



Not forgotten: The importance of keeping in touch with former foster carers

The Fostering Network, November 2019

'Children need to know that they're not forgotten.'

Foreword

A system that too often, without reason, ends children's important relationships is one that is not fit for purpose.

Relationships are the golden thread that runs through children's lives. A support network of people who know a child well helps them to feel loved, develop a strong sense of self and maintain healthy relationships in the future.

This is particularly important for children in care who may have faced instability in every aspect of their lives. In foster care, children often experience positive family life for the first time and develop valuable relationships with their foster family. It is essential that, if they then move within or out of the care system, they do not lose touch with the people they love and trust.

The Fostering Network launched the Keep Connected campaign in response to reports from foster carers that they had not been allowed ongoing contact with the children they had looked after. In one case, a foster carer who had been prevented from seeing a child he had looked after for many years, successfully challenged the local authority in court to overrule the decision.

Since then there has been no significant progress; young people are still losing touch with the people that matter to them when it is not in their best interests. It is still assumed, too often, that there should be no contact after a child moves, and while there may be times when it is not appropriate for a child to keep in contact with their previous foster families or others, these will be the exception rather than the rule. We need a culture shift to ensure that the starting position in any transition planning is for ongoing contact.

We hope this report will create lasting change in the way that local authorities and fostering services plan and support contact between children and their former foster carers.



Kevin Williams
Chief Executive

Background

When children move within or out of the care system, they can find leaving the people who have looked after them traumatic, even experiencing it as rejection. Staying in touch can mitigate this loss and help children to trust their new carers more easily and ultimately strengthen the new relationships.

Received wisdom in social work used to be that a child should break off their relationship with one carer to replace it with a new one – based on a belief that bonds can only be formed one at a time. This approach has children waiting months after a move before being 'allowed' to see their former foster family again.

However, research now suggests this is damaging and that, in fact, having a close bond with an adult makes it easier to form future bonds, enables children's development and improves their wellbeing. The Care Inquiry shone a spotlight on the importance of children's relationships six years ago, and

the Government in Westminster included a recommendation about supporting the bond between fostered children and their former foster carers in the Fostering Better Outcomes report.

Social work practice has not kept pace with the developments in the theory. A survey we conducted of 179 young people in care and care leavers showed that 55 per cent were not supported to keep in touch with their foster carers, despite 81 per cent saying it was important. The findings are published in our report, [Keep Connected: Maintaining Relationships When Moving On](#).

We have grave concerns about the effect this has on children, who can be left feeling abandoned or can struggle to build attachments to new carers. This, though, is not the full extent of the damage of failing to support relationships - foster carers and their families can also be affected.

Foster carers routinely side-line their own needs to prioritise their fostering, but it can take an emotional toll on them and their family to lose contact when a child leaves their home.

We are often told that saying goodbye is the hardest part of the role, but without the reassurance of ongoing contact, the system is compounding foster carers' grief, leaving them not knowing what has happened to the child or how they're getting on in their new home. It can also leave foster carers feeling guilty that the child feels forgotten or abandoned.

When foster families have had this experience, how can we expect them to be able to give as much to the next child, knowing they may be stopped from ever seeing them again when they move on?

We looked again at these issues in our 2018 State of the Nation's Foster Care survey, to establish more evidence and better understand the scale at which relationships are being damaged and lost. More than 3,000 foster carers from across the UK told us about the contact they have with the children they have fostered. The findings of this survey form the basis of this report. The personal stories have been shared by foster carers who have had children move on from their care, but names have been changed.

Peter

Saying goodbye to the children, mostly babies, we've looked after is always emotional, it's usually accompanied by many tears. Our own children experience rising tension in the run up to the transition and generally it's a challenging time for everyone. What always helps is the relationship we build with the adopters and birth families with whom the children in our care have gone to live. We still keep in touch – to one degree or other – with all the children we have looked after. We see this as a crucial part of our fostering role, although Christmas is becoming expensive!

