



When I see them,
I would like to not
be in a small room
all the time.
11-18yrs

I used to see Mum and
older brother three times
a week. It has been cut
down to once a week
and this makes me sad.
I don't know why
contact was cut down.
8-10yrs

Staying connected:

The views of looked after
children and young people on
their contact arrangements

I think it's just
the right amount,
because when I see
them it's nice and
everyone is happy.
11-18yrs

I don't like
going to dad's.
It makes me
feel unsafe.
11-18yrs

Key findings and
recommendations



Introduction

Every year several thousand children and young people complete the *Your Life, Your Care* and *Your Life Beyond Care* surveys, as part of the Bright Spots Programme.

Family in the *Your Life, Your Care* surveys

- ▶ The surveys were co-produced with 140 care experienced children and young people to explore what they felt made their lives good.
- ▶ The children in care who helped design the *Your Life, Your Care* surveys thought a key part of feeling good was staying in touch with their families.
- ▶ The surveys ask children in care aged 8-18 questions about whether they see their parents, brothers, and sisters frequently enough and gives them the opportunity to write their own comments about how often they have contact.
- ▶ Between 2015 and 2020 2,417 children (8-10yrs) and 5,372 young people (11-18yrs) responded to these questions from 36 English and 6 Welsh local authorities. 3,084 children and young people wrote their own comments.

A team at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford analysed the findings and a full report of what they found can be downloaded at www.coramvoice.org.uk/staying-connected-report.

To think about what the findings meant for policy and practice the Bright Spots team organised an online workshop to explore the learning and discuss recommendations with young people, professionals and academics.

This briefing pulls together some of the key findings from the research and the recommendations from the workshop and includes related questions to help managers, practitioners and other decision makers reflect on what the findings may mean for them.

A note on language

In different places there are different names for supporting children to stay connected with their families. There is no perfect language. We would prefer that it did not have a name and instead conversations would focus on children keeping in touch with the people that are important to them. Labels can make young people feel different to their peers. In this report we have tried to use the words that children and young people used as much as possible, whilst striking a balance with presenting clear messages from the research. We would encourage the people who work with individual children to continue to ask them what works for them and use this language in their practice.



Recommendations

Based on the research findings and the workshop discussion we identified seven key areas in which to improve policy and practice.



- 1 Work with all children in care to identify the key relationships in their lives.



- 2 Make arrangements for children and young people to maintain contact, develop relationships and reconnect with people who are important to them.



- 3 Listen to and involve children and young people in decisions about the arrangements to see and keep in touch with family and others who are important to them.



- 4 Keep children in care informed about their families, why they can or cannot see them, and what arrangements have been made for them to spend time together.



- 5 Ensure plans are regularly reviewed and reflect the current circumstances, wishes and needs of children and young people and their families.



- 6 Normalise family time whenever possible, minimising the use of contact centres and supporting children and families to meet in the community.



- 7 Make sure the workforce has the skills and knowledge to prioritise and confidently support children in care to stay connected to the people who are important to them.

Overview of findings

Feelings about seeing family

Happiness with how often children in care saw their family was important to their well-being. It was not whether they saw them or not that influenced their well-being, but whether they felt it was the right amount.



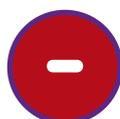
Children and young people who felt arrangements were 'just right' enjoyed and looked forward to seeing their family.

Those who were positive felt:

- They were being listened to
- Their views were respected
- Some were trusted to manage their own contact arrangements

"I love to see my family. I love to go bowling. I am happy when I am with my family."

8-10yrs



Many children and young people were unhappy with how often they saw their families.

- Most children in care wanted to see their parents and siblings more often, but a small group wanted to see them less often.

"I wish I had more contact, and I would like it to be longer."

8-10yrs

Children in care who felt they saw parents 'too little' wrote about:

- Feeling sad, angry & unsettled
- Relationships feeling strained when not seeing family often enough

"I feel like every time I see them, I come back generally upset or in some sort of negative mood. I feel I need to see them a little bit less to help me with my emotions."

