

Title: Changes in contact visit between foster care children and their birth family during the COVID-19 lockdown in Spain

Abstract

The purpose of this communication is to present the effects of the Spanish lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic on the regime of family contact between foster children and their biological family. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown have had, and will continue to have, a far-reaching impact across all levels of society. Lockdown in Spain meant the restriction of mobility and the impossibility of leaving one's home, except in special situations. Nonetheless, maintaining face-to-face contact between the children and their birth families was not an exception. This is the reason why it is of high importance to know how the children in foster care have experienced and faced this new and worrying situation.

Data were gathered through an online questionnaire in Spain that was completed by 100 foster families, including kinship and non-kinship foster care, from different regions of the country. Of this sample, only 61 foster care families had children in their care who had contact visit with their biological family. The variables analysed before and during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic were: who the child had contact with; frequency of contact; type of contact; the child's attitude and feelings about contact with family members; and if there was no contact during the lockdown, who took the decision. Descriptive and frequency analysis were carried out.

The results show that during the lockdown few children had any type of contact with their familiars (i.e. mother, father, siblings, grandparents or uncles and aunts), but the mother and siblings are the most stable figures. Frequency of contact was reduced but other types of contact were appeared in some cases (i.e. (video) phone calls, by social networks). Feelings like being angry before the contact or the attitude of not wanting to have contact were decreased. In addition, in the majority of cases were the Child Protection System who decided to cease the contact during the COVID-19 lockdown in Spain, and only in one case was the child in foster care.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown have brought about other forms of contact between the foster child and their family members, that may not have been taken into account before. While it is true that face-to-face visits are the most favourable, it is important to promote these other forms of contact, as videophone calls, that also make possible to maintain affective bonds between foster care children and their family. However, more effort and resources should be made to adapt optimally to this new situation. This would also allow the continuity of birth families so that contact is not diminished or ceased, as long as it is beneficial to the child in care. In this process, it would be of particular relevance to listen to the voice of children in care and allow them to contribute with how they would like to live and face the contact with their relatives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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