

**Nuffield  
Family Justice  
Observatory**

**Report focus**

This report examines what is known about the implications of digital contact on the well-being of children who have been separated from their birth relatives.

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# The effects of digital contact on children's well-being: evidence from public and private law contexts

Rapid evidence review



## About this report

This rapid evidence review examines what is known about the implications of digital contact on the well-being of children who have been separated from their birth relatives. The review was commissioned following the implementation of social distancing measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the UK in March 2020.

This review is part of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's Modernising Contact initiative and complements a wider review on contact and well-being: Iyer, P., Hammelsbeck, R., Lynch-Huggins, S., and Boddy, J. (2020). *Contact following placement in care or adoption: implications for children and young people's well-being*. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. [Forthcoming.]

May 2020.

## Recommended citation

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*. Rapid evidence review. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Lisa Harker from the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory for her support at all stages of the work. Professor Janet Boddy from the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth at the University of Sussex acted as the academic adviser on this review, and we are grateful for her recommendations and guidance throughout the review process. The authors would also like to thank the peer reviewers of the study, Professor Daniel Monk (Birkbeck University of London) and Dr Jan Macvarish (University of Kent).

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

Nuffield FJO has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Nuffield FJO or the Foundation.

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## Executive summary

This rapid evidence review examines what is known about the implications of digital contact for the well-being of children who have been separated from their birth relatives. The review was commissioned following the implementation of social distancing measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the UK in March 2020. While the government has announced some relaxation of the statutory regulations for looked-after children, advice at the time of writing indicates that local authorities in England and Wales remain obligated to allow looked-after children 'reasonable contact' with their birth families.<sup>1</sup> In light of this advice, it is crucial to understand how digital technologies can be managed to maintain contact while prioritising children's best interests.

### What do we mean by 'well-being'?

This review takes a multi-dimensional view of 'well-being', using a broad definition of 'the combination of feeling good and functioning well' at both individual and interpersonal levels (Huppert and So 2013; Seligman 2011, cited in Huppert and Ruggieri 2018, p. 136). In this context, we take it to include: mental health; emotional well-being; physical health; behaviour; safety; identity; satisfaction with contact arrangements; quality of relationships with birth family/non-resident parents; and quality of relationships with placement family/resident parents.

The review synthesised the findings of 16 publicly available studies from international academic and grey literature, covering both public and private law contexts.

## Key findings

The evidence indicates that it is not possible to simply state that digital contact with birth families is either positive or negative for children and young people's well-being. However—and while none of the studies established (or attempted to establish) a causal impact of digital contact on children's well-being—several key themes emerge.

### Digital contact is more immediate, less formal and can help facilitate relationships

The more immediate and less formal nature of digital contact with birth families has key benefits for children and young people's well-being. It can allow them to feel more connected to their birth families, develop their sense of identity, and have more freedom and control over contact arrangements.

### It can be difficult for carers and professionals to set boundaries and supervise digital contact

Key challenges in digital contact include negotiating the amount of responsibility placed on children and young people in care to manage digital contact. There is also the potential for unwanted digital contact from birth family members and associated risks to their safety and emotional well-being.

### Digital contact can help to overcome physical distance between children and young people in care and their birth families

Digital contact provides a means for contact to continue in the context of social distancing requirements. Digital contact can also provide a means of contact when the costs of face-to-face contact, for example related to travel, are prohibitive for birth or placement families.

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<sup>1</sup> See: The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020. UK Statutory Instrument No. 445. Available from: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/445/contents/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/445/contents/made) [18 May 2020]; and Children's social services during the COVID-19 pandemic: guidance (Welsh Government 2020). Available from: <https://gov.wales/childrens-social-services-during-covid-19-pandemic-guidance.html> [20 May 2020].

### **Digital contact should be used to enhance rather than replacing face-to-face contact**

Private law studies highlighted that children, parents and professionals alike feel that there are benefits of face-to-face contact that are lost through digital contact alone.

### **Appropriate forms of digital contact depend on the child's age and experience**

Findings from private law studies indicate that appropriate forms of digital contact depend on a child's age and existing digital practices—though children of all ages need to be supported and appropriately supervised given the potential associated risks and challenges.

## **Key recommendations**

Available evidence on digital contact indicates that the key question is not *whether* digital contact has a positive impact on children's well-being, but *how best to facilitate* digital contact that is positive for children's well-being. Key questions for professionals to consider include:

- how digital contact arrangements can be organised and meaningfully managed
- how children and young people can be supported and equipped to manage digital contact themselves.

### **Take a child-centred approach**

It is crucial to consider the needs, rights and perspectives of children and young people when arranging digital contact. This includes establishing age-appropriate forms of digital contact that complements children's everyday lives. *The majority of the reviewed studies do not include children and young people's own perspectives on digital contact and well-being.*

### **Manage expectations and transitions**

Professional support is important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic since, in many cases, professionals will be managing transitions from face-to-face contact to digital contact. They will be doing so at a time of considerable stress and anxiety for many people. The reviewed evidence indicates that digital contact may be a useful contingency measure when face-to-face contact is not possible, but it should not be seen as a long-term replacement for direct contact.

### **Support all parties**

All parties, including children and young people, birth families, carers and placement families, require support for agreeing contact arrangements and setting appropriate boundaries. Children and young people need to be supported so that they feel in control of digital contact, but that they are not solely responsible for managing boundaries or staying safe. This will increase the likelihood they can enjoy the benefits of digital contact. It will also ensure that they are supported to manage any challenges, and report any safeguarding concerns. Birth families may also require tailored support to make sure they have positive experiences of contact for their own and their children's well-being.

### **Acknowledge digital inequalities**

Unequal access to technology, good quality internet connections and digital skills mean that digital contact is not possible for all looked-after children and young people and their birth families. While not discussed in reviewed studies, it is an important consideration when deciding how best to balance appropriate contact arrangements with social distancing requirements.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims and scope of the review

This rapid evidence review examines what is known about the implications of digital contact for the well-being of children who have been separated from their birth relatives in public law contexts. This includes those who have been separated from their birth parents following family court proceedings, accommodated in care on a voluntary basis, or placed in legally permanent arrangements including adoption or special guardianship. We also review relevant literature on digital contact in private law contexts, such as separation and divorce, and draw out key lessons for managing digital contact between birth relatives and children in public law placements. The present review complements another rapid evidence review commissioned by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (FJO), *Contact following placement in care or adoption: implications for children and young people's well-being*, which focuses more broadly on contact in public law contexts (Iyer et al. 2020).

