



## Article

# “It Is Possible to Call More People Mum” – Contact Between Children in Foster Care and Their Birth Parents

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**Abstract:** Contact arrangements in child protection can often create conflicts and distress. This is an area the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWSs) have paid greater attention to in recent years, to a large degree due to several recent decisions made by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the early 2020s and Norway’s Supreme Court in March 2020, as well as subsequent case law, all highlighting the importance of post-care contact. In the article, we focus on conditions that contribute to successful contact arrangements. We also discuss how CWSs can organise such arrangements in ways that lead to cooperative relationships around the children. The article analyses data from two cases where all those participating in the contact arrangements agreed that they worked well. In addition, we draw on supplementary data from a survey of caseworkers in the CWS about their experiences and assessment of contact arrangements in 525 cases. The analyses show that flexibility, openness, recognition, dialogue, and participation are particularly significant. It is essential to look at contact arrangements as ongoing processes, incorporating changes occurring in the child’s situation, the parents or the foster parents.

**Keywords:** contact arrangements; foster care; children’s reactions; children’s participation

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## 1. Introduction

“Good cooperation gives the children a sense of predictability and common boundaries. Birth parents and foster parents must cooperate and agree”.

(foster mother)

According to Norwegian legislation, children in public care have the right to maintain contact with their birth family. Consequently, a formal decision to place a child must include a plan for maintaining contact. A decision to terminate all contact is extremely rare. However, there are no fixed regulations for how these arrangements are to be organized. The Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWSs) have recently paid more attention to these contact arrangements. Such arrangements can become a source of controversy and conflict, often affecting the children negatively and necessitating adjustments (Stang et al. 2023). However, the increased attention is, to a large degree, due to several recent decisions made by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and Norway’s Supreme Court, as well as subsequent case law, all highlighting the importance of post-care contact (Sandberg 2020; Alvik 2021; Stang et al. 2023). According to the ECHR’s decisions, the main goal of contact while in care is to facilitate reunification. One consequence of this is that it becomes ever more essential to establish positive and sustainable contact

arrangements. This has led to the Child Welfare Tribunal<sup>1</sup> deciding on more frequent contact than previous decades (Alvik 2021; Stang et al. 2023). The main objective of this article is to present some possible elaborations of this issue through in-depth analyses of two cases, supplemented by survey data from social workers.

## 2. Background

The article is based on the research project Contact after Placement (Stang et al. 2023).<sup>2</sup> This multi-method project aimed to expand the knowledge base about contact practices decided on by Child Welfare Tribunals and courts, as well as voluntary and informal arrangements. Such knowledge can again be helpful to the political and administrative efforts to ensure legally correct practices in the child's best interests (Stang et al. 2023). One starting point was that contact can have an intrinsic value regardless of whether foster children end up moving back to their family of origin. The project generated new knowledge about varying practices in contact arrangements.

## 3. The Reunification Objective and Contact Arrangements

Research has shown a link between contact frequency and the likelihood of reunification, in that very infrequent or no contact significantly reduces the chances of reunification (Fanshel and Shinn 1978). According to this knowledge, sufficiently frequent contact, particularly between younger children and their parents, will be necessary. The next question is if more frequent contact can be arranged to increase the likelihood of this outcome. This is discussed in a recent scoping review covering 2000–2021 (Healy et al. 2023). The review points out that parents can provide emotional and practical support to their children. It also refers to research on strategies for involving parents and the positive effect of some of these on parents' contact with their children. Although the review primarily includes small-scale studies, some consensus exists about the characteristics of programmes that effectively involve parents. It is, for instance, essential to adopt a resource-oriented and inclusive approach due to the experiences many parents have, as their situation often worsens emotionally, socially, and financially when they lose custody of their children (Broadhurst and Mason 2020).

However, it has been challenging to determine the "correct" frequency of contact due to the diverse characteristics of foster children, such as age, reasons for placement, and the nature of their relationship with their parents before placement (Quinton et al. 1997). Theoretical and empirical knowledge still cannot state with certainty what frequencies of contact work best for children and young people in foster care. Thus, this tends to become more of a legal or even normative issue.