11-18yrs

Those who reported that relationships were difficult felt:

- Let down by parents who failed to turn up
- Embarrassed by their parents
- That visits ended in arguments

Differences between groups

The researchers used statistical analysis to look at what was associated with whether children and young people felt that they saw family members often enough.



Too little time with family

For every 10 children in care between 2 and 3 felt they saw their mums, dads, brothers or sisters too little.

Most children and young people who commented wanted to see their family more often. Only 185 comments of the 3,000 were about family time being 'just right'.



“I wish I had more contact, and I would like it to be longer.”
8-10yrs

“I’d like more arranged contact but it is expensive to travel to and from counties. I’d like a travel warrant.”
11-18yrs

Too much contact

Not all children and young people wanted more contact. Out of every hundred children in care, 2 or 3 wanted contact to stop or be cut down.



“I’m scared of my dad, but I still have to have contact with him. I don’t want to.”

11-18yrs

Barriers to seeing family



“I am told the ‘contact team’ doesn’t work at weekends. If that is their job, then they should work when I can have contact ... not just business hours. It’s stupid, stupid, stupid. My mum works and so after school contact is difficult and only an hour!”

11-18yrs

“I want to see my family more. My social worker is supposed to be doing police checks. I have been here since September and the checks have not been done. It’s not like I can just visit. I live 5 hours from home.”

11-18yrs

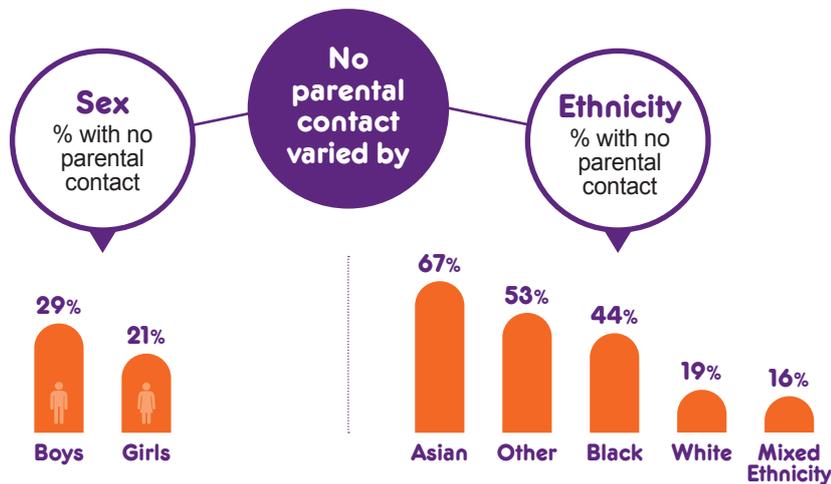
No parental contact



“I’m allowed to see my mother but choose not to.”
11-18yrs

Children and young people did not have contact because

- Child or young person did not want contact
- Parents did not live in the UK
- Parents’ circumstances or wishes
- Their parents had died
- Assessed as not in their best interests for a very small minority



“The Red Cross are going to help me, but I have been waiting a long time. I feel very, very bad about not knowing if my mother or my sisters are even alive. I spend a lot of time worrying about them.”
11-18yrs

