



When I see them,
I would like to not
be in a small room
all the time.

11-18yrs

I used to see Mum and
older brother three times
a week. It has been cut
down to once a week
and this makes me sad.
I don't know why
contact was cut down.

8-10yrs

Staying connected:

The views of looked after
children and young people on
their contact arrangements

I think it's just
the right amount,
because when I see
them it's nice and
everyone is happy.

11-18yrs

I don't like
going to dad's.
It makes me
feel unsafe.

11-18yrs

Research
report

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Introduction

The Bright Spots Programme began in 2013 to understand children and young people's experience of care. The Programme uses four online surveys of well-being to capture the views of looked after children (age 4-7 years and 8-10 years), young people (11-18 years), and care leavers (18-25 years). The surveys were co-produced with 170 children, young people, and care leavers and the methodology to create and validate the children's surveys has been reported elsewhere (Selwyn *et al.*, 2017; Wood & Selwyn 2017; Zhang & Selwyn 2019). Conceptually, our surveys cover eudaemonic (e.g., positive about the future) and hedonic (e.g., happiness) aspects of well-being with subjective well-being defined as, feeling good and functioning well at an individual and interpersonal level.

The local authorities (LAs) that commission the well-being surveys are provided with a detailed report exploring their young people's responses. The responses are compared to the average response of looked after young people in other LAs, those of peers in the general population, and responses over time for LAs who repeat the surveys. More information on the surveys, findings, and examples of innovative local authority practices developed in response to survey findings can be found at <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots-2/>.

The surveys for children in care contain demographic questions and questions (indicators) that makeup four well-being domains: relationships, rights, recovery, and resilience. Some questions replicate those used to report on the general population's well-being by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). All the questions are optional. Looked after children and young people who helped create the surveys identified satisfaction with their contact arrangements as a key indicator of feeling good about their relationships. The surveys, therefore, contain four questions on contact for children aged 8-10 years and 11-18 years.

Questions on family contact are not included in the survey for those aged 4-7 years because of potential distress and decisions on contact may not have been made.

The questions on contact ask: 'Do you see your mum?' and with response options of – 'too much', 'just the right amount', 'too little' and 'I do not see her'. The same question is asked about contact with dads and brothers and sisters. There is a further open-ended question, 'Do you have any thoughts or opinions about how much contact you have with your birth family?' An additional response option was added in the 2019-2020 surveys of 'passed away.' We had considered including that option when the surveys were first developed but our children's focus groups felt that it would be too upsetting. However, comments from children and young people who subsequently completed the surveys expressed irritation that the option was not provided. Seven percent of young people (11-18 years) and 3% of children (8-10 years) recorded that their mother had passed away and respectively 9% and 5% their fathers. In comparison, the mothers of 1% of children under the age of 16 in the general population have experienced the death of their mothers (ONS, 2019). There are no national data on the percentage of children experiencing the death of a father.

Here we report on children and young people's satisfaction and views about contact with their birth family and other key people in their lives.

Method

Between 2015 and 2020, 36 local authorities (LAs) in England and six LAs in Wales used the Bright Spots surveys with their looked after children and young people. On average the response rate was 35%, but it varied by LA (range 15%-84%) of their eligible children completing the surveys. All the surveys used in this analysis of contact were completed before the first national lockdown in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Data from the 42 LAs were merged to create two SPSSv27.datasets a) 8 to 10 years (35 survey questions) and b) 11 to 18 years (50 survey questions): a combined total of 7,809 responses.

The open-ended text question was cleaned to remove 'no', 'yes' or 'nothing' responses, as we could not be certain what the child or young person intended by that response.

Children aged 8-10 years provided 1,137 text comments (47% of the sample) as did 1,947 young people aged 11 to 18 years (40% of the sample). In total, 3,084 children and young people commented on their contact arrangements with similar proportions of girls and boys providing text responses.

The analysis of questions began with frequencies of responses and cross-tabulations by sex, ethnicity, and type of placement followed up with tests of chi-square independence with a Bonferroni correction to allow for multiple comparisons. The text comments were entered into NVivo version 12. The researcher read all the comments and wrote down initial reflections. The comments were then coded, organised into broad themes, and discussed with a second researcher. Some of the themes had been decided before the analysis began based on the question itself, previous analysis and reports for individual LAs. These were 'quality of contact', 'frequency of contact' and 'children having no contact' and these themes continued to be dominant in children's responses. However, the organisation of codes, themes and sub-themes continued to evolve through the writing

process. The themes were structured under two main themes: satisfaction with the quality and satisfaction with the frequency of contact. Subthemes for satisfaction with the quality of contact included:

- Context – location and timing, activity during contact, the behaviour of the supervisors, who the children were seeing.
- Feelings and emotions about the quality and frequency of contact.
- Involvement in decision-making on contact.