## 4. Additional and Conflicting Objectives for Contact Arrangements

However, reunification is not necessarily the sole objective of contact, despite this being the overarching legal goal. A recent Belgian study raised this question (Chartier and Blavier 2021). It reviewed more than 500 cases, aiming to identify factors that may impact the opportunities for reunification. The results suggest that reunification is an important goal, but other factors must also be considered. Four key factors were identified as significant to take into consideration when children had been in foster care for an extended period: the perceived quality of the relationship between the child and the parents, the parent's level of involvement, the time, and the impact of parental pathology and substance abuse. The study also emphasises the importance of intensive work, particularly during the first year after placement, to maximise the chances of reunification or, alternatively, to prepare a realistic plan for all parties involved. In addition, Chartier and Blavier

(2021) argue for discussing shared care, where the parents can be part of a “team” around the child, even if the child is growing up in a foster home.

The idea of “shared care” between foster parents and parents has been prominent in some literature since the 1980s and 1990s. This can be seen as an attempt to dissolve some of the sharp dividing lines often existing between the family and the foster family, despite the fundamental differences between them, as an alternative to either—or thinking about the goal of reunification. Remembering that children and parents can have excellent contact without reunification becoming an issue may also be advantageous. At the same time, the reunification goal can be maintained even if a contact arrangement sometimes does not work well (Cannaert and De Wilde 2024; Järvinen and Luckow 2020; Thørnblad et al. 2023).

The literature on how birth-parents can establish and maintain positive relationships with their children without reunification being the objective still needs to be improved (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2024; Healy et al. 2023). While there is abundant information on contact in general (see Backe-Hansen et al. 2019; Stang and Baugerud 2018; Stang et al. 2023 for overviews; Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022), fewer studies exist about factors contributing to successful contact arrangements, which is the focus of this article. We explore how CWSs can facilitate contact between children and young people in foster homes and their parents and what is needed to develop robust and positive cooperative relationships around the children.

Contact arrangements can fulfil many different functions, which may affect how the parties experience contact situations in unintended and intended ways (Stang and Baugerud 2018). For instance, one underlying purpose on the part of the parents may be to influence the decision-making process in a case through behaviour they see as strategic. Further, the perceived quality of contact and the children’s reactions to contact can be used to evaluate the quality of the attachment between the child and the parents, even though situational factors should be considered. Episodic observations can, in turn, be used as part of an assessment of possible reunification or as an argument for changing existing arrangements. On the other hand, the contact content can be used as a basis for guiding parents in how contact should preferably take place, i.e., whether there is something one wants or does not want parents to say or do. Supervision during visitation can be used for guidance so that the visitation works better or to check that things do not happen that are stressful for the children. However, contact can also become an arena for raising disagreements between birth parents, foster parents, and possibly CWSs concerning the location or design of the visitation arrangement. This can happen, for example, when the birth parents or foster parents seek to influence the children to behave or express themselves in particular ways, or if the children seek to influence what should happen through their ways of behaving during contact. Our survey contributed data about such processes (Stang et al. 2023).

It must be assumed that contact is a social situation characterised by many factors, including disagreements and conflicts, which underlines the importance of facilitation and follow-up. In addition, experiences and reactions are processes that evolve and change over time, particularly if placements last long. Children become older, and changes in the birth family and the foster family situation need to be considered.

Below, we outline the study’s empirical and methodological foundations and then present and analyse the empirical data. In the ensuing discussion, we will underline the significance of cooperation, flexibility, acknowledgement, dialogue, children’s opposition to contact, and participation.

## 5. Methods and Material

The analyses presented are based on two datasets. First, they draw on interview data from two cases where the parties in the contact arrangements agreed about having good relationships with each other and, second, on supplementary data from a survey of caseworkers in the CWSs (Stang et al. 2023). The cases highlight the importance of cooperation, flexibility, recognition, and dialogue, while the survey data shed light on the children's reactions to contact and participation, as evaluated by the caseworkers, and how this influences the workers' judgment. In addition, the survey provides a broad understanding of CWSs' work with contact. The two data sources complement each other, providing a nuanced understanding of prerequisites for well-functioning contact arrangements. Most of the CWSs are trained social workers.

Recruitment for the overall case study was carried out in collaboration with two NGO organisations and the CWSs. The organisations identified the cases and contacted the CWSs responsible for the families so they could ask birth parents/foster parents/children about participating in the study, which is commonly necessary for this kind of study according to ethical regulations. The researchers then contacted those who had given their consent and arranged interviews. There are, of course, possibilities of positive bias in this type of recruitment process. This was not judged to be detrimental to the analyses in this article, as we wanted to build on positive practices.

