Contact for children in long-term care

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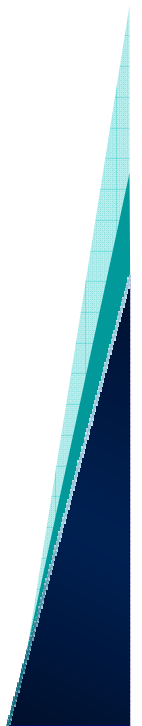**Social Policy Research Unit**

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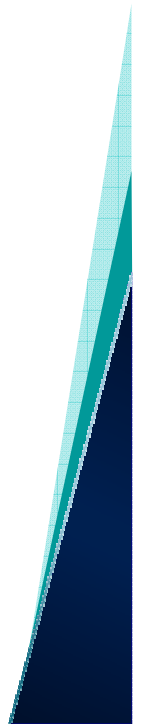nina.biehal@york.ac.uk

Values and aspirations

Arguments for contact between children and families

- ◆ The rights of children

- ◆ The rights of parents

- ◆ To maintain a sense of identity
  - ◆ Continued sense of belonging to the birth family

- ◆ To reduce the child's sense of loss

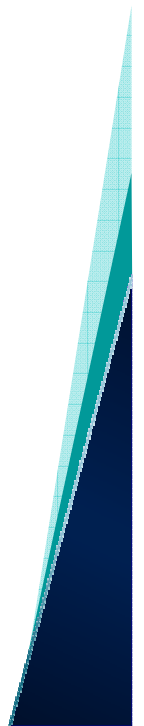- ◆ Because the family will support the child when he or she leaves care

Claims about the effects of contact

- Claims have been made that contact:
  - Has a positive effects on children's emotional and behavioural development
  - Reduces the risk of placement disruption
  - Promotes the reunification of children with families

- BUT the research evidence that it has a direct, and positive, effect on children is limited and inadequate (*see Quinton et al 1997)*
  - We don't know that contact *does* have these positive effects and we don't know that it *doesn't*

- No direct relationship: it's more complex
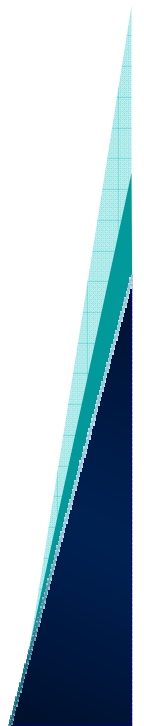 - e.g. link between contact and reunification

Example: contact and reunification

◆ Research evidence: children who have less contact remain longer in care (and vice versa)

◆ This has led to claims that contact is the key to reunification

◆ BUT the research evidence:

  ◆ Just *describes* the association between contact & reunion

  ◆ It does not *explain* this link – contact may not be causal

◆ Although research has shown that children who stay in care less than 6 months have more contact, this does not mean that contact *causes* an early return to families
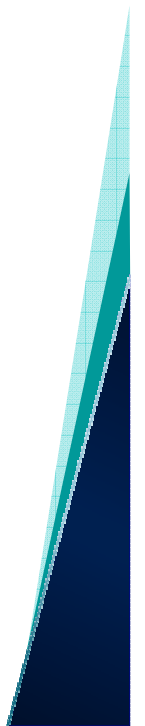
Factors linked to contact & reunification

- Factors associated with the chance of reunification:
  - Reasons for the placement (risk to child)
  - Social workers' own contact
  - Purposeful planning by social workers
  - Child behaviour
  - Change in parents' capacity to care for child
  - Child and parent motivation
  - Quality of parent/child relationship
- These factors influence *both:*
  - Whether/how often child has contact with family
  - Whether child is reunified with family

Contact for children in long-term care

◆ Contact may raise particularly complex issues for children in *long-term* care

◆ The majority of children who are in long-term care are there due to serious abuse or neglect

◆ Many children may want continuing contact

◆ The *quality* of contact is important

 ◆ contact may often be positive for the child

 ◆ but it may also be difficult and uncertain

Study of children fostered long-term............