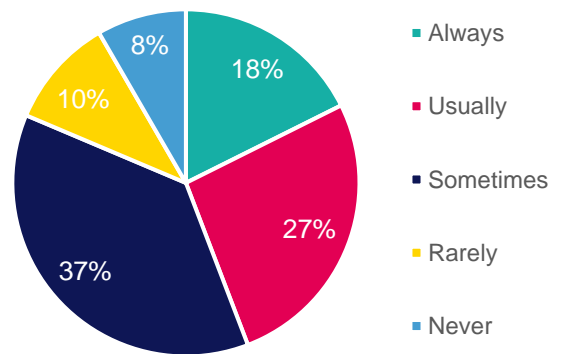
Having this ongoing relationship is, of course, wonderful for us as a foster family. We love attending key milestones of the children who have lived with us – birthdays, christenings and so on. But, we also know that keeping in touch has helped the families where the children are now living. We've been on the end of the phone, supporting new adoptive parents when their baby won't sleep, eat, have their hair washed and so on. We're useful babysitters when new parents have to go to meetings or need an extra pair of hands. And because we've done this a number of times now, we can give advice on where to go if new families need extra support.

As foster carers we have experience and expertise that has built up over many years. This, combined with the very human aspect of the relationships we have with the children, is what makes keeping in touch so important.

Findings

Q1. Do you keep in contact with former fostered children?

There are foster carers who have life-long relationships with the children they have looked after, offering them support and love well into adulthood. However, this is not the universal experience. Fewer than half of foster carers (45 per cent) said they always or usually keep in touch. 563 respondents (18 per cent) said that they rarely or never remain in contact. Although in some cases there will be a good reason to cease contact, the high number of people losing touch suggests a culture that fails to value children's relationships.



Worryingly, several foster carers added comments to say they had 'never been made aware that this is a possibility' or 'didn't know [they] could have contact after [children] left [their] care'. This suggests that the culture of 'giving children a clean break' remains pervasive and contact is not even being discussed.

Becky

When Becky was moved from our care to a residential home, she made it clear she wanted to keep in touch. One day she even turned up on our doorstep with bare feet, having run two miles to get there.

Thankfully, the staff at her new home recognised how important we were to her and helped us to see her and support her over the phone whenever she had a bad day.

However, when she moved again, her social worker asked us not to see or speak to her until she settled. We had huge reservations. This was a child with severe attachment trauma and the fact that she had made an attachment to us was a miracle in itself. But we followed the social worker's instructions and had not seen her for almost two months when the placement ended suddenly.

Becky tried to call us a few days later; she was really unhappy. I told her social worker, hoping it would show that Becky needed us, but was instead told that until she settled Becky would no longer have access to phone calls.

It felt like Becky was being punished. Why wasn't her social worker listening to her? We couldn't understand why they would stop contact again when history had shown this didn't help Becky to settle.

After seeing The Fostering Network's campaign, I wrote to my MP, who contacted the Children's Minister. The Minister responded in support and when I showed the letter to my fostering service, they finally agreed we could see Becky.

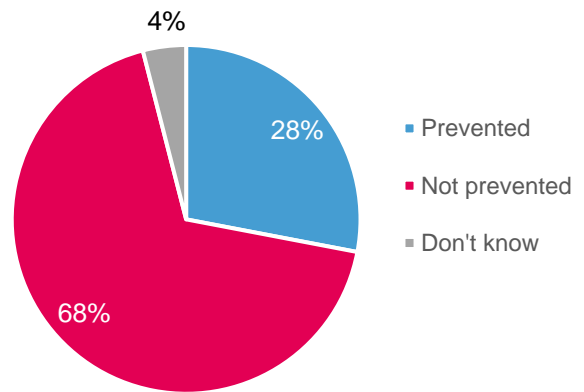
When we finally visited Becky again, it had been six months since our last contact. I'm glad we're back in touch, but I don't know if it will help her or not now. We will try to make sure she isn't left feeling that no one wanted to see her.

Q2. Have you ever been prevented from keeping in contact with a former fostered child?

More than one in four foster carers (28 per cent) had been prevented from keeping in contact with a child they have fostered.

This is over 800 respondents who could have stayed in children's lives but were stopped.

