

Twenty-first Century Contact: the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet by young people in care

Abstract

This article contributes to the growing area of research appertaining to the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet by children in care in order to maintain contact with family and friends. It is based on a triadic method of semi-structured interviews with 12 young people and their foster carers and social work practitioners. The study found that the young people 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'. The opportunities provided for this by the new technology enabled immediacy, reach and communication in real time and duration; all features that allowed them to control the 'who, how and when' of their relationships. But despite the potential of the new communication methods to bring 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.

Key words

Contact, foster carers, smartphones, Internet, risk, birth parents

Introduction

The 2017 review of foster care in England by Baginsky and colleagues (DfE, 2017) identified a number of new developments and challenges. Among these were issues associated with young people's contact with birth relatives and friends, noting it's benefits and dangers in different situations. Interestingly, it also identified a difference between contact as defined by legislation and the practical interpretation and application by young people. The review suggested that new technologies, such as mobile communication devices and access to the Internet, not only increase opportunities for contact but also change how contact is perceived by different people involved in the care process.

To the author's knowledge this is the first study that focuses on young people in care in their current placement and how they make use of the mobile communication devices and the Internet for contact. As such, attention will be focused upon exactly how the young people in care carried out this form of contact and the format it took. Additionally, attention will be given to whether the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet either enhanced or hindered communication between the young people in care and individuals from their familial and friendship networks.

Children in care

The Children Act 1989 emphasises that children are best served by their birth parent(s) unless it is absolutely essential for the state to intervene. Therefore, there is a presumption in social work practice in favour of contact and a predisposition towards children continuing to enjoy relations with members of their immediate birth family and others who are emotionally important to them. Consequently, Government guidance states that local authorities have 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 not consistent with the child's welfare (DCS Families, 2010: 2). However, these intentions mask the practicalities of organising contact and the possible risks associated with it, not just for the children but also for their birth parents, foster carers and social work practitioners.

The demographic details for England shows that 39% of children in care are aged between 10 and 15 years of age and 23% are over 16. The statistics also show that many young people enter care in mid-childhood, meaning they are likely to have significant and potentially long-standing relationships with relatives and friends they will wish to continue, despite being placed in care. It is likely that the ability to remain in contact has been greatly eased in recent years by the use of mobile devices and the Internet (Fursland, 2010; Simpson, 2013; Sen, 2015).

Forms of contact

Depending on the reasons why a child comes into care and his or her developmental needs, contact whether supervised, facilitated, supported or unsupported and can take a number of forms, such as face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, overnight visits and letters. The settings for meetings also vary and may include foster and birth family homes, residential units, children's centres, local authority offices and outside venues such as McDonalds. However, the research literature suggests that contact often takes place in an environment that is unfamiliar and this adversely affects the nature and quality of the experience (Cleaver, 1998:35 and 140; Triseliotis, 2010; The Office of the Children's Rights Director 2009, 2012). The Coram/BAAF publication *Best Practice in Supervised Contact* (Slade, 2010: 27) suggests ways of easing the 'abnormality and artificiality of supervised contact', noting the importance of the 'psychology of environment' and the need for privacy and homeliness. But despite these efforts, the recent review of fostering by Narey and Owers (2018) found that many settings for contact were not 'conducive to a pleasant and successful experience for all parties' (2018:88). In terms of practical organisation and management of contact this is often carried out by foster carers (Macaskill, 2002; Triseliotis et al. 2000 and Wade et al, 2011). During contact visits children and young people may be subject to the repeated negative and rejecting behaviours that may have led to them being placed in the care of the local authority. Alternatively, the child/young person may be showered with gifts and promises of returning home within a short period of time contrary to the details denoted in the Care Plan (see James et al., 2008; 2010; Wilson and Sinclair, 2004 and the Department for Education, 2012). Regarding the frequency of contact, this is dependent upon the Care Plan as devised by the Social Work practitioner and the wishes of the child in care at that time. These arrangements can change, particularly if any problems are identified. For example, a negative emotional response on the part of the child in care may result in contact being reduced or removed altogether (Neil, Beek and Schofield, 2003a and The Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2009a).