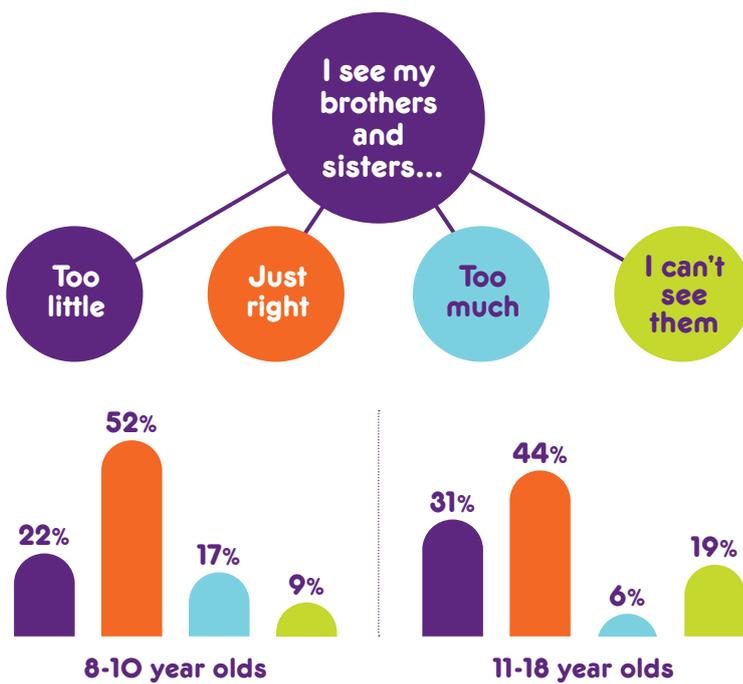
The mothers of around 1 in 15 of the teenagers in care had passed away. In the general population only 1% of children under 16 have lost their mother. Compared with those of White and Mixed ethnicity young people of Asian, Other and Black ethnicities more frequently had no parental contact. From comments we knew that some of these young people were refugees or seeking asylum.

Contact with brothers and sisters

Most of the written comments from children and young people were about how much they enjoyed living with their brothers or sisters and missed those who did not live with them. A few felt they saw them too much.

Reasons for not seeing them included:

- Younger siblings adopted
- Parents preventing contact
- Siblings refusing contact
- Living far away or in another country
- A small number were assessed as posing a risk to siblings



Involvement in decisions

Half of the young people felt involved in decision-making and that their wishes were listened to.

Others felt ignored and that decisions were made for them.



They also felt that arrangements were inflexible, not changing as they got older or their family's circumstances changed.

Lack of information

Some children and young people wrote about things not being explained or of not being informed about their families, especially their dads.



“At the minute I don’t want to go to contact... I know that if I want to go, I can tell my foster carers and my teacher.”

8-10yrs

“I do not want to see my brother or dad. I see my mum too little. Nobody listens when I tell them that I do not want to see a member of my family. Every decision about contact with my family is made for me.”

11-18yrs

“I used to see Mum and older brother three times a week. It has been cut down to once a week and this makes me sad. I don’t know why contact was cut down.”

8-10yrs

“I don’t know why I don’t see my dad. I worry about it because he might be dead.”

8-10yrs

Recommendations for policy and practice

To reflect on the implications for policy and practice of the research findings we organised an online workshop to explore the learning and discuss recommendations. The participants included care experienced young people, academics, a representative from Ofsted, as well as local authority staff and managers, including professionals with specific responsibility for family time/contact services.

The discussions highlighted both how current practice could be improved and a desire for a greater cultural shift in the way that children's services plan and manage how children and young people spend time with the people who are important to them.

We discussed an overreliance on formal settings and a need to normalise family time wherever possible. The group felt that contact using supervised settings, which used to be the exception, had now become the norm. A shift away from this approach would involve managing risk and enabling children and families to spend time together in the community whenever possible, rather than in designated spaces overseen by professionals.

The discussion also highlighted the need to reinforce and implement existing guidance, especially around the importance of the voice of the child and ensuring that plans are guided by the wishes and feelings of children in care.

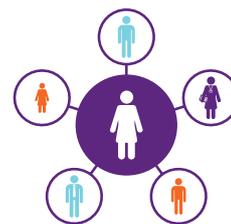
Based on the research findings and the workshop discussion we identified seven key areas in which to improve policy and practice. To help services reflect on these areas, we have identified a series of questions for services to explore in order to support children and young people to spend time with the people who were important to them. These questions are not meant to be an exhaustive list but ideas to support reflection. We would encourage an ongoing dialogue about the key themes and how services can best address them, including involving children and young people in identifying and implementing changes.

Explore the implications of the findings for your services

Children and young people's experiences of family time and the services that are delivered will vary between local authorities. We encourage all local authorities to engage with their children and young people and staff to explore what would make their experiences of family time better.

