

There were two key areas where professionals wanted more guidance:

- choice of digital platforms, and how to use these safely, protecting the confidentiality of carers and adoptive parents where necessary
- ideas and guidance about how to make video calls work well, particularly in terms of making it an enjoyable and safe experience for children.

What ideas did people have about the value of using technology to facilitate contact beyond the immediate crisis?

Many people did identify benefits in the use of digital contact, and there was much positivity about the potential to continue using it beyond the immediate crisis. Many

people wanted to see this as one of a number of options that could be used alongside existing options, as opposed to completely replacing them.

Some people had been surprised at the benefits of video calls, and some professionals were questioning whether they had been too risk averse in the past, for example by facilitating all contact themselves in order to keep parents and carers separate.

Key concerns about future digital contact were that:

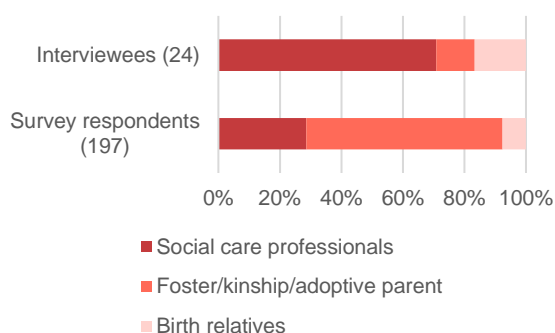
- usage should be decided on a case-by-case basis, with individuals and circumstances taken into account
- any risks should be effectively managed
- digital contact should not replace face-to-face contact, where the latter is working well
- digital forms of contact could offer a new alternative to letterbox contact for adopted children—however this would need to be carefully thought through, with issues of mediation and security being carefully addressed.

Birth parents of adopted children who only had letter contact were typically very positive about the idea of digital contact.

Study strengths and limitations

A wide range of professionals were included in the interviews and survey responses, including those with special responsibility for managing contact, those supporting birth parents, children's social workers and their managers, independent reviewing officers, adoption workers and managers, and social workers supporting foster carers.

Figure 3: Survey respondents and interviewees



The methods allowed us to gain information about children across the whole age range, and including children with disabilities, who were living in a range of family based and group care settings. However:

- no data were collected directly from children or young people
- the views of some other groups were not well represented—for example, professionals supporting kinship carers/special guardians, Cafcass workers, and birth fathers
- although the open format of our questions allowed respondents to raise any issues they felt relevant, it would have been helpful to ask respondents to comment on any issues that were specific to families of minority ethnic origin.

Recommendations

Virtual contact between babies and young children and their parents needs particular consideration.

It is important to recognise that babies and very young children will have very limited in the extent to which they can participate in video calls. Nevertheless there can be some benefits in terms of parents getting the reassurance of seeing their babies, and having a chance to build a relationship with the baby's carer—which will be of benefit to the baby when face-to-face contact can resume. Babies may benefit from hearing their parent's voice and seeing their face. It is important to take a developmentally informed approach.

Video calls including very young children should aim to be engaging, for example including singing, story reading or simple games. Even so parents may need support to have realistic expectations.

Video calls could be supplemented by other forms of contact that can make up for the limited time children can engage. For example, carers could send parents photos or short video of the child and messages to update them about the child; parents could send a recording of a story or song to be played to the child.

The lack of direct contact between babies and parents, not through the fault of the parents, must be taken into account in decision-making about plans for the child.

Children's family contact in lockdown should draw on the principles of best practice that have been learned from the wider research around contact for children.

Research into contact suggests that it can benefit children in terms of maintaining family relationships, returning home, and managing issues of loss, separation and identity. These benefits are dependent on the *quality* of contact, more than the type or frequency.

Key principles to follow to achieve good quality contact for children should continue to be applied when adjusting contact plans as a result of lockdown:

- keep children's individual needs, wishes and feelings at the heart of decision-making
- build trust and good relationships between the child's birth family and their carers/adopters
- take the wishes, strengths and support needs of parents and carers/adoptive parents into account
- assess and manage risks proportionally
- aim for contact to be a child-friendly, rewarding experience.

The use of digital methods, including video calling and a digitally mediated post-adoption letterbox contact service, should be considered as part of a range of options available for children separated from their birth families beyond lockdown.

The use of digital contact in the future is likely to work best where children, parents, carers and adoptive parents are involved in the development/planning and review of such methods.

Significantly, further research is needed on children's experiences of digital contact.

Endnotes

1. Department for Education. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children's social care services. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care [Accessed 11 May 2020].
2. Welsh Government. (2020). Children's social services during the COVID-19 pandemic: guidance. Available from: <https://gov.wales/childrens-social-services-during-covid-19-pandemic-guidance-html> [Accessed 20 May 2020].

About the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

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-founder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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