Our aim is to provide an accessible overview of the key relevant evidence that can support policy makers' and professionals' decision-making on managing digital contact in children's best interests. The objective is to help inform policy and practice in England and Wales, drawing on both UK and international research evidence.

This review was commissioned following the implementation of social distancing measures in March 2020 to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the UK. While the government has announced some relaxation of statutory regulations for children in care<sup>2</sup>, advice at the time of writing indicates that local authorities remain obligated to allow looked-after children 'reasonable contact' with their birth families:

We expect that contact between children in care and their birth relatives will continue. It is essential for children and families to be in touch at this difficult time, and for some children, the consequences of not seeing relatives would be traumatising [...] It may not be possible, or appropriate, for the usual face-to-face contact to happen at this time and keeping in touch will, for the most part, need to take place virtually.

(Department for Education 2020)

In light of this advice, it is crucial to understand how digital technologies can be managed to maintain contact while prioritising children's best interests.

## 1.2 Overview of digital contact

In England and Wales, the underpinning legislation for children separated from their birth relatives is the Children Act 1989. This legislation emphasised parental responsibility in the 'best interest of the child', conceptualising placement in care as a support for upbringing (see Skivenes and Thoburn 2016; Lynch 2017). The Act includes a statutory duty for local authorities to promote contact between looked-after children and their families. In 2014, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was amended to create a statutory framework for post-adoption contact. See Iyer et al. (2020) for a more detailed discussion of the legal framework

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<sup>2</sup> The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

for contact in England and Wales, and the implications for understanding children's best interests and rights in relation to family.

There is a growing interest in how children's rights can be respected within a digital environment. At present, risk-based narratives tend to dominate understandings of children in digital environments (Livingstone 2020). In the UK, discussions about children and digital technology have become 'highly politicised and are routinely contested within the public sphere', and technology has become a focus of concern in relation to child well-being (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018, p. 4) While the potential vulnerability of children should not be ignored, especially in the context of child safeguarding and welfare interventions, a focus on risk in digital contexts can underplay children's agency and voice (Livingstone 2020). Instead, a rights-based approach emphasises that children's engagement with digital worlds must allow them to 'develop their fullest potential, to play, to be supported according to their evolving capacity and best interests and to be heard by decision-makers in matters that affect them' (Livingstone 2020, p. 2).

This tension between children's rights to family, their wider rights and risks in a digital environment is clear in the literature on digital contact. Several studies discuss 'formal' digital contact, such as court-ordered arrangements in public and private law contexts. These include the use of Skype and FaceTime to facilitate formal sibling contact for children in care in the UK (Monk and Macvarish 2018), and 'virtual visitation' between children and non-custodial parents in the context of separation and divorce in Canada and the United States (Doucet 2011; Saini et al. 2013; LaMarca 2012). 'Informal' digital contact, or forms of digital contact that are initiated by children or family members themselves (whether separated due to public law interventions or private law contexts such as parental separation or divorce) is more commonly discussed. In earlier studies, social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo were described as a common means for adoptees to contact their birth mothers, siblings and other birth relatives (MacDonald & McSherry 2013; Greenhow et al. 2014). More recent studies reflect the wider range of social media platforms available and used by children to maintain contact with their birth families, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tango, Twitter, Instagram and FriendLife (Simpson 2020).

Concerns about unplanned and unmediated informal digital contact are often discussed, particularly from professionals' perspectives. Risks include undermining the security and stability of placements (Macdonald et al. 2013, 2017; Monk and Macvarish 2018), and children and birth family members contacting each other when this has been prohibited, or beyond agreed arrangements (Simpson 2013; Macdonald et al. 2017; Alford et al. 2019). However, other studies consider the positive aspects of informal digital contact, particularly from children and young people's own perspectives. These include the benefits of the immediate, continuous connection via digital means, in both public and private law contexts. These features of digital contact can help to facilitate a sense of normality in relationships between children and the family members they are separated from (Doucet 2011; Saini et al. 2013; Wolman and Pomerance 2012; Simpson 2020). In turn, this points to the importance of understanding digital contact within the 'everyday contexts of children's lives and digital practices' (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018, p. 5). As Buckingham (2013) has argued, it is possible to move beyond debates on risks vs. rights in the digital world through a 'socially situated, contextualised analysis of technology' (2013, p. 8). This approach considers the dynamic relationship between children and young people's uses of technology and their



social needs and purposes. This includes a recognition that digital practices, and appropriate forms of digital contact, will vary depending on the child's age (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018). In this report, we consider the implications of digital contact for children and young people's well-being, taking into account differences by age group, and the often divergent perspectives of carers and placement families, resident and non-resident parents, professionals, and children and young people themselves.

### 1.3 What counts as well-being?

Debates about the definition and measurement of well-being have a long history (e.g. Morrow and Mayall 2009; Huppert and Ruggieri 2018). For the purposes of this review, we understand well-being as multi-dimensional, using a broad definition of 'the combination of feeling good and functioning well' at both individual and interpersonal levels (Huppert and So 2013; Seligman 2011, cited in Huppert and Ruggieri 2018, p. 136). This allows us to explore the following dimensions of children's well-being in relation to contact arrangements:

- mental health—the presence and absence of conditions such as depression and anxiety
- emotional well-being—how a child feels before, during and after contact arrangements
- physical health—including the absence of disease and fitness levels
- behaviour—including the presence or absence of prosocial or anti-social behaviour
- safety—whether a child is safe or at risk from physical, emotional, sexual harm or abuse
- identity—a child's understanding of their sense of self
- child's satisfaction with contact arrangements: including satisfaction with the frequency and form of contact, and with family member/s or others with whom contact is arranged
- quality of relationships with birth family/non-resident parents—including levels of attachment and quality of communication
- quality of relationships with placement family/resident parents—including levels of attachment and quality of communication.

Many of these dimensions imply a subjective measure or 'self-interpretation' of well-being. However, in the studies reviewed, children's well-being is often determined or measured by others, rather than themselves.<sup>3</sup> Of the 12 primary studies included in the review, only four (Greenhow 2014, 2016, 2017; MacDonald et al. 2017; Monk and Macvarish 2018; Simpson 2020) include children and young people's own perspectives on their well-being. In all other studies, children and young people's well-being is reported from the perspectives of professionals (including social work practitioners, mental health professionals, care home managers and legal professionals), carers (including adoptive parents and foster carers), and custodial and non-custodial parents.

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond the literature specifically examining digital contact and well-being, the Bright Spots study in England and Wales provides an important exception, as a study in which children in care and care leavers are asked to define their own wellbeing (see Selwyn et al. 2017; Wood and Selwyn 2017). In future, this dataset has the potential to illuminate the relationship of subjective well-being and the frequency and quality of contact.