On our website (www.coramvoice.org.uk/staying-connected-report) you can find a suggested workshop plan template that can be used to explore the implications of the findings for your services. It is intended to spark discussion and reflection about the findings in this report. If you have participated in the Bright Spots surveys in your own local authority, you can include your local findings about family time in your session.

¹ ADCS/Cafcass (2021) Guidance for completing the Social Work Evidence Templates; Children Act 1989, Section 34; Department for Education (2015) The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review; Regulation 14 Fostering Services Regulations 2011



1

Work with all children in care to identify the key relationships in their lives.

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ How do you work with children and young people to understand who is important to them and how and when they would like to spend time with them?
- ▶ Do your policies give the same level of priority to arranging contact with siblings as with parents?
- ▶ Do you regularly revisit plans with children and young people and check whether there are additional relationships that should be included (e.g. siblings that are born after the original plan was made, other trusted adults that are important to the child)?
- ▶ Do you audit and review whether family time/contact plans include brothers and sisters, extended family, pets and other people who are important in children's lives (e.g. mums ex-partner, former foster carers and their children)?
- ▶ Do you use eco maps or other tools to identify key relationships and the strength of those relationships to inform children's arrangements?
- ▶ Do you listen to and respect children's wishes if they want contact to stop or be reduced?



2

Make arrangements for children and young people to maintain contact, develop relationships and reconnect with people who are important to them.

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ Are you enabling contact at times that work for children and families given children's routines, work, school and other commitments (e.g. parents or siblings' working hours, not missing after-school clubs, being mindful of meal and sleep times for younger children)?
- ▶ Are you making sure children do not worry about the costs associated with family time and is there funding available for parents, siblings' and extended family to travel to enable contact?
- ▶ How are you supporting children and young people to re-establish relationships with people who are important to them, but they have not seen for some time?
- ▶ How can you use the time before/after a contact session to work with parents on the parent/child relationship (e.g. discussing consistent boundaries, how to play)?
- ▶ What therapeutic support are you offering to children and young people and their families to manage and improve their relationships?
- ▶ Are children in residential care experiencing additional barriers to family time and how can you support them to overcome this?
- ▶ Are independent visiting services available and offered to children and young people who have no parental contact?
- ▶ How are you supporting children to deal with loss of contact or bereavement? Is there therapeutic support available?
- ▶ How are you using contact to support young people to develop a support network that will be there for them once they have left care?



3

Listen to and involve children and young people in decisions about the arrangements to see and keep in touch with family and others who are important to them.

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ Are there opportunities for children and young people to express their views about contact plans in court proceedings?
- ▶ Are children's wishes and feelings reflected in each child's care plan? Can processes be simplified to ensure that arrangements can be reviewed with changing circumstances?
- ▶ Do children and young people know where to turn if they are unhappy with who and how often they are seeing key people in their lives? Is support readily available and accessible to children and young people (e.g. speaking to social workers, accessing advocacy, complaints processes)?
- ▶ How are older children in care supported to manage contact with family themselves where safe for them to do so, with someone who checks in and make sure this is manageable for them?
- ▶ Do you collect data on how happy children are with family time arrangements? Does this appear in dashboard monitoring and audits?
- ▶ Are children asked to give feedback on family time services?
- ▶ Have children and young people had the opportunity to specify how they would like services to refer to family/contact time in their individual case and collectively?



4

Keep children in care informed about their family, why they can or cannot see them and what arrangements have been made for them to keep in touch.

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ Do you have child friendly communication tools to help children understand family arrangements, what will happen and when (e.g. child friendly booklets & leaflets, visual calendars, video of contact centre & what happens there)?
- ▶ Are social workers regularly taking the time to explain arrangements to children and young people and why they may be unable to see their families? Are these conversations happening with all children and young people, regardless of age?
- ▶ Are you checking whether (especially younger) children in care understand arrangements and have any unanswered questions about their families?
- ▶ How are children supported to understand who their father is and why there may be no contact? Is the extended family on the paternal side considered in planning?
- ▶ Does each child have someone who is responsible for making sure updates from family members, photographs, videos and other mementoes are shared with the child and kept safely for them to be accessed now and in the future?
- ▶ How are carers supported to understand and explain family time arrangements to children and young people?
- ▶ If relatives do not keep to family time arrangements, do you work with them to understand why and try to remove barriers (e.g. timings, location)?