Subthemes for satisfaction with the frequency of contact included:

- Children and young people who had no contact and reasons for this
- Not enough, right amount and too much contact

More information on coding is in the Appendix.

The characteristics of children and young people who completed the surveys

In total, 7,809 children aged 8-10yrs and young people aged 11-18yrs completed the surveys on their subjective well-being. The sex and ethnicity of those who responded are set out in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Children and young people's sex by age group

	8-10 years		11-18 years		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Girl	1,106	45.8%	2,545	47%	3,651	47%
Boy	1,251	51.8%	2,728	50.8%	3,979	51%
Missing	60	2.4%	119	2.2%	179	2%
Total	2,417	100%	5,372	100%	7,809	100%

Boys were slightly under-represented in the survey responses (51%), as national statistics showed that 56% of the care population were male (Department for Education 2021).

Table 2: Children and young people's ethnicity by age group

	8-10 years		11-18 years		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
White	1,753	73%	3,501	65%	5,254	67%
Mixed	351	14%	730	14%	1,081	14%
Black	165	7%	513	9%	678	9%
Asian	62	3%	376	7%	438	6%
Other	7	-	192	4%	199	2%
Missing	79	3%	80	1%	159	2%
Total	2,417	100%	5,392	100%	7,809	100%

Overall, ethnic minority young people may be slightly over-represented (33%), as nationally they make up 25% of the total care population (Department for Education 2021).

It is difficult to examine representativeness because data on age groups and ethnicity of the care population are not published. We would expect a larger proportion of young people aged 11-18yrs to be of minority ethnicity, as unaccompanied asylum seekers are generally within this age group and they make up 5% of the care population. In our surveys, 69% of the text comments came from the 11-18yrs age group.

The ‘missing’ responses to the question on ethnicity were not always missing. Children who had completed the survey had written in words that did not fit the response options offered in the survey. For example, they wrote tanned, olive, cream, brown, and a few wrote, don’t know. A few of the older group (11-18 years) also recorded their skin colour or wrote that they were Muslim or wrote, “It doesn’t matter” and more chose to leave the question unanswered. The data also showed where children and young people were living (Table 3).

Table 3: Children and young people’s placements

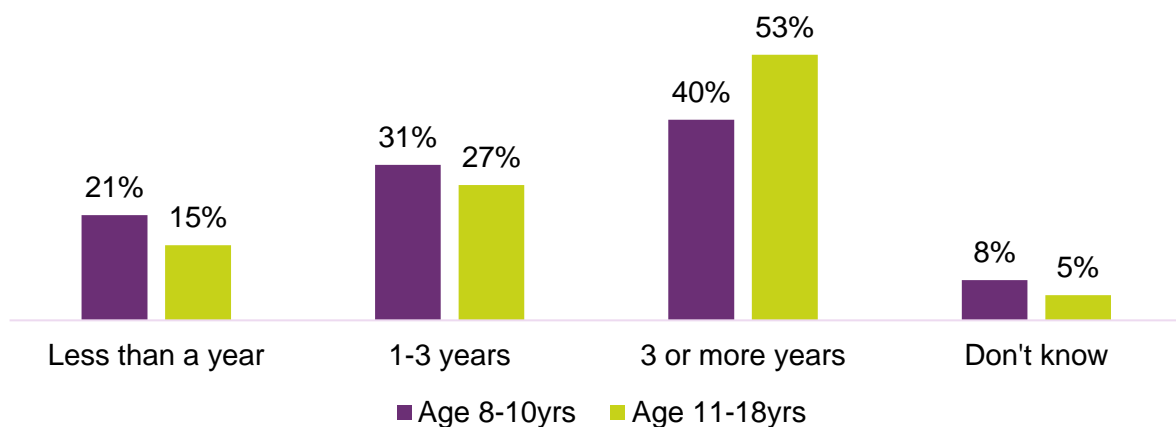
	8-10 years		11-18 years		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Foster care	1,871	77%	3,745	70%	5,616	72%
Family or friends	452	19%	628	12%	1,080	14%
Residential care	62	3%	636	12%	698	9%
Somewhere else	2	-	320	6%	322	4%
Missing	30	1%	63	1%	93	1%
Total	2,417	100%	5,372	100%	7,809	100%

The distribution of responses by type of placement was similar to the national care population statistics of 72% in foster care and 12% of young people in residential

placements (DfE 2021).¹ Young people who responded somewhere else were mainly aged between 16 and 18 years and in temporary or supported accommodation.

Children and young people were asked how long they had been in care. Just over half (53%) of young people (11-18 years) had been in care for three or more years, as had 40% of those aged 8-10 years (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Length of time in care



Overall, the characteristics of the children and young people who completed the surveys were very similar to the characteristics of the whole care population. A forthcoming analysis found that the local authorities who took part in the Bright Spots Programme were representative of all English local authorities. We can therefore be confident that the results reflect the range of views of children and young people who are looked after. The next section considers children and young people's responses to the questions about their satisfaction with the frequency of contact with their family.