## 1.4 Who counts as family?

In order to consider the implications of digital contact with family for children's well-being, it is important to consider how family is defined. Recognising the complex, fluid nature of family lives (e.g., Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2019) is particularly important for understanding what 'contact' and 'family' might mean for children and young people who experience care placements or who are adopted (e.g., Neil et al. 2015; Boddy 2019). Additionally, there are clearly fundamental differences between the dynamics of family life for children in these contexts and for children whose parents are separated or divorced. In public law contexts, there are often distinctive challenges in facilitating contact with siblings and extended birth family members (e.g. Monk and Macvarish 2018; Kiraly and Humphreys 2013; Moyers et al. 2006). There can also be tensions between placement families and birth family members in managing contact, which in turn can affect children's relationships, placement stability and levels of attachment to different family members (e.g. Kiraly and Humphreys 2013; Selwyn et al. 2013; Ellingsen et al. 2011). Negotiating (digital) contact between custodial and non-custodial parents who are separated or divorced can be fraught with a different set of complexities, some of which may be relevant to the challenges of contact for children in care placements. For example, children may have to negotiate parental hostility or conflict to secure contact, which also has implications for their emotional well-being and the quality of their relationships (Saini et al. 2013).

## 1.5 Overview of review methods

This review follows an adapted rapid evidence assessment (REA) methodology. We focused on identifying and synthesising published material that was accessible and could be included in full-text screening within the limited time available for the review, which means that books or reports of equivalent length have been excluded. The findings reported in Chapter 2 are based on a proportion of studies that met our inclusion criteria and may not comprehensively summarise all relevant evidence. The full list of studies that were screened at full text but were not taken forward for data extraction and synthesis is included in the Bibliography. Full details of review methods are provided in Appendix A.

A total of 16 key studies were identified for inclusion in the review (see Figure 1). They include two quantitative studies, six qualitative studies, four mixed-methods studies and four evidence reviews.

Of the included studies, 11 focused on public law contexts and 5 on private law contexts (see Table 1). While a similar number of public law studies (19) and private law studies (15) were identified through the search process, the relationship between digital contact and well-being was better evidenced in public law contexts than in private law contexts (see Table 1). This may reflect the pattern of available evidence, as it seems in the private law context there is greater focus on how digital contact is applied in child custody cases rather than its effects on children's well-being.

**Table 1: Number of included studies**

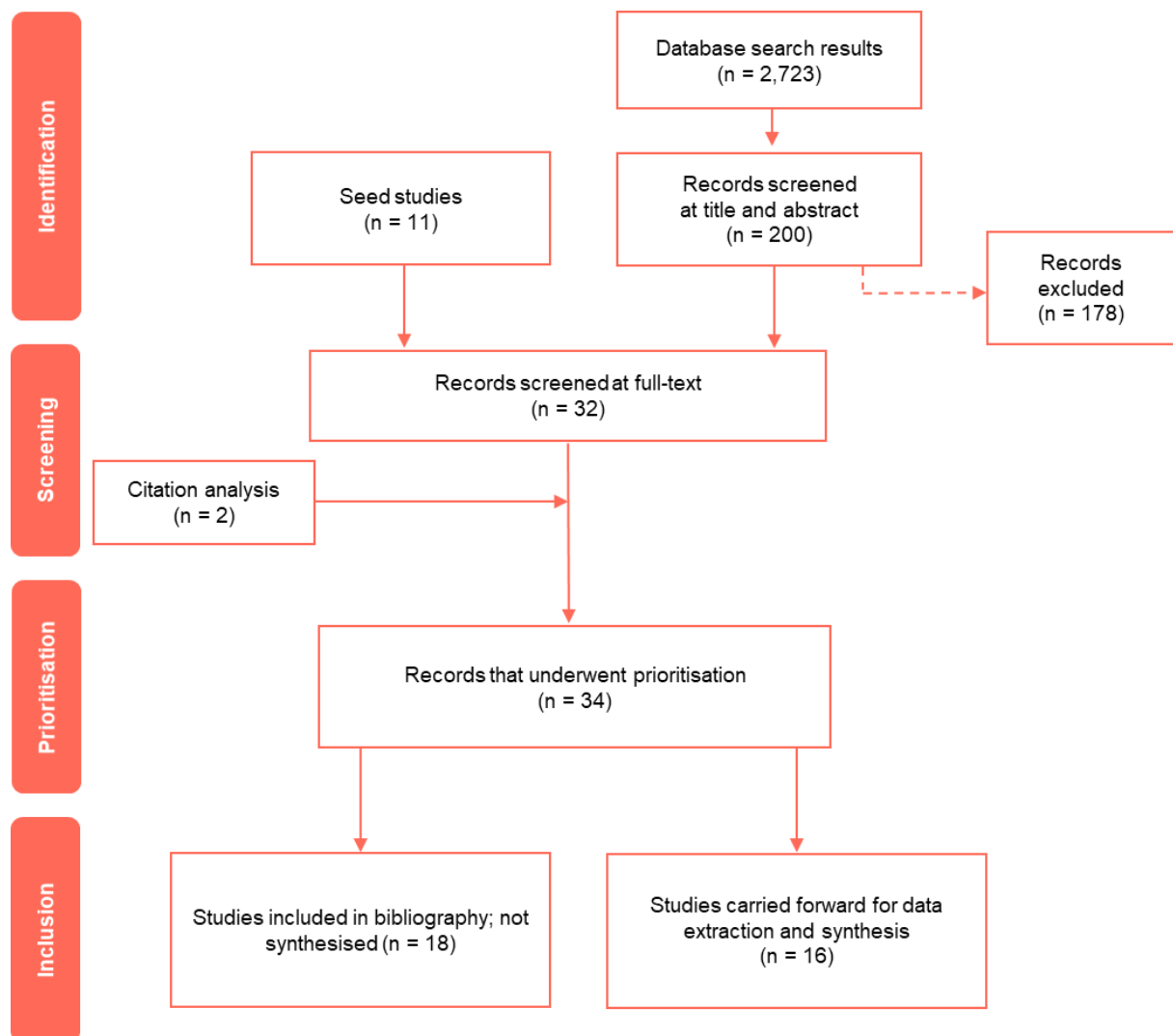
Context	Number of included studies
Public law	11
Private law	5
<b>Total number of studies</b>	<b>16</b>

None of the synthesised studies established (or attempted to establish) a causal impact of digital contact on children’s well-being. Our interpretation of study findings is informed by Ott and Boddy’s (2019) guidance on quality standards for qualitative research, prepared for Nuffield FJO:

Rather than a focus on ‘what works’, the underpinning question is ‘what is (or can be) known about’ a topic, with an accompanying need to recognise the contribution of exploratory and theory-building studies.