Based on the last contact, we interviewed the participants about their experiences with the existing contact arrangement; the preparation for, implementation of, and follow-up after contact; and how the informants thought contact could and could not be facilitated. The overall empirical case material consists of five visitation arrangements, including 20 interviews. In addition, we conducted two focus group interviews and four individual interviews with key actors who represented the children, parents, foster parents, and supervisors and who have experience with and views on contact.

In this article, we strategically selected two cases where the participants agreed that contact arrangements and cooperation worked well. The cases, also chosen for their complexity and depth, feature different actors with shared experiences and views on contact arrangements. How contact is arranged will necessarily differ depending on the child's age, the basis for and length of placement, the parents' situation, or reactions to access. The two cases show variation in the child's age, length of stay in the foster home, and contact with and without supervision. The first case is a 15-year-old boy who had been in the foster home for eight years, all the time with contact with his mother. The second case concerned a 14-month-old boy who saw his mother and father separately a few times a year under supervision. He had been in the foster home since he was seven months old. Both placements were expected to be permanent. Data from the two cases included interviews with 10 people. In the first case, we interviewed the boy, his mother, the foster parents, and the CWSs caseworker. In the second case, we interviewed the birth mother, the foster parents, the CWSs caseworker, and the social worker supervising the contact.

Two of these case interviews were conducted in the foster home, one at the NGO organisation's premises, two at the CWSs, one at the university, one digitally, and one by phone. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded and transcribed except for three, where we took extensive notes. In a thematic analysis of the interviews, we examined what appeared to be central to good social relationships (cf. Braun and Clarke 2006). Flexibility, openness, recognition, and dialogue were key themes.

Some of the data from the electronic survey were included because they supplemented the analyses presented in the article (as presented in Stang et al. 2023). We received data about 525 cases distributed among 72 caseworkers in the CWSs. The informants worked in both large and small municipalities and were responsible for a varying number of cases. We asked about frequency, duration, where the visitations were

arranged, and who was present. This had not previously been investigated to such an extent in Norway. Because caseworkers have a central position in the administration and evaluation of contact arrangements, we were concerned about obtaining their views on different purposes of contact and, not least, how various forms of contact seem to affect the children. Furthermore, we were concerned about the participation of children and young people, including their putative disagreement with existing arrangements and why and how this influenced the workers' judgment.

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the project, and we have followed the ethical research guidelines of confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation. The children were given fictitious names, and personally identifiable information was omitted.

Below, we present the analyses from the two cases. In the ensuing discussion, we include analyses of relevant parts of the survey data.

## 6. Collaborative Relationships in the Two Cases

### 6.1. Case 1. Robert, 15 Years Old

Robert had lived in the foster home for eight years and was seven years old when he was placed there. Robert has weekend visits six times a year with his birth mother, and the visits can be extended during Christmas and summer holidays. When visiting his mother, Robert meets siblings, grandparents, and other family members. The placement is considered permanent until he turns 18, and reunification has never been an issue. The purpose of the contact is to maintain contact with the birth family.

Robert's foster parents and birth mother have cooperated since he was placed. They describe the collaboration as excellent and say they have good dialogue, close contact, and mutual trust. Everyone agrees that this is important to Robert. The development of the present excellent working relationship started when the foster mother called the birth mother shortly after the placement to obtain the information she needed about Robert's health. The birth mother was initially dismissive but changed her mind, and they had a long conversation. She was invited to the foster home, where she could see Robert's room and surroundings.

The foster mother handled most of the contact and coordination around Robert and the contacts. She and his birth mother had weekly conversations, and the foster mother became a critical support person for the mother. The birth mother says: *"It helped a lot that the foster home was accommodating and that they also cared about me and how I was doing"*. The caseworker in the CWSs describes the collaboration around Robert as unique and said that this was due to the excellent contact between the birth mother and the foster mother. The open and trust-based dialogue was understood as fundamental for Robert having a good situation in the foster home and for his contact with his mother to be safe and meaningful. For Robert, seeing that there were understanding relationships and cooperation between the mother and the foster parents could prevent and reduce loyalty conflicts.

