

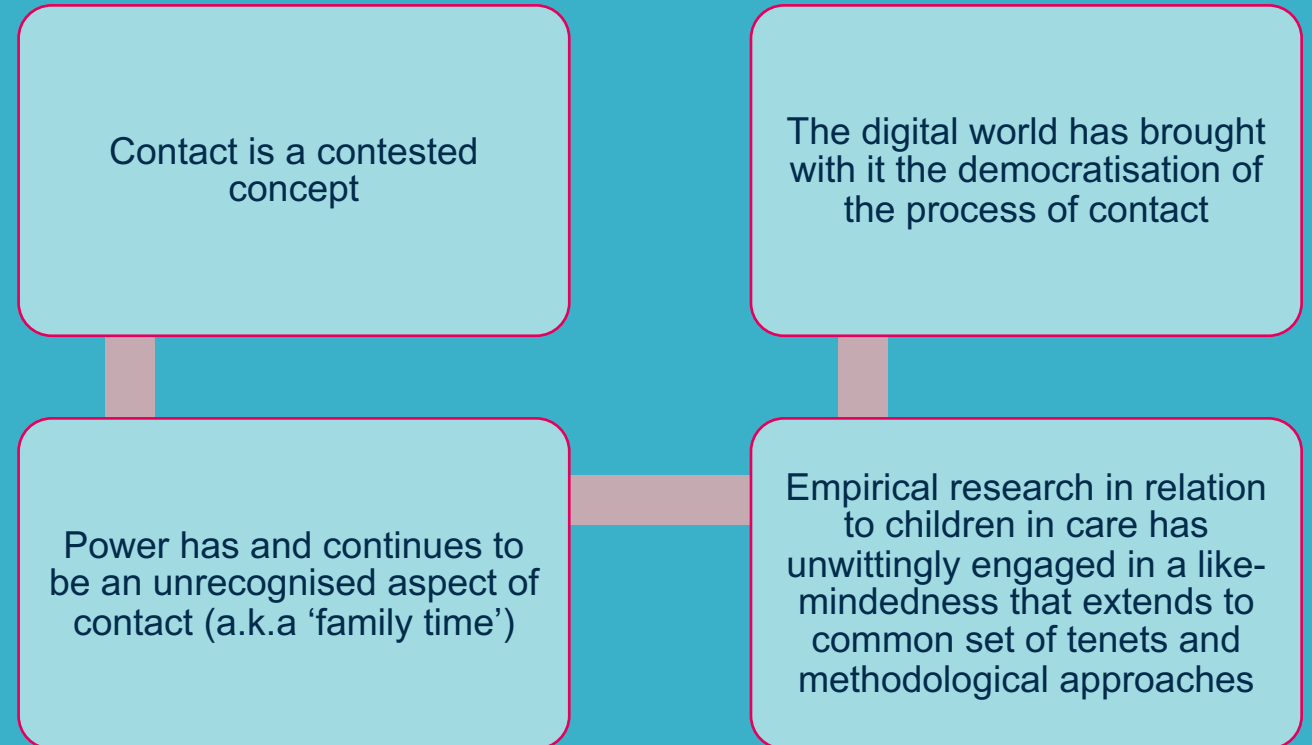


**A reconceptualisation of
'contact' between
separated young people
and their families in the
light of new technologies**





Reconceptualisation includes:



Contact what is it?

- Maintaining links with the parent birth parent(s) and wider family
- Part of an overall Care Plan for a child/young person in care
- Direct contact e.g. face-to-face, overnight stays
- Supervised or unsupervised
- Indirect contact e.g. telephone calls and letters
- Foster carers have a role in organising and supporting direct contact



Contact: What is it?

Contact – what is it?

Relationship
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Maintaining links

Connection

Belonging

Acceptance

Contact: What is it?

Contact – what is it used to achieve?