(Ott and Boddy 2019, p. 3)

**Figure 1: Overview of rapid evidence review process**



## 2 Findings

The evidence from the 16 reviewed studies indicates that it is not possible to simply state that digital contact with birth families is either positive or negative for children and young people's well-being. In this chapter, we summarise the potential benefits and drawbacks to children and young people's well-being from public law and private law literature. The age, individual context and digital platform preferences of the child are important considerations. All parties, including children and young people, birth families and carers or placement families, require support for agreeing contact arrangements and setting appropriate boundaries. This can support the positive aspects of digital contact and manage its potential risks. Although it cannot replace face-to-face contact, the reviewed evidence provides insight on how digital contact can, in certain circumstances and with the right support in place, enhance existing contact arrangements.

### 2.1 Differentiated outcomes and perspectives based on age

Most reviewed studies either explicitly or implicitly indicate that digital contact needs to be considered in relation to children's age. Different kinds of digital contact are described as more appropriate for younger children than older children and young people. Similarly, the effects of different forms of digital contact on children and young people's well-being varies according to their age. For example, from the public law literature, Quinn, Sage and Tunseth's (2019) qualitative study with 40 social workers in the United States suggested that video calls may be beneficial for children who are non-verbal or who do not have sufficient communication skills to speak over the phone.

The implications of digital contact depending on children's age are commonly discussed in the private law literature. In a review of the use of virtual visitation in contested relocation cases in Canada, the United States and Australia, Doucet (2011) noted that courts are more cautious about the use of virtual visitation when children are under six years old. This is based on the courts' assumption that younger children will not be able to form a bond with a non-resident parent over video calls (Doucet 2011). Based on a review of virtual parenting time in child custody disputes in the United States and Canada, Saini et al. (2013) also reported that children's age is a determining factor when considering the suitability of digital contact. In particular, the authors noted that using information and communication technologies (ICT) may not be suitable for contact with children who have limited verbal communication skills. In a study with 30 parents from divorced families in the United States, none of the adult participants felt that the age of their child had an influence on the quality of Skype calls (Wolman and Pomerance 2012). However, the authors noted that levels of satisfaction may vary from the child's perspective depending on their age. While video calls may be stimulating for younger children, teenagers may prefer texting as they can control how and when information is shared (Wolman and Pomerance 2012).

These reflections from Wolman and Pomerance (2012) raise another critical issue. The majority of the reviewed studies do not include children and young people's own perspectives on digital contact and their well-being. While it is crucial to understand the perspectives of professionals, carers and birth parents, it is also important to note that children and young people are likely to have very different views on the digital world compared to adults (see Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018). In the following sections, we draw out implicit and explicit findings about digital contact and well-being in relation to

children and young people's age groups and note where their perspectives have been included.

## 2.2 Quality of relationships: children and birth families/non-resident parents

Multiple public law studies indicate that digital contact can support better relationships between looked-after children and their birth families (Alford, Denby and Gomez 2019; Macdonald et al. 2017; Quinn, Sage and Tunseth 2019; Simpson 2020). In a qualitative study with 12 triads of young people in foster care (aged 13–18), foster carers and social practitioners, Simpson (2020) found that young people view contact by text, phone and social media as useful way to **stay in touch** with their birth parents, siblings and other relatives. In a mixed-methods study in Northern Ireland, Macdonald et al. (2017) explored the perspectives of care home managers and key workers across children's charities and statutory trusts. According to these participants, mobile phone contact between looked-after children and their birth families (including extended family members) can help to **reduce children's feelings of isolation** and **increase feelings of connectedness**. Similarly, in a qualitative study involving 40 social workers in the United States, Quinn, Sage and Tunseth (2019) found that video assisted visitation helped foster children feel **connected to their families** and also promoted **family bonding**.<sup>4</sup> Across public law studies, it was recognised that digital contact is beneficial for maintaining relationships when the child and birth family are separated by physical distance (Greenhow et al. 2017; Quinn, Sage and Tunseth 2019).

Specific features of informal digital contact have been recognised as improving the quality of children's relationships with birth families. In Greenhow et al.'s (2014, 2016, 2017) qualitative study with six adopted young people (aged 14–22) and 11 adoptive parents in England and Scotland, participants indicated that the lack of formality of digital contact allows the connection between young people and their birth families 'to feel **more natural and family-like**' (Greenhow et al. 2016, p. 382). In Simpson's (2020) qualitative study in England, young people in foster care (aged 13–18) valued the immediacy of video-calling and messaging applications. These facilitated **a continuous connection** between themselves and their birth families (including extended family members). By contrast, foster carers and social workers in the same study viewed the immediacy of digital contact as a 'nuisance' and had concerns that it encouraged young people to use their phones too frequently (Simpson 2020, p. 14). According to the author, this reflected foster carers and social workers' view that staying in touch via mobile devices was not a 'legitimate form of communication' compared to face-to-face contact (Simpson 2020, p. 14). This study provides an important example of the way in which **young people and key adults can have different interpretations of the same dimensions of digital contact**.

In line with the public law literature, a number of private law studies indicate that digital contact can help children maintain relationships with their non-resident parents, especially when there is a greater physical distance between separated or divorced parents (Doucet 2011; LaMarca 2012; Saini et al. 2013). In a mixed-methods study with 30 divorced parents of children (aged 1–19), participants reported that video calls helped them feel closer to their children. Further, their children valued the **increased opportunities for interaction** (Wolman and Pomerance 2012). In the same study, parents reported that children missed

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<sup>4</sup> Age not specified in Quinn, Sage and Tunseth (2019).

their non-resident parents less if they were able to video call when they wanted to. In a review of digital parent-child relationships, Saini and Polak (2018) concluded that digital contact provides non-resident parents with increased opportunities to share **regular day-to-day conversations** with their children, which is critical for maintaining and enhancing relationships. Similarly, based on their review of the use of virtual visitation in contested relocation cases in Canada, the United States and Australia, Doucet (2011) noted that digital contact can offer flexible, ongoing interactions between children and non-resident parents compared with face-to-face contact. For example, digital contact could be scheduled at times when face-to-face contact would not be possible (Doucet 2011).