The foster mother emphasised the importance of putting herself in the mother's situation and the fact that she has been deprived of care for her child. There is always a reason why children are removed, and the parents have basically "lost" the child. She said, *"Foster parents must not blame but support the parents and meet them with humility and respect. When you show the parents matter, the child becomes calmer"*. The foster mother explained that a whole family follows when you foster a child. It is essential that foster parents talk about their parents with the children and that they talk about both positive and adverse events. Their task as foster parents is to make the children safe and secure. She emphasised that most foster children will want to contact their birth family at some point, and then it is essential that they are prepared for this. It is also necessary to include the parents in everyday life around the children, and that they contact the parents when they have any

questions and tell them if something extraordinary happens. The foster mother had experienced birth parents as the foster parents' most prominent supporters: They have children together and must, therefore, have common goals. They must cooperate and agree. Good cooperation gives the children a sense of predictability and standard rules.

Robert's mother agreed with this and added that the CWSs is also a bit of a "parent" and that three parties must cooperate in the follow-up of the children. She found that when the foster parents are open and inclusive and provide information, this will prevent irritation, anger, and arguments. Regular information and contact beyond regular visits are also crucial. She emphasised that obtaining information about everyday events means a lot, such as how things are going at school, haircuts, etc. She believed that foster parents may be afraid that their foster children will be reunited and do not facilitate contact. Children may call their foster parents "Mum" and "Dad". However, "*It is possible to call more people Mum,*" she said, adding that it is essential not to forget that the birth mother is also a mother.

Over the years, the family had had several caseworkers, and neither the mother nor the foster parents cooperated positively with everyone. The mother said she had a good relationship with the current caseworker and felt respected and taken seriously. The caseworker was described as responsive and concerned with their wishes and needs. The mother also said that she and Robert can participate in decisions.

The mother was concerned about Robert's right to participate. She exercised flexibility in carrying out the contact arrangement in practice. She said, "*The contact is about the children, and I think they should be allowed to participate in deciding what they want to happen.*" She wanted Robert to be able to decide how contact was to be carried out and let him decide if he sometimes did not want to visit. Usually, Robert's wishes determined when there would be a visit or whether it was postponed. Now that he had become a teenager, a lot was going on that he prioritised, such as parties and friends. Sometimes, several months had passed without Robert and his mother having had contact. The mother said this was challenging but wanted to prioritise Robert's needs. She also thought contact would not be pleasant if he opposed seeing her. The close dialogue with the foster home meant that she still received regular information about what and how Robert was doing. She explained that this was a good help when there was a long time between contacts. Robert said he would talk to his foster mother if he wanted changes, and then the foster mother spoke to his mother, and they arranged matters.

This case shows how the excellent cooperation between the birth mother and the foster parents has been built over the years and has contributed to Robert being able to develop and maintain relationships with both his birth mother and foster parents over time, even though the mother was initially sceptical about the placement. In this case, the mother and the foster mother were the most critical adults, perhaps because cooperation with the CWSs had been difficult. In turn, Robert has participated in the process with increasing self-determination over time. This is a process we often see in families in general.

In the following case, the foster parents' openness and generosity towards the parents are also central.

#### 6.2. Case 2. André, 14 Months

André was placed in an emergency home directly after his birth and moved to his foster home when he was seven months old. He is described as a vulnerable child who needs peace and to be shielded from stress. The placement is long-term and located at a strictly confidential address. The parents do not live together and have supervised contact separately in a public place. The mother has three and the father has two visits a year, each lasting one hour. Contact aims to help André know his biological origins and history.

The parents had an ongoing case with the Child Welfare Tribunal because they wanted more contact, but the result was unknown during the interviews. The parents are followed up closely by conversations and guidance from the CWSs and the supervisor before, during, and after contact. At the first visits, the parents were not allowed to have physical contact with André, which the foster parents experienced as problematic and unnatural. Eventually, this changed.

The parents and foster parents met twice every six months under the auspices of the CWSs. They got to know each other, asked questions, and discussed how André was doing. Every month, the foster parents sent the parents pictures and wrote about how André was doing.

