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Impact of COVID-19 on care and contact

Experiences in the first COVID-19 lockdown on foster carers and young people in their care

RESEARCH SUMMARY

November 2020

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Acknowledgments

The team at Research in Practice would like to thank the young people, carers and birth families who took the time to complete the survey. We would also like to thank Matthew Brazier from Ofsted, Alison O’Sullivan from the National Children’s Bureau, Lucy Peake from Grandparents Plus, Louise Smith from the Local Government Association, Claire Steeksma from the Department for Education and Carolyne Willow from Article 39, for their thoughtful review and input to the report.

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This research was conducted as a partnership between Research in Practice and TACT. The work was also supported by the Children and Families Principal Social Worker Network.

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Introduction

The lockdown introduced in the UK in March 2020 to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching implications, with many of those in and leaving care facing reduced support from social care and restrictions on time spent with their birth families. While schools remained open for small numbers of young people, data released in April 2020 suggested many young people in care were not attending school over lockdown.¹

Research in Practice was approached by TACT in response to anecdotal intelligence that some young people and carers were reporting improvements in wellbeing during lockdown, particularly related to changes with schooling and improved relationships in the home.

To explore these findings, Research in Practice, in collaboration with TACT, designed three separate surveys for young people in care, carers and birth parents. While we had a positive response with over 100 returns from young people and over 300 from carers, these results cannot be considered representative of all young people and carers, and instead provide a valuable insight into these respondents' experiences of lockdown.

The birth parents' survey received only seven responses. We think this is likely a reflection of the limits of our networks, which are orientated towards work with practitioners and carers. To better understand the experiences of birth parents, and those of brothers and sisters, it is necessary to engage people through different networks and forums; organisations such as the Family Rights Group might be better situated to explore birth parents' experiences. It is also worth noting that, due to the distribution and platforms used in the present research, it is likely that respondents were already receiving a degree of professional support and possessed the means and knowledge to access the internet. Were the surveys distributed through different channels and platforms, different experiences might have been reported.

These surveys focused on foster care, but many of the issues are also highly pertinent to kinship care arrangements. Kinship carers and special guardians often face additional challenges of poverty and of complexities around parent contact in a family context. These inequalities and vulnerabilities of many kinship carers in the face of COVID-19 have significantly amplified the need for support on a par with that offered to foster carers. Issues of digital poverty and (for example, for older carers with less experience of online interaction) skills and knowledge development are particularly pertinent.²

Concurrent research³ has further highlighted digital poverty and the importance of ensuring digital access for parents, carers, young people and brothers and sisters. In addition to relevant hardware and software, access to broadband, data, electricity and phone signal are essential. Practical considerations⁴ are also necessary to ensure those involved have the knowledge, skills and confidence to navigate the technology⁵ and ensure safe and sensitive interactions, with pre-defined boundaries⁶ and attention to safeguarding considerations.⁷

1 www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings

2 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2020/october/developing-virtual-support-for-kinship-carers/

3 www.liia.london/covid-19/research-in-practice-covid-19-project

4 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/videos/digital-family-contact-time-sharing-and-building-knowledge

5 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2020/october/developing-virtual-support-for-kinship-carers/

6 www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/digital-contact-childrens-wellbeing

7 www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/lockdown-keeping-in-touch

In respect of the findings themselves, some of the issues raised in the surveys have significant implications, in particular for the ways in which social work interactions and contact/family time⁸ are planned and organised. Further discussions informed by the survey findings need to foreground the rights, needs and wishes of the individual children and families we are working with. We would strongly advocate that these should take precedence over financial considerations – challenging though this is, or the preferences of individual social workers in deciding how to arrange meetings and keep in contact.