Perspectives on contact

The literature in relation to contact outlines a variety of perspectives. Beginning with that of the birth family Millham and colleagues (1986) noted a tendency for it to decline the longer the child is in care and that the feelings experienced by birth parent(s) at the loss of their children can have a detrimental impact on parent-child interaction during contact. According to Millham et al., birth parents often *'feel frozen out.....but it also reflects their powerlessness to intervene, their lack of role and their feelings of guilt and inadequacy'* (1986 p.117). Subsequent studies have highlighted the significance of the young people's extended family and the importance of grandparents and step siblings (Neil and Howe 2004). These studies highlight that grandparents, like birth parents, experienced negative feelings of loss, guilt and shame, but the intensity of these feelings was dependent on the extent of participation that grandparents had in the daily care of the child. The literature in relation to fostering makes limited reference to other relatives, such as aunts, uncles or family friends, except when the children or young people in care repeatedly mentioned their desire for contact with individuals beyond the immediate birth family (The Office of the Children's Rights Director for England, 2009a and 2012b).

Social work practitioners, in contrast, have mostly expressed more cautious views about the effects of contact and these probably reflect difficulties associated with contact (. A cross-national study by Boddy and colleagues (2013) revealed that immediate birth family members and those from wider network were often placed at a distance once the child or young person was placed in care. This study also suggested that social work practitioners were ambivalent about working with parents and there was little recognition by practitioners that a child in care may have more than one family (2013, p.8) An important message coming from the work of Boddy et al., (2013) is that although young people were living away from home in fostering settings, their family relationships remained 'psychologically present' (p.13) and could not be ignored. Although obviously wishing the best for the child or young person in their care, they often have to deal with the emotional turmoil before and after visits and anger when the child/young person is let down by the unreliability of their birth parent(s). Also, where foster carers are not present at the contact visit, it is often hard for them to know what went on and what was decided, but their

involvement in a contact visit is likely to create an artificial and possibly tense atmosphere. Consequently, identifying the fact that for successful contact there is the need for empathic and skilled management of a variety of needs and agendas (Schofield and Stevenson, 2009: 198)

The literature highlights that foster carers face difficulties and frustrations with contact. They may have to deal with the emotional responses and behaviours exhibited by children in care either before or after contact. Manifestation of psychological distress can include crying, angry/violent outbursts, as well as psychological factors such as bedwetting (Macaksill, 2002; Schofield et al., 2009 and 2011).

Contact, mobile communication devices and the Internet

A number of studies (Greenhow, et al., 2017; McDonald, et al., 2014 and Wilson, 2016) have explored how children who are in care or have been adopted use mobile communication devices and the Internet for contact with people they value, mostly members of their family. Greenhow studied ten adoptive families and charted what she called 'virtual contact' and drew out the practice implications for adoptive parents and social work practitioners. A similar study focusing on looked after children (MacDonald, et al., 2014) entailed an examination of how young people in both residential and foster placements use mobile phones for contact. Eight senior managers and 20 care home managers were interviewed and a survey of foster carers yielded 128 replies.

Greenhow identified that virtual contact followed a pattern of communication that began with regular exchanges but which reduced over time and was replaced by infrequent communication and information gained from online updates on social media. However, despite the decline in communication over time, virtual contact did allow for natural family-like communication. Importantly, it was noted that there were positive opportunities associated with virtual contact for adopted children. The McDonald study (2016) also noted

that children and young people benefitted from the immediacy that mobile communication devices allow (p. 834) and recognised that those who did not want direct contact with certain individuals could keep other lines of communication open through the use of the new technology.