The foster and birth parents expressed mutual respect and described good dialogue and cooperation. They also described a responsive and reliable relationship with the caseworker in the CWSs and the supervisor. The birth mother said that the boy is safe with his foster parents. The foster parents were concerned about the parents and communicated that all four of them love André and want the best for him. They emphasised that they understand that the parents' situation is complex and do not condemn them. They also emphasised the importance of maintaining contact between André and the parents. Even though the parents cannot have custody of him, it is essential to include them, and the foster parents explained that they must show the parents understanding and acceptance of what they are struggling with:

“When it was decided that we would be André’s foster parents, the parents would meet us. We were in the middle of the transfer when we had a meeting... I almost got tears in my eyes. However, it is one of the nicest things I have participated in because we were all really nervous. And then we came into that room and found something in common around the care and love for André, in a way. Moreover, we started by addressing the elephant in the room by saying, ‘We do not judge you. We understand that things have become difficult. We all want to work together for the child’s best. We can perform the task of being the parents and then do it. Nevertheless, do not think we judge you or talk negatively about you to André.’. And then, some balloons dropped. We all cried a little, and then I think it has set the tone for an open relationship. They got to know us, and we got to know them.”

In the same way, the foster parents expressed that it is of great importance that they experience support and acceptance from the parents:

“I would say that they are very good at saying nice things about us. It has a big impact on our collaboration. They say, ‘We think you are doing a good job, and thank you for taking care of André.’ In the last meeting, when we were on our way out the door, the father said, ‘I just have to say that I think you are really good.’ That was very generous. Imagine being able to say so in such a situation. It helps us in our approach to them. I am very impressed with how they handle the situation.”

André is too small to express his wishes and needs. Therefore, it is up to the foster parents, birth parents, and supervisor to interpret his reactions to each visit. These have sometimes ended earlier than planned because André seemed tired. Sometimes, the foster parents suggested ending a visit; at other times, the parents took the initiative. The parents said they did not want the contact to be exhausting for André. The CWSs also emphasised that contact should be on the boy’s terms, according to his needs, functioning, and what he could tolerate.

This case shows how it is possible to build a positive relationship and cooperation between birth parents and foster parents even when the parents are negative about a placement at the outset.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. *Dialogue, Recognition, Openness, and Flexibility*

Excellent working relationships between the parties in these two cases were present despite painful experiences and memories, the length of the placements, whether there was supervision or not, and whether there was agreement about reunification. Cooperation among parents, supervisors, and the CWSs was also described as good. Although there had been and may be disagreements regarding the scope and place of contact, as in André's case, this did not seem to overshadow the fact that everyone was working together to facilitate contact in the safe and best possible way for the child. Even the fact that André lived at a confidential address with supervised contact did not prevent the parents from expressing that they had a positive relationship with the foster parents. Supervision can sometimes lead to more strained contact and affect the interaction among children, parents, and foster parents (Stang et al. 2023). The parents may feel they are being monitored, become insecure, be afraid of doing something wrong, and restrain themselves. Therefore, everyone must be familiar with the basis for supervision, and the supervisor must have a clear role and carry out the supervision as gently as possible.

Both Robert's and André's parents seemed to prioritise cooperation, sometimes even at the expense of their wants and needs. The foster parents expressed understanding for and acknowledged the parents' situation and emphasised being open, accommodating, and caring towards them. Furthermore, the foster parents emphasised that they neither blamed nor condemned the parents for being unable to care for the children. The foster parents put into words and facilitated that the parents had and should have a role in the children's lives and that, together, they could contribute to their best interests.

On their part, the parents expressed gratitude and trust in the foster parents. André was too young to understand what was happening and to put his feelings, needs, and reactions into words, and it was the adults who interpreted and acted on this, for example, by ending a visit earlier if he seemed tired. Robert, a teenager, could express his wishes but still left most decisions to the adults, even though he could prioritise being with friends over spending time with his mother. As the cases illustrate, attention to the children's needs, flexibility, open dialogue, recognition, and respect among parents, foster parents and the CWSs can be crucial for building cooperative relationships that create suitable contact arrangements for children.

### 7.2. *Different Purposes of Contact, Dependent on Persons and Contexts*

In the two cases, the overall purpose of contact for all the participants was that Robert and André should develop and maintain a positive relationship with their parents and have positive experiences when they met. In the survey, caseworkers in the CWSs were asked what, in their opinion, the purpose of contact is (Stang et al. 2023). The caseworkers mentioned several purposes, which should be considered independently of the objective of reunification. For instance, contact can help children learn about their history and contribute significantly to their identity development. Furthermore, they emphasised the importance of ensuring that the children could experience relationships with several people, feel loved by more people, and maintain continuity in their lives. The caseworkers also considered it essential that the children experienced the contact as positive and safe, regardless of other objectives. They emphasised the importance of preparation and facilitation of contact. This largely resonates with the points raised in the two cases.



