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Unsupervised contact in an age of new technology Possible solutions

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Contact

*“Contact remains a mixture of art and science”
(Triseliotis, 2010)*



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Contact

Biehal (2007) states that there is a collective practice wisdom that contact can:

Help and maintain secure attachments (McWey and Mullis)

Promote psychological wellbeing (Delfabbro et al., 2002)

Encourage a sense of identity (Delfabbro et al., 2002)

Sustain placement stability (Thomas, 2005)



Perspectives on contact and social media

The screenshot shows a Windows Internet Explorer browser window displaying a blog post. The address bar shows the URL: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/blogs/childrens-services-blog/2013/05/foster-care-in-a-digital-world-secret-mobile-phones-and-re-child-proofing-the-kinde/7c>. The page title is "Foster care in a digital world: 'Secret mobile phones and re-child-proofing the Kindle'". The author is Camilla Pemberton, a Journalist, and the post is dated 16 May, 2013, in the "fostering" category. The main content features a photograph of hands holding a smartphone. Below the photo, the text reads: "The ever-expanding digital landscape can be a terrifying area for foster carers to navigate, but there are many less-reported positive sides to this too, writes the *secret foster carer*". Further down, it says: "When a new foster child arrives in our home we let them unpack then go over our house rules. One of these is: 'Your mobile phone stays downstairs, on the table in the hall, please.'". The right sidebar contains an "About" section for the Children's Services blog, a search box, a "Categories" dropdown menu, and a "CommunityCare Jobs" advertisement with the text "Be found by leading employers" and "YOUR CV". The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the Start button and several open applications: "Community Care - Mic...", "SST", "Microsoft PowerPoint...", and "Foster care in a digita...". The system tray shows the time as 13:30.



Characteristics of unregulated contact

- Cannot be easily supervised or monitored
- When contact is made there has been not been any preparation beforehand for the response that is received and there is no support afterwards to manage the emotional complications
- Incessant contact risks undermining the stability of a placement
- Often instigated where formal contact arrangements include either supervised, limited or reduced face-to-face contact



Characteristics of unregulated

- Physical and/or emotional harm to the Looked After Child
- Emotional wellbeing of foster carers can be threatened



Perspectives on contact and social media – children and young people





Why do Looked After Children engage in unregulated contact ?

Possible reasons include:

- Looked After Child is being manipulated or exploited
- Looked After Child is experiencing a conflict of loyalty between the birth and foster families
- Looked After Child is contravening the wishes of the social workers or other professionals



An alternative explanation ?



Homogenous characteristics of adolescence includes:

- Limited ability to exercise self restraint
- The seeking of experiences that create heightened emotions
- Engaging in experimentation
- Lack of good decision-making skills

(Dahl, 2004; Galvan et al., 2007; Steinberg, 2007 Partridge, 2010 and Reamer et al., 2010)



An alternative explanation ?



The adolescent that has experienced abuse and neglect:

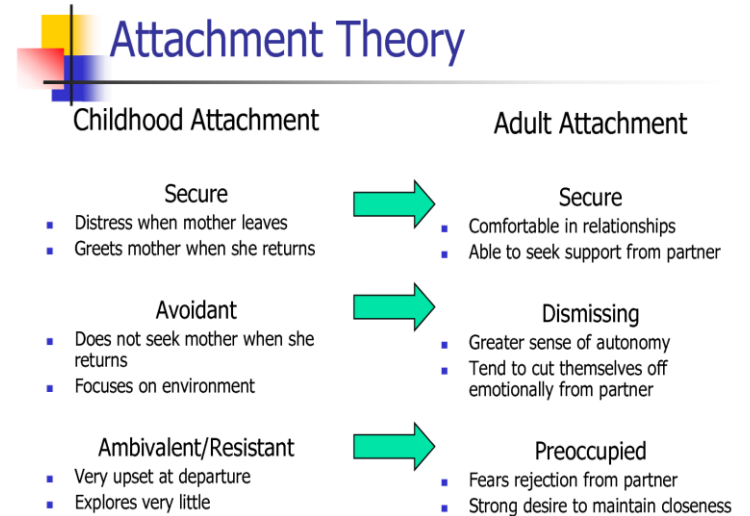
- experiences behavioural and emotional dilemmas which manifest themselves as both wanting to be close to the caregiver whilst at the same time wanting to escape (Howe, 2009)
- Get stuck in attachments that function around the need to survive (Batmanghelidjh, 2012)



An alternative explanation ?



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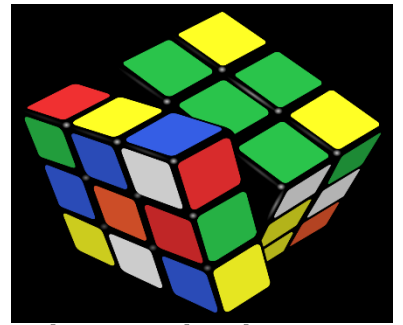


Implications for social work practice

“....to make sure they [social workers] fully understand the implications of social networking for contact so that planning takes full account of the possibilities that might develop, and ensures adopters and foster carers fully understand the issues” (Adams, 2012 p.59)



Rubix Cube of unintended consequences



Carrick-Jones (2012) talks about the Rubix Cube© of unintended consequences, if one side of the cube is moved it affects all the other sides. The analogy applied to unregulated contact takes the following form:

- Focus on safeguarding alone = limited or no access perceived as being unfair and unwarranted and therefore access will be sought by any means possible
- Focus on accessibility and responsible use = issues related to privacy and possibly deception if certain conditions are related to use e.g. foster carers placing blocks on certain websites



Theoretical considerations that can usefully inform social work practice

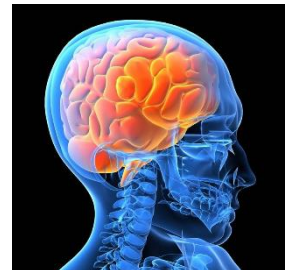


Networked publics: an imagined community that emerges as a result of people, technology and practice (boyd and Marwick, 2011 p. 7)

Theoretical considerations that can usefully inform social work practice

Contrary evidence exists regarding the cognitive characteristics of adolescents. Young people can exercise sound decision making:

- Low level arousal and when emotional engagement is cool represents cold cognition and under such circumstances the level of decision-making is equal to that of an adult
- High level of arousal and emotional engagement represents hot cognition resulting in poor decision-making





Suggested solutions



- Provide environments that create, support and maintain cold cognition particularly when focusing on issues that relate to contact
- Recognise that unregulated contact should not always be associated with risk, a notion that is difficult to conceive in the risk averse world of child and family social work
- The need for a much more balanced approach to risk in order to ensure that any action taken does not disproportionately discriminate (Kemshall, 2007)
- Recognise that unregulated contact can have positive and negative outcomes



Suggested solutions



- Give due consideration to the wishes and views of Looked After young people and in order to do this:
 - ❑ *Requires a discussion about relationships and their potential for harm and how, if there a possibility of harm, it might be mitigated. Such a discussion should take place in an environment of cold cognition*
 - ❑ *Take account of the foster carer role (level of expertise and additional support necessary to develop safeguarding strategies)*



Suggested solutions – educational psychotherapeutic field

Emotional Scaffolding

- Promoting an emotional secure base to which a Looked After young person can return
- Demonstrating daily continuity and certainty
- Promotion of the Looked After young person's dignity

(Geddes, 2006; Sunderland, 2006 and Bomber, 2009)

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