Satisfaction with the frequency of contact arrangements

Children and young people were asked whether they were seeing their mothers, fathers, and siblings frequently enough. The options provided for responses were 'too much', 'just

¹ Department for Education (2021) Looked after Children statistics available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children>

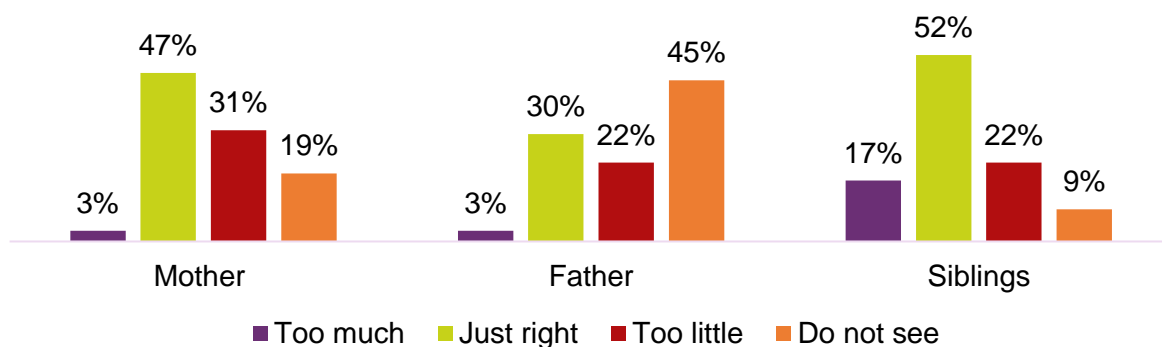
right', 'too little', 'do not see' and 'passed away'. As all the questions were optional there were missing responses (Table 4) with the most missing on satisfaction with seeing their fathers.

Table 4: Missing responses to questions on satisfaction with contact

Age	Contact with mother	Contact with Father	Contact with siblings
8-10 years	3%	4%	4%
11-18 years	5%	6%	5%

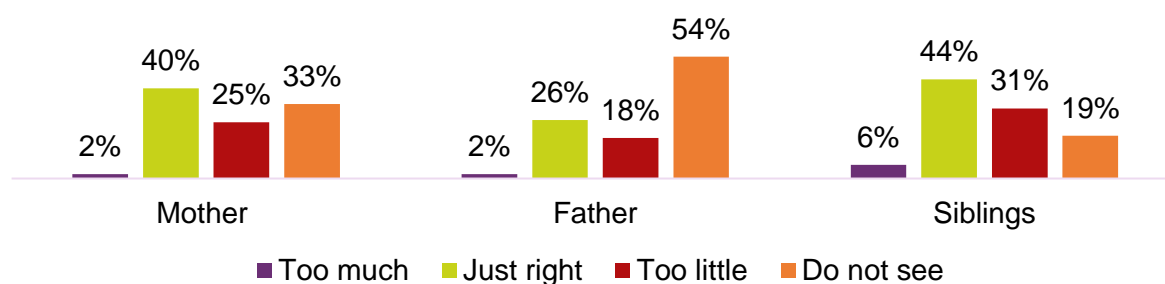
In total, 2,391 children aged 8-10 years had answered at least one of the questions on satisfaction with family time, as had 5,289 young people aged 11-18 years. Many felt that their contact arrangements were not 'just right'. A quarter (25%) of young people and 31% of children felt they saw their mothers 'too little' (Figure 2 and Figure 3). Fewer felt they saw their fathers 'too little', and comments revealed that many did not know who their father was, or that he had never played a role in their life.

Figure 2: Satisfaction with the frequency of contact (8-10yrs)



A third of young people were not seeing their mother and more than half (54%) had no contact with their father. More than a quarter (26%) of young people and 12% of children had no contact with any of their parents.

Figure 3 Satisfaction with the frequency of contact (11-18yrs)



As the length of time in care increased so too did satisfaction with the frequency of contact. Nearly a third (32%) of young people who had been in care for less than a year recorded that contact with their mothers was 'just right' compared with 43% of young people who had been in care for three or more years. There was a similar increase in satisfaction with sibling contact and a smaller increase in satisfaction with contact with fathers (rising from 22% to 28% reporting 'just right' after three or more years in care). Children aged 8-10yrs had the same pattern of satisfaction with contact frequency increasing the longer they were in care.