The research by Sarah Wilson (2016) offers a different perspective, referring to an 'economy of dignity' that is grounded in mobile communication devices having the ability to sustain pre-existing relationships. Her study focused on the sensory, material and spatial construction of (not) belonging among young people who were separated from their biological parents (p. 285). Unsurprisingly, respondents emphasised the importance of social networking sites they could access, leading Wilson to conclude that young people in care could exercise considerable self-care through the use of the new technologies.

The response by foster carers and social work practitioners to the use of mobile communication devices

Although there has been limited research as to how foster carers and social work practitioners are responding to children's use of mobile communication devices, one survey, the *Online Safety Foster Carer Survey of 2016* (Guardian Saints, 2017), was written by a group of concerned parents and carers about the dangers of the online world for vulnerable young people. The authors of this survey obtained the views of 329 carers, 58% of whom were caring for young people between 11-17 years of age, key findings highlighted challenges in relation to mobile devices, such as mobile phones purchased by birth parents and the use of free Wi-Fi hotspots (Guardian Saints, 2017: 12). It also noted that mobile phones were particularly difficult to manage as they were unable to apply controls to the devices in the same way that they could with computers and their own personal Wi-Fi. Another important finding from the survey is the age of foster carers and their confidence with technology. A similar finding was identified by The Children's Commissioner (2017). The conclusion of that study was that in fostering placements, access to the Internet

depended on the carers' own digital skills and that a lack of such ability led to an alarmist and overly cautious approach.

In relation to social work practitioner's experiences of young people's use of mobile communication devices and the Internet, the literature is primarily concerned with how it affects safeguarding (see Sage and Sage, 2016; Boddy and Dominelli, 2016; Breyette and Hill, 2015; Mishna, et al., 2012 and Reamer, 2013). Fursland (2010) refers to the risks in relation to children in care making use of the Internet, thereby reinforcing the narrative of risk, whilst Simpson (2013) focused on why children in care pursue unregulated contact and in doing so referred to the neural and cognitive development of adolescents and the associated impact of attachment (2013 p.382). Simpson (2016) also suggested that there is a divergence of opinion taking place in child and family social work about the use of mobile devices by children and young people in care and this is influencing how practitioners respond to the risks and opportunities afforded by the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet. In a similar vein, both Ballantyne et al., (2010), as well as Willoughby (2018) stated that there is a necessity for social work practitioners to have a greater knowledge and understanding of mobile devices and social media so as to reduce risks but also promote opportunities for children and young people in care.

Currently, the literature in relation to this phenomenon of contact is concerned with the effects of it being unmediated, but little evidence is available as to how this contact takes place, with whom and how it is subsequently managed. Having established from the review of the literature that there are complexities and difficulties associated with format and type of contact that is organised by social work practitioners, it would seem that children and young people in care are using mobile communication devices and the Internet as a credible means by which to continue communication with members of the familial and friendship networks. Therefore, this study is unique in that it sought to answer the following research questions:

- Do looked after young people make use of mobile communication devices and the Internet for contact with their family and friendship networks and, if so, how do they do is this?
- Does the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet enhance or hinder communication between young people in care and individuals from their familial and friendship networks?

Methodology

Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, it was decided that the strategy to be employed should include elements of inductive and deductive approaches. The project design was influenced by a view that young people are social actors in their own right (James and Prout, 1996: 49), able to exercise agency in a way that enables them to decide which family and friends they wish to maintain a connection and are free to choose the way they do it.

The study was undertaken in an English local authority and involved young people in care, their foster carers and their allocated social work practitioners. It concentrated on young people who had been in a stable placement for a period of nine months or more. The methodology comprised semi-structured interviews with and completion of an Ecomap by the young person and interviews with his or her foster carer and social worker. This method acknowledges that there is not just one reality for all participants (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh.

Sample

The small sample comprised twelve triads of young people, foster carers and social work practitioners. The following table gives the background details of the young people.