Belonging and Permanence study

196 children in long-term placements in 7 English authorities

- ◆ in foster care in 1998/9* *and*, 3 years later, were either:
- ◆ still living with the same foster carers (in *index placement*)
- ◆ *or* had been adopted (by their foster carers or by strangers)
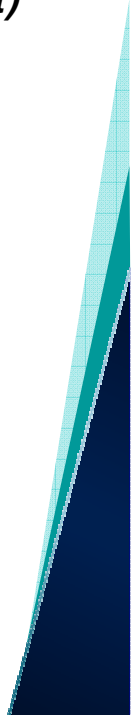

1. **Follow-up survey 4-5 years later** (7+ years after index placement)

- ◆ Postal questionnaires to adopters/foster carers & social workers

2. Qualitative study

- ◆ Interviews with 37 children and foster carers or adoptive parents

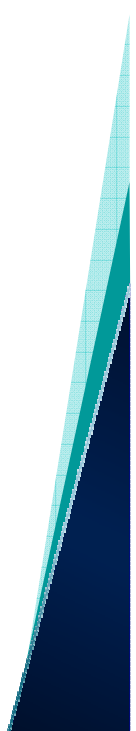** Studied by Ian Sinclair et al (2005)*

What happened to the children?

Placements 7+ years after entry to index foster placement

1. Adopted   39% *(77)*

2. Stable foster care   32% *(63)*
   - ◆ still with index foster carers 7+ years later

3. Unstable care career   19% *(37)*
   - ◆ had moved to a new placement

4. Other   10% *(19)*

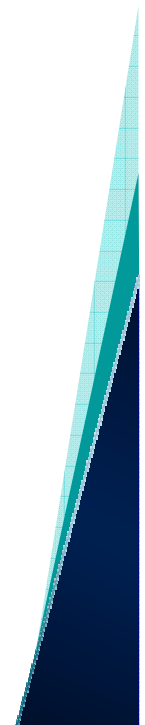*Will talk about the 99 children still in care placements*
- ◆ *89 of these were in foster placements (+10 in residential care)*

How many had face to face contact?

% of group

	Stable foster care n=57	Unstable care n=36
Face to face - mother	74	75
• *Sees mother (at least) monthly*	*31*	*37*
Face to face - father	37	44
• *Sees father (at least) monthly*	*12*	*20*
Face to face - either/both parents	77	86
Face to face - siblings	86	97
• *In same placement as a sibling*	*42*	*15*

Contact forbidden

Contact was forbidden for 25% of the fostered children (due to risk to child)

- ◆ Usually forbidden with father, mother or both
- ◆ Many could still see siblings

How much contact did children want?
Foster carers' views

- 'Child has as much contact as he/she wants' (n=72)
    - Not at all   25%
    - To some extent   25%
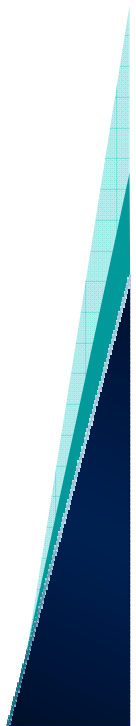   - To a large extent   44%

- Children who had no contact: child's feelings about this

	with mother (n=24)	with father (n=21)
Distressed	29%	24%
Ambivalent	25%	33%
Content	46%	44%

Quality of contact: positive views

- Most carers thought contact was a positive experience for child, at least to some extent
    - To a large extent   51%
    - To some extent   34%

- Social workers were more likely than carers to view the contact as positive
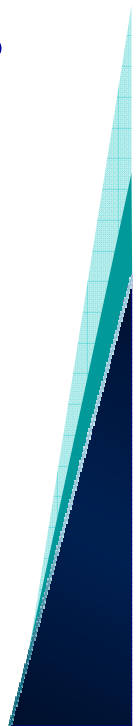   - Foster carers agreed with them in only 38-56% of cases where social workers rated contact positively

Problems with the quality of contact

1. ## Foster Carer views

   1.   *To a large extent*

   ◆ Problems over regularity of contact   11%

   ◆ Child upset by how treated during contact   18%

   ◆ Exposed to serious risk during contact   10%

2. Social worker reports

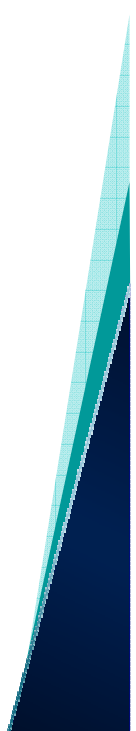   ◆ 4% of those children who had contact had been

   re-abused during contact

Foster carer views of contact

◆**Many carers were positive, especially the carers of children with unstable care histories**

