

Keeping in touch

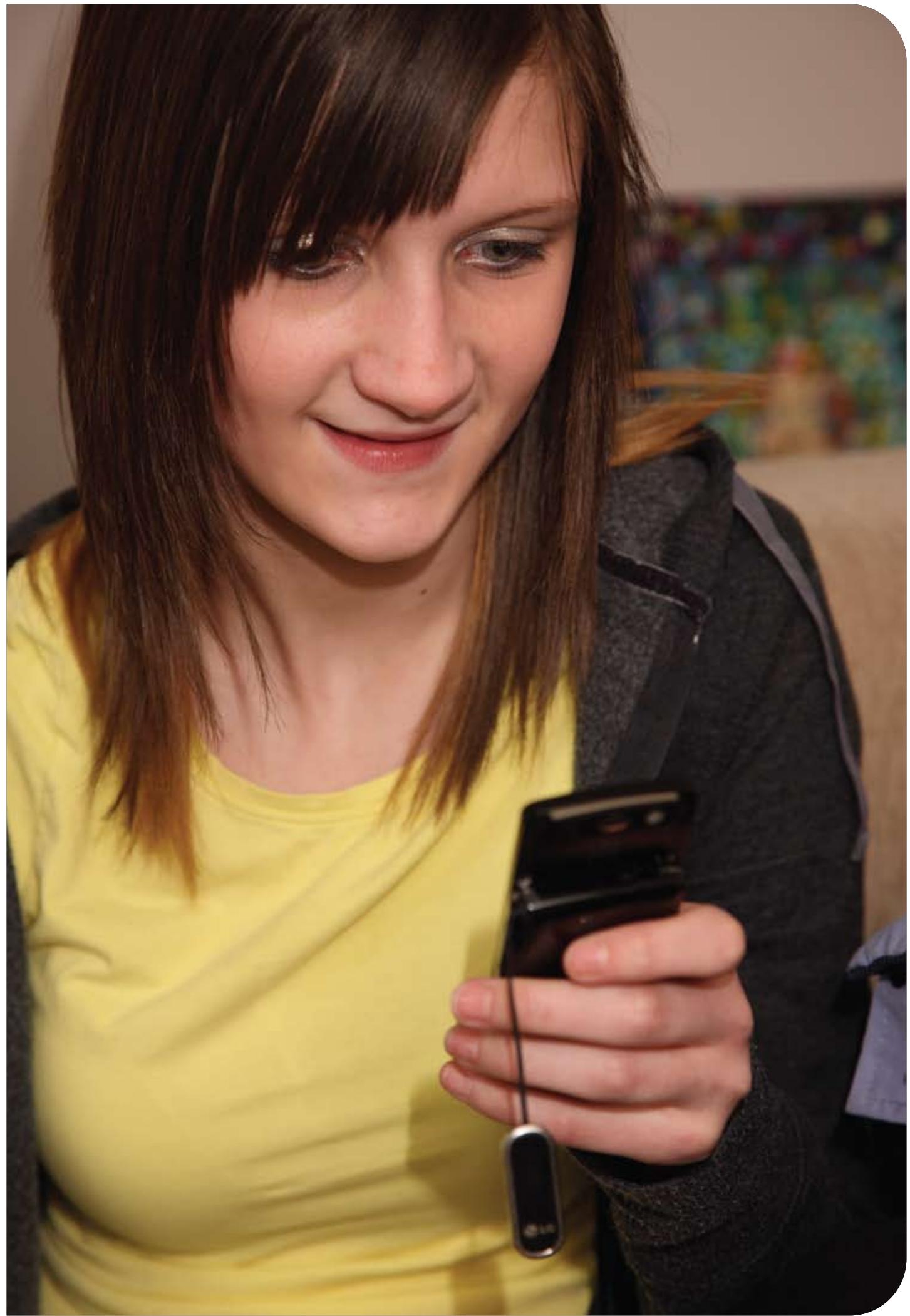
A report of children's experience by the
Children's Rights Director for England



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About the Children's Rights Director

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director for England. With my team, one of my main duties is to ask children and young people for their views about how both children and young people are looked after in England. My duties cover children and young people living away from home in all types of boarding schools, residential special schools or further education colleges, children and young people living in children's homes, in family centres, in foster care or who have been placed for adoption, and care leavers and children or young people getting any sort of help from council social care services.

As well as asking young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the Government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people living away from home or getting children's social care support. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

During our many consultations with children and young people in care, we have heard that keeping in touch with parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents and friends is an important issue for many children and young people. They have told us how coming into care, and then moving to different placements, can mean children losing contact with their birth families, and that it can separate brothers and sisters. This report gives the views of children and young people in care about keeping in touch – and losing touch – with their birth families, friends and other people important in their lives.

We try to write all our reports so that they can easily be read by children and young people, and by government ministers. Like all my reports, this report is being published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my reports on our website: www.rights4me.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roger Morgan".

Summary

We asked 370 children in care, through a survey and discussion groups, for their views about keeping in touch – and losing contact – with their families and friends while in care.

Children wanted a choice about who they kept in touch with and who they didn't. Overall, children wanted contact to be kept up if both they, and the person they wanted contact with, wished to stay in touch. They accepted that sometimes contact had to be stopped for their own safety.

Sometimes contact was complicated when children wanted contact with one person, but not their partner. Contact could be lost for many reasons, sometimes quite small, and often became lost as time passed, people simply grew apart, children moved to new placements, or were placed a long way away. Children would also lose contact with a brother or sister who got adopted.

Contact could be through visits, but also on social networking websites like Facebook, by phone or email, or by letters and sharing photographs. Having news about your family members could be very important. Children thought that social workers should do more to arrange contacts with family and friends, where children wanted contact. For some, contact with friends could be more important than contact with family. Contact visits should only be supervised when really necessary. Meeting family members you hadn't seen for some time – including siblings – could be strange, and needed to be done gradually. Some children ran away to be with a member of their family.

- The longer a child had been in care, the more likely they were to have lost contact with their parents, brothers or sisters.
- 51% had contact with their birth mother at least once a month.
- 18% had lost all contact with their birth mother.
- Foster children were less likely to have contact with their birth mother than those in children's homes.

- 23% had contact with their birth father at least once a month.
- 46% had lost all contact with their birth father.
- Boys were more likely than girls to lose contact with their birth father.
- Foster children were more likely than children in children's homes to have some contact with their birth father.
- 56% had contact with a brother or sister at least once a month.
- 12% had no contact with any siblings.
- Boys were more likely than girls to have some contact with their brothers or sisters.
- 36% had contact at least once a month with a relative other than their parents, brothers or sisters.
- 32% had contact at least once a month with a friend they had made before coming into care.
- 35% had lost contact with all friends they had made before coming into care.
- 14% had contact at least once a month with a friend they had made in an earlier care placement.
- Boys were more likely than girls to stay in touch with friends they had made in earlier placements.
- 16% had contact at least once a month with a previous carer.
- Foster children were less likely than children in children's homes to stay in touch with a previous carer.
- 52% had at least one brother or sister who was also in care.
- 81% of those who had brothers or sisters in care had been separated from them in care.
- Boys were more likely than girls to be separated from brothers or sisters in care.

