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A Brief History of Contact in Fostering and Adoption: Practice and Power, and The Coming of the Mobile Phone

Introduction

This paper builds on a recent contribution to Adoption & Fostering by one of the authors that adds to the growing area of research on the use of mobile communication devices and the internet by children in care in order to maintain contact with family and friends (Simpson, 2020). The author's research found that the young people in her study were not passive recipients of their familial and friendship networks and did not deem their interactions as 'contact', perceiving them more as 'staying in touch'. Opportunities provided by new technology enabled immediacy, reach and communication in real time and duration – all features that allowed the young people to control the 'who, how and when' of their relationships. But despite the potential of the new communication methods to maintain cohesion between young people and their relatives, it was not utilised or supported by their foster carers or social work practitioners who tended to view this new channel of communication as a risk or a nuisance. This paper has also been finalised at a time when the importance of virtual communication (as distinct from physical interaction) and the maintenance of social and familial ties has starkly come to the fore as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contact Contested (Again)

Contact between UK children in care and their birth families comes in many forms. It includes correspondence (letters, email, texts), sharing photographs and meetings with family members, and, as we shall see, developing forms of group interactions facilitated by social media. It can be arranged on a 'horizontal' basis, that is directly between birth families, the child and that child's carers, or much more arranged by the agency that oversees the child's care. Despite a legal right for children and young people in pre-adoption proceedings and foster care to maintain contact with their birth family and the practice of post-adoption contact, contact[1] has been and still is open to a spectrum of opinion. There have been views that contact should not happen at all on the basis of the need of a 'clean break' and the benefits of leaving the past behind when a child is being considered for adoption (Tomlin Committee, 1925 as cited in Ryburn 1999; Macaskill, 2002; Moyers et al. 2005; Loxterkamp, 2009 as

[1] A co-author of this paper has written of the language used in fostering and adoption policy and practice, and, amongst identification of other ambiguous or power-laden words, has drawn attention to the inadequacy of the word 'contact' used in professional discourse (Clapton, 2018). Contact is a 'hard' word to describe what is essentially family relationship time however for ease of flow and understanding, it will be used throughout this paper.

cited in Sen and Broadhurst, 2011; Narey, 2011 and Narey and Owers, 2018). Whilst at the other end of the spectrum, there has been an emphasis on the benefits of contact in, for example, the assuaging of psychological distress and diminution of feelings of loss of identity experienced by children and birth parents (Triseliotis, 1973; Millham, 1986; Rowe and Lambert; 1980; Winter and Cohen, 2005; Neil 2006; and Morgan, 2012; Minnis and Walker, 2012). Until recently there has been a widespread presumption of contact between children in care and their birth families. However, a recent review of fostering has resurrected objections to contact arguing that it is 'not always being in the best interests of the child' (Narey and Owers, 2018:82) and provided a series of examples as to why the presumption of contact should be removed. Moreover, the authors reminded readers that the presumption introduced in the Children Act 1989 (England and Wales) had since been diminished by a number of judicial judgements that recognised concerns over the possibility of the perpetuation of domestic violence arising from contact arrangements, and in an effort to avoid child distress provoked by adversarialism between separating parents (Kaganas, 2018). After a lengthy period of seeming professional consensus on the general value of contact to the child, objections to a presupposition of contact expose some of the underlying attitudes held by the various adult parties ranging from those who were pro-contact (birth parents, see for example, Malet et al, 2010) to tolerant of contact (foster parents, see, Wilson and Sinclair, 2004) to often pessimistic/sceptical about it (social workers, Thompson, 2019). Sen has argued the debates reflect a series of value positions that are linked to views on the rights of the individual child and his/her family, and the role of the state (Sen, 2018). Indeed, the history of contact shows that the ownership and exercise of control has been the prerogative of the state (and as we shall see, the rise of the use of social media by children and their families disrupts this). But first what can a brief history of contact tell us?