We know that forming and maintaining attachments in childhood can make it easier for young people to have stable relationships in later life. It is therefore concerning that foster carers, who might have looked after a child for many months or even years, are being prevented from offering them longer-term love and support.



Q3. Who prevented the relationship from continuing?

The most likely party to have prevented contact were the local authority or fostering service, half the respondents (323 foster carers) gave this answer.

New adoptive parents were the next most likely group to have prevented contact (18 per cent). Emotions can understandably run very high during the adoption process and with some practitioners still recommending "nesting" with your new child without other people around, it is unsurprising that adopters are not always making space for former foster carers in their child's life.

However, anecdotally there are many examples of adoptive parents who have built a relationship with their child's former foster carers and valued their support.

Other parties including birth family, other foster carers, IROs and residential care staff were also reported as having prevented contact in some instances.

Tommy

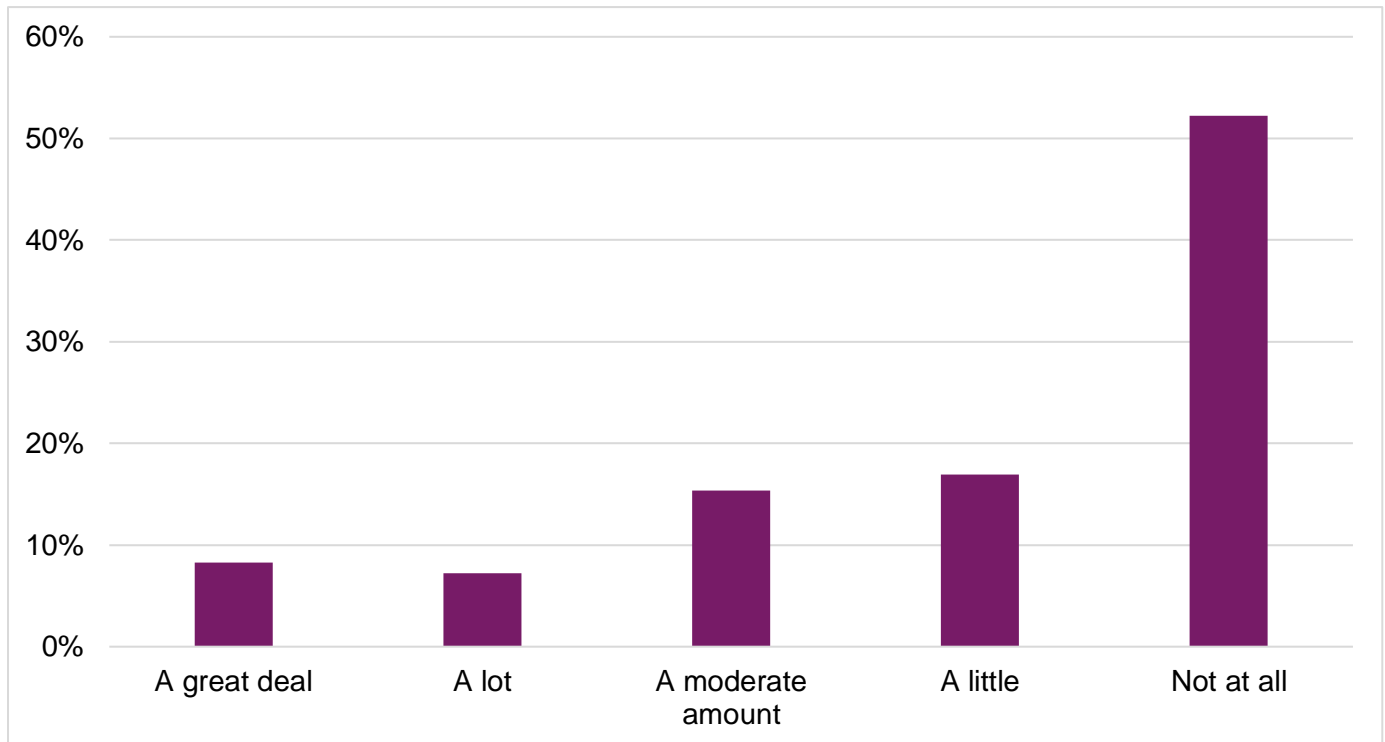
Since Tommy left a year ago, I have only seen him once.