Enabling a child to form a new attachment to his/her carers

[McAuley, 1996](#) ;
[Biehal, 2009](#) and
Children's Rights
Director, 2012

Assess the relationship between the child and birth parent(s)

[Cleaver, 2000](#) and
[Triseliotis, 2011](#)

Providing a child with a sense of his/her family history, as well as self-identity

[Triseliotis, 1983](#) and 2000;
[Lynnes and Goddard, 1996](#);
[Feast 2009](#), [Adams, 2012](#);

[Triseliotis, 1983](#);
[Rushton, 1989](#)

Allowing a child to heal from negative feelings associated with the birth family

[Macaskill, 2002](#); [Sinclair et al. 2005](#); [Schofield and Beek \(2005\)](#); [Biehal, 2007](#) and [Adams, 2012](#)

Maintain relationships with siblings and other birth relatives

[Macaskill; 2002](#); [James et al, 2008](#);
Children's Rights
Director,
2009 and
2012

Aid reunification with the birth family

[Delfrabro, 2002](#); [Sinclair, 2005](#)
[Biehal, 2007](#); [Farmer et al. 2011](#)
and [Wade et al., 2011](#)

Access

Children Act 1948

The child in the care of the local authority had the status of being an individual without rights or possessions

Child Care Act 1980

Imposed a duty on local authorities to notify birth parents and Guardian ad litem of cessation of contact

Rowe and Lambert (1980)

Children and young people in care left to drift in residential care

- **23% regular contact**
- **35% less frequent contact**
- **41% no contact**

Access

Code of Practice 1983

Place the child in care as close as possible to their home and provide birth parent(s) with assistance in terms of travel by helping with related costs.

Social work practitioner accountability to birth parents as all decisions about access needed to be explained and followed up in writing.

"[it] usually lies at the bottom of the team leader's drawer buried under a pile of other circulars or is pinned anonymously on the social services notice board" (Bullock et al. 1991:90).

Lost in Care (1986)

Birth parents faced a series of barriers that prevented them from maintain links with their children e.g. travelling long distances and rules about visiting



Contact

Children Act 1989 emphasised the ideological assumption that children are best served by their



Local authorities have a duty to *“endeavour to promote contact between a child in care and his/her parents or others”* unless it is impractical to do so, or not consistent with the child’s welfare

(Department of Children, Schools and Families: Guidance and Regulations: Volume 2 - Care Planning, Placement and Case Review, 2010)

Wishes and feelings of the child in care being taken into account when planning contact



Contact



Local authorities have a duty to “endeavour to promote contact between a child in care and his/her parents or others” unless it is impractical to do so, or not consistent with the child’s welfare

- **When face-to-face contact took place, it often did so in an environment that was not immediately familiar.**
- **Limited opportunities to have contact with wider members of familial network**
- **Contact reduced or stopped altogether if a child or young person in care misbehaved whilst in placement**

Empirical Studies

Major characteristics of contact	Research Study	Findings
Maintain and develop siblings family relationships with birth and other members of familial network	Rushton (1980); Morrison and Brown (1986); Millham et al., (1986); Heger (1988); Staff and Fein (1992); Hindle (1995); Macaskill (2002); Wilson and Sinclair (2004); Herrick and Piccus (2005); Linares et al., (2007); Gusta and James et al., (2008) Schofield, Ward and Young (2009) and Gustavsson and MacEachron (2010);	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The longer a child is in care the more likely that contact would reduce • Abnormality and artificiality of supervised contact • Children and young people stressed and upset leading up to contact and immediately afterwards • Parents feel frozen out and powerless • Members of the wider familial network e.g. grandparents experience negative feelings of loss, guilt and shame
Enabling a child in care to form new attachments and avoid idealisation of birth parents	McAuley (1996) Macaskill (2002) and Office of the Children's Rights Director (2012)	No meaningful increase in the level of emotional involvement even after the child in care had lived with the foster family for 2 years. Continuing sense of loyalty to birth family
Heal from negative feelings associated with the birth parent(s), as well as therapeutic worth	Delfrabbro, Barber and Cooper (2002) McWey and Mullis (2004); Schofield and Beek (2005) Moyers et al., (2006) and Sen (2018)	Contact provides the opportunity for birth parent(s) to demonstrate negative behaviours e.g. overt rejection; making false promises and feigning illness
Sense of history and identity	Neil, Beek and Schofield (2003)	Children in care have to negotiate a difficult terrain of separation and loss on a daily basis
Correlation between contact and reunification	Farmer et al. (2011) and Wade et al. (2011)	Tentative links to reunification but dependent upon other factors that include support package once the child returns home

Quinton et al., (1997) and Boyle (2017) express concerns regarding methodology across the studies

Research Questions

- Do young people in care make use of mobile communication devices and the Internet for contact with their familial and friendship networks, if so, how is this carried out?
- Does the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet enhance or hinder communication between young people in care and individuals from their familial and friendship networks?
- How do foster carers and social work practitioners negotiate and manage contact that is undertaken through the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet by young people in care?