Where children and young people were living also affected ratings of satisfaction. There was little difference in the proportions of children and young people feeling parental contact was 'just right' if they were in foster or kinship care. However, young people (11-18yrs) in residential care more frequently reported that they had too little contact with their mothers, fathers, and siblings compared with young people in other types of placements.²

Local authority variation

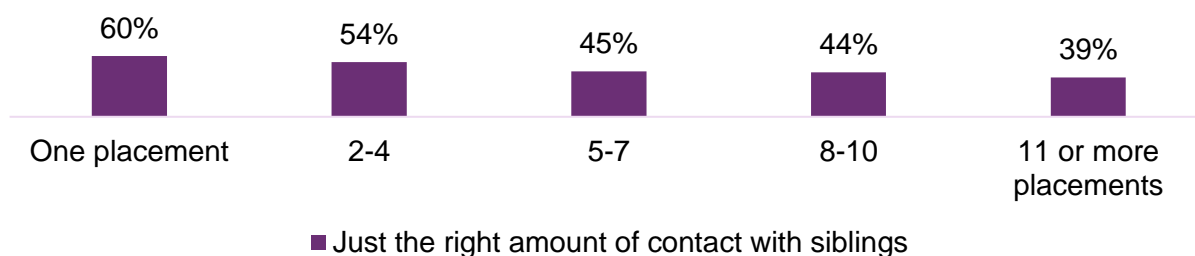
Our forthcoming research (in preparation) found that young people's (11-18yrs) responses varied depending on the local authority (LA) caring for them. Variations in satisfaction with contact were evident in respect of mothers and siblings but not fathers. Depending on the

² Mothers $\chi^2=43.272$, df12, $p<.001$ Fathers $\chi^2=31.604$ df12, $p<.002$, Siblings $\chi^2=16.696$, df8, $p<.003$

LA caring for the young person between 36% and 72% of young people felt contact was 'just right' with mothers and between 40% and 71% with siblings.

Feeling that sibling contact was 'just right' was also statistically associated with the number of placements a young person (11-18yrs) had experienced. As the number of placements increased, satisfaction with contact decreased. Sixty percent of young people who only had one placement were satisfied with their contact frequency compared with 39% of those who had had eleven or more placements (Figure 4). In most LAs about 1-2% of young people reported having 11 or more placements but that varied by LA. In some LAs, none of their young people had had 11 or more placements whilst in others, 10% of their young people reported multiple placements.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with sibling contact and number of placements (11-18yrs)



The LA variation was slightly different for the younger children (8-10yrs) and their survey did not include a question on the number of placements they had experienced. There was no statistical difference in the proportion feeling that contact was 'just right' with siblings but there was for mothers (range 37%-81%) and fathers (range 17%-70%).³

³ Age 11-18yrs by LA Fathers $\chi^2=45.171$ (n=2,299) df41, p=.302, mothers $\chi^2=59.880$ (n=3,429) df41, p=.029 sibs $\chi^2=68.129$ (n=3,893) df41 p<.005. Age 8-10yrs fathers $\chi^2=56.681$ (n=1,282) df 41, p<.05, mothers $\chi^2=56.434$ (n=1,901), df41, p<.05, siblings $\chi^2=49.322$ (n=1,987) df41, p=.175

Variation by sex and ethnicity

We examined whether being a boy or girl made any difference as to whether contact was occurring. There was no significant difference for the younger age group. In the older age group (11-18yrs), and compared with girls, a larger proportion of boys had no contact with either parent.⁴ The difference was largely explained by the finding that in our samples 62% of those in residential care were boys. As noted earlier being in residential care was associated with young people reporting insufficient contact with their families. There may be several reasons for the association between residential care and lack of contact.

Residential units tend to be at a greater distance from the family home compared with foster placements, thus making contact more difficult (Ofsted 2014). Another possible reason is that a residential placement may be needed if a young person has more challenging behaviour, and that may also lead parents or young people to reduce contact.

Although few children reported 'too much' contact, girls (8-10yrs) more frequently than boys recorded 'too much' contact with their mothers.⁵ In comparison with boys more girls of all ages provided written comments about contact, especially their feelings about not seeing enough of a brother or sister.

We also considered whether ethnicity made any difference as to whether contact was occurring. There was no statistical difference in the presence/absence of contact for those aged 8-10yrs⁶ but there were differences by ethnicity for those aged 11-18 years.⁷ Most White and Mixed ethnicity young people had contact with at least one parent. The Black and Other ethnic groups had less contact, and the Asian group had the least and were statistically different from all the other ethnic groups (Table 5).