Table 1: Details of participants by triad

Young person in care	Age	Duration in care	Foster Carer	Allocated social worker
Jane	17	9 months	Betty	Nadia
Nora	14	9 months	Toni	Cath
Kaitlin	14	7 years	Perry	Camlyn
Matt	15	5 years	Bev	Margaret
Lamar	17	10 years	Mary	Zayla
Justine	14*	2 years	Laura	Verone
Leo	14	2 years	Nanci	Carissa
Leighton	15	3 years	Todd	Candice
Jaiden	18	15 years	Madaline and Rex	Bernice
Bradley	17	6 years	Rose	Casey
Kayne	16	3 years	Piers	Candice
Darrell	13	3 years	Rayanna	Elaine

*Justine withdrew 15 minutes into the interview but the foster carer and social worker continued until completion.

Procedure and data analysis

The young people first completed an Ecomap, that is a visual assessment tool that identifies his or her significant relatives and friends. This was followed by a semi-structured interview that explored their use of mobile communication devices and the Internet for the purpose of contact. Foster carers and social work practitioners were interviewed about the same issues. The emerging information was analysed using the Framework Method which allowed the researcher to capture both commonalities and differences within the responses through the use of matrices that summarise the results in rows (cases) and columns (codes), thereby producing 'cells' of summarised data (Gale, et al., 2013).

Findings

Staying in touch with family

All the participating young people had lived in their foster placement for nine months or more. Six of them had contact arrangements in place at the time of the interviews (Nora, Kaitlin, Justine, Leo, Kayne and Darrell). The direct contact was often with birth parents and siblings and was limited to a specific period of time. In each case, the foster carers played a central role in transporting them to and from the meetings. Contact for three others (Bradley, Leighton and Leo) was organised by their foster carers, particularly when it involved seeing siblings. Two young people (Matt and Jane) had no contact of any kind with their birth family. Matt's social worker had tried hard to organise meetings but had been unsuccessful, and Jane's family had ostracised her. Nora, Kaitlin, Justin, Leo and Jaiden also made indirect contact via regular telephone calls and this was accepted as part of their care plan. Justine's and Leo's birth parents or relatives would telephone the foster carer first before the phone was handed over.

There were a range of applications used by the young people, as well as the texting and phoning capabilities of their mobile phones and social networking sites. A total of 12 different social networking sites and apps were regularly used, as the following table displays.

Table 2: Social Media platforms used by young people in care

Name of young person in care	Social media and apps made use of for contact with members of familial and friendship networks
Jane	Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat
Nora	Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tango, Facetime, Twitter, Skype and Instagram
Kaitlin	Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Kik, Skype, Flickr, Instagram and FriendLife

Matt	Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat
Lamar	Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram and Gmail
Justine	None used
Leo	Facebook
Leighton	WhatsApp and Facebook
Jaiden	Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram
Bradley	Facebook and Gmail
Kayne	Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, FriendsLife
Darrell	WhatsApp

An immediate finding was that the use of mobile communication devices is an intrinsic part of the lives of the young people in care, with smartphones being the most common device used.

“It’s easy, you don’t have to travel, like, for ages to go and see her [Mum]. Even if she is busy, you know at some point you will get to talk. Sometimes I initiate the conversation. Sometimes she initiates it and just – it’s just about everyday life and stuff like that” (Kayne, aged 16)

Also noticeable was that during all the interviews, none of the young people mentioned the word ‘contact’ to describe their communications. Instead, they simply spoke about ‘staying in touch’ and the actual activities involved in doing this, for example texting, calling or using WhatsApp, video-calling and sending pictures.

A further finding highlighted the way the young people chose to instigate communication with particular members of their family and social networks. As Nora explained:

“You just wanna show things off, like, what are you in, or what are you doing, or who are you meeting. Just like when we went to Heavenly Desserts we eat something I just take a

picture, put it on Snapchat. They comment on it like 'y'alright' and everything, or they send me a text on Facebook".