### *7.3. Interpreting and Contextualising Children and Young People's Reactions*

There are many reasons why children react before and after contact with their birth family. The visits can reflect disagreements between the adults, and they can mobilise previous traumas and present children with dilemmas that are difficult to deal with. Contact can be organised in ways that children are not comfortable with and that do not fit well in their lives, or they might not feel good on the day of the visit. Children's reactions to contact can vary, including refusal of contact, agitation, or difficulty concentrating, as well as more severe reactions, such as difficulty sleeping or eating, withdrawal, difficulty keeping up with school, sadness, or aggression. Sometimes, reactions are described as lasting so long before and after contact that they harm the children's daily lives. In her review of court decisions, Alvik (2021) found the following reactions: restlessness, tiredness, aggressive outbursts and sadness, difficulty concentrating, loss of schooling, particularly contact-seeking, poor sleep, nightmares or bedwetting, poor appetite, and social or other mental problems.

In the survey, we asked the caseworkers to assess the frequency of these reactions before and after contact. They were divided into the age groups 0–6, 7–12, and 13–18. In addition, the survey mapped the extent to which the children and adolescents showed joy and relief before and after contact—a dimension often omitted when reactions to contact are assessed. It turned out that this applied to about half of the surveyed children.

Regardless of age, anxiety before visitation was described as the most expected. It was also mentioned as the second most frequent after contact. The most frequent reactions after contact were tiredness (0–6 and 7–12-years) and difficulties concentrating for the oldest (13–18). At the same time, the youngest children could be restless and contact-seeking, while the oldest were restless and tired. It turned out that the more severe reactions, such as poor sleep or nightmares, problems with appetite, and social or mental difficulties, were less common. The proportion of reactions was generally lower among the oldest.

If we accept that children and young people can be expected to react to contact for different reasons and in various ways, the question becomes how these should be interpreted. When contact arrangements are characterised by conflict, the different actors may interpret the children's reactions differently. For example, a child's refusal to meet with the parents could be understood as the child not wanting to see them or as an expression of the foster parents "setting up" the child. Reactions in the form of anxiety, sadness, or seeking contact could be interpreted as the child missing their parents and wanting to see them more often, or as an expression of their anxiety about losing their foster parents. Or how are we to understand when children say different things to their parents and foster parents regarding where they want to live? Divided loyalty might not be a good enough term to describe the child's feelings. Furthermore, many foster children do not want to hurt either their birth parents or foster parents and say what they believe the different grown-ups want to hear.

### *7.4. Dialectics Between Overall Purposes and Children's Reactions*

Another relevant question is what kinds of consequences the various reactions should have regarding contact. In the survey (Stang et al. 2023), the caseworkers had proposed reduction or cessation in 13% of the cases. The most common reason given was that the child/adolescent exhibited strong and adverse reactions (37%) and that the child/adolescent refused and did not want to see their parents (30%); in other words, child-focused arguments. Arguments about the parents' ability to follow up and the parents' behaviour were far less used, and cooperation difficulties were only mentioned by one caseworker. On the other hand, the reasons for extending contact were that the contact worked well, that the children wanted to themselves, that the parents asked for it, or that the foster parents thought it was okay. Only one caseworker mentioned the EtCHR judgments.

The caseworkers painted a nuanced picture of how the children's reactions were used in ongoing evaluations of contact arrangements. This underlines the need to make individual assessments and ensure that the children's experiences and reactions can be safeguarded and followed up over time. However, since the survey was anonymous and several answers to the questions about reactions were possible, obtaining combinations of reactions at the individual level was impossible.

Contact is a matter of complicated interpersonal relationships, where children and young people are vulnerable to loss of trust and potential breakups and do not always understand why adults act the way they do. The question, therefore, arises as to what kind of guidelines the CWSs can apply to interpret children's reactions, especially when they appear to be severely bothered over time. One approach is to assess the child's responses before, during, and after a visit and suggest adjustments in the frequency, duration, or location based on this evaluation, which can serve as the foundation for implementing changes to enhance the child's experience. Another option is to invest more time preparing for contact, attending a couple of visits, and having conversations afterwards, intending to develop a shared understanding of the child's reactions and what they may be due to. In the survey, we found that talking to all parties before contact was more common than afterwards, while some reactions could be more common afterwards. Moreover, the context of the visits may be ambiguous or conflicted, causing the participants to be uncertain about their expectations, have different expectations that lead to conflict, or be unsure about interacting with others present. In that case, preparations for the individual visits will be essential to reduce uncertainty and thereby contribute to greater security.