The survey responses also raise some serious challenges to us all in how school, for many children in care, can be a source of anxiety and upset, the absence of which was welcomed (at least initially) by a number of respondents. It is important to recognise that, when things are going well, school can also be an important protective factor for children and young people in care. The issue raised is not school versus no school; rather how are schools to provide a trauma-informed setting for children to socialise and learn. There is some excellent work going on around the country to achieve this, see for instance Aspland et al (2020).⁹

Due to the dynamic nature of the pandemic, it is important to situate the results in the broader picture; the present surveys were conducted during June 2020, towards the end of the first lockdown but with restrictions to remain for an indefinite period. The findings described below suggest a blended approach to digital and face-to-face communication, however preferences and evidence of effectiveness might change as the situation progresses, and it is important to maintain open communication which centres the needs and wishes of individual children, young people and their families. While the current research throws light on the views of older children, we would strongly advocate the urgent need to enable physical contact between parents separated from babies and very young children wherever safe and possible. Examples of proactive work by local authorities, and evidence on why this is vital for the rights and developmental needs of parents and infants can be found at the links in the footnote.¹⁰

8 We use the term ‘family time’ throughout as this is preferred by young people, see for example: www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf

9 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2020/february/developing-trauma-informed-practices-in-inner-london-schools-the-itips-pilot-2020/

10 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/parent-infant-contact-in-the-pandemic/; www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/projects/safeguarding-babies-during-the-covid-19-crisis

Summary of findings

- 1.** This report summarises the findings from three questionnaires, which were designed to explore the impact of lockdown on young people in and leaving care. Lockdown began in March 2020 to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and had a substantial impact on the lives of many young people in care. At the time of writing, a three-tier system is in place across England, with local restrictions depending on which tier the area is in; social distancing remains in place across the country.
- 2.** The three questionnaires were designed for: young people in care or with care experience; carers; and birth parents. The surveys were open for a month between June and July 2020 and were distributed via an online survey, with additional promotion via newsletters and social media.
- 3.** In total, there were 116 responses to the young people's survey, 302 to the carers' survey and seven to the birth parents' survey. Due to the number of responses from birth parents, their experiences are presented as a 'case study' and should not be considered representative of the experiences of other birth parents. The carer and young person surveys should also not be considered statistically representative of all carers and young people in care; however the response rates were higher and reflect a valuable sample of the care population. For the young people's survey, the average age of respondents was 13 years old with a minimum age of 6; therefore the results should not be considered representative of care experience for young children. As only a minority of respondents were under 11, we use the term 'young people' throughout to generalise findings.
- 4.** Many young people and carers described how lockdown had given them more quality time to spend with families or those they live with; over 90% of those in foster care reported relationships at home had improved or stayed the same during lockdown.
- 5.** There were mixed views on virtual family time. While some felt it was a more flexible and convenient option which gave young people more control over the situation, the lack of physical contact was an issue for some, as was the additional responsibility this placed on foster carers to help manage family time.
- 6.** In respect of virtual contact with social workers / personal advisors, over 80% of young people and 90% of carers felt this was the same or better than their contact prior to lockdown, citing increased availability and convenience. However, some people felt there had been a reduction in the amount of contact, and this was particularly apparent for those who experienced a change of social worker over lockdown and did not have an opportunity to meet them.
- 7.** Experiences of home-schooling were also mixed, with some young people thriving due to the flexibility and one-to-one support from carers, and others struggling with the lack of routine and reduction in social contact. Carers also raised how the individualised attention supported some young people's learning; however some foster carers commented on the considerable responsibility and time commitments of home-schooling.
- 8.** The wellbeing of children and young people varied considerably over lockdown, with some enjoying the experience and increased free time, and others missing the structure of school and relationships with friends and family. Many reported looking forward to lockdown restrictions easing, while also hoping to maintain the increased quality time lockdown had given their families / households.