- Children in children's homes were more likely than foster children to be separated from their brothers or sisters in care.
- 86% of all children in care thought it important to keep siblings together in care.
- 29% of those who had brothers or sisters in care thought it could sometimes be right to separate siblings, provided there was a good reason.
- Boys were more likely than girls to think that it can sometimes be right to separate siblings in care for a good reason.
- Children in children's homes were more likely than foster children to think that it is never right to separate siblings in care.
- Those who had been in care for between two and six years were most likely to be losing contact with siblings, and were most likely to be against siblings in care being separated.

The main reasons that might make it right to separate siblings in care were if they really didn't get on with each other, if there was danger to any of them, or if they wanted to be separated.

The three best ways for siblings to keep in touch if they had been separated were by visits, by phone or email, and by having photos of each other.





How we asked for views

We asked children and young people for their views in two ways. First, we invited children and young people in care to fill in a survey, using specially designed question cards. We sent invitations to take part in this survey to children and young people in children's homes or foster care across the country. We picked their children's homes and fostering services at random from our national lists.

Second, we invited children and young people in care to join one or more groups to discuss or give us their views personally. Again, we chose the homes and services at random to send invitations to, and for this report we sent these around the southern part of the country. We send invitations around different parts of the country for different reports.

We met one group at the Planetarium in Winchester. This group gave us their votes on a number of questions we projected on the planetarium screen for them. We then held six discussion groups about keeping in touch with families, at the Milestones Museum, Basingstoke. At each of these we asked children and young people to give us their views about a series of issues for this report. Each group was led by a member of our team, and another team member took notes of the views people gave. Only the children and young people in the group, and members of our team, were in the room, so that people could speak as freely as possible. The adults who had brought children waited in another part of the museum.

The survey and the discussion and voting groups also gave us their views for two other reports we were preparing: *Care and prejudice* (about how being in care affects children, and how other people react to knowing someone is in care) and *Getting advice* (about how children in care get the advice and information they need).¹

In many of our survey questions, we asked for people's views without suggesting any answers, and we analysed their answers afterwards for this report, so that the views are the children's own and not ideas we had suggested for them to choose from. Where we say there is a 'big difference' in the answers given by different groups of children, this means that there was a difference of 10 percentage points or more between the different groups.

Not all the children answered every question in our survey, so we have said how many children did answer each question. Where we have given percentages for different answers to a question, these are out of all the children who answered that question.

In this report, we have not left out any views that we might disagree with, nor made our own comments on anything children or young people told us. We have not added our own views or ideas. What this report says is purely the views of children and young people.

¹ *Care and prejudice* was published in 2009. You can find this report in the 'reports archive' on our website: www.rightsforme.org. *Getting advice* will be published early in 2010.

The children and young people who gave us their views

Altogether, we received survey responses from 316 children and young people. Another 54 children and young people took part in our groups about keeping in touch: 16 of these in the voting session in the Planetarium and 38 in one or another of our five discussion groups. In total, therefore, **370 children and young people gave us their views for this report.**

Of the 311 people who filled in our survey and who told us their gender, 166 (53%) were female and 145 (47%) were male. Out of the 308 who told us about their ethnicity, 271 (88%) said they were white, 17 that they were from a mixed background, 14 that they were Black and three that they were Asian, while three identified their backgrounds differently. Out of 316 who told us whether or not they had a disability, 42 (13%) said they did have a disability. Out of these 42, 38 told us what type of disability they had. Twelve of these said they had learning difficulties, eight that they had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and five that they had dyslexia.

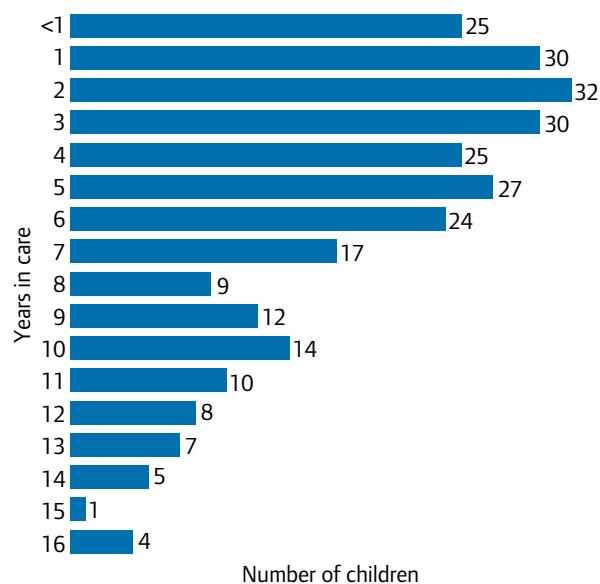
Out of the 299 people who filled in the survey and told us the sort of placement they were living in, 161 (54%) were living in children's homes and 123 (41%) were living in foster homes. Eight care leavers also filled in our survey, as did four children placed to live with their own parents and three who lived in residential special schools. We have included all these in our results.

For each of the survey questions answered in this report, we have checked to see whether there are any big differences in the answers given by boys and girls, by children with a disability, and by children living in children's homes and foster children. Where there are, we have said so.

We also wanted to know whether how long children had been in care made a difference to their answers, so we have checked this as well. Out of the 280 children and young people who answered a survey question about how long they had been in care, 87 (31%) had been in care for up to two years, 106 (38%) between two and six years, and another 87 (31%) for over six years.

The chart shows the details of how long the children had been in care. We had views from children who had spent a fairly short time in care, and those who had spent many years and most of their lives in care.

Figure 1: How long children had been in care



How much contact children have with their birth family

In our discussion groups, children and young people told us that **there were many different members of their birth families that they wanted to keep in contact with**. As well as parents, brothers and sisters, some said they wanted to keep in touch with grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces: ‘all family in general not just birth parents’. Sometimes **children wanted to keep in touch with people who were not actually relatives, but were close friends of their birth families**. One told us that they missed the contact they had had with their godparents. Another told us that when they came into care they had lost contact with their brother’s girlfriend, who used to take them out and who had spent a lot of time with them. They really missed seeing her, because she had become someone special to them. One young person told us they missed contact with their ‘very first social worker – she left to have a baby’.

Many told us that they wanted to keep in touch with particular family members, but not always with everyone. Whether you wanted to stay in touch with a particular parent sometimes ‘depends how dangerous parents are’. Perhaps too, ‘you might not always want contact with certain people because they might have something to do with the reason you were taken into care in the first place’.

A person might want to stay in contact with one parent, but not the other one, or with one brother or sister but not another one. This could be very difficult. **Sometimes the person you want to keep in contact with will not, or cannot, see you without their partner, or another relative you don’t want to see.** As an example, one young person told us that they wanted to see their father, but not their stepmother, because of what had happened in the past: ‘I want to see Dad, but he won’t see me without Step-mum there.’ They had now lost all contact with their father. You might lose contact with someone altogether because you don’t want to see someone who is closely related to them. One young person said this was ‘not right, because later in life when you come out of care you’ve got no one to see because you’ve lost contact’.

One of our discussion groups said they simply could not answer questions about whether children in care should be helped to keep in contact with parents or siblings. They said that always ‘it depends on which parent’ and ‘it depends on which sibling’. Keeping in contact isn’t always right, it always depends on the individuals, what is right for each of them, and what they each want to happen.