Some children may have a poor relationship with their parents, or they want to distance themselves from them and express resistance to contact. Such reactions are essential to explore; sometimes, the situation may only be resolved after a long time. In this case, parents may be involved in other ways, such as through contact via social media, photos, or written information (Aamodt and Mossige 2014). In exceptional cases, contact may work so poorly that it should be reduced or terminated in the child's best interests. Further discussion of this falls outside the scope of this article.

#### *7.5. Children and Young People's Participation in Contact*

Regarding children's participation in decisions about contact, Robert's case shows the importance of getting to know what the child wants and involving them in the planning in the best possible way, on the basis of the individual child's situation. As we saw, André's reactions to contact with his parents influenced how the visits were arranged, with room for flexibility regarding concrete visits.

In our cases, participation is understood as following the children's initiative during contact, allowing them to participate in deciding what to do, where and when to have contact, and being aware of and considering their reactions. In Robert's case, the foster parents conveyed to the CWSs what he wanted based on what he had said to the foster mother. Robert's wishes were respected, including when the visits should take place and how long they should last. André could not verbally express his wishes and needs. Therefore, observations and interpretations of his reactions during contact were emphasised. It was up to the foster parents, birth parents, and supervisor to act on this basis.

In the survey, we found that the degree of participation and influence increased with age and was lowest for children between the ages of three and six (Stang et al. 2023). The proportion of individuals involved in decision-making or having a great deal of influence was approximately 15% for the youngest age group. In comparison, it ranged between 50% and 60% for seven-year-olds and older. The issue of children's age and maturity and their implications for participation opportunities has been extensively debated in the literature. This is mainly related to assessments of young children's opportunities to

understand what decisions are about and what it means for children to feel that they have co-responsibility for the consequences of decisions made (Backe-Hansen 2009, 2021; Moore and Kirk 2010; Ormstad et al. 2020). Many caseworkers need more knowledge to involve young children (van Bijleveld et al. 2019). Our survey also produced many examples of how the children contributed (Stang et al. 2023). This included writing down one's contact plan and allowing children to express their wishes about time or activity, frequency, overnight stays, and whether there should be contact with or without a supervisor.

For most foster children in Norway, there is a decision about contact with the birth family: one or both parents, grandparents, siblings or other influential persons. Huseby-Lie (2023) conducted a systematic review that included children's perspectives on contact with their birth parents. It was based on 37 studies published between 2000 and 2023, of which 6 were quantitative. Most of the studies conclude that foster children want contact with their birth parents, even if contact exposes them to traumatic situations (Skoglund et al. 2024). At the same time, the results were inconclusive. Huseby-Lie found studies showing that children could find contact problematic and that children do not always want to have contact with their parents, for example, if this is experienced as traumatic or perceived as forced. Huseby-Lie points out that there are significant variations between foster children but does not discuss what kind of variations there may be. Nor do the studies she refers to discuss what "more" and "less" contact should be about. The studies originate from several countries with different social systems, and it is not possible to know from Huseby-Lie's review what the frequency and duration of contact means for foster children of various ages with problems of different severity and perhaps changed priorities over time.

On the basis of interviews with 18 CWSs employees and Child Welfare Tribunal members, Gerdt-Andresen et al. (2024) discuss the child's right to family life under public care and how to facilitate contact that maintains, develops, and strengthens family ties (Sandberg 2020). However, it is striking that the authors do not highlight the importance of children's perceptions and reactions regarding contact. The emphasis on children's right to family life (although this may also include the foster home) leads to an unformulated principle that children will always desire to maintain their relationship with their birth parents. Some research on older foster children indicates this is not always the case (Skoglund et al. 2024 Wade 2008). This issue could profit by further discussions.

In a study by Kiraly and Humphries (2013), 21 former foster children participated. The study found that the only positive description of contact with their parents occurred when the children chose it, and the contact took place in an informal setting. Formalised contact was generally perceived as forced and strained. This was especially true when the visits were arranged in a public office. Furthermore, contact was described as positive when it consists of joint activities that create memories, such as birthday parties and other celebrations, or doing something else enjoyable together, such as going for a walk (Bogolub 2018; Kiraly and Humphries 2013).