For six years I fostered Tommy and his sister Emma, until it became clear the two of them could no longer live together. Emma now lives with me on a special guardianship order, but since her brother moved to another foster carer my relationship with him has been irreparably damaged.

Tommy's new foster carer and the local authority didn't want me to see him until he had settled. Six months after he left my home, I was finally allowed to see him, but under such restrictive conditions that Tommy missed out on our long-awaited trip to see The Lion King at the West End.

Emma recently saw her brother without me, she told him about another trip we had taken, and he replied, 'Ask if I can come too next time'. I would have loved to have taken him with us, and it breaks my heart that I'm being stopped from giving this little boy experiences and showing him that he is still loved.

Q4. In general, how supported do you feel in maintaining contact with former fostered children, where appropriate?



More than two thirds of foster carers told us they received little or no support to maintain contact with their former fostered children, while fewer than one in six felt they got a great deal or a lot of support.

Without the right support, former foster carers, new foster carers, adopters, special guardians and birth family are put in the precarious position of trying to establish boundaries and expectations during what can be a challenging transition period.

Former foster carers and new carers, adopters etc. need support and guidance to ensure ongoing contact is successful for everyone involved. In failing to offer this, children's services are letting down the children in their care and putting unnecessary strain on former fostering families and new placements.

Support can include clear guidance, specific training and funding to facilitate visits. It may also be necessary to hold a vacancy after a child moves on or provide additional respite care for other children in their care to enable the foster carer to visit the child that has left.

Planning and preparation are essential to set expectations and make practical arrangements. It is imperative that local authorities include foster carers in transition planning from the start.

When children's services have this proactive approach, it helps to create a culture that prioritises children's relationships.

Sarah

There were six years between Sarah's move to a residential home and the Facebook message that put us back in touch, but we were thinking of her the whole time.

Despite what we, her foster carers, knew was best for Sarah, we were not allowed to see her again after she left us aged 13. We desperately tried to keep in touch, but everyone who was looking after her was convinced she needed to move on without any contact.

The end of Sarah's time with us had been really difficult and, ultimately, we couldn't give her the care she needed. Nevertheless, we had become incredibly fond of her and we told her we still wanted to be part of her life. It felt terrible to be unable to keep the promise we had made, and I worried she would feel abandoned by us.

We always knew she would be back in touch with us as soon as she could, and we were waiting to hear from her. Eventually she did; it was on the day of her 18th birthday.

Conclusions

The results from our State of the Nation Survey support our previous findings that the care system is doing little to promote fostered children's relationships when they move within or out of it and is far too often, in fact, obstructing them.

The level of support that children receive to maintain their relationships is inconsistent. They are reliant on their adopters, foster carers or family to facilitate contact, often without training or guidance.

Former foster carers can play an important role in children's lives, helping them to settle in a new home, offering support at difficult times and enabling them to make sense of their past.

The sector must work together to end outdated practice that sees children lose touch with their former foster carers when they move on. Contact should be discussed during planning for every transition and enabled unless it is decided that it is not in a child's best interests.

The Fostering Network has published the [Keep Connected principles](#) to shape how transitions from and within the care system are approached across the UK. The aim is for all children and young people who are moving on from foster families to be enabled to keep in touch with them – and with other significant people in their lives – through better understanding, planning and support.

Recommendations

- The UK's governments should ensure that guidance and regulations require that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and that foster carers are enabled to support their former fostered children as they move home, to a permanent placement, or through the leaving care process.
- Local authorities and trusts must ensure that contact between children and their former foster carers is encouraged and supported, challenging the prevailing culture where necessary.

- When local authorities, trusts and independent fostering providers are inspected, proper attention should be paid by the inspectors as to how these relationships are being built and supported for children and young people in care.
- Maintaining contact after a fostered child moves on should be routinely considered part of the role of a foster carer, and foster carers should be supported to carry this out.
- All relevant parties should adopt the Keep Connected principles and embed them in their policies and practice accordingly.

Contact

For more information about the campaign or to share your experience:

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