In our discussion groups, children and young people told us about **various reasons for losing contact with their birth parents and families**. Sometimes being placed somewhere a long way away meant losing contact ‘because had to move out of area’. For others, they lost contact while they were sorting out their own emotional problems: ‘By the time you are sorted others might have moved on.’ If you had a family member who had a problem of their own, you could lose contact because nobody helped them to keep in touch: ‘My brother has autism and no one has helped him keeping contact.’ It was also very easy to lose contact when your family member is very young: ‘Babies lose contact until they are a certain age – that’s not fair.’ Sometimes families just gave up on contact: ‘Family can’t be bothered any more.’

‘You might not always want contact with certain people because they might have something to do with the reason you were taken into care in the first place’

One young person described how they had wanted to keep in touch with their birth father when he was very ill in hospital for a long time. They said that they had not been allowed to visit him because he was connected to a lot of support equipment, but told us that made it especially important that they could see him. They said, 'They won't let me see him because they think it will scare me, but I'm old enough.'

In another group, there was a discussion about how some birth parents tried hard to keep in touch with their children in care, but that this sometimes didn't work. One person told us about their experience: 'No matter how much somebody changes it just doesn't happen. My mum tried really hard, did [their] flat out and everything, but they still said no. I reckon it's unfair.'

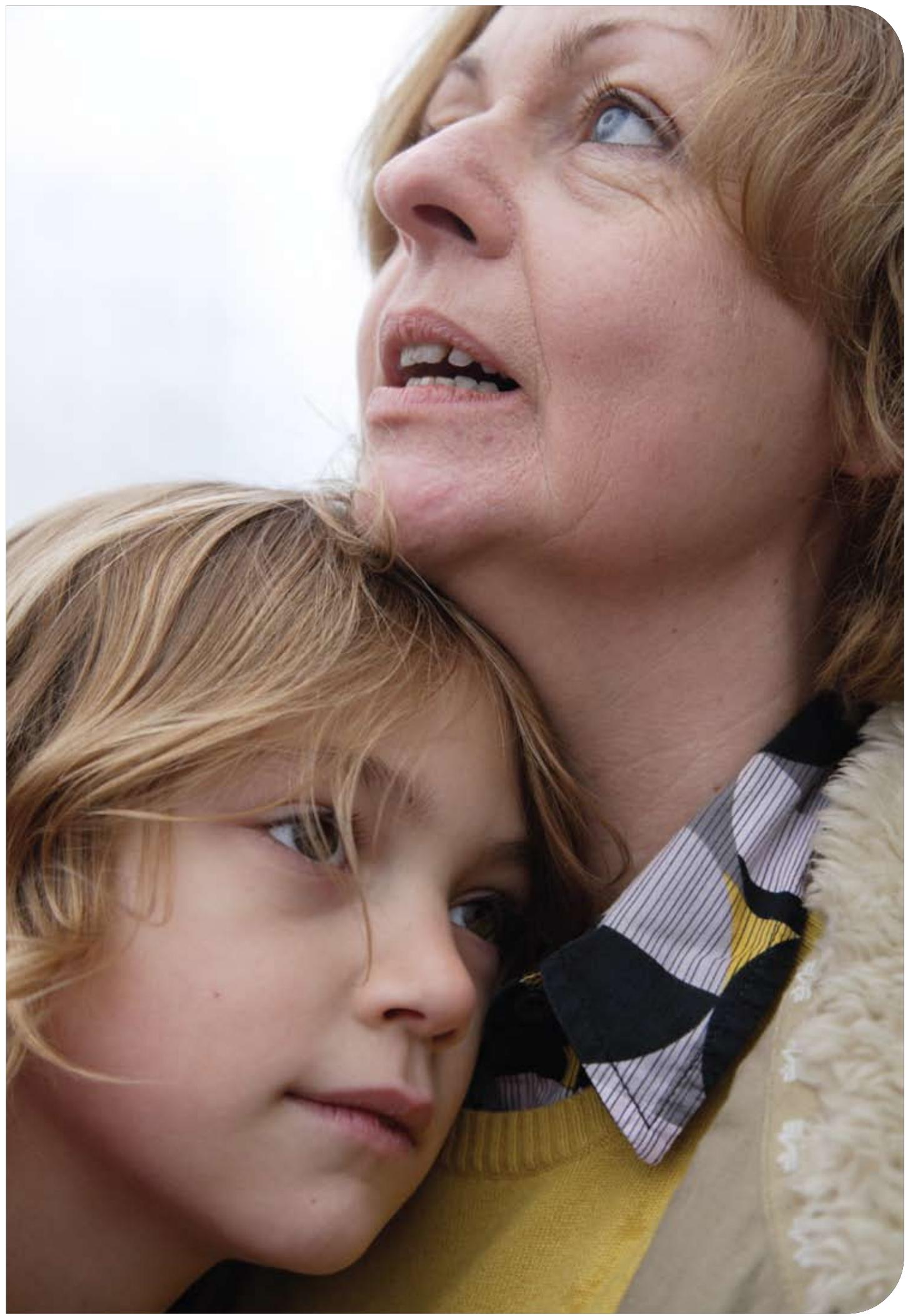
Two other reasons were raised in our discussion groups, which greatly concerned those in the group. We were told that sometimes carers did not really want children to keep in touch with their birth families, and did not help children to stay in touch: 'Carers might not want you seeing them or to have contact.' We were also told that some children were upset that they had **lost contact when a brother or sister had been adopted** – as one person put it, 'It's like they've gone missing.'

Contact could be lost for other reasons that children did not think were right. An example of this was where a relative was not allowed to visit them at their foster carers' house, because the relative kept smoking and the foster carers wouldn't have someone smoking in their house because it was bad for the younger children. Another example was where a young person gradually lost contact with a member of their family because contact kept being stopped as a punishment: 'You might stay out late and get grounded and contact is stopped.' Sometimes contact could be lost because other members of the family 'turn against you by saying negative stuff and blaming me. People turn family against you'. **After a while, even for what seem like small reasons, contact can get less until you completely lose touch.**

When a while ago we wrote a report about children's experiences of running away,² we heard that one of the reasons for children running away from their placements was to go to someone in their own birth family. Children told us about this for this report too. We heard in our discussion groups that **some children would run away to see their family members even if they weren't allowed contact with them**: 'If I get annoyed, I'd do it anyway'; 'I'd run off to see them'; 'if really wanted to, I would go anyway'.

In our survey, we asked how often children and young people were in some sort of contact with different members of their family and with friends. We asked them to include contact by phone, letter, email or social website, as well as visits. From the discussions in our groups, we knew that for some people, **just having regular news about members of their family** was very important, even if they weren't able to visit them: 'When there's no contact, you always think the worst'; 'I'd rather know even if the message is bad'. Some thought they got very little news: 'We don't get told very much.' Some only wanted news about big events, while others wanted to know 'how they are and what they are doing'. If you had a relative abroad, news could become even more important: 'I have an uncle in the army, he's in Afghanistan – I want to know what's happening and don't know what's going on.' News about family members could come from social workers or carers, but 'better if family told you'.

'When there's no contact, you always think the worst'



One of our discussion groups thought that making sure children in care get news about their families was an important job for social workers: ‘It’s the social worker’s job to actually push to get the information, but not too far.’ One person said that their social worker had promised to help get information, but ‘it just dropped, they just didn’t do it’. Another said that their social worker had said they weren’t going to try to get the child any news about their family: ‘They just said no, it’s not going to happen, they didn’t give a reason.’