"I like his mum and dad so I don't mind the contact and sometimes I do wish that he had more contact....
I understand that it's difficult, so I don't want to encourage something that's not going to happen" (Carer of Johnny, unstable care)

◆ **But some worried about the care children received**

" I saw the bond slipping, mainly because of what she was doing to them they went to visit her....the boys used to turn up and she'd never be up for them, she'd never have food in for them, there would be strange people there that frightened the boys." (Carer of Nathan, stable foster care)

Carer views about the effects on children

◆ **35% of children were upset by unpredictability of contact**

"Their dad has always been in and out of their lives....He'd phone them once a week and then they wouldn't hear from him for months." (Carer of Aidan, stable foster care)

" (I'm) worrying all the time, what's it going to be today? Is she going to turn up, is Sheila going to get upset 'cos mum's not going to be there?"
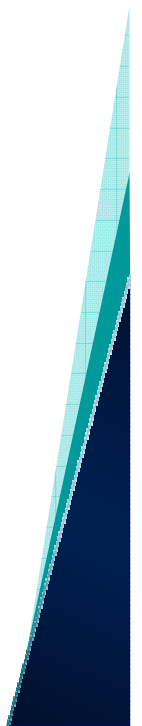
◆ **Some worried about the effects on the children**

"It used to be awful. He used to be very anxious before a contact so that he would misbehave and be really naughty at school, because all he could think about was this contact he was going to have. And then when he went back to school the next day after contact, again we'd have some upset because of what happened during the contact." (Carer of Brian, stable foster care)

Children's perceptions of contact

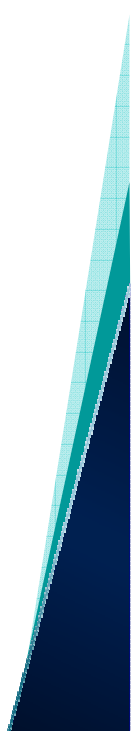Children feelings about contact were linked to:

- ◆ their histories of separation
  - ◆ age at separation, reasons for separation

- ◆ their histories of placement

- ◆ the actions of their parents

- ◆ the way they made sense of their histories

- ◆ their sense of belonging to the foster family

Contact and the child's sense of belonging

◆ Children in stable foster care (with same carer for 7+ years)
   ◆ Primary identification with foster family

   or

   ◆ Reconciles belonging to both families

   or

   ◆ Qualified sense of belonging to foster family

◆ Unstable care
   ◆ Long-term foster placement had ended
   ◆ Had been in current placement 0-4 years (mean stay 1.46 years)

1. Stable: primary identification with foster family

3 Children interviewed (age 10-14 years)

◆ 2 placed with carer as infants and 1 at age 4 years

◆ viewed foster carers *'as if'* they were parents

◆ carer sense of entitlement/child accepts 'parental' role

◆ no direct contact with parents

    ◆ contact forbidden (1 child) *or*

    ◆ parents (drug-dependent) did not contact, or ceased contact

REECE (age 10)

Foster carer "(His mother) never even asked to speak to him, it's really just like he didn't exist. I mean she knew he'd been really ill and never once did she ring up.....I think it's better for him to have no contact.....there's been no influence, it's just been easier..."

Child " I don't mind really if I don't see my real parents....when I'm old enough I'm allowed to see them."

2. Stable: reconciles belonging to both families

3 children interviewed (age 14-17 years)

- placed with carer at age 5-9 years
- did not idealise parents, but one was a little preoccupied
- viewed carers as *'just like'* true parents (parents not 'replaced')
- regular, mainly satisfactory contact
  - Parents keen to maintain contact
  - Contact not forbidden due to risk

SARAH

Visited mother regularly (alternate weekends), took friends along
Happily settled in foster care, spoke of having two 'mothers.

Child " Well (contact) is about right ....I like going to see her...she's really nice, she's quite small, like me. She has a laugh as well. She likes to take us out but sometimes she can't, She likes to do more with us, more contact, so she's already got more contact...She buys us sweets. ..buys us presents so, basically, things like a normal parent."