Reviewed private law studies also indicate that video calls can increase non-resident parents' engagement in younger **children's day-to-day activities**. According to several private law studies, these activities include helping with homework, story-telling, instrument recitals, games and involvement in birthdays and other events (Doucet 2011; Saini et al. 2013; Wolman and Pomerance 2012). Participation in these activities has been linked to positive outcomes for parents and children (Doucet 2011; Wolman and Pomerance 2012). For example, in a sample of 30 parents from divorced families in the United States (with children from age one to late adolescence), all reported that Skype allows them to experience more fully what their child's world is like (Wolman and Pomerance 2012). However, the authors noted that while children feel closer to parents during these forms of digital contact, they can feel a **greater sense of separation** afterwards (Wolman and Pomerance 2012).

One private law study has highlighted the disadvantages of using video calls to maintain children's relationships with their non-resident parents. While recognising the benefits of the interactive nature of video calls, in a review of court decisions and legislative acts in the United States, LaMarca (2012) noted that virtual visitation can be more demanding for children. In particular, the author noted that it requires the child to be fully engaged, compared to in-person contact which facilitates quality time without requiring the child's constant attention.<sup>5</sup>

### **2.3 Quality of relationships: children and placement families/resident parents**

Fewer public law studies have explored the implications of digital contact for children's relationships with their placement families, and none of the reviewed private law studies discuss the implications for relationships with resident parents. From the public law literature, Simpson's (2013) review of contact through mobile technologies and social media in the UK indicated that the continuous nature of digital contact between young people in care and birth parents could **undermine placement stability**. Other public law studies have discussed the **complexities of setting boundaries around children's use of digital contact**. Alford, Denby and Gomez (2019) reported 11 caregivers' (biological parents, foster parents and kinship carers) responses to a programme in the United States. This aimed to develop fostered young people's **relational competence** ('insight, skill and the ability to forge nurturing, meaningful, and sustained involvement with another individual', 2019, p. 1) by providing them with a smartphone to keep in touch with family members, caseworkers and service providers. Caregivers in this study reported that setting boundaries to regulate

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<sup>5</sup> Age not specified in LaMarca (2012).

smartphone use among young people (aged 12–20) was necessary to limit 'inappropriate use', such as using phones late at night (2019, p. 12). However, in the same study, caregivers also acknowledged that setting boundaries or stopping digital contact can **cause tensions** between carers and young people in care (Alford, Denby and Gomez 2019).

Similarly, in their socio-legal exploratory study in England and Wales, Monk and Macvarish (2018) found that some young people viewed the denial of digital contact between their birth siblings as a **punishment**. Together, these studies suggest that difficulties in navigating the boundaries of digital contact can negatively affect the quality of the child's relationship with their placement family. However, in a mixed-methods study in Northern Ireland (Macdonald et al. 2017) several foster parents reported that mobile phones are 'a way of life for all children, not just children in care' (2017, p. 839) and adopted a pragmatic view to **negotiation and explanation** around digital contact to minimise risks and potential harms. One foster parent felt that **working on the basis of trust** was better than closely monitoring digital contact and noted that monitoring their foster child's messages 'wasn't right [...] and [was] sometimes embarrassing' for the child (2017, p. 840).

## 2.4 Developing a sense of identity and other skills

One public law study has explored the ways in which digital contact can positively contribute to children's sense of self. In Greenhow et al.'s (2014) mixed-methods study, adoptees (aged 14–22) and adoptive parents acknowledged that the connection between themselves and their birth families, maintained through digital contact, was integral to building **adoptees' identity**. However, Greenhow et al. (2014) also noted that some adoptees experienced split loyalties between their family and birth families, which could be experienced as disruptive to their sense of identity.

Another study suggests that digital contact can contribute to the development of other skills among children and young people in care. In a qualitative study with 11 caregivers (biological parents, foster parents and kinship carers) in the United States (Alford, Denby and Gomez 2019), many caregivers felt that smartphones gave young people an opportunity to build their **independence**. Specific skills described by caregivers included **time management skills, organisational skills** and **social skills**. However, other caregivers in the study felt that providing looked after young people with phones and then placing restrictions on their usage (such as blocking games and other applications) placed **unfair and unrealistic expectations** on young people. Caregivers also felt that **too much responsibility** was placed on young people to respect the blocks and restrictions placed on phones (Alford, Denby and Gomez 2019). In a further reflection of the challenges related to attempting to control young people's use of digital technology, many young people on the programme used their 'ingenuity and creativity' to override blocks and settings to access restricted features (Alford, Denby and Gomez 2019).

## 2.5 Satisfaction with digital contact

In several public law studies that include their perspectives, young people have reported **high levels of satisfaction** with digital contact. Adoptees (aged 14–22) in Greenhow et al.'s (2014) qualitative study in England and Scotland reported they were happy to be in online contact with their birth relatives. Specifically, participants felt that online contact through social media sites such as Facebook provided them with **greater freedom and control** over

contact arrangements (Greenhow et al. 2014, 2016, 2017). Notably, one study reported that young people used technology to **control unwanted contact** with birth family members. In Simpson's qualitative study with young people in foster care (aged 13–18) in England, a 14-year-old participant reported unwanted contact from their birth mother via Facebook, followed by multiple requests to meet up in person. As this participant did not feel ready for this kind of contact, they blocked their birth mother (Simpson 2020). This example demonstrates young people's ability to use technology to assert control over contact with birth family members. Other participants in the same study indicated that they found sharing of joyful moments over social networking sites to be **emotionally rewarding** (Simpson 2020).

Two public law studies have indicated that looked after young people can be **dissatisfied** with other elements of digital contact. For example, in their study in England and Wales, Monk and Macvarish (2018) reported that some adopted young people perceive video calls to be **limited compared to face-to-face contact**. Similarly, in her review of managing contact with children in care and their birth families in the UK, Simpson (2013) discussed one study in which children and young people felt that digital contact with birth family and friends was **a poor substitute for seeing them in person**. Social workers in Quinn, Sage and Tunseth's (2019) study in the United States also reported that children did not get the 'feel' of family when communicating over video calls. If parents were distracted or doing other things while on a video call, children could also feel rushed (Quinn, Sage and Tunseth 2019).

Reflecting on these strengths and weaknesses of digital contact, one public law study and two private law studies concluded that **digital contact should be considered an addition to, rather than a replacement for, face-to-face contact** (Quinn, Sage and Tunseth 2019; Saini and Polak 2018; Doucet 2011). Based on their review of virtual visitation in contested relocation cases in Canada, the United States and Australia, Doucet (2011) argued that digital contact should never be used to replace physical contact. Similarly, in Saini and Polak's (2018) quantitative study involving legal and mental health professionals, a majority of participants (69%) viewed information and communication technologies as means to enhance parent-child contact, rather than to replace face-to-face contact.