As well as helping people to keep in contact with their families, it could sometimes be **important that social workers took into account whether the child actually wanted contact**. One person summed up their experience on this: ‘They listened to me when I wanted to shorten contact, because I didn’t want to see them any more.’ Another young person told us that they had run away from their placement to avoid having contact with their birth family, because their wish to stop contact hadn’t been listened to.

Some of our groups gave us their **thoughts and examples of good and special ways of keeping in touch with birth families**. Remembering to send cards and gifts on special occasions was important, and carers were important in this. One person said their ‘foster carers make special occasions happen’, but another said their step-parent had stopped them from getting cards from their birth parent.

One young person told us about how she had been able to organise a party for her birth mother, and how special it had been to cook for her and bring her family together. Another told us about a contact visit where their supervising worker had allowed them all a couple of hours extra together because everything was going so well; this had been very special to the family. Someone else told us that the staff at their children’s home had done a great deal to help them keep in touch with someone important to them. Another said that their social worker had helped by buying new clothes with the young person to wear at a family wedding.

Some children told us that basic practical help can make a big difference to keeping children and families in touch with each other. If they live a long way apart, any sort of help with travelling, from help with the cost to a carer driving the child to the visit, or even ordering taxis, could make all the difference. Help with getting access to a computer to keep in touch often helped, and so did giving children phone credit when they needed it for contacting their parents.

In our discussions we also heard that **contact visits are better if the family have some activities to do together**, and contact can be ‘boring’ if the family don’t plan anything. **If contact is happening in a special contact centre, then it is important that the centre is ‘lived in and homely’**, rather than being just a big area like a large hall or meeting room: ‘When they are really spacious it is horrible.’

One group talked about **‘letterbox contact’**, where family members can write to each other by sending their letters to a person who makes sure they get passed on. One member of that group told us how he had used that to exchange letters and photographs with his younger brother, and to keep him in touch with what was happening. He had always wanted to know how his younger brother was doing at school, and to make sure that his little brother didn’t forget him: ‘When he gets older, he will know.’

‘They listened to me when I wanted to shorten contact, because I didn’t want to see them any more’

In many groups we were told that **emails and social websites** were good ways of keeping in touch: 'I can't get rid of my mum – she's always on MSN or Facebook!' Sometimes these were good ways of making contact with family members you didn't already know: 'Facebook is really good, I met my aunt on it who I couldn't remember'; 'I thought cousins were missing, now I have contact with them and know they're safe'. In one group, we heard that keeping in touch electronically isn't as good as a visit, but sometimes you can say things in an email or on a social website that you would find difficult to say face to face. It was good to have a variety of ways to keep in touch. Contact by computer depends on the child's age and ability to use a computer. It also depends how good a relationship you already have with a person; if you already know someone well, you would want email and website contacts as well as just the occasional phone call.

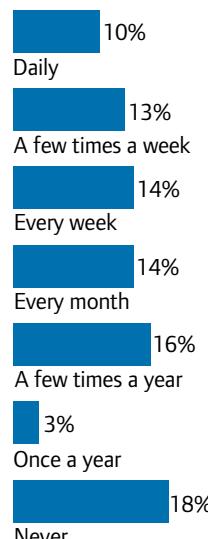
We did hear in our groups that keeping in touch with members of your birth family through a computer could have its problems. Some carers didn't allow children to use email and social networking sites, and some children were worried about their safety on the web: 'Someone could hack into conversation.' One person said: 'Social services wouldn't encourage it because of old perverts.'

Some of our groups discussed the **best ways to start contact again with family members they had not been in touch with**. They agreed that this needed to be done gradually, and that when you met up for the first few times, it always helped if there was another member of the family there that you already knew.

Three hundred and four young people told us about contact with their birth mother. Out of these, 33 (11%) said they didn't know or that the question didn't apply to them. **Over half (51%) said they had contact with their mothers at least once a month**. Thirty-seven per cent said they had contact with their mothers at least once a week, and 10% said they had daily contact. **Eighteen per cent said they had no contact at all with their mothers.**

The chart gives the details of how often young people said they had contact with their birth mothers.

Figure 2: How often children have contact with their birth mother



Percentages of the 304 children who answered this question

We found some big differences between different groups of children and young people. **Children in children's homes were more likely than children in foster homes to have contact with their birth mothers at least once a month**. Fifty-eight per cent of children in children's homes had at least monthly contact with their birth mothers, compared with 42% of children in foster homes.

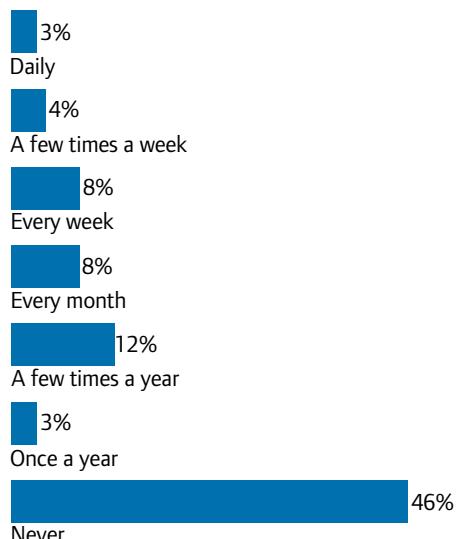


We also found that **the longer someone had been in care, the more likely they were to lose contact with their birth mother**. Once they had been in care for over two years, they had much less contact with their birth mothers, and **those who had been in care for over six years were the most likely to have lost all contact with their birth mothers**. Seventy-eight per cent of those who had been in care for less than two years had contact with their birth mothers at least once a month, compared with 49% of those who had been in care between two and six years and 47% of those who had been in care more than six years. Thirteen per cent of those who had been in care for less than two years told us they had lost all contact with their birth mothers, 16% of those in care for between two and six years had lost all contact, but 27% of those who had been in care for over six years had lost all contact with their mothers.

We then asked how often children and young people had some sort of contact with their birth fathers. Three hundred answered this question. Fifteen percent said they didn't know, or that the question didn't apply to them. **Less than a quarter (23%) of the children and young people said they had contact with their birth fathers at least once a month**. Fifteen per cent said they had contact with their fathers at least once a week, and 3% said they had daily contact. **Forty-six per cent said they had no contact at all with their fathers**. Clearly, **children in care are far more likely to be in contact with their birth mothers than with their birth fathers, and are much more likely not to know, or to have no contact at all with, their birth fathers**.

The next chart shows the details of how often children in care told us they had contact with their birth fathers.

Figure 3: How often children have contact with their birth father



Percentages of the 300 children who answered this question

We found some big differences between different groups of children in how much contact they had with their birth fathers. **Boys were more likely than girls to have lost all contact with their birth fathers, and children in children's homes were more likely than children in foster homes to have lost all contact with their birth fathers**. Fifty-nine per cent of boys told us they had no contact at all with their birth fathers, compared with 49% of girls. Fifty-two per cent of children in children's homes told us they had no contact with their birth fathers, compared with 41% of foster children.

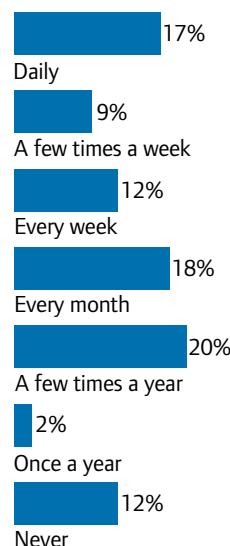
'I can't get rid of my mum – she's always on MSN or Facebook!'