Implications for practice

1. Where age-appropriate, virtual family time can be a valuable tool in some cases, giving young people control of the interaction, including when it ends and how it occurs. However, care should be taken in maintaining boundaries and ensuring young people are still able to have important physical / face-to-face family time – particularly with brothers and sisters – wherever safe and possible.
 - a. Considerations should also be given to younger children, who might struggle to engage virtually and without physical ‘play’ stimuli.
 - b. Video games and apps might also be explored as options for connecting virtually, for brothers and sisters in particular.
 - c. There might also be an appetite from foster carers for additional support around arrangements and supervision of virtual family time.
2. Social workers making use of virtual and remote contact are able to maintain relationships with families where there are pre-existing relationships, and this may in fact be an approach which enables more regular communication. However, where relationships are being established or changing, a face-to-face relationship is important.
3. Where virtual communication and contact with birth families and social workers is utilised, it is important that this complements, rather than replaces face-to-face contact and is offered as an option for those who wish to engage this way. Flexibility and control were central to the benefits described for these methods of contact.
4. The increase in quality time foster families spent together during lockdown was commented on by many young people and carers, with a large majority feeling that their relationships had improved or stayed the same during this time. This finding highlights how for many, dedicated time together can promote foster family relationships.
5. Although the majority of young people and carers seem to have benefitted from additional time together in the household and the relationship building that goes along side this, it has not been positive for everyone, and a case-by-case approach is crucially important. Furthermore, despite some benefits, most young people were still keen for lockdown to end due to the absence of contact with their friends and extended network outside of the household – including school friends.
6. Access to technology and a stable telephone / internet connection are both essential for people to engage in virtual family time. It is important to ensure young people, carers and birth parents have access and support to use these; further work might also engage with young people and families who are unable to access the above, to explore how they might best be supported.
7. Further work might also be necessary to hear the voices of younger children and those unable to engage with this survey. For instance, virtual family time may not form a suitable alternative for children who cannot engage and care should be taken to consider individual circumstances when recommending digital approaches. Further consideration should be taken for young people with physical or learning disabilities who may be less able to engage with these technologies, and further research is necessary before making any recommendations in this area.
8. In summary, the present lockdown has highlighted some positive messages as a result of social care adaptations, including increased time as a family and the use of technology to increase the frequency of communication between social care professionals and families. However, there are also some cautionary notes related to ensuring any use of digital alternatives is done with young people in a way that gives them choice and control of their relationships, and also acknowledges the importance of relationships outside of their home with friends and extended family. Crucially, digital substitutes can be a valuable tool for social care professionals, but only when used in a strengths-based and person-centred way; the COVID-19 lockdown has provided some valuable lessons which may support practice going forward.

Overview of surveys

An overview of respondents and findings can be found in the table, with further details in the respective sections below.

Table 1: Overview of survey responses

Survey (n responses)	Young people's age ranges	Young people's living arrangements	Findings
Young people (116)	6 – 23	74% in foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 96% felt relationships with foster families had improved or stayed the same. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activities they reported doing together included school work, cooking and chatting. > Mixed views on virtual family time; 59% felt this had remained the same and 26% felt it had got worse. > 84% felt contact with social care had improved or remained the same. > Wellbeing varied greatly but many young people were looking forward to lockdown ending and spending time with family and friends again.
Carers (302)	0 – 17+	92% foster carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 89% felt relationships with the child / young person in their care had stayed the same or improved. > Mixed views on virtual family time; 46% felt the quality of family time had remained the same and 37% felt it had got worse. > 90% felt the amount of contact with social workers had improved or remained the same. > Variations in wellbeing were reported and carers generally wanted social contact and schooling to return to normal, while hoping for the increased family time to remain.
Birth parents (7)	5 – 17+	86% in care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > As seven responses were received from birth parents, these were summarised as a case study, to provide an overview of respondents' experiences. > Birth parents appreciated being able to see their children during lockdown, though some felt the amount of contact had reduced. Most found the lack of face-to-face contact extremely difficult. > Experiences of contact with social care varied, with differing reports as to whether it had increased, decreased or stayed the same. Birth parents expressed a wish to receive updates about the wellbeing of their children. > There were also variations in parental wellbeing reported; birth parents generally described looking forward to lockdown ending and being able to see their children face-to-face again.