In addition to all of this, the young people were also able to monitor and even see what was going on in their wider family. This was important even when a young person's feelings were not reciprocated; there was still a mechanism to maintain a connection. Thus, even in difficult circumstances, the new technology gave more scope for negotiating the complexities of their relationships, so avoiding the withering of family links noted in the earlier studies.

"I have two sisters they're my half-sisters. Like the relationship's broke down in a way? But then like I do talk to 'em sometimes online, see how they are – I always check if they're OK and stuff. But I don't really talk to them much" (Lamar, aged 17)

"I have... 3 older sisters on my Mum's side. I stay in touch with only one of 'em by Facebook. We used to see them all the time. I get in touch with her about once a week" (Kayne, aged 16)

But as noted earlier, contact arrangements are fraught with difficulty when relationships are abusive or when a birth parent displays difficult behaviours associated with mental ill health or substance abuse. In such circumstances, the young people managed their communication in various ways; this included ignoring their mobile phone, blocking the birth parent on social media accounts and asking their foster carer to manage phone calls. An example of this was Kaitlin whose birth mother contacted her unexpectedly on social media after years of silence. Her response to this new found contact was less than positive:

"Well, she got Facebook. And um – she tried to add me so I added her. So, I started talking to her and she was like, when do you wanna meet up an' all that. And I was like I don't want to meet up with you. Cos like - I'm not ready. And so – like – she started texting me all the time. Through lessons and that, so I blocked her" (Kaitlin, aged 14)

As to whether or not the use of mobile communication devices helped or hindered contact by the young people in care, this is a matter of interpretation. The findings suggest that the use of mobile communication devices offered immediacy and ease by which communication with members of the familial network could be achieved. However, it was also evident that the devices were not so helpful in the sense of the same characteristic being present in cases of unwanted contact.

Staying in touch with friends

The findings revealed that the smartphone is particularly important for young people to engage in friendships outside of the immediate control of their carers. They can plan social events, share information and check availability with their peers, like any other adolescent.

“Just occasionally, like, I do skating every weekend, so it’s like – are you going...either on Facebook or Snapchat... are you going skating or not? That’s about it.” (Matt, aged 15)

Equally important was that this facility allowed the young people to create boundaries between their friends and their carers, even though this can create problems for looked after children if the State is in loco parentis. But in general, the study found that the difficulties and complexities the young people experienced in maintaining and managing peer relationships were very much the same as for other adolescents making use of mobile communication devices. They were often involved in arguments online; and one young person in particular, was a victim of bullying:

“I’ve been bullied loads, that’s why I deactivated it. But I’ve started a new one and got friends that I know won’t bully me. Yeah cos I’m in care, they was like saying things about my mum and things about my dad and all that” (Kaitlin, aged 14)

What is reflected in the friendship networks for many of the young people who took part in the study, is adolescent development. That is, a growing level of independence for the younger adolescents, and greater independence for older adolescents. This was facilitated through the use of mobile communication devices. Such findings reinforce the fact that the practice of contact is dominated by an adult perspective, and not necessarily by that of children and young people in care. This in turn, leaves little room for the ebb and flow that often characterise human relationships that are at best complex, and are in effect made more so with the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet.

Response of foster carers and social work practitioners

Whilst it was evident that young people involved in the study primarily used their mobile phones as a device of choice for a variety of activities, this was not necessarily welcomed by their foster carers. It was often associated with a reduction in face-to-face communication and a drain on time. There was not any recognition by social work practitioners or foster

carers who took part in the study that the use of mobile devices had the potential to support familial relationships. Instead, they tended to see the use of the mobile communication devices as a risk or a nuisance, sometimes describing the young people as being 'addicted' to their devices.