⁴ $\chi^2=39.675$ (n=5,042), df2, $p<.001$

⁵ 40 girls (4%) age 8-10yrs compared with 26 boys (2%) felt they had too much contact with mothers $\chi^2= 16.696$, df8, $p<.003$

⁶ $\chi^2=3.713$ (n=2,273), df4, $p=.446$

⁷ $\chi^2=600.373$ (n=5,099) df4, $p<.001$

Table 5: The young person’s ethnicity and contact with parents

	Contact with a parent		No contact with either parent	
	n	%	n	%
White	2,721	81%	625	19%
Mixed	590	84%	116	16%
Black	280	56%	216	44%
Other	87	47%	99	53%
Asian	118	33%	240	67%

We did not collect information on whether young people were unaccompanied asylum seekers or refugees. However, some young people who had recorded their ethnicity as Asian also provided comments on their immigration status and country. It was clear that young people did not recognise the ‘Other’ category. Most of their home countries (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan) would mean that their ethnicity would be categorised (using the Department of Education’s ethnicity coding) not as Asian but as being of any ‘Other’ ethnicity.

Overall, we found that the type and number of placements, length of time in care, and the responsible LA all affected children and young people’s satisfaction with their contact arrangements. Surprisingly a quarter of young people (11-18yrs) had no parental contact and lack of contact was associated with being a boy and of Asian, Other or of Black ethnicity. The children and young people also provided many comments on who they wanted to see.

The next section considers why children and young people thought contact was not as frequent as they wished and their comments on involvement in decisions about their contact arrangements.

Who children and young people wanted to see

Most children and young people wanted to see their parents and siblings, but they also wanted to see extended family members and pets. There were more comments about mothers, sisters, and brothers. Some children and young people wrote about wanting to see grandparents, great-grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles as well as godparents and stepparents. Children's written comments implied that extended family members often seemed to be omitted from children's contact arrangements or to have very limited contact on special occasions. Children and young people were very specific about the key people they wanted or did not want to see, for example, writing:

I don't want to see my dad or my brother. I want to see my mom and granddad, grandma, uncle, my dog. 11-18yrs

I don't see my father but see my stepfather. Families are made up of lots of people who may not be blood relatives, but you see them as your family. 11-18yrs

I want to see my nan and granddad more. 11-18yrs

As previous research has found (e.g., Moyers *et al.*, 2006) young people who were not seeing their parents found it helpful to have contact with extended family members.

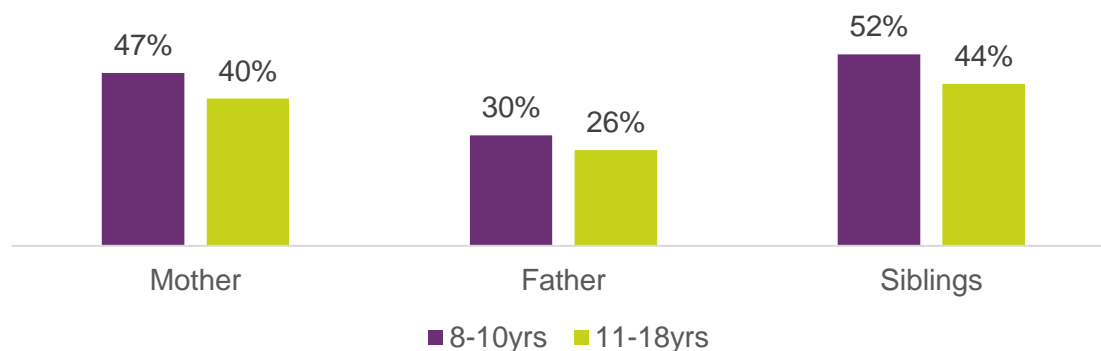
Both my mother and father have died since being in care, but I do see my half-siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles from time to time. I see my full siblings regularly. I see everyone as much as I would like. 11-18yrs

The 'right' amount of contact

In response to questions on satisfaction with the frequency of contact, a larger percentage of children aged 8-10yrs were satisfied compared with those aged 11-18yrs (Figure 5).

Even so, less than half thought contact with their mothers was 'just right'.

Figure 5: Contact frequency is 'just right'



Most of the comments from children and young people were complaints about lack of contact and difficulties with contact arrangements. Only 185 comments were from those who felt contact was 'just right' and those comments were about the joy and happiness that contact brought:

I think it's just perfect.8-10yrs

Happy mummy daddy.8-10yrs

I think it's just the right amount because when I see them it's nice and everyone is happy.11-18yrs

When I meet my mum and dad it is a very happy thing and gives me a positive feeling that they are still there for me even though they can't look after me.11-18yrs

A minority of children and young people reported more strained family relationships but still felt the frequency of contact was 'just right.' They wrote:

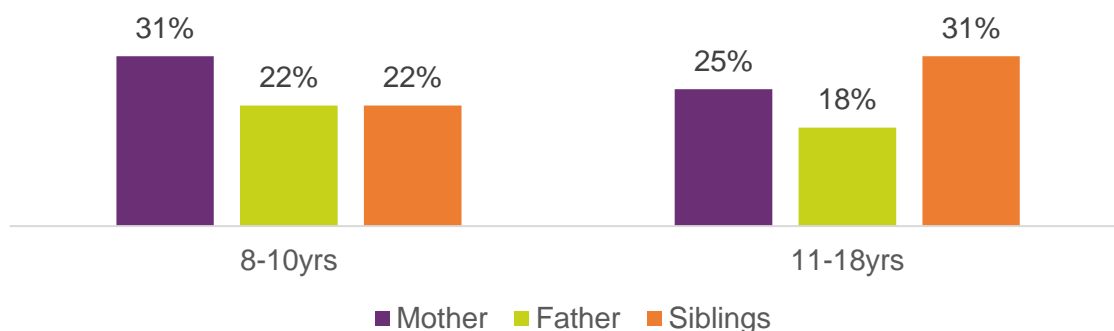
I am happy that I see them, but I don't want to see them anymore.8-10yrs

Enough, I get stressed if I am due to see them.11-18yrs

Too little contact with parents and siblings

Nearly a third of children (8-10yrs) and a quarter of young people (11-18yrs) felt they were not seeing their mothers enough. Concerns about lack of contact with siblings seemed to be felt more by the older young people (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Too little contact with family



In total, 1,636 children and young people provided written comments on their feelings and views on how often they saw family members. About three-quarters of those comments were about not having enough contact with family members. Children and young people wrote:

I only get contact every 2 months.8-10yrs

I feel like 6 times a year is not the right amount. I think we should be allowed to have more contact because they are our mum and dad after all. Most people see their mum and dad every day. I know it is different for them because they are not in care, but still [should be] at least 10 times a year.11-18yrs

Children and young people often recorded that they saw their parents monthly or six times a year and wanted contact more often, with weekly or fortnightly being common suggestions. The current frequency of contact reported ranged from more than once a week to annual meetings. Young people commented:

3 times a year is not enough! We could make it 4 times to make it an even number? 11-18yrs

I would like to see my dad 6 times per year and would like the same for my mother and brothers, as this is just 4 times per year.11-18yrs

The 'too little' response was completed by children and young people when either the frequency and/or the duration of the contact visit were unsatisfactory. Many thought that the visits were too short, for example, writing:

I wish I had more contact, and I would like it to be longer.8-10yrs

Would like more time, only have 2-hour contact.11-18yrs

Reasons for seeing family too little

Children and young people gave reasons as to why they thought contact was infrequent. Reasons were their family's circumstances or the long distance that they or relatives had to travel and the costs of doing so, or their social worker had not taken their wishes into account or failed to make the necessary arrangements.

I would like to see my older sister more often, but she has moved away. She works and it is quite difficult to get to see her.11-18yrs

I can't see my mum before Christmas because it's too far for them to travel. My social worker can't be bothered. 11-18yrs

I want to see my family more. My social worker is supposed to be doing police checks. I have been here since September and the checks have not been done. It's not like I can just visit. I live 5 hours from home.11-18yrs

Distance from the family home to placements was mentioned not just because it affected the frequency of parental contact but also detrimentally affecting contact with siblings. The distance and costs of travelling to and from contact were of concern. The costs bothered children who were mindful of how much their mothers were spending to see them, and older young people complained that they could not afford the costs of travelling to visit their siblings:

I'd like the contact to be in [my hometown]. ... Mum doesn't have much money and it costs to get to [contact].8-10yrs

I'd like more arranged contact but it's expensive to travel to and from counties. I'd like a travel warrant. 11-18yrs

Not enough [contact] because no one wants to fund it. 11-18yrs

Whilst some of these factors might be outside of the control of the LA, flexibility in arranging times for families to meet, placing children and young people closer to home, and providing funding to support contact could help make contact more frequent.

Too much parental contact

Not all children and young people wanted more contact. A few children and young people (330: 2-3%) wanted parental contact to cease or be reduced. A few children wrote that they felt unsafe during contact or that they found the meetings too difficult. They wrote:

I don't want to see my mum and dad anymore. 8-10yrs

I don't like going to dads. It makes me feel unsafe. 8-10yrs

I'm scared of my dad, but I still have to have contact with him. I don't want to. 11-18yrs

I don't want to see my parents until they stop taking drugs, but they come round to [placement]. 11-18yrs

Parental differential treatment

Another of the reasons children and young people gave for wanting to end contact was feeling that they were treated differently than their siblings by their parents. Research on child development has found that parental differential treatment is associated with greater conflict among siblings and, for the less favoured child and the favoured child poorer self-esteem and lower well-being (Feinberg *et al.*, 2000). Children and young people wrote about differential treatment and their feelings about contact:

I don't want to see my dad because he says he loves my sister more than me and treats us differently.8-10yrs

I see my mum once a month and that is too much for me. It upsets me that she spends more time with my brother than with me.11-18yrs

The feelings of unfairness and injustice were keenly felt when children and young people had siblings who were still living at home and who were not in care.