## 2.6 Safety

In terms of children's safety, several public law studies have indicated that digital contact offers a **safe means to maintain relationships** between children and their birth families (Macdonald et al. 2017; Greenhow et al. 2014; Sen 2010). Based on a qualitative study with social workers and reporters to the children's hearing system in Scotland, Sen (2010) found that digital contact is perceived to be less threatening than face-to-face contact as it **removes the threat of physical harm**. In a qualitative study in Northern Ireland, residential home managers and key informants indicated that mobile phones provide an appropriate means for young people to stay in touch with their birth parents or other family members if they **do not want to engage in face-to-face contact** due to difficult circumstances (Macdonald et al. 2017). Greenhow et al. (2014) have also noted that digital contact provides an opportunity to **prepare for future face-to-face contact at a safe distance**.

Private law studies have also indicated similar benefits of digital contact related to children's safety. Based on their study with 30 parents from divorced families in the United States,



Wolman and Pomerance (2012) noted that in situations in which there is reason to prohibit physical contact for the safety of children, digital contact can **preserve the possibility of a relationship without threat of physical harm**. In a quantitative study involving 103 legal and mental health professionals in Canada, 44% of participants reported that digital contact could protect children from face-to-face contact with a parent where safety is a concern (Saini and Polak 2018). Based on a review of court decisions and legislative acts on custody arrangements in the United States, LaMarca et al. (2012) argued that the use of digital contact allows children to maintain a relationship with non-resident parents, while not having to directly experience parental conflict.

However, in their review of the use of ICT to facilitate parent-child relationships in child custody disputes in the United States and Canada, Saini et al. (2013) also noted that children are still **at risk of verbal and emotional abuse** via digital contact with non-resident parents. Multiple public law studies have similarly emphasised that **non-physical risks to children's safety** may not be mitigated by digital contact. This includes exposure to continued or new forms of emotional abuse (Simpson 2013; Greenhow et al. 2016; Macdonald et al. 2017), or parental alcohol and substance misuse (MacDonald and McSherry 2013). These risks are of particular concern in relation to informal, unsupervised forms of digital contact. For example, digital contact through social media may be used by birth family members to initiate **unwanted contact**. As discussed in Section 2.5, however, young people in care can also use digital technology to assert control over unwanted contact with birth family members (Simpson 2020).

Foster parents and adoptive parents have voiced concerns about their lack of control over digital contact, including in relation to, children and young people **using the internet to approach family members with whom contact is prohibited**. This includes cases where contact has been prohibited to protect children from harm (Alford, Denby and Gomez 2019; Greenhow et al. 2016; MacDonald and McSherry 2013; Simpson 2013). Monk and Macvarish (2018) also reported safety concerns related to a lack of control over the type of information shared over social media or video calls. Beyond digital contact with birth families, however, many of the concerns voiced by carers and professionals relate to more general **risks associated with internet use**. In Macdonald et al.'s (2017) qualitative study, care home managers and key workers linked unregulated mobile phone use with **increased risk of sexual and criminal exploitation**. The authors noted professionals' concerns around safe internet use due to the vulnerability of looked-after children and young people. On the other hand, based on a qualitative study with social work professionals in Scotland, Sen (2010) has argued that if young people in care are not allowed to use the internet, and therefore do not develop safe online practices, they may be at greater risk in the long term. This further suggests the importance of considering forms of age-appropriate digital contact in relation to looked-after children and young people's wider digital practices.

## 2.7 Emotional well-being

A number of public law studies have highlighted the negative effects of unexpected or 'out-of-the-blue' digital contact for looked-after children and young people's well-being. In Greenhow et al.'s (2016) study, adoptees (aged 14–22) reported that unplanned, unmediated digital connections were **emotionally challenging**, and they felt unprepared to handle contact with estranged birth relatives. Moreover, when digital connections were unexpected, it was not possible to negotiate appropriate boundaries or safety restrictions

prior to contact (Greenhow et al. 2016). In MacDonald and McSherry's (2013) qualitative study, adoptive parents highlighted concerns with unexpected digital contact initiated by older siblings of adopted children (aged 11–15). Adoptive parents in this study expressed particular concerns about contact during adolescence. As a time when 'normative demands' were placed on children's emotional well-being, adoptive parents felt 'the additional complexity of negotiating new birth family relationships' placed a high emotional burden on adoptees (MacDonald and McSherry 2013, p. 91). MacDonald and McSherry (2013) noted that adoptive parents' preference was for contact with birth family to be delayed until early adulthood when adoptees are better able to 'cope with the full truth' (2013, p. 91) of their birth family histories. However, it is important to note that this study provides insights into the struggles of adoptive parents with adoptees' digital contact. As noted by the authors, unplanned digital contact 'represented a threat to [adoptive parents'] investment in the child's well-being and to their identity as parents' (MacDonald and McSherry 2013, p. 93).

In the private law literature, several studies explore the relationship between digital contact and **parental conflict**, and the associated negative effects on children's emotional well-being. In their review of the use of ICT to facilitate parent-child relationships in child custody disputes in the United States and Canada, Saini et al. (2013) suggested that digital contact can lead to continued parental conflict, causing **emotional harm** to children. Children may also feel **responsible for reducing conflict** between parents, creating an additional burden around how they manage and communicate experiences of digital contact (Saini et al. 2013). High-conflict disputes between parents may impede the beneficial uses of digital contact, for example, where this leads to resident parents restricting or over-monitoring digital contact (Wolman and Pomerance 2012; LaMarca 2012).

### 3 Conclusions and recommendations

#### 3.1 Key findings

Our review indicates that it is not possible to simply state that digital contact with birth families is either positive or negative for children and young people's well-being. There are valid concerns about the challenges around setting boundaries and ensuring children and young people's safety through informal types of digital contact, such as social media. However, these concerns often reflect a wider cultural context of adults' fear and lack of control over children's digital practices (Buckingham 2013; Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018). There are also key benefits of digital contact for children and young people, including a greater sense of freedom and control over their birth family relationships.

If digital contact is considered within the wider context of children and young people's digital practices, key questions for professionals include:

- how digital contact can be meaningfully regulated
- how children and young people can be supported and equipped to manage digital contact themselves.

This will facilitate a more rights-based approach to digital contact, which is centred around children and young people's day-to-day lives and their 'evolving capacity and best interests' (Livingstone 2020, p. 2).

Our review highlights the following key findings from studies on digital contact in public law contexts.