Contact in Fostering and Adoption: A History

The notion of contact has come to be enshrined in legislation, and where this is not achievable, ie after adoption, contact has come to be seen as necessary for children who remain in care (Siegel and Smith, 2012). Changes in the profile of children being fostered and adopted have been the principle driver for this with children coming into care with often significant positive relationships and attachments with birth family members that are deemed necessary to be maintained (McSherry et al, 2013). Across the twentieth century a presumption towards contact has emerged, that is a predisposition towards children in care continuing relations with members of their immediate birth family and other people (Ferguson, 2019). The Children Act 1989 (England and Wales) emphasised that local authorities had a duty to endeavour to promote contact between a child in care and his/her parents or others unless it

is not practicable to do so, or inconsistent with the child's welfare (Department of Children, Schools and Families: Guidance and Regulations: Volume 2 – Care Planning, Placement and Case Review, 2010: 2). Similar legislation was enacted throughout the UK, for example the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. However, contact was not always taken for granted Hendrick (1994: 22-28) comments that early legislation in the form of the Children Act of 1948 signalled that children in the care of the local authority had the status of being an individual without rights or possessions. This meant that, wherever possible, such children were either to be placed with adoptive parents or returned to their birth families. No half-way house or parallel planning here, they were owned by one or other set of parents. At that time, there were no guidance or procedures governing contact between children in care and their birth parents. More often than not, contact between children and their birth parents was subject to the discretion of social work practitioners or even 'actively discouraged' (Norrie, 2017: 9). According to Macaskill (2002: 2), the issue of contact came to the fore again in the late 1970s as a result of the changing nature of adoption that is, adoption emerged as a viable alternative to the state care option for children who would otherwise have remained in residential homes or long-term foster care, even those children who had strong links with their birth families. Of importance here was Rowe and Lambert's (1980) seminal study that was concerned with these children and how long they were waiting for action to determine a settled family placement. Their findings revealed that, while there were few children on adoption waiting lists, there was a large number of children left to drift in residential settings with no designated plan for either adoption or return to their birth families. Moreover, Rowe and Lambert found that amongst the sample of children, 23% had regular contact and 35% had less frequent contact with one parent and that most of the children (41%) had no contact at all. In other words, the longer a child was in care, the less effort that was made to support his or her relations with birth parents or other family members. The study revealed the way in which ongoing relations between children in state care and their families had little priority once a child had come into care and that where contact existed, practitioners controlled (or 'managed') whether or not it took place. Over twenty years later, Macaskill deemed Rowe and Lambert's study 'highly influential… it ignited a new professional awareness of the significance of access' (2002:2). The study contributed to the English Child Care Act 1980 that imposed a duty on local authorities to notify the child's birth parents and others, including the Guardian ad litem, of the cessation of, what at the time was termed, 'access'[2]. From a legal perspective, the language of the Child Act 1980 included terminology that indicated that the local authority had 'custody' and 'physical possession of the child' (Maidment, 1981: 25-26). This was a period where the phrase 'In loco parentis' – meaning in the place of, or instead of,

[2] The use of the word 'access' with its connotations of a one-way street to the passive child, also falls into the category of 'fostering and adoption talk' referred to in the previous footnote.

parent – meant, in practice we would contend, not simply the assumption of parental responsibilities by the state, but also such act of assumption came with a diminution of the role of birth parent in the ongoing life of the child.

In 1983, a Code of Practice on 'access' to children in care was published. This and similar guidance elsewhere in the UK (e.g. Access to Children in Care or Under Supervision in Scotland 1983) offered guidance and information relating to the management of such interaction, where the underlying premise was the reunion of the child in care and his/her birth family. To this end, it was expected that local authorities would place a child as near as possible to his/her home and provide the birth parents with assistance in terms of travel by helping with related costs. Furthermore, the Code also specified the circumstances under which access could, if necessary, be terminated. Importantly, the Code ensured that social work practitioners were accountable to birth parents, because they had to explain all their decisions about access and follow it up in writing. Unfortunately, despite the far-reaching purpose of the Code it was, according to Adcock (1995), never wholeheartedly implemented. It was not until the publication of Millham et al.'s (1986) study entitled *Lost in Care: The problems of maintaining links between children in care and their families* that contact and how it took place, or not, became centre stage once more. Once again, research raised major concerns about the issue of contact between children and birth families. Birth parents were found to face a series of barriers that prevented them from maintaining links with their children. These barriers included travelling long distances and rules about visiting often in the form of foster carers and residential staff placing restrictions and providing minimal encouragement, or acceptance of, contact (Adcock, 1995: 17). The findings were described as alarming Chaiklin (1988). However, just as concerning was the failure of the researchers to firstly, recognise that they were observing the work of informal yet far-reaching in effect, power dynamics and secondly, not to question this.