I am not sure Mummy and Daddy can do more often. They are very busy. But my brothers and sisters who are not with foster carers but live with family see them lots and lots. I don't know why it is different for me, it just is.8-10yrs

Contact with brothers and sisters

Most children and young people did have siblings: just 6% had none. A few children (365: 17%) and young people (301: 6%) reported that they saw their brothers and sisters 'too much'. Many of these responses came from those who were living with a sibling. They wrote about daily annoyances or a need for personal space, which could be difficult if siblings were sharing a bedroom. Young people wrote that they lived with their brothers and/or sisters and *they get on my nerves a lot (11-18yrs) ... I would like to be in a separate room from my older brother (11-18yrs).*

The response option 'too much' might have been used by children and young people to signal that they were being bullied or scapegoated – both types of behaviour are more common among siblings who have experienced domestic violence or have been abused themselves. (Linares 2006). On the other hand, comments may reflect normal ambivalent feelings about siblings. Research on sibling relationships in the general population has found that rivalry and arguments are common at the same time as having intensely positive feelings (Pike *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, most of the comments from children and

young people were about how much they enjoyed living with a sibling and missed siblings who were not in the same placement. They wrote:

I am lucky to live with my sister.8-10yrs

I like living with my sister, but I don't have enough contact with my other brothers and sister. 8-10yrs

I see my brother too much because he lives with me, but I like seeing him.11- 18yrs

We know that siblings are often split up in care for a range of reasons such as large family size, entering care at different times, and younger ones placed for adoption. While 9% of children and 19% of young people reported they could not see siblings, the proportion not seeing all their siblings were likely to be greater. In total, 39% of comments in the theme 'no contact' referenced siblings. Many of these comments clarified that some siblings were seen but not others:

Too much because I live with them, not enough for the ones I don't live with.11-18yrs

Other research (Tarren-Sweeny & Hazel, 2005) has found that girls' mental health seems to be more adversely affected by separation from siblings.

Reasons for lack of contact with brothers and sisters

The reasons given for the lack of contact were that: younger siblings had been placed for adoption, parents preventing contact with siblings who lived with them, difficult sibling relationships, distance from placements, siblings living in another country, and in a very small number of cases the young person having been assessed as a risk to their siblings.

The comments included:

I can't have contact with my young brother because he is adopted. I'm only allowed to write to him twice a year.11-18yrs

I can't see my siblings because they are too far away.11-18yrs

I would like more contact with my family - my sister does not want to see me, but I want to see her.11-18yrs

I want my brothers and sisters to come to the UK - I have asked but I haven't got an answer yet - this makes me very sad.11-18yrs

I don't know how to contact my brother in [country]. I would love to see him, as he is the only sibling I have – our parents are dead.11-18yrs

Social services think I am a risk to my younger siblings because I have been in trouble with the police and been inside. I am annoyed I cannot see them at home.11-18yrs

Parental behaviours could also affect whether sibling contact was occurring. Some young people felt they had been scapegoated and blamed for the family's problems. Stepfamilies too could add an extra layer of difficulty in agreeing to contact for some young people.

Young people wrote:

I want to be able to see my siblings again. Their dad has stopped contact between us.11- 18yrs

Step Mum makes me feel uncomfortable to see my siblings.11-18yrs

My dad stops me from seeing my brothers. I have seen a solicitor and I have a children's rights worker helping.11-18yrs

A very small minority of young people also commented that their foster carers or social workers prevented them from seeing their siblings or that they attended the same school but had no 'official' contact arrangements. Young people wrote:

It is difficult because they [siblings] are in the same school as me, but we do not have 'official' contact.11-18yrs

I cannot see my other siblings due to their stupid foster carers.11-18yrs

Sibling relationships are usually the most enduring of all family relationships. Sibling contact seemed to be particularly important for those aged 11-18 years with some writing that their contact with siblings was more important to them than contact with parents,

I'd personally like more contact and time with my siblings. I currently feel like I never want a relationship with my mother. 11-18yrs

No contact with either parent

More than a quarter (26%) of young people aged 11-18 years and one in eight (12.5%) of those aged 8-10 years reported that they had no contact with either parent. Written comments were provided by 441 children and young people who had no parental contact. In addition, there were comments from 253 who had no contact with their father and 68 who had no contact with their mother.

Children and young people's comments did not always 'match' the response they had given to the question on satisfaction with contact. Some of the children and young people who wrote comments about why they were not having any parental contact had also ticked the box stating that their contact arrangements were 'just right.' Therefore, the percentage of children and young people not having contact with parents is likely to be higher.

Reasons why there was no parental contact

From children and young peoples' perspectives, the reasons given for no parental contact were that: children and young people reported that they did not want to see their parents, their parents were not in the UK (e.g., unaccompanied asylum seekers, refugees), parent's circumstances and wishes, bereavements, and contact had been assessed as not in the child's best interests.