Sample

- Consisted of 12 triads made up of a young person in care, the foster carer and child social work practitioner
- Young people in care ranging from 13 to 17 years in care

Age	Gender
13	Male (no=1)
14	Male (no=1) Female (no=3)
15	Male (no=2)
16	Male (no=1)
17	Male (no=2) Female (no=1)
18	Male (no=1)

- Foster carers consisted of 10 female and 2 male carers. Wide range of experience in terms of fostering ranging 4 -18 years, the median being 10 years.
- The total number of children cared for during the period of 4 -18 years was 221.
- All the Social Work practitioners interviewed were female. 50% of the practitioners had been in post for less than 3 years, the remainder of the practitioners had worked for a duration of 6.5 through to 20 years.

Findings

Staying in touch

“My brothers they both work, so that’s the only way we keep in contact is by Facebook or Whatsapp but it’s just general chitchat, ‘how’re you getting on’, like the same with my mum, I always send them pictures and they always say ‘oh that looks nice’, like and then we arrange times when we’re all gonna go up to mum and have like a family dinner or something”

(Lamar, aged 17)



Findings



Surveillance and Monitoring

3 types of surveillance and monitoring:

- Physical activities
- Computer software used
- Monitoring via other agencies or individuals

“So I’m just saying that if he’s got his mobile phone and he’s in his bedroom, he just keeps his door open and every so often I’ll just go and do like little spot checks with Darrell, “What you doin’ on your phone matey?”

(Rayanna, Foster Carer)

Findings

Surveillance and Monitoring



Monitoring via other agencies or individuals

Monitoring of posts by fostering family members

Monitoring by members of the birth family

Monitoring by agencies e.g. schools

Computer software used to monitor young people in care

GPS Tracker

Parental permissions e.g. purchasing of games, blocks on website pages

Monitoring software

Facebook Friend

Physical tasks and activities used to monitor young people in care

Overseeing use and sharing information

Random checking of mobile phone

Regular checking of mobile phone of mobile phone content

Checking Internet history

Remaining in the same room whilst a mobile communication technology device is used

Details of passwords for social media accounts

Written Agreement

Young person in care to leave the bedroom door either open or ajar

Findings

Day to Day Management

Name of Foster Carer	Examples of Management
Perry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of mobile phone is limited throughout the day e.g. cannot be used during breakfast period nor at mealtimes
Mary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not allowed to have mobile phone or any other mobile communication technology in the upstairs part of the house
Laura	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mobile phone does not have a SIM in it• Turning off Wi-Fi at night in the fostering household
Nanci	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family computer is situated in the foster carer's bedroom and the foster carer is the only person can view and print off emails• Mobile phone brought downstairs at night at a regular time before going to bed
Madaline and Rex	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parental permissions and password protection used for certain websites
Rose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mobile communication technology devices not allowed in the bedroom
Piers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initially no mobile communication technology devices were allowed in the bedroom

Overarching messages

- Characteristics of staying in touch include: immediacy; a sense of connection; independence, control and non-reliance on foster carers; reflects the natural rhythm of life unlike contact
- Disciplinary gaze: sleep walking into surveillance where the aim is social control (Penna, 2005 p.147)
- Privacy and concealment

The COVID-19 effect.....

- Rapid evidence review by Neil, Cropton and Sorenson (2020) revealed widespread use of WhatsApp, Facetime, Zoom and Microsoft Team

Video conferencing via Zoom gives me control over who can come into the session. It allows me to silence any inappropriate conversations and have discussions with parents without the children being able to hear if needed. I am able to still take notes and compile a report for each session as I would normally.

Democratisation



New approach

As Kellett (2005:9) states:

“Children observe with different eyes, ask different questions – they ask questions that adults do not even think of -, have different concerns and have immediate access to peer culture where adults are outsiders.

The research agendas children prioritise, the ... questions they frame and the way in which they collect data are substantially different from adults and all of this can offer valuable insights and original contributions to knowledge”