As we had found over contact with birth mothers, how long someone had been in care made a big difference to how likely they were to be in contact with their birth father. **The longer someone had been in care, the more likely they were to lose contact with their birth father.** For contact with birth fathers, there was a steady falling off of contact over the years in care: the percentage of people who said they had lost all contact with their birth fathers was 31% of those in care for less than two years, 42% of those who had been in care for between two and six years, and 61% of those who had been in care for over six years. The percentages of people who told us they had contact of some sort at least once a month with their birth fathers fell from 35% of those in care for less than two years, to 22% of those who had been in care for between two and six years, and then to 12% of those who had been in care for over six years.

Our next question was about contact with birth brothers or sisters. We had answers about this from 301 children and young people through our survey. Ten per cent said they didn't know, or the question didn't apply to them (for example, they didn't have any brothers or sisters). **Over half (56%) said they had contact with a birth brother or sister at least once a month.** Thirty-eight per cent said they had contact with a brother or sister at least once a week, and 17% said they had daily contact. **One in eight children (12%) said they had no contact with their brothers or sisters.**

Of course, some children had contact with brothers or sisters because they were living together in the same placement. From another question in the survey, we know that 11% of the children were living with a brother or sister, and these would be among the 17% who told us they had daily contact with their brothers or sisters. The chart shows the details of how often children told us they had contact with birth brothers or sisters.

Figure 4: How often children have contact with birth brothers or sisters



Percentages of the 301 children who answered this question

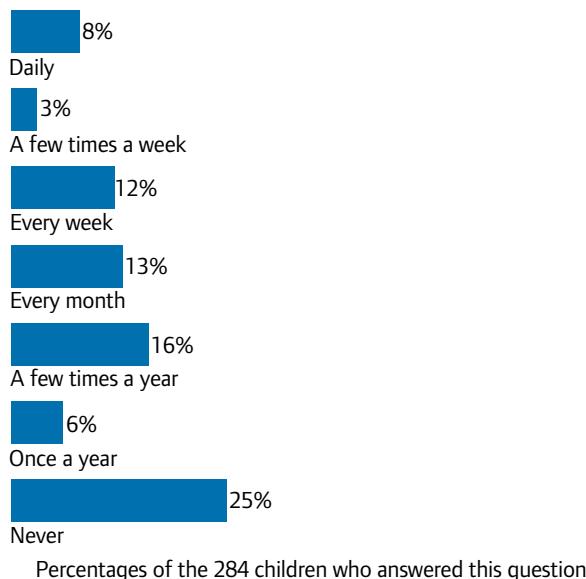
There were two big differences between groups of children in how often they said they had regular contact with their birth siblings. The first was that **more boys than girls told us they had at least monthly contact with their birth brothers or sisters.** Sixty-three per cent of boys said they had at least monthly contact of some sort, compared with 50% of girls.

The other big difference was that, just as we had found with contact with birth mothers and fathers, **the longer children spent in care, the less contact they were likely to have with their birth siblings.** The percentage of children who said they had some sort of contact with a birth brother or sister at least once a month fell from 80% of those who had been in care for less than two years, to 55% of those who had been in care for between two and six years, and 41% of those who had been in care for over six years. The percentage who said they had lost all contact with their birth brothers or sisters was 9% of those in care for less than two years and very much the same at 8% of those in care for between two and six years, but then doubled to 18% of those who had been in care for over six years.

Our last survey question about contact with families was about keeping in contact with other relatives than parents, brothers or sisters. We had 284 answers about this, and 16% said that they didn't know or that the question didn't apply to them.

Just over a third (36%) of the children said they had contact with another relative at least once a month. Twenty-three per cent said they had contact with another relative at least once a week, and 8% that they had daily contact. **A quarter (25%) said they had no contact with any other relative.** Again, the chart gives the details.

Figure 5: How often children have contact with a relative other than their parents or siblings



There was a very big difference between groups of children and young people in how often they had contact with these other members of their birth families. **Children in children's homes were much more likely than foster children to have at least monthly contact with a birth relative (other than a parent or sibling).** Forty-seven per cent of children living in children's homes said they had at least monthly contact with another birth relative, compared with 23% of foster children.

As we had found for contact with other members of their birth families, **the longer children spent in care, the less contact they said they had with other relatives, as well as with their parents and siblings.** Contact with other relatives was much less for those who had been in care for more than two years; there was a steady rise in the percentages who told us they had lost all contact with these other relatives as children spent longer in care. Fifty-two per cent of those in care for less than two years told us they had at least monthly contact of some sort with other birth relatives. This fell to 34% of those in care between two and six years, and 32% of those in care for over six years. The percentage who had no contact at all with other birth relatives went up from 18% of those in care for less than two years to 24% of those in care for between two and six years, and to 32% of those in care for over six years.

Answers to our survey questions about keeping in contact with birth family members did not show up any big differences between children who told us they had a disability and children generally, in whether or not they were in contact.

**'Facebook is really good,
I met my aunt on it who I
couldn't remember'**

Should children in care keep in contact with their families?

We had many discussions in our groups about whether keeping in touch with members of their birth family was generally something good for all children in care. Opinions differed, but most people agreed that **whether a child in care ought to stay in contact with a particular member of their family should depend on whether the child wants to be in contact, whether that family member wants to be in contact, and whether that contact is safe.** ‘Contact needs to be good and safe.’ Contact should depend on ‘you and whoever you are keeping in contact with’. ‘It depends on who you are to see, really’; ‘if problems with them they shouldn’t be able to see them’. Social workers ‘should ask the children’, but sometimes ‘social workers can decide not good for you so shouldn’t happen’; ‘it’s not always good’. One group suggested that decisions about contact should always be shared between the child and their social worker: ‘Arrangements should be 40/60 between young people and social workers, but dependent on age.’

The children in our groups also thought they should have a lot of say about exactly how much contact there should be, and what sort of contact it should be. ‘If young people just want contact by phone, that’s OK. If they want to go to see family, then social workers should make that happen.’

‘If young people just want contact by phone, that’s OK. If they want to go to see family, then social workers should make that happen’

There were differing views in our discussion groups about **social workers arranging, or supervising, children’s visits with their families.** One young person summed it up very well: ‘Some workers get in with the family and make friends, they then become like part of the family. Others mess it up.’ Some children and young people told us that they thought supervision of contact with members of their families was needed sometimes, but not all the time: ‘don’t need to be supervised every time’. In one discussion, a young person told us: ‘I don’t understand why visits are supervised. I can understand if you’re being abused, but if nothing’s happened then there’s no reason.’ One group discussed the way a social worker supervising visits could help to get contact started again once people had lost touch: ‘say, can see for an hour and have supervised contact to persuade’. Help in making contact again can be very important. **If you have been separated for a while, contact can then feel strange:** ‘It’s going to be a bit weird.’

Some in our groups thought social workers should take a big role in helping children to keep in touch with their families, and that they do in fact do this well: ‘Every time you see them they’re always asking you. It’s their job. They have to make it happen and they do make it happen.’ Others, though, thought that social workers didn’t give enough priority to keeping children’s contacts going: ‘I wanted more visits and kept on being told, we’ll discuss it at your next review, but it never happened’; ‘it takes too long to make a decision. When they want to make a decision they can make one fast, but they don’t want to’. One person explained that they had found their social workers too busy with other things to find time to do contact work, but ‘if they have too many cases to deal with we shouldn’t have to suffer’.