The concerns raised by Millham et al., were further substantiated by research published the following year by Rowe in 1987 (cited in Bridge, 1997). This revealed that children in long-term foster placements experienced little contact with their birth parents. The historical account provided by Adcock echoed the work of Bullock et al. (1991) which, as part of linking research to policy change, examined the success of Section 12 A - G of the Child Care Act (which was added to the English Health and Social Services and Social Security Adjudications Act 1983). This section made it obligatory for local authorities to notify birth parents when they wanted to terminate access and also make them aware of their rights. Until this time, a stipulation of this nature that gave social work practitioners the legal authority to terminate 'access' on the grounds that it was not in the 'best interests' of the child had not existed. Previously, when such grounds were presented to birth parents, they did not have recourse to appeal against such a decision. Bullock et al. (1991: 88) highlighted the fact that the new

legislation represented a major change in terms of moving from what was originally a professional decision to a legal one. Therefore, building on what was observed by Chaiklin (1988) and what was not explicitly addressed in Bullock et al.'s research, was the immense power at the disposal of the local authorities – and, more specifically, social work practitioners at an individual case-level – to remove contact altogether. This power was present even where the decision-making had moved from discretion to being based on legislation. Further scrutiny by Bullock et al. as to the implementation of the legislation, revealed that, although there were one thousand formal notifications that were sent to parents each year, this figure did not reflect the reality in practice. That is, Bullock et al's research illustrated that for many children and birth parents, access was terminated because it did not immediately fit with care and placement plans that included adoption and long-term foster-care placements. The researchers went on to note that the Code of Practice had not been widely read and that '[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' (1991: 90).

In sum, for the period between 1948 until the late 1980s, how contact was managed and conducted was captured by a series of research studies that evidenced that children in care and their birth parents were not able to have 'access' to each other due to a series of barriers that could be described as attitudinal, financial and geographical. Arguably this constitutes a systemic relegation of the significance of birth family connections. The discretionary exercise of social work power can be seen in other ways. The gradual reduction of contact for the 'good of everyone'. Or the relinquishment of agency management as a result of staff turnover. The above embodies a concept of contact as provisional and precarious, something to be doled out or tapered off at the discretion of social workers, or as required by the agency, with little or no consultation with children and young people in care and their birth parents. Or just not an agency priority. However, the exercise of systemic power was not just within the purview of social workers, Millham et al., (1986) found that foster carers and workers within residential units stipulated the terms of access – with greater emphases on the latter's convenience.

An understanding of contact from the perspective of birth parents and the wider family comes from studies such as Millham et al. (1986: 117). They comment on the decline in contact between children in care and their birth parents, as well as the feelings experienced: *'parents feel frozen out…..but it also reflects their powerlessness to intervene, their lack of role and their feelings of guilt and inadequacy'* (1986: 117). They argued that the feelings experienced by birth parents at the loss of their children can have a detrimental impact on the quality of the parent-child interaction during contact and this thus inadvertently result in an all-round distressing experience. Twenty five years after Millham et al, similar child and birth parent's experiences of contact were captured by Farmer et al.

(2011: 46). They found that contact was variable in frequency and quality, and factors such as difficult transport arrangements, the child's preparation and behaviour, the quality of the setting where contact took place, the experience of being supervised, plus any other contact restrictions such as time alone, all had a negative impact on birth parents' experiences.

The advent and implementation in England of the Children Act (1989) (the broad principles of which were subsequently reflected in other UK jurisdictions) could be said to represent the defining moment in terms of contact. It changed how children in care were regarded by the state. The Act formalised the concept of 'contact', as opposed to 'access'. Macaskill (2002) has commented that this change in terminology placed an emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of the birth parents, as well as promoting partnership-working by statutory agencies. It also signalled that the principal objectives were rehabilitation and returning the child to the birth family. Where this was not possible, fundamental breaches of connections between the child and their birth family were to be avoided wherever possible. Thus, the Act laid the basis for today's generally-practised efforts to set up and maintain relationships ('contact') between children that are looked after by the state and their families of origin. This is not withstanding the previously noted shifts in judicial emphasis relating to the dilution of the principle of contact.

Most recently, the phrase 'family time' has emerged as an alternative to the word contact (see for example: https://www.fosteringhandbook.com/doncaster/contact_family.html). This is an interesting terminological shift that may or may not embody different attitudes that contain a greater respect for kinship ties.

New Research Insights and Real and Virtual World Developments

In the Research World

This brief historical overview has charted the progress made from access to contact and now to 'family time', and the way in which the status of children in care significantly changed from being possessions of the state to having specified rights. It has also drawn attention to the exercise of formal and informal mechanisms of control by social work practitioners, foster carers and residential staff to shape and manage the quality and amount of access children in care had with their birth parents and wider family. Despite the fact that there are now pre-determined rights for children in care to have contact with family members and indeed generally expectations that contact will occur, as we will argue, changes in terminology, and the associated presumptions that accompanied this, do not immediately guarantee any changes in the informal power dynamics.