#### **Key finding 1: Digital contact can help facilitate more immediate, less formal relationships.**

There are positive dimensions to the **more immediate and less formal** nature of digital contact. These features allow children and young people in care to feel more connected to their birth families, to develop their sense of identity through these connections and to have more freedom and control over contact arrangements. Evidence from the wider developmental psychology literature on the association between involved parenting and better child outcomes (e.g. Sarkadi et al. 2007) shows there could be long term benefits to maintaining positive birth family relationships through digital contact.

#### **Key finding 2: Setting boundaries and supervising digital contact**

It can be difficult for carers and professionals to **set boundaries and supervise digital contact**. This raises issues such as the amount of responsibility placed on children and young people in care when managing digital contact, the potential for unwanted digital contact from birth family members and associated risks to children and young people's safety and emotional well-being.

#### **Key finding 3: Maintaining relationships in spite of physical (and social) distance**

The ability to maintain relationships through digital contact from a **distance** has practical benefits. For example, digital contact can help to overcome physical distance between children and young people in care and their birth families. It can also provide a means of

contact when the costs of face-to-face contact, for example related to travel, are prohibitive for birth or placement families.

There are also relevant lessons that can be drawn for public law contexts from studies on digital contact in private law contexts:

#### **Key finding 4: Enhancing rather than replacing face-to-face contact**

Ideally, digital contact should be used to **enhance rather than replace** other forms of direct and indirect contact. Children, parents and professionals alike feel that there are benefits of face-to-face contact that are lost through digital contact alone.

#### **Key finding 5: Facilitating age-appropriate, contextualised digital contact**

Appropriate forms of digital contact **depend on children's age and existing digital practices**:

- conversations via video calls may not be appropriate for very young children—the artificial nature of such interactions may make it difficult for younger children to bond or interact with adults virtually
- with older children, video calls may allow birth family members to participate in everyday activities such as helping with homework, story-telling, games and in key events such as birthdays
- older children and young people may prefer, and have access to, other forms of digital contact—for example, mobile phones and social media may provide a greater degree of control over contact.

### **3.2 Recommendations for practice**

As in the forthcoming wider Nuffield FJO evidence review on contact and well-being (Iyer et al. 2020), findings on digital contact indicate that the key question is not *whether* digital contact has a positive impact on children's well-being, but *how best to facilitate* digital contact that is positive for children's well-being. The recommendations from that review are therefore as applicable to digital contact. This means that contact should be **child-centred**, understood as **safe and meaningful involvement**, involve **active management and support**, and be supported by a **broad and dynamic understanding of family**.

Due to the social distancing measures introduced to reduce the spread of COVID-19, which are ongoing at the time of writing, digital forms of contact may need to temporarily replace face-to-face contact for children and young people in care. In addition to the recommendations from the wider review, we therefore conclude by outlining the following specific recommendations.

#### **Practice recommendation 1: Take a child-centred approach**

Considering the needs, rights and perspectives of children and young people when arranging digital contact is key. This includes establishing age-appropriate forms of digital contact, and facilitating digital contact that is complementary, rather than disruptive, to children's everyday lives and digital practices.

#### **Practice recommendation 2: Manage expectations and transitions**

Digital contact comes with opportunities and challenges for children and young people in care, birth families and placement families. Professional support is required to ensure that all

parties are involved in agreeing the 'rules of engagement' for digital contact. This is particularly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic since, in many cases, professionals will be managing transitions from face-to-face contact to digital contact. They will also be doing so at a time of considerable stress and anxiety for many people. Digital contact may be a useful contingency measure when face-to-face contact is not possible and can be a means to enhance in-person contact. However, the reviewed evidence indicates that digital contact should not be seen as a long-term replacement for direct contact after the coronavirus crisis. Additionally, since digital contact may not be appropriate for very young children, ways to facilitate face-to-face contact should still be considered despite social distancing requirements.<sup>6</sup>

### **Practice recommendation 3: Support all parties**

All parties, including children and young people, birth families, carers and placement families, require support for agreeing contact arrangements and setting appropriate boundaries. Children and young people need to be provided with support so that they feel in control of digital contact but not responsible for managing boundaries and maintaining their safety. This will increase the likelihood that they can enjoy the benefits of digital contact. Further, it will ensure that they are supported to manage any challenges that come up and report any safeguarding concerns. While not discussed in the reviewed studies, it is also important to provide support for the birth family. This includes supporting them to manage digital contact from a technological perspective (see below). Crucially, it also involves acknowledging that parents whose children have been taken into care also have complex needs. They too may require individualised support to ensure positive experiences of contact for their own and their children's well-being.

### **Practice recommendation 4: Acknowledge digital inequalities**

Unequal access to technology, good quality internet connections and digital skills may mean that digital contact is not possible or reliable for all looked-after children and young people and their birth families. While this was not discussed in the reviewed studies, it will be an important consideration for policy makers and practitioners when making decisions about how best to balance appropriate contact arrangements with social distancing requirements.

## **3.3 Recommendations for further research<sup>7</sup>**

### **Research recommendation 1: Understand children's perspectives and needs**

Studies are required to understand **children's perspectives and needs**, and **how digital contact corresponds to children's everyday digital practices**. Our review indicates that children and young people may view and experience digital contact very differently from their carers and social work professionals. They are also best placed to provide insights into how digital contact can be situated within their everyday digital practices. Rapid qualitative research to understand how children, young people, birth and placement families are

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<sup>6</sup> For example, guidance for the coronavirus crisis in the Netherlands states that 'professionals should always consider within the current possibilities which form of contact suits the specific situation of the child, the young person, the family or other involved parties'. This means that, when necessary, face-to-face contact should be considered possible with appropriate precautionary measures (Netherlands Youth Institute 2020, translated from Dutch by Boddy).

<sup>7</sup> The identification of evidence gaps in rapid evidence reviews should be treated with caution. We cannot claim to have identified all relevant literature on digital contact and well-being in this review.

maintaining contact during the COVID-19 crisis would also provide important real-world perspectives on managing digital contact.

**Research recommendation 2: Understand age-appropriate forms of digital contact**

Further work should be done to understand **which forms of digital contact are appropriate based on children's age**. Evidence from North American private law contexts indicates that a range of digital contact arrangements can be used depending on children's age and developmental stage. However, there is limited evidence on how age-specific arrangements could be supported and implemented in the UK.

**Research recommendation 3: Understand how to manage digital contact in the context of socio-economic inequalities**

There is little evidence on **how to manage digital contact in the context of socio-economic inequalities**. Access to digital technology and skills varies significantly in the UK (Office of National Statistics 2019). If digital contact is to be used as a temporary replacement or future enhancement for face-to-face contact, more work is required to understand how this can be facilitated for those who do not have access to or experience of digital technology.