Because contact and visits with your family are so important to many young people, it was vital that when social workers made arrangements, these actually worked: ‘Sometimes, social workers make arrangements without checking out parents’ plans. This can raise a young person’s hopes that they will be seeing their family, and then their family can’t make it.’



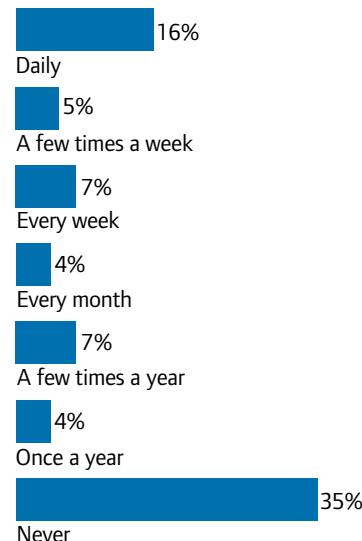
How much contact children have with their past friends

One of the things children and young people have often told us about being in care is that **they can lose contact with friends they had before they came into care, and lose friends again each time they move to a new placement**. In one of our discussions, we heard that for some people in care, ‘sometimes friends mean more than family’. We also heard that the friends you kept in contact with were the most important friends: ‘When I came into care, I learned who my real friends were and have kept contact with all of them that matter. The rest weren’t worth bothering about.’ As part of our survey, we asked about keeping in contact with friends.

We heard from 291 children about contact with friends they had before they came into care. Twenty-two per cent said they didn’t know, or the question didn’t apply to them (where, for example, they had been very young when they came into care). **Nearly a third (32%) said they had contact at least once a month with a friend from before they came into care**. Twenty-eight per cent said they had contact at least once a week with a friend from before care, and 16% said they had daily contact. For many of those, they saw friends from before care regularly because they still went to the same school. **Over a third (35%) said they had no contact with any friends they had before coming into care**. The detail is shown in the chart.

‘Sometimes friends mean more than family’

Figure 6: How often children have contact with a friend they made before coming into care



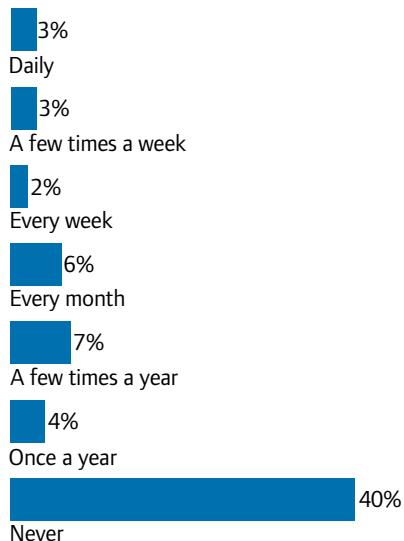
Percentages of the 291 children who answered this question

Again, how long a person had been in care made a difference. As we expected, we found that **the longer someone was in care, the more likely they were to have lost all contact with friends they had before they came into care**. Fifteen per cent of those who had been in care for less than two years had lost contact with all friends they had before coming into care, compared with 39% of those who had been in care for between two and six years, and 47% of those who had been in care for over six years.

We also asked a survey question about contact with friends children had made in their previous placements. We heard about this from 292 people. Thirty per cent of these said that they didn’t know, or the question didn’t apply to them (for example, because they had not changed placements since coming into care).

One in seven (14%) said they had some contact at least once a month with a friend from a previous placement. Eight per cent said they had contact at least once a week with a friend from a previous placement, and three per cent said they had daily contact. **Forty per cent told us they never had contact with any of the friends they had made in previous placements.** Details are in the next chart.

Figure 7: How often children have contact with a friend they made in a previous placement



Percentages of the 292 children who answered this question

Girls were more likely than boys to tell us that they had lost all contact with friends from their past placements. Boys were more likely to keep in touch with friends from past placements, though not in very close contact. Boys were no more likely than girls were to be in regular contact at least once a month. Forty-seven per cent of girls told us they had no contact at all with any friends they had made in past placements, compared with 31% of boys.

As with all sorts of contact with family and friends, **the longer someone had spent in care, the more likely they were to tell us they had lost all contact with all friends from previous placements.** This was the case even though people who had been in care longer were more likely to have made more friends in previous placements. Twenty-seven per cent of those who had been in care for less than two years said they had lost all contact with any friends they had made in a previous placement, compared with 42% of those who had been in care for between two and six years, and 49% of those who had been in care for over six years.

There were no big differences between children who told us they had a disability and children overall, in whether or not they kept in contact with past friends, either from before care or from past placements.

'When I came into care, I learned who my real friends were and have kept contact with all of them that matter. The rest weren't worth bothering about'

How much contact children have with their previous carers

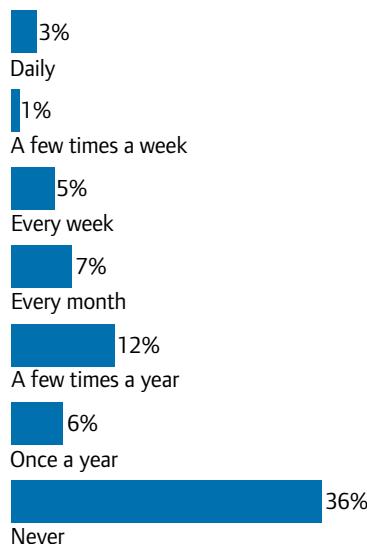
Finally in this set of questions in the survey, we wanted to find out how much contact, if any, children had with the adults who had cared for them in their previous placements. In our discussion groups, there were widely **different opinions about whether people did or didn't want to keep in touch with previous carers**. At one extreme, someone said they didn't want to keep in touch with their old carers, because those carers couldn't have cared much, or 'they wouldn't have got rid of you would they?'. At the other extreme, someone said, 'I want to see all my old foster carers again.'

In the survey, we had answers from 295 children, and out of these 30% said they didn't know or the question didn't apply to them, for example because they had not moved to a new placement since coming into care.

Sixteen per cent said they had contact at least once a month with a previous carer. Nine per cent had contact at least once a week, and three per cent said they still had daily contact. **Over a third (36%) no longer had any contact with a previous carer.** The chart shows the breakdown of these numbers.

'I want to see all my old foster carers again'

Figure 8: How often children have contact with their previous carers



Percentages of the 295 children who answered this question

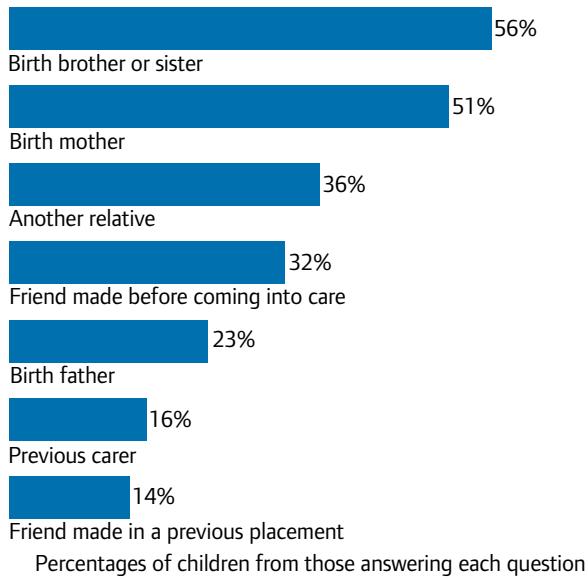
Children and young people living in foster care were less likely than those in children's homes to have contact with previous carers. Forty-four per cent of foster children told us they had no contact at all with previous carers, compared with 32% of those in children's homes. Only six per cent of foster children had contact with a previous carer at least once a month, while 22% of children in children's homes told us they had at least monthly contact with a previous carer. How long children had spent in care did not make a big difference to whether they kept in contact with previous carers. Children who told us they had a disability were no more, nor less, likely than children generally to lose or keep some contact with previous carers.