Young people survey

- > There were 116 young people aged 6 – 23 who completed the young people’s survey, with 74%¹¹ living in foster care. The average age of respondents was 13.3 years (SD = 3.28).
- > Relationships and connections were key themes emerging across questions and there were reports that, for some, lockdown has led to an increase of quality time with those they live with; 83% of children and young people in foster care reported spending more time with their foster families during lockdown, while 96% felt relationships with foster families had improved or stayed the same.
 - Activities they reported doing together included school work, cooking and chatting.
- > There were mixed views about virtual family time, with 59% feeling family time was the same as before lockdown, 26% feeling it was worse and 15% better. Young people appreciated the flexibility and convenience of virtual family time, but missed being able to hug their family members.
- > The amount of contact with social care over lockdown was generally thought to have remained the same or increased by 62% of respondents.
 - Some preferred the virtual contact while others noted they had had less support, particularly those who had experienced a change of social worker.
- > Challenges which emerged across questions related to a loss of routine and sources of support, such as friends and teachers, who were less available during this time.
- > In general young people reported looking forward to lockdown ending, though some hoped that positive elements, relationships in particular, could be maintained.

Carers Survey

- > There were 302 carers who completed this survey, 92% were foster carers and the young people in their care ranged in age from 0 to 17+ years.
- > Most carers (89%) felt their relationship with the child or young person in their care had remained the same or improved, citing more time, less pressure and a closer bond. However, for some their relationship with the child or young person had been strained.
- > Over half of children and young people were reported by carers to have taken part in virtual family time and this was felt to be broadly the same (46%) or slightly worse than normal (37%). For some there were positive impacts such as less travelling and family time being more relaxed, but concerns were raised around children and young people missing face-to-face contact and supervising virtual family time being an additional pressure for carers.
- > Carers broadly felt they had received similar or increased levels of contact with their social workers during lockdown (90%). Some carers noted that virtual contact was responsive and that social workers were easier to access because they were less busy due to reduced travel; however, some carers did miss face-to-face support.

¹¹ Responses are rounded to the nearest percentage point

- > Carers reported mixed views around school depending on the needs of the child, with 37% feeling the change in schooling had not impacted the family, 26% feeling it had improved things and 38% feeling it had made things worse. Home-schooling was noted as flexible and in some cases improving the quality and quantity of learning. Many carers felt one-to-one time was beneficial, especially if the child had additional needs.
 - However carers raised concerns about the potential impact of reduced social interactions, the lack of routine and challenges with motivation. The considerable additional pressure home-schooling placed on carers was also raised.
- > Carers' reports suggest that lockdown has had a varied impact on children and young people's wellbeing. For some it has been very positive, reducing pressure and slowing the pace of life, for others there has been less change, and for a final group lockdown has been detrimental for their wellbeing, increasing anxiety and removing routines. For some carers this has been an extremely challenging time, supporting children and young people with little opportunity for a rest or break and often juggling other challenges.
- > Looking ahead carers hoped that increases in family time and the kindness and community spirit of lockdown would continue, whilst a large number wished to see a return to normal regarding social contact and a return to school, leisure activities and family time.

Birth parents survey

- > Seven responses were received to the birth parents' survey and as a result responses are presented as a case study, to give an overview of respondents' experiences. This cannot be considered representative of the experiences of other birth parents.
- > Birth parents who engaged with virtual family time with their children appreciated the flexibility afforded by this method, however missed face-to-face contact and being able to give hugs. Some difficulties in respect of technology and arranging family time with foster carers were also described.
- > There were mixed views about experiences with social care with some birth parents feeling contact had increased and others feeling it had decreased. Some birth parents also expressed a wish to receive updates from social care about the wellbeing of their children.
- > There was also a mixed response to questions about wellbeing, however overall birth parents rated their wellbeing as fairly low. In general, birth parents were looking forward to the easing of lockdown restrictions and hoped to resume face-to-face family time with their children.

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