

Contact families in Sweden – a preventive supporting intervention or a kind of placement for children and teenagers?

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What is a contact Family



- The contact family is a special method for supporting children in families with social problems
- Contact family support is decided on and paid for by the Social Welfare service in the municipality where the child lives with the biological family.
- It's either a family that is recruited by the social service or a family from the child's social network.
- The contact family is regarded as a volunteer, but is paid as small fee monthly.

What is a contact family (2)

- It's a back-up, an extra resource for parent and child.
- The child stays with the contact family one/two week-ends a month, and maybe also some week-days and holiday-weeks
- The child is treated as a family-member and participate in the every-day life of the contact family.
- This form of social support is the most frequently used in social work with children and their families in Sweden. Some 22,000 children are recipients of this form of support and relief, both for the children and their parents.

Design of the research study



- 50 children in 38 families, living in 4 different areas (municipalities of different kind)
- Methods and material: Interviews and documentation yrs. 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008

(Social Services acts and the municipalities' activity plans)

- Interviews with social workers (40 + 40 + 12)
- Interviews with a cluster of the children (12), and their parents and their contact parents (40 + 40), in 2000 and 2006.

Some results 1

The social situation for the children

- 40 children lived with only one parent.
- 34 children had bad or non-existing contact with the other parent.
- 4 children lost a parent during the investigation period.
- 34 children had at least one parent with drug problems or mental disorders.
- 40 children had a bad network.
- 30 children had experienced violence in the family.
- 33 children had their own social problems (school, neurological disorders etc).

The Contact Family support as a developing potential?

- 17 children had also been placed in their contact family as a foster family in shorter or longer periods.
- 35 children had an additional support, (in school, at home, or as a foster care)
- 17 children had had a contact family support for more than five years.

Aims of the support for the children

- To give the children access to “ordinary family life”
- To give the children access to other adults and good parental models
- To give the children social confidence
- To give the children stability in everyday life
- To enable the children to develop better emotional stability

Aims for the children, part 2

- To enable the children to be seen, confirmed and have security
- To give the children a good social development
- To give the children a chance to spend time away from home and have some fun
- To give the children knowledge about social limits and their surrounding world
- To give the children a substitute who can compensate somewhat for the lack of contact with the absent parent

Disadvantages for the children?

- Being separated from the family could cause feelings of jealousy and separation
- Being afraid of what could happen to the parent if left alone too much
- Difficulties to understand and cope with different rules and regulations in the two family-systems and the loneliness of this situation.
- Being assigned a contact family when the need is actually more extensive and requires foster home care instead.
- Being abandoned by the Contact Family after several years of visiting their home.

Supporting factors for the Children

- The contact family can be supportive as a relief to the parent. They can also help in dealing with conflicts in the family by giving this relief to the lonely parent.
- The contact family can be a support or have a complementary function in the upbringing of the child.
- The contact family can give support to the child in terms of prediction, confirmation and belonging. Sometimes also they become the “significant other” for the child.

Contact Family – a support with many combinations (or roles) for the individual child?



- Contact Family as support and relief
- Contact Family to give a complementary parent care
- Contact Family as acute foster home
- Contact Family that from the beginning is planned to become a foster home
- Contact Family that becomes a foster home after many years
- A foster home that becomes Contact Family
- Contact Family becomes a form of boarding home

13:15 The voice of a child

Why I go there? Well because I have fun there and because I like them so very much. It feels like they are my family, like relatives but in a strange way...like second cousins maybe? I have known them as long as I can remember.

Titti (13), who came to the family as a foster child when she was 3 years, and have had them as her contact family since she was 6 years old.

The voice of a parent

”The knowledge that they exist and could take care of my son if I was taken ill or something... I can think of that while lying awake at night, that they care for him and would be there if something happened to me”.

Rosa, the mother of **Ruben** (12)

The voice of a social worker

“The aim is that the boy should be able to continue to live at home with his father, that the contact between father and son can be normalized. That the boy will be able to develop in a normal way to have a good life, both as a child and when he grows up.” About **Sonny** (10)

Children's participation

- Children's participation in the assessments needs more consideration.
- More work needs to be done to involve children in the continued process of planning and decision-making concerning the contact-family interventions.
- Children need to be more involved in the following-up during the on-going intervention.
- More work needs to be done to involve children in the ending of the intervention, to say good-bye and to tell their experiences.

How to involve the Child more?

- To inform the child about the results of the investigation, why was the particular decision made? (“Not what you wanted but...”)
- What is the reason for the Intervention being given? (“It’s because...”)
- When, where and how?
- How do you want me to keep in touch with you?

What's next?

- An on-going project (with Stockholm, Capital of Sweden) about how to develop the Process of contact family intervention
- Focus-group with contact families about their experiences and their relationship with the biological family.
- Interviews with "Young Adults" about their experiences of spending time in a Contact family during their childhood.



At last

Thank's for Your Attention!

Welcome to contact me

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