The people children have contact with every month

Putting all this information together from our survey, the next chart shows the percentage of children who have some sort of contact with each sort of person in their lives at least once a month.

Figure 9: Who children in care have contact with each month



From this chart, we can see that the family or friends children are most likely to have some sort of contact with at least every month are their brothers or sisters and their birth mothers. Their birth fathers are the least likely relatives to have contact with.

Among their friends, they are more likely to have contact with friends they made before coming into care than friends they made in a previous placement. They are most likely to lose contact with friends from previous placements, and with their carers in previous placements. Of course, we do not know from our survey how often children who aren't in care lose contact with their past friends. Children in care may or may not be more likely than other children to keep in touch, or lose contact, with friends they have made in the past.

Along with this, children's answers to our survey had confirmed that **contact with all family and friends, including birth parents, brothers and sisters, and friends made before coming into care or in previous placements in care, became less the longer they spent in care.**

How many children in care are separated from their birth brothers and sisters?

In our survey, we asked how many children had brothers or sisters who were in care too, and whether they were placed together in the same placement, or had been separated in different placements. We had answers to this question from 311 children and young people.

Out of those 311, just over half (52%) said they did have brothers or sisters who were also in care. The other 48% said they did not have any brothers or sisters in care.

The very large majority of children who had brothers or sisters in care had been separated from them. Out of the children who said they had brothers or sisters in care, 81% had been separated from their brothers and sisters, and were not in the same placement as any of their brothers or sisters.

Boys in care were more likely than girls to be separated from their siblings. Out of those who had siblings in care, 85% of the boys and 75% of the girls were in a different placement from any of their brothers or sisters.

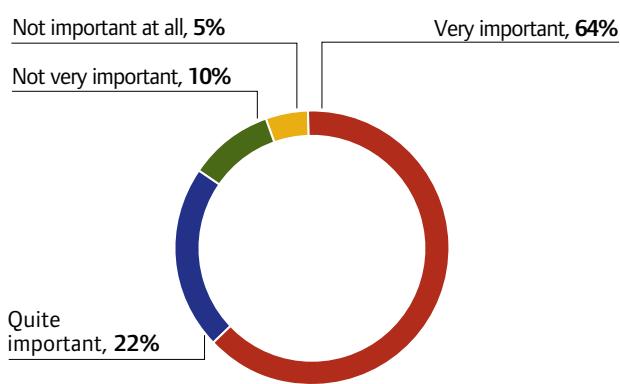
Those living in children's homes were much more likely to be separated from their siblings than those living in foster care. Out of those who had siblings in care, 99% of those in children's homes were in a different placement from any of their brothers or sisters, compared with only 66% of those in foster homes.



Should siblings be separated in care?

We asked all the children in our survey – not only those who actually had brothers or sisters in care – how important they thought it is to keep brothers and sisters in care together. Two hundred children answered this question. The next chart shows the percentages who gave each answer.

Figure 10: How important is it to keep brothers and sisters together in care?

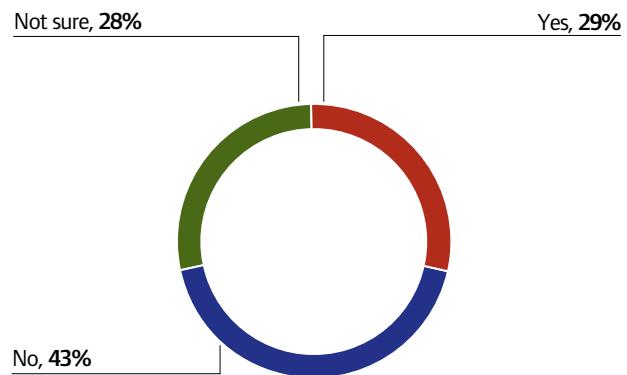


The great majority of children, 86%, said that they thought it is quite important, or very important, to keep brothers and sisters together when they are in care. Fifteen percent thought that it was either not very important, or not important at all, to keep brothers and sisters together. Here are some quotations from our discussion groups about this: 'it is usually right if the young person wants to do it'; 'it's right because you can watch each other grow up and help them with their education'; 'should put siblings together even if they don't want to be – they are siblings and will learn to get along'; 'if one isn't settling in the placement then they should go – you should not unsettle all of them'.

There was also a view that it was right to keep siblings together from the start, as trying to bring them back together again once they had grown apart could be difficult: 'Siblings should always be together. They get upset when placed apart and come back together again.' Bringing siblings back together after they had been separated for a long time could also bring risks: 'should look at what's best for you before doing that, eg your siblings may be taking drugs or stealing and you may be forced into that'.

Knowing that the great majority of children in care think brothers and sisters should be kept together, we found out from those who actually had brothers or sisters in care whether they thought it was ever right to separate siblings. We had answers from 131 children and young people. The chart shows their answers.

Figure 11: Is it right to separate brothers and sisters in care?



'Siblings should always be together'

From these answers, we can see that the children had very mixed views on whether it is ever the right thing to do to separate brothers and sisters when they are in care. This could be a difficult decision: 'Don't know whether separating is better or not, sometimes it's better to have separate placements.' **Forty-three per cent of children who actually had brothers or sisters in care said that separating siblings in care was never right. Over a quarter (28%) were not sure about this, and over a quarter (29%) told us they thought it could sometimes be the right thing to do to separate siblings.**

Overall, girls were less sure than boys about whether it was ever right to separate brothers and sisters in care. Although exactly the same percentage (45%) of girls and boys said it was never right, 35% of girls (compared with 23% of boys) said they were unsure about this, and 20% of girls (compared with 32% of boys) said it could sometimes be right. **A higher proportion of children in children's homes were against ever separating siblings in care than were children in foster homes.** Fifty-one per cent of those in children's homes said it was never right to separate brothers and sisters in care, compared with 36% of foster children.

Comparing the views of children and young people in different groups, we found that **far more of those who had been in care for between two and six years were against brothers and sisters ever being separated in care than those who had been in care for either less than two years, or longer than six years.** Fifty-two per cent of those in care for between two and six years said that siblings should never be separated, compared with 38% of those who had been in care for less than two years, and 37% of those who had been in care for more than six years.