"My view of it is, and I'm obviously called an old fuddy duddy, is that there's far too much time spent on mobile phones. And I can only see it getting worse really. Because of technology improving, which is great in some respects, but on the negative side, they lose that face to face contact, that social element of communicating" (Toni, Foster Carer)

Reference was also made to risks associated with unsupervised communications, such as grooming, cyber-bullying or other inappropriate activity:

"It's negative. If you want to get hold of a young person and find out where they are and what they're up to. Or if there's any criminal activity involved, but the negative is, obviously they've got online access which isn't always in the child's best interests" (Camlyn, Social Worker)

The outstanding message from the study was, therefore, that for the young people, communication with relatives and friends was a natural part of daily living but that this view was not a view shared by either foster carers or social work practitioners because they did not recognise staying in touch in this way as a legitimate form of communication. They preferred methods that reflected the current understanding of contact.

"I don't think they should be allowed on Facebook until they're an adult cos I just think it's misused as children a lot of the time it's just misused and it causes – well, it has caused breakdown in our placements here" (Perry, Foster Carer)

It could be argued that this preoccupation with risk about mobile communication and the Internet reflects adult concerns in general about the use of mobile communication by children and young people (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Livingstone and Brake, 2010; and Ofcom, 2017).

Discussion

Whilst the sample is small, the research results indicate that mobile communication devices and the Internet are the means by which young people in care conduct and maintain their familial and friendship relationships in an informal and impromptu manner. Furthermore, the young people particularly emphasised the opportunity the new technology offers to stay in touch and the variety of ways to do it. What was also noticeable was that they had strong connections with selected relatives and friends and worked hard to maintain them. It was equally clear that their notion of 'staying in touch' differed from the more traditional perceptions of 'contact' in that it was not bound by people, places and time, and did not need to rely on an adult to organise it. The immediacy and day-to-day engagement were valued, echoing Turkle's (2008) notion of the 'always-on' that is a characteristic of mobile communication devices - they are "*ready to mind and hand*" (p. 122).

These benefits applied even when family members were no longer engaging with the young people or when ties were completely fractured. The early work of Walsh and colleagues (2008) in Australia focused on how mobile phone use related to belongingness and social identification. They started from the premise that a sense of belonging is one of five emotions that motivate certain social behaviours, meaning that individuals will actively seek out frequent contacts and enhance relationships to maintain social bonds. These feelings of belonging mean that the psychological presence of kin is not lost and they have a sense of being valued. Even when relationships had completely broken down, a sense of connection was often maintained through sending of a Facebook message or viewing the notifications of relatives on Facebook.

Characteristics of staying in touch

An obvious characteristic of staying in touch based on the results of the study was the immediacy and reach made available through platforms such as video-calling apps like Tango, texting and Facebook Messenger, all of which were used by the young people interviewed. In addition to the privacy and control this activity offered, there was also the

added pleasure of the emotionally rewarding effects of being able to share joyful moments and achievements. Linked to this immediacy is the aspect of duration, that is the time involved in communication that can range from a matter of seconds to continual dialogue over a longer period, and can take the form of pictures and texts. Licoppe's (2004:144) concept of connected presence is typified by this continuous connection. This sense of connected presence is exactly the opposite of contact at a specified time, location and duration and so displays a level of spontaneity noticeably absent from formal arrangements.

The responses of foster carers and social work practitioners participating in the study indicate that there is a generation who may not be able to appreciate the connectedness that is available to young people as a result of mobile communication devices and access to the Internet. Both groups tended to emphasise the risks and potential harm posed by the new technologies rather than the benefits for the children and families. It can be argued that even if there are contact arrangements that are inclusive of telephone calls, these tend to take place at specific times, and are, often supervised by the foster carer. In contrast, the use of mobile communication devices provides a level of spontaneity that might not be truly achieved by the nature of formal contact arrangements.