Twenty years after Rowe and Lambert research yet again found, at best, agency ambivalence towards contact and at worst neglect of its importance. At the beginning of the Millennium, the Contact After Adoption Project found that less than one in five children had a plan to have contact with birth relatives (Neil, 2002). Ten years later, further evidence of this emerged in the large scale UK research study by Wade et al. (2011) that was inspired by the *Pursuit of Permanence Study* undertaken by Sinclair et al (2007, as cited in Wade et al., 2011). The findings of the research (2011:73) indicated that the key factor influencing the decision-making of social work practitioners relating to the increase or decreasing of contact was the ability of birth parents to make sufficient change in their circumstances to warrant a judgement of 'somewhat' or 'significant' improvement. However, the continuation of contact is not solely linked to the improvements in the circumstances of birth parents. It also extends to what takes place during contact between the child and birth parent. Triseliotis (2010) argues that whilst many social work practitioners take account of the complexities of contact and allow for these as part of their assessment, there are others who assess the birth parents as if they were the primary carers (p. 62) this can lead to conclusions that a strong attachment between child and birth parents does not exist. Triseliotis goes on to point out that such statements fail to take into account the age and understanding of the child, particularly those that have been fostered since birth. Furthermore, operational issues such as the frequent changes in contact supervisors and escorts can make the whole experience of contact unsettling even before a child enters a room to see his/her birth parents. Added to this there may also be issues related to the emotional response being relayed by the foster carer(s) before the contact visit thereby heightening a child's sense of divided loyalties and conflict. He makes the added point that in situations of supervised contact, it is an 'artificially constructed situation' (2010: 64) that places immense pressure and stress on birth parents as there are no clear guidelines as to the kind of behaviour that needs to be demonstrated. Consequently, where there is contact with more than one child, in an unfamiliar setting and where there is little to do to encourage interaction, the lack of communication and engagement between the child and birth parents can be deemed to be poor by an assessing social work practitioner. This situation is further compounded by the role of the contact supervisor, who may be unclear as to his/her role in relation to providing accurate information regarding a contact session. Triseliotis concludes by commenting that the entire process of contact has inherent difficulties that, on the one hand condemn birth parents for failing to engage proactively with their child, and on the other, may criticise them for being far too dominant. Bullen et al., (2015) as part of their literature review on supervised contact further substantiate Triseliotis' perspective by indicating that the evidence base for such judgements about quality of birth parent-child interaction during supervised contact is considerably thin. They echo

Triseliotis' observation of the ability for social work practitioners to assess and judge the quality of contact in the absence of empirically based guidelines and a standardised framework.

Although Triseliotis (2010) and Bullen et al., (2015) address a specific form of contact – that is supervised contact as a means of determining the suitability or otherwise of a child's return to parents – nevertheless the various dynamics in play have clear parallels with other forms of contact in: the opacity of official purpose, the debilitating and disempowering nature of practical arrangements and the differing expectations of outcome which may place the birth parents and their children at a disadvantage.

A further study that captures the powerlessness of birth parents is that of Schofield, Ward and Young (2009). The study is unique in that it was carried out across three nations; Sweden, Norway and the UK. Semi-structured interviews with thirty-two birth parents aged between twenty-nine and fifty-five and a focus group of social work practitioners were used as part of the methodology. The findings from the study revealed that birth parents experienced not only the loss of their child, but also their identity as a parent, which they often had to battle with social work practitioners to defend (2009: 21). Parents spoke of wanting up-to-date information about their children and feeling 'starved' when they had limited news (2009: 20). A number of parents from the study also spoke of making daily use of their mobile phones to contact their children at specific times during the day (for example, bedtimes) and it was these moments that they most valued. This study captures the complexity of emotions, including anger, guilt, blame, detachment, hopelessness and powerlessness, felt by birth parents. What the researchers have not made explicit are the power differentials that exist in terms of contact.

The above observations of supervised contact when viewed with greater scrutiny, highlight the power differentials inherent in contact. He provides instances of when birth parents felt that their behaviours were being observed and assessed and when their utterances were controlled during supervised contact, or when contact was cancelled because birth parents arrived a few minutes late as a result of travel difficulties (2010: 64). It appears that the very concept and practice of contact create a series of power differentials including a lack of standardised frameworks and agreed expectations and an unreal 'fishbowl' set-up including the presence of an obvious observer/assessor who may exercise arbitrary controls over behaviour. Accordingly, the dynamics that are set up in the contact process can set a likelihood of poor outcomes for children and birth parents; these include a child distress, a residue of negative emotions and a sense of birthparent powerlessness.