At first it seemed odd to us that people who had been in care for between two and six years should be so much more against separating siblings than were the people who had been in care for either shorter or longer times. But then we remembered that we had already found from another question that the biggest drop in contact with siblings happened after two years in care. Eighty per cent of children who had spent less than two years in care still had contact with brothers or sisters at least once a month, but only 55% of those who had been in care for two to six years had told us that they had this much contact any more with their siblings. **It looks as if when children go beyond two years in care they are very likely to be losing touch with their brothers and sisters, and so they are then most likely to be against this happening to children in care.**

Next, we wanted to know what sorts of reasons there might be for separating brothers and sisters in care. We had answers from 161 children telling us when it might be right to separate siblings. Here are the top three reasons they gave us, with the percentages of children giving each reason from the 161 who answered the question:

- If they don't get on with each other (from 27%)**
- If they are in danger, especially in an emergency (from 17%)**
- If they want to be separated (9%).**

Our discussion groups told us that although it can be right to separate siblings who simply don't get on with each other, this still needs to be thought about very carefully each time: 'Depends how they are together.' Siblings often do fight and argue, and that doesn't mean that they should necessarily be separated.

Other reasons, given by fewer children and young people, included: separating siblings when one is growing up to leave care, or if there is not enough space in a placement for them; if being separated is in their best interests; if they have different needs; or if one is not settling in their placement. Sometimes it might not be possible to place brothers and sisters of very different ages in the same placement, because they have different needs at their different ages. In our discussion groups, there was a strong view that children's own views and wishes should be a big part of any decision about separating siblings. One young person described how social workers also needed to do a good assessment of whether particular brothers and sisters should be kept together or separated, and not just go with what the children wanted at the time, especially if the children themselves didn't all think the same way: 'If it was left to the kids, I might say no, others might say yes, so kids shouldn't decide it.'

Looking at the answers from different groups of children, we found that boys put growing up and leaving care in their top three reasons for separating siblings, instead of siblings wanting to be separated. Children in children's homes did the same. Foster children put not having enough space to look after siblings together as one of their top three reasons for separating them, instead of siblings wanting to be separated.

'Don't know whether separating is better or not, sometimes it's better to have separate placements'

From the answers to these questions in our survey, **overall, children in care think it is important to try to keep siblings together in care, but that there can still be good reasons in particular cases for separating them.**

In our discussion groups, we talked about **whether siblings who had been separated in care should be placed together again in the future**. There were mixed views on this: 'After being apart for so long you've grown apart, so it wouldn't work now'; 'it can work if you've been apart'; 'depends what type of relationship you have, but sometimes it can be too late'. Some thought that when siblings have grown settled separate from each other, it could be wrong to try to bring them together again. One person said that siblings who lived apart for a long time could become strangers to each other, and it 'wouldn't be a good idea to put two strangers together'.

Once brothers and sisters were settled with their own carers, it might not be a good thing to separate someone from their own carer in order to join a brother or sister somewhere else: 'Young people would get close to their own carers and might not want to leave them.' It might be best to make sure they could keep in contact, without trying to move them to live together again: 'just would have wanted to see brother but not live together because they have settled into their foster home'.

If they are to live together again, this should not happen suddenly, but gradually, starting with increasing contact: 'contact to work up to it – at start feels awkward being back together again'. **The longer siblings live apart from each other, the less well they know each other, and the less likely it would be that they could just live together again:** 'it can be emotional if it's been a long time'; 'separate lives, if come together then their lives could clash, would still like the opportunity to try though'. A lot of work would be needed to help siblings to know each other again.

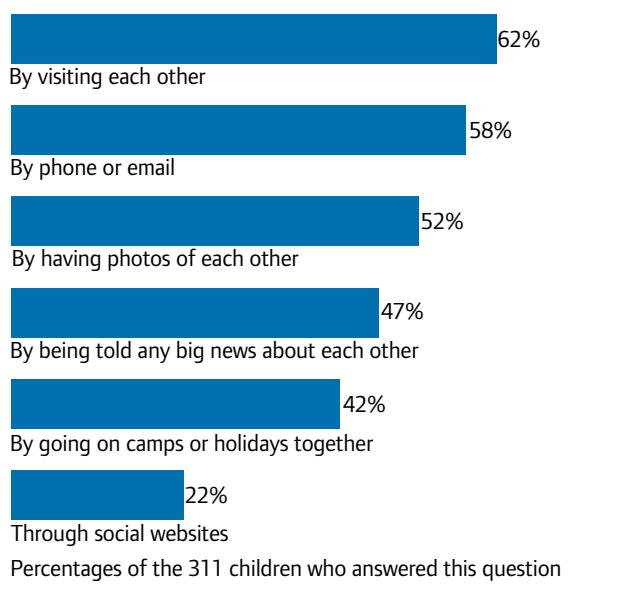




Keeping in touch with brothers and sisters

Finally in our survey, we asked children and young people about different ways that brothers and sisters in care who are in different placements should keep in touch with each other. We gave them a list to choose from. A total of 311 children and young people answered this question, and the chart gives the percentages that gave each answer. Each of them could give more than one answer, so the percentages do not add up to 100.

Figure 12: How should brothers and sisters in care keep in touch if they are separated



Only nine children (3%) told us they thought it doesn't matter if siblings in care lose touch with each other.

'If a young person doesn't want to keep in contact they shouldn't be forced to, if they do then a social worker should do something about it'

Boys and girls, children with a disability, children in children's homes and children in foster homes all gave the same top four preferred ways for brothers and sisters to keep in touch with each other. How long children had been in care, though, made a difference to what came third and fourth in their lists. Keeping in touch by going on camps or holidays together came third on the list for children who had been in care for less than six years, but fourth on the list for those who had been in care for over six years.

From their answers, we can see that the children and young people in our survey thought **the best way for brothers and sisters to keep in touch was to visit each other, and the next best was to speak to each other by phone or email. It is important to note that over half the children said that brothers and sisters should have photographs of each other.** We have heard in other consultations how important photographs can be to children in care. Being kept up to date with **major items of news about each other, and being able to go together on holiday or on special camps for siblings in care** were also important ways of keeping in touch. It is also worth noting that social websites did not score highly as a way for siblings in care to keep in touch with each other.

Having news about brothers and sisters was very important if you had been together in the past and got to know each other, but **in discussion groups some told us they wouldn't want news about brothers or sisters they had never known.** 'If you never knew them you might get upset, but what's the point if you never knew them in the first place?'

Over three quarters of the children (**75%**), **out of the 204 who answered one more question about this, thought that councils should help children and young people to keep in touch with their brothers and sisters in care.** The other 22% thought that this should be left up to the young people themselves. As one child summed it up: '**If a young person doesn't want to keep in contact they shouldn't be forced to, if they do then a social worker should do something about it.'**

Last words

At the end of our survey, we asked children and young people to give us any other messages about keeping in touch with brothers and sisters in care, to put in this report. Here are their final messages to anyone reading this report:

'Don't split us up. It is hard enough coming into care without not seeing my brother/sister'

'Have more carers that can look after brothers and sisters together'

'I think brothers and sisters should always stay in touch'

'I'd like us to be together, but I understand if not allowed'

'If a brother or sister have got a good bond with each other I think they should be kept together'

'If you have a sibling with you it is better because you can have a bit of your birth family all the time'

'Brothers and sisters need to guide each other through hard times'

'My sister was in a different placement to me. We ran away all the time to see each other. We should have been together'

'When brothers and sisters are not in care together they should have at least frequent visits'

'You shouldn't lose kids that are adopted'

'Try their hardest to keep them together but if they don't, make sure they don't drift apart and become more like distant relatives than brothers and sisters'

And finally, a last word from a young person who summed up what they thought about the need to work hard to keep family members in contact with each other after someone in the family had been taken into care.

'It's a big issue that needs to be taken seriously. It's one of the most important things but social services don't see it that way.'

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