Implications for social work practice

This study, though small, supports an argument for change in terms of an ideological shift from 'contact' to 'ongoing connection and relationships' for looked after children. This will require social work practitioners to enter a meaningful debate that recognises the strength of relationships that children and young people have, despite being separated from their family. Central to the debate will be the views of the young people as they now have greater control over their communication, a fact not fully appreciated in perspectives dominated by concepts of 'best interests' and safeguarding. The study undertaken by Porter (2019) that saw the examination of 160 records concerned with Scottish children's and

young people's involvement in decision-making about contact reinforces this point. Those findings point to the clear wishes of children and young people being recorded in only 12% of contact decisions. Inevitably, radical technological change raises new issues in relation to children's rights, corporate parenting, the rights of parents, safeguarding and wellbeing; however, this does not mean that action cannot be taken (Eekelaar, 1994; Woodhead, 2005 and Parker, 2019).

Given the risks emphasised by carers and social work practitioners, it is suggested that local authorities should have a practitioner who specialises in the use of mobile communication devices and social media. This would ensure that important questions are raised at the outset with fellow practitioners and foster carers about the use and management of technology and children's rights with regard to its use. The training of social work practitioners and foster carers will also be required to encourage a more nuanced and child-centred approach to safeguarding that inevitably follows.

A final implication for practice comes in the form of the theoretical frameworks that practitioners rely on when considering contact. Given the findings from this study, it may now be appropriate to consider the value of Socio-genealogical connectedness that stresses the importance of charting and taking account of children's broader social network, extended family and home community. Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (1997) state that socio-genealogical connectedness is not a replacement for attachment theory but rather seeks to build on it in a way that takes account of the child's wider ecological networks.

Limitations

One of the first limitations that is likely to have affected the findings concerns the data captured from both foster carers and social work practitioners. It was noted on more than one occasion that both respondent groups made mention of other children as part of sharing details of their experiences. Whilst this provided a broader understanding of the phenomenon of children in care and their use of mobile communication devices and

Internet for contact, it was necessary to remind these respondents of the need to keep in mind the young people who were participants of the study.

Another key limitation reflects the sampling technique used. For the purposes of this study a specific type of purposive sampling technique was used. Yet the young people who were recommended for the study cannot necessarily be presumed to provide a sample that is inclusive of a representative range of young people in care e.g. a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This is because social work practitioners had a preference in relation to those young people where there were no difficulties in relation to contact. A similar limitation is mentioned by Mezey et al., (2015) who recognise that where social work practitioners act as informal gatekeepers there is a likelihood of selection bias. Therefore, whilst the study provides some insight as to how children in care make use of mobile communication devices and the Internet for contact, what is not apparent in any great detail or depth, are the experiences of young people in care who are experiencing difficulties with this type of contact. Given the difficulties of accessing children in care, it is highly doubtful whether an alternative approach could have been used or accepted by the local authority and social work practitioners. As has already been stated throughout this paper, the study was small and whilst it is important not to go beyond the findings, the point made by Carminati (2018) would seem relevant in that she states: *“generalizability in qualitative studies is focused on the researcher’s analysis and understanding of circumstances rather than on the collection of representative data”*. In other words, there is room to extrapolate or transfer the findings of the study based not only upon the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon, but the existing research and policy that the study has been informed by.

Conclusion

The study findings indicate that the use of mobile communication devices and the Internet provide young people in care with a degree of independence, control and freedom from

scrutiny that are not traditional features of life in the care system. In more than one instance, the young people had stopped or started staying in touch with members of their familial network *at will*. In other words, the interaction that took place was part of an ongoing informal communication pattern, unlike the formulaic nature of contact for children in care that can appear static and out of sync with their natural rhythm and life routine. There is also the need to consider what Licoppe (2004:139) has described as a shared history of expectation, routines and understanding of the world, that takes place through a continuous conversation within an interpersonal relationship. For young people in care, this means that they continue to have ongoing conversations with specific family members by choice and are unhindered in doing so, thereby leading to the reaffirmation of their existing relationships. Consequently, even when a young person has been removed from the family home there is still a continuing psychological connection to the familial and friendship networks that is not easily lost or erased by entering the care system.

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