Three years after Triseliotis, a study by Boddy et al. (2013) provided an insight into the social work practices of four European countries in relation to contact (England, Denmark, France and the

Netherlands). Their cross-national study entailed a critical analysis of academic, policy and what they termed as 'grey literature'[3]. The findings from the study revealed that immediate birth family members and individuals from the wider familial network were often at a distance once the child or young person was placed in care and social work practitioners had a fundamental ambivalence to working with parents (2013: 8). The interviews involving English stakeholders highlighted that the level of conceptualisation in relation to 'contact' was limited and that it was not prioritised, regardless of the child returning home or not (2013:15). This suggests that insufficient consideration was given to why contact was put in place and how beneficial it was for children in care. The study also identified that there was little recognition that children and young people in care may have more than one family that they relate to, and that, this can lead to complex relationships between various family members, for example, with step-brothers and sisters. This lack of recognition has the unintended effect of distancing other family members and could be said to be further evidence of the passive exercise of informal power, power exercised by omission rather than commission.

The findings from the studies mentioned thus far allows us to conclude that contact continues to be problematic and challenging, not only because of a lack of conceptualisation in the United Kingdom (Boddy et al., 2013), but also because of the relative lack of acknowledgement regarding the degree of emotional investment that is regularly embodied in the process of contact. This is often occluded by attention to arrangements such as time, place, travel, facilities. These matters are important yet at the heart of contact is the fact that at one and the same time it represents relationship, yet it is also the embodiment of separation. Nonetheless, this core issue can be occluded, displaced or not addressed. The above raises a question about what children's experiences of contact can tell us about the power dynamics of contact?

In a contribution that sought to redress the imbalance towards adults' views of contact, the former Children's Rights Director for England, Dr Roger Morgan canvassed the views of children and young people regarding their experiences. He and his team spoke to children living away from home in all types of settings (boarding schools, residential special schools, further education colleges, children's homes, family centres, fostering placements and adoptive families, as well as those children and young people who are in receipt of support and help from children's social care). Of the Children's Rights Director reports that exist, the two that hold the greatest relevance in terms of contact are entitled *'Keeping in Touch'* (Morgan, 2009) and '*Children's views on Fostering'* (November, 2012). *'Keeping in Touch'* was derived from the views of 370 children. The key finding of Morgan's work was that children and young people wanted to stay in touch with different members of their birth family. Moreover,

[3] 'Grey' literature included government policy reports, issue statements and policy statements

they also wanted to remain in contact with people who were not birth relatives, but with whom they had some level of emotional connection e.g. close friends of birth family (2009: 9). As part of the survey, the children and young people related their personal experiences of being unable to sustain contact because of their emotional difficulties, or because of the actions of social work practitioners who precluded contact for reasons such as unsatisfactory progress on the part of the birth parent. But regulation of contact was also as a form of 'punishment' when the behaviour of children and young people were deemed to be challenging, with echoes of how contact can be rationed for birthparents, contact would be turned on and off like a tap depending upon their conduct. Similarly, the Children's Commissioner has gathered the views of children in care in England, and these findings indicate that many are of the view that they do not have sufficient contact with their birth family, whilst others have mentioned the importance of maintaining contact with members of their extended family, as well as siblings (2018). It is argued that what has been set out thus far represents evidence as to the continuing power differential that exists within contact. As if the data from studies by those public officials tasked with the job of listening to children is not sufficient, the study by Porter (2019) adds further weight. Porter's study focuses on contact decision-making for Scottish children in care. He found that only in 12% of the records reviewed for the purpose of study was there an explicit statement recording the wishes of the children. It was also noted that there was no recording of the child's views in 64% of the contact decisions. The most recent review of care arrangements in Scotland has found a pressing call for better connections with birth family members and greater power over these, importantly, the review called for children in care to be 'actively supported to develop connections and relationships…' (The Independent Care Review, The Promise, 2020: 23).

Forty years after Rowe and Lambert it seems that little has changed regarding the relative lack of attention to the connections between birth family members and children in care. However, this is unlikely to remain the case. A new dynamic has emerged. The mobile phone.