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## Appendix A: Review methods

This review adapts the methodology and structure of a rapid evidence assessment (REA), which is a ‘balanced assessment of what is already known about a policy or practice issue, by using systematic review methods to search and critically appraise existing research’ (Government Social Research, n.d.). While REAs aim to be rigorous, to facilitate a ‘rapid’ approach, concessions are made to the breadth and depth of the review by limiting aspects of the process.

### Inclusion criteria

To be included in the review, studies had to meet the population, context, topic and outcome criteria outlined in Table A1. In order to capture the range of available evidence, studies using quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods and evidence reviews were eligible for the review. Peer-reviewed academic literature and non-academic (‘grey’) literature were considered for inclusion in the review.

**Table A1: Inclusion criteria**

<b>Population</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children in care</li> <li>- Children with divorced or separated parents</li> </ul>
<b>Context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public-law related care arrangements, including:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Residential care</li> <li>o Foster care</li> <li>o Kinship care</li> <li>o Special guardianship</li> <li>o Adoption</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Private-law arrangements, including:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Separation</li> <li>o Divorce</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Topic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital contact with birth family, including contact via:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Text message</li> <li>o Video call (ex: Skype or FaceTime)</li> <li>o Email</li> <li>o Social media (ex: Facebook, Snapchat)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Outcome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Well-being, including:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Mental health</li> <li>o Emotional well-being</li> <li>o Physical health</li> <li>o Behaviour</li> <li>o Safety</li> <li>o Identity/sense of self</li> <li>o Child’s satisfaction with contact arrangements</li> <li>o Quality of relationships with birth family</li> <li>o Quality of relationships with placement family</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Other study criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Study contexts: UK, Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand</li> <li>- Study period: 2010 – 2020</li> <li>- Study language: English</li> </ul>

## Study identification

Key studies were identified as ‘seed studies’ based on preliminary searches of Google Scholar using short search strings (i.e. ‘digital contact children in care’). Two studies (Monk and Macvarish 2018; Sen 2010) were identified as relevant seed studies following their inclusion in another rapid evidence review commissioned by Nuffield FJO, *Contact following placement in care or adoption: implications for children and young people’s wellbeing* (Iyer et al. 2020). The seed studies were used to identify key terms to develop search strings and as a benchmark to determine whether the search strings retrieved relevant results.

Systematic searches of Google Scholar and SocINDEX were undertaken using a series of search strings. Google Scholar was chosen in order to capture both academic publications and grey literature through our literature searchers. SocINDEX was chosen because it includes records from social work, legal and sociology journals. During the screening stage, two additional relevant studies were identified as relevant for the review.

## Literature searches

Search strings were developed through an iterative process of piloting different terms and combinations. The final search strings used achieved a balance between (1) retrieving enough results to give confidence that key studies were not missed and (2) being specific enough to limit the number of irrelevant results.

The tables below outline the search strings used to identify public law studies (Table A2) and private law studies (Table A3). Searches were run in Google Scholar and SocINDEX. In Google Scholar, it is only possible to restrict results by year. In SocINDEX it is possible to restrict search results by year, country and language; as well as specifying where in a study the search term must appear (e.g. TI before a string means those terms must appear in the title). Different searches were therefore run in each database. In Google Scholar the terms needed to be specific to avoid retrieving too many irrelevant results, whereas in SocINDEX broader terms with title restrictions could be used. For example, running a search with the terms ‘adopt’ and ‘technology’ in Google Scholar retrieved too many results that included studies that discussed the adoption of technology. In SocINDEX, it was possible to include these terms and specify that they needed to appear in the title, thus narrowing the search results.

**Table A2: Public law search strings**

Database	String 1	String 2	String 3	String 4	Restrictions
Google Scholar	("children in care" OR "looked after child*")	<b>AND</b> (("digital contact" OR "digital access" OR "digital visit*" OR "digital communication") OR ("virtual contact" OR "virtual access" OR "virtual visit*" OR "virtual communication"))			<b>Years:</b> 2010–2020
SocINDEX	TI ("out-of-home care" OR "kinship care" OR "special guardianship" OR "foster care" OR residential OR adopt*)	<b>AND</b> (family OR birth parent* OR sibling* OR relative*)	<b>AND</b> (contact OR visit* OR relationship*)	<b>AND</b> TI (digital OR virtual OR mobile OR internet OR technology OR technological)	<b>Years:</b> 2010–2020 <b>Countries:</b> UK, Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand <b>Language:</b> English

**Table A3: Private law search strings**

Database	String 1	String 2	String 3	Restrictions
Google Scholar	(divorce* OR separation* OR separate* OR coparenting OR post-separation OR postseparation OR custody)	<b>AND</b> (parent* OR sibling* OR relative* OR family OR child*)	<b>AND</b> ("virtual contact" OR "virtual visit" OR "virtual visitation" OR "virtual communication" OR "virtual relationship" OR "virtual time")	<b>Years:</b> 2010–2020
	(divorce* OR separation* OR separate* OR coparenting OR post-separation OR postseparation OR custody)	<b>AND</b> (parent* OR sibling* OR relative* OR family OR child*)	<b>AND</b> ("internet visitation" OR "internet communication")	<b>Years:</b> 2010–2020
SocINDEX	TI(divorce* OR separation OR separate* OR coparenting OR post-separation OR postseparation OR custody)	<b>AND</b> ("parent-child contact" OR "parent-child relationship" OR "parenting time") OR (contact* OR visit* OR communication* OR relationship* OR time* AND parent*)	<b>AND</b> (digital OR virtual OR internet OR technology OR technological OR "information and communication technologies")	<b>Years:</b> 2010–2020 <b>Countries:</b> UK, Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand <b>Language:</b> English

### Screening and prioritisation

Screening took place (a) at title and abstract level, and (b) at full-text level. Screening tools were developed and refined by more than one reviewer in the research team to ensure a consistent approach between researchers. Due to the rapid nature of this review, the first 200 results of literature searches were screened, and we limited the maximum number of studies to be included for synthesis. Studies were prioritised for inclusion if they focused on the relationship between digital contact and well-being. Following this process, 16 studies were prioritised for data extraction, synthesis and final inclusion in the review.

### Data extraction and synthesis

We extracted basic descriptive information on studies and key findings on: (1) the description of digital contact studied; (2) positive and negative effects of digital contact on well-being; and (3) the effect of different contact arrangements by demographic characteristics. Following data extraction, we narratively synthesised findings, drawing out key themes from the studies.