Children have different preferences for contact with their family of origin, so it is crucial to consider their perspectives on all aspects of contact. When this is the goal, the CWSs should find forms of contact that do not affect children's opportunities to settle down in the foster home. It is, therefore, necessary to arrange situations where parents and children can meet in ways that build and maintain positive relationships (cf. Huseby-Lie 2023).

Participation is more than just implementing legal rights; it also involves dialogue and is a fundamental part of children's development (Stang et al. 2023). As shown above, participation increases as children age. The younger the child, particularly if the child cannot speak, the greater the need for interpretation, which may be complex and open to

different interpretations. Some contact arrangements for children and young people in foster care exemplify this issue.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

Well-functioning contact arrangements involve cooperation among foster parents, CWSs, and biological parents. These relationships should be based on open dialogue, mutual recognition, and transparency. It is essential to be mindful of the children's reactions during contact and to actively involve and support them when planning and executing visits (Gerdtts-Andresen et al. 2024; Johansen et al. 2022). The parties' perception of contact arrangements will also evolve according to children's development and other family-related events. If a child is living in a foster home for an extended period, this is crucial to consider when making arrangements. Ideally, parents' acceptance of the situation and their role in their child's life is important in this process, and they often need support to do so. In addition, open communication and a positive working relationship are essential, even if the parents disagree with the placement. However, it is essential to acknowledge that not all parents will agree immediately or over time. Parents' attitudes can change due to unforeseen events or if they feel they are increasingly losing control over their children. It can also be demanding for parents to behave naturally towards their children on supervised visits. Therefore, it is necessary to have a clear supervision mandate, an area that needs to be clarified and professionalised (Stang et al. 2023; Taplin et al. 2021).

Despite their parental rights, birth parents can still feel inferior and powerless when attempting to deal with the CWSs and foster parents. They might often feel the requirement to cooperate and show acceptance to see their child difficult to handle, or they may have experiences of being disrespected and stigmatised because they were deemed unsuitable as parents. It is also essential for foster parents to approach their role with generosity towards the birth parents and to understand their different life situations. It is essential to communicate and emphasise birth parents' value and place in their children's lives. This can help them accept the situation and positively influence their relationship with their children. When they feel valued, they are less likely to fear being replaced and can have an opportunity to be positive, non-custodial parents. These practices can be referred to as "shared care" (Chartier and Blavier 2021) or inclusive foster homes (Gerdtts-Andresen et al. 2024; Oliver 2020). Foster parents may also feel powerless about CWSs, especially if they believe that the children react negatively to a contact arrangement, or they do not receive acceptance for their way of understanding the situation. They may feel caught in a difficult situation, as they are responsible for the child but, at the same time, are suspected of having a vested interest in not recognising the child's relationship with the parents as necessary (Gerdtts-Andresen et al. 2024; Stang et al. 2023).

Flexibility is essential when caring for children and addressing parents' needs to establish sustainable contact arrangements over time. The child's well-being is a top priority, and arrangements should be made to support the parents' role and self-esteem. However, it is essential to note that flexibility may be limited by the legal requirement that only the Child Welfare Tribunal can restrict visits. Being flexible does not imply skipping or shortening visits, even if the child's needs and expressed wishes suggest otherwise. Although decisions, rules, and routines govern contact, it is still possible to practice flexibility to adapt the scope, duration, content, place, and who is present to the child's (and the parents') needs. It is necessary to create room for adjustments and regulations of contact based on the child's needs through dialogue among birth parents, foster parents, CWSs, and possibly a supervisor. This approach helps ensure that the children are well taken care of. Building good working relationships is essential to prevent negative perceptions or the feeling of access rights being taken away when proposing changes. Responsive and accessible CWSs are crucial to safeguard the interests of the children, birth parents, and

foster parents. Regular collaboration meetings, evaluations, guidance, and handling of individual incidents can help establish and facilitate effective communication and visitation arrangements.

It is essential to involve the children in this process. The children's and family's needs are unique. Initial personalised treatment and support are essential to creating solid and effective plans. According to Stang et al. (2023), contact arrangements should be considered a distinct measure, not just part of a care plan. This means that time and resources should be dedicated to developing, monitoring, and adjusting contact arrangements throughout a placement.

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## Notes

1. The primary formal decision-making body in Norwegian child protection cases.
2. The research project was carried out at OsloMet, and funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (Bufdir) (Stang et al. 2023).

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