The Real World and Virtual World: Twenty-first Century Contact and Social Media

This paper has set out the case of a continuing imbalance of power that has existed within contact. The advent of the Internet and mobile communication technology is fundamentally changing this imbalance.

Six percent of children under seven years old have a smartphone, 61% of this age group have their own tablet via which most access the internet. Nearly 20% of under 4 year olds have access to the internet (Ofcom, 2019). These percentages will increase. The scope and ability of modern social media

appliances to facilitate communication between people is staggering. We cannot do justice to all aspects but crucially, smartphones allow access to people and place-finding free services, advice from any sources at any time of the day, enable the users to see and talk to each other across distances and places at any time (one-to-one and in multiples of people), and meet and chat with strangers (including members of family that they have never met). In many ways messaging using social media platforms has replaced letter-writing, telephoning (Dawson, 2017) and even emailing if some of the chatter on the business websites is anything to go by (LaFrance, 2016). So long as there's a signal and the battery is charged, the smart phone and other mobile devices have changed forever the way that information can be received and communicated in a multitude of ways and means. And this has been reinforced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rapid evidence review undertaken by Neil, Copson and Sorensen (2020) in relation to contact during the COVID lockdown in England reveals that there was widespread use of various technological platforms that included Zoom, WhatsApp, Facetime, Microsoft Teams, as well as gaming programmes. Additionally, birth parents, foster carers and social work practitioners have risen to the challenge of creating opportunities for children to continue contact with birth parents and other relatives. Examples include a parent purchasing a colouring book for herself and her child and they simultaneously undertook the activity, sharing their progress with one another. Additionally, foster carers setting up activities such as playing with a favourite toy whilst having virtual contact has proved successful, and also sending daily video clips and pictures to birth parents, particularly in relation to young children (2020:10-12 and 22). The successes also extend to how children responded to the virtual communication they engaged in, there were examples of a number children appearing relaxed and at ease with the technology. On the other hand, there are reports of virtual communication having 'taken the emotion out of contact'. However, the rapid evidence review also points to the fact whilst new technology has been introduced there has not yet been a re-evaluation of any of the informal and formal dynamics in play. In fact, it would seem that regardless of the technology there continues to be the need to control, both formally and informally, contact due to reasons related to the security concerns regarding certain platforms e.g. Zoom; intrusion into the foster home; the management of contact for large siblings groups, as well as birth parents. A social worker is quoted:

"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." (Neil et al, 2020: 12)

In addition, as a caveat, the Review only goes as far as capturing the experiences of adults and not those of children and young people directly (with good reason given the nature of the review and the ethical implications). So, care must be exercised that the review findings do not (inadvertently)

continue the propagation of both a discourse and research that is primarily focused on those who inherently have power, as opposed to those that do not, a central factor in the vast bulk of the research to date.

To sum up, one of the authors of this article has already reported from her study of the use of social media by fostered children to maintain contact with their birth families (Simpson, 2013, 2016, 2017 and 2020). Those papers explain the diverse and inventive uses by children of social media to develop, initiate and maintain links between them and their family networks. The very ubiquity of mobile phones is noted along with the importance of having access to these by the young people in her study. She concludes that as regards the management and exercise of control of contact, especially for adolescent and teenage children, the genie is out of the bottle and that it is nigh impossible to exercise any meaningful control over the use of social media by children in care (in the same way as this is proving impossible in families in general with no experience of care). We posit that Narey (2011 and 2018) and others who suggest that contact ought not to be presumed, speak from an analogue world that fails to appreciate the continuing sense of psychological connectedness that children and young people in care have with their families (Boddy et al., 2013), and how the use of the Internet and mobile communication devices assists with this (Howard, 2012; McDonald, et al., 2014; Greenhow, 2017 and Simpson 2020). The disruption to face-to-face contact caused by COVID 19 (Neil, Copson and Sorensen 2020) makes such appreciation even more pressing.

In conclusion then, what we seem to be witnessing in today's digital world is a democratisation of the process of contact. Hitherto, contact has generally been controlled by social workers and foster parents and this power has not always been experienced as benign. Rather than bewail the fact of the widespread use of social media by children and young people in care and warn of the dangers (see for instance, Fursland, 2010), the advent of social media and its widespread use by these children and young people ought to be actively encouraged. This with a view to supporting relationships that can be viewed as beneficial in the sense of maintaining connections with the birth family and other people that are important (Simpson, 2020; Greenhow, 2017 and McDonald, et al., 2014).

Social media use, approved of or not, marks a qualitative point in the history of contact between children and their birth families, community and friends networks.

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