3. Stable: a qualified sense of belonging

5 children, age 13-16 years

- ◆ placed at age 2-7 years
- ◆ all were rejected by parents, 4 abused or neglected
- ◆ ambivalence, hurt and anger towards parents
- ◆ some ambivalence to foster carers (conflicts of loyalty)
  - ◆ intermittent, unsatisfactory contact

MAURICE (age 15)

Foster carer " He loves his mum to bits.....(Contact) just screws him up, just screws his head up all of the time"

Child "It's alright some of the time, but we argue a lot...I don't know why, I think she just likes the argument or the attention or something. Sometimes she, like, goes into one of these moods."
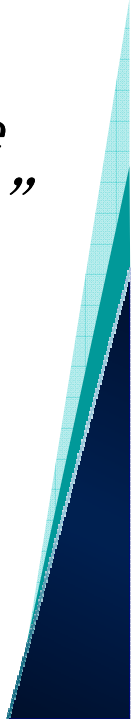
4. Unstable care

7 children interviewed (age 10-16 years)

◆ unstable group entered care later (mean age 5 yrs)

◆ previous long-term foster placements had broken down

◆ in current placement 2-4 years

◆ Most children wanted contact and most carers thought contact was important

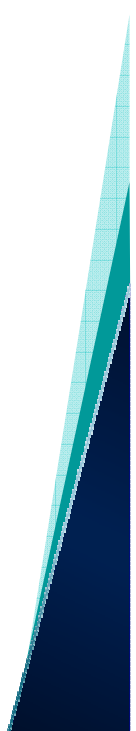*Foster carer "I think Daniel needs to know that they're still there and he really does love his mum and dad."*

Daniel "I love to see my mum and dad. Once a month, but when that can't happen I don't really mind as long as I can see them."

4. Unstable care: child and carer views

Foster carer "Monica needs an identity. She can't identify with us, she 's our foster daughter...deep down she needs a sense of who she is...she needs those questions answered from them."

Monica " It's like you get picked up during the day and then the night, you suddenly drop, it's like this really thin rope and then when they leave it's, like, cut and it has to start all over again. You have to build yourself back up to see them again and then it all goes again when you've done it, it's hard.
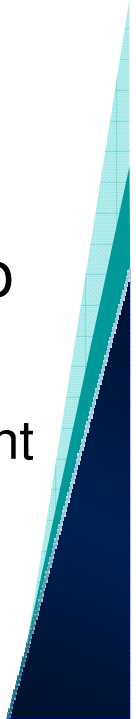
Children's views of contact with families

◆ Important to understand contact in the context of children's histories and current circumstances

Children's feelings about contact were linked to:

◆how they made sense of their parents' past and recent behaviour (their mental representations of parents)

◆to their age at separation from parents:

   ◆ Children separated very young rarely longed for contact

   ◆ Some children separated at an older age were happy with the contact they had, others yearned to see parents, others were angry with them.

◆how they made sense of their own histories

◆how far they felt they belonged in the foster family

◆to some extent, to the carers' attitudes to contact

Conclusion

- Most children were in regular contact with families,

    - but only about 1/3 saw parents at least monthly

    - high levels of contact with siblings

- The quality of contact was variable

- Children's feelings about contact were often complex

    - Some found it unproblematic

    - others were ambivalent about it, or upset by it

- Children's feelings about contact were closely related to

    - their feelings about belonging to the foster family/ birth family

    - their care histories e.g. age at placement, stability of placement

    - the actions of their parents

    - their mental representations of their parents and of their own histories

References

Nina Biehal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker and Ian Sinclair (2010) *Belonging and Permanence. Outcomes in Long-term Foster Care and Adoption*. London: BAAF.

Summary www.DFE-RBX-09-11.pdf (*Characteristics outcomes and meanings of three types of permanent placement*).

Ian Sinclair, Claire Baker, Kate Wilson & Ian Gibbs (2005) *Foster Children. Where They Go and How They Get On*. London: JKP.

Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C.and Mayes, D. (1997) 'Contact between children placed away from home and their birth parents: research issues and evidence' *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 2 (3) pp.393-413.

Jim Wade, Nina Biehal, Nicola Farrelly and Ian Sinclair (2011) *Caring for Abused and Neglected Children. Making the Right Decisions on Reunification or Long-term Care.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Summary: www.DFE-RBX-10-06 (*Outcomes for maltreated children*)