5



Normalise family time wherever possible, minimising the use of contact centres and providing opportunities to meet in the community.

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ Does family time need to be supervised? If so, by who?
- ▶ Can contact staff behave in a way that gives families more privacy?
- ▶ How are risks assessed and plans to manage them developed? Do policies and procedures encourage the management of risks or avoidance of risk?
- ▶ Do families have time together which is just about spending time, i.e., not under pressure to perform or be assessed by psychologists, guardians and social workers?
- ▶ Do your contact centres provide a good range of activities for families that are suitable for all age groups (e.g. baking, playing board games, arts and crafts, outdoor play, reading)?
- ▶ Are additional activities other than face-to-face visits included in contact plans (e.g. exchanging emails, photographs, letters, phone calls, video calls)?
- ▶ What role can the child's network take in supporting contact in the community?
- ▶ How can carers be more involved in planning and arranging contact, including online (e.g. facilitating video calls, managing email for messages)?
- ▶ How can foster carers and residential staff work together to make sure that siblings that do not live together have opportunities to spend time together?
- ▶ Can children be supported to attend family gatherings/celebrations or family members be safely invited to take part in a child's daily activities (e.g., taking them to football practice, play groups)?
- ▶ Do you have dedicated budgets for each child in care that children, parents, carers, supervisors etc. can use to plan activities for special occasions?



6

Ensure family time plans are regularly reviewed and reflect the current circumstances, wishes and needs of children and young people and their families

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ Are plans for contact discussed in detail at the legal planning meeting (pre order), clear plans provided in the social worker's initial statement and in the Care Plan, ensuring that plans are in the best interests of the child?
- ▶ Do IROs proactively review children and young people's contact plans every 6 months, making sure that they are up-to-date, have considered the current views of the child or young person about increasing, reducing or ending contact and taken account of changes in family circumstances?
- ▶ How do you work with carers and schools to observe and explore how children and young people feel before and after contact, picking up on worries and engaging them in discussions about this?
- ▶ If a family member has died, what arrangements have been made for children to be supported to visit the grave and whether visits should be repeated on key dates?
- ▶ Can contact arrangements be changed quickly if there is a sudden change in circumstances (e.g. if a grandparent becomes ill)?



7

Make sure the workforce has the skills and knowledge to confidently support family time for children in care.

Questions for services to explore include:

- ▶ Does everyone who works with children in care recognise their role in supporting family contact (social workers, IROs, foster and residential carers etc.) and are aware of their duties under existing guidance and regulations?
- ▶ Have you embedded regular review of contact plans and a focus on wishes and feelings through supervision, audits and training (e.g. practice week focus)?
- ▶ Are workers trained in how to use different tools to understand children's wishes and feelings and who is important to them (e.g. eco maps, genograms)?
- ▶ Do social workers feel confident in talking to children about why they cannot live with their families, why there might be limitations and helping children to manage any disappointment or feelings of rejection when contact does not go as planned?
- ▶ Do workers and carers feel confident in supporting family time for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children whose families may be abroad and may not be contactable in the same ways as other children? What training and development can you offer to upskill them in this domain?
- ▶ Do workers have the skills and knowledge to talk to children and young people about their worries?
- ▶ Do workers have the skills and knowledge to support families to develop better relationships, as part of family time?
- ▶ Do you need to commission any specialist services to support children and families (e.g. therapeutic or bereavement services, family counselling or conflict management)?
- ▶ Do workers consider how birth, step, foster or adoptive parents might be worked with to make sure children keep in touch with their brothers and sisters?



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BS

This report was written as part of the Bright Spots Programme. The Bright Spots Programme is a partnership between Coram Voice and the University of Oxford, funded by the Hadley Trust.

For more information about the Bright Spots Programme go to:

www.coramvoice.org.uk/bright-spots

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Download other resources related to this report, including the full research findings at:

www.coramvoice.org.uk/staying-connected-report

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