Young people who chose not to have contact

In total, 185 young people and 55 children wrote that the lack of contact was their choice.

Comments included:

I don't want to see my parents. 11-18yrs

I do not see them and hope it stays that way. 11-18yrs

I'm allowed to see my mother but choose not to. 11-18yrs

Other young people (11-18yrs) wrote about their strong feelings that had led to them deciding that they did not want contact for example,

I hate my mum I want to kill my dad ... I have given up on them. 11-18yrs

Young people wrote that they had decided to stop contact because parents had consistently let them down or the young person had decided that they were unable to cope with the emotional impact of contact:

My Dad's been in touch and said he wants to see us but we're not ready. 11-18yrs

I choose not to see my Mum and Dad because it makes me sometimes feel sad, angry, and confused. 8-10yrs

Children also wrote that they felt rejected when parents did not turn up for contact.

My mum doesn't come. I don't think she cares. 8-10yrs

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people

Where contact was not occurring with either parent many comments from children and young people explained that they could not see their parents as they were unaccompanied asylum seekers or that their parents lived abroad. The survey did not ask young people about their immigration status because, during the piloting of the surveys, young people

had expressed anxiety about the repercussions if their information was shared. However, 52 young people (11-18yrs) provided comments that indicated that they were unaccompanied asylum seekers. For example, writing, *I cannot see my family as I am an unaccompanied young person, and it would not be safe.* They wrote about waiting for the Red Cross to trace their families and expressed distress and worry at the lack of contact, with some young people not knowing if their family members were still alive. For example, writing,

The Red Cross are going to help me, but I have been waiting a long time. I feel very, very bad about not knowing if my mother or my sisters are even alive. I spend a lot of time worrying about them. 11-18yrs

A further 81 young people and 10 children commented that their family members lived abroad. Whilst there was some ambiguity about their residential status it is likely that a high proportion of these children and young people were also unaccompanied asylum seekers or refugees as they had written,

My family is in Sudan, and I have no contact. 11-18yrs

I sometimes worry about my mum because she has been deported from the country. 8-10yrs

A few children and young people who had family living abroad did report telephone or online video contact with family members, but this was not always reliable,

My mum is now in Ethiopia in a refugee camp ... I tried to contact her by the camp number every week... most of the time they are not willing. So, I hardly speak with my mum. 11-18yrs

Parents' circumstances and wishes

Young people wrote about their parent's mental health problems and substance misuse preventing contact visits:

I wish I could see my mum, but she has a lot of mental health problems such as bipolar and bpd and I know she has more but that's all I know about. I can't see my dad.11-18yrs

They also wrote about wanting to see their parents but their parents not wanting to see them:

I want to see more of them, but my family don't really want to see me.11-18yrs

I have never had contact with my mother, as she has never bothered.11-18yrs

A minority of young people also mentioned that contact had been assessed as not in their best interests and there were a couple of comments from young people who felt they had been prevented from seeing family members due to their behaviour:

My social worker said she was going to sort out contact, but when it comes to it, she says, 'I can't have it because I've misbehaved.' But in my opinion, that's wrong. I shouldn't be punished. I'm already in care and that's enough punishment as it is.11-18yrs

I'm never allowed to see my family because social services won't let me.11-18yrs

Reasons for no contact with fathers

The reasons children and young people gave for seeing their mothers but not their fathers were that: they had never had a relationship with their father, felt their fathers did not want to see them, or that contact had been assessed as not in their best interests. For example, writing

Dad decided he did not want contact.8-10yrs

I have never seen my dad.11-18yrs

I want to meet my dad, but I don't think I'm allowed.11-18yrs

Reasons for no contact with mothers

Fewer children and young people wrote they saw their fathers but not their mothers.

Reasons were predominantly because the child or young person chose not to see their mother, but also included their mother's wishes or circumstances:

I made the choice not to see my mum.8-10yrs

I don't want to see mum – she left me.8-10yrs

Would want to see my mum although she wants no contact with me.11-18yrs

Bereavement and ill health

There were 41 comments from young people and five comments from children relating to the death of a relative. Most of the comments referred to parents who had passed away, but children and young people also wrote about the death of siblings, stepparents, and grandparents. One young person wrote that he saw his mother in his dreams, and another reported that he had not been allowed to attend a grandparent's funeral, and another expressed a desire to visit a grave:

I would like to visit my mum and sister's grave.11-18yrs

Young people also felt that contact needed to be more responsive to changing circumstances such as grandparents who became ill:

I deserve to have more [contact] as my nan is poorly and this hasn't been taken into consideration.11-18yrs

The survey did not ask children or young people where contact took place, but many comments were complaining about contact centres and the organisation of contact. The venue and timing of contact affected the children and young people's perceptions of how successful family meetings had been. Comments on the quality of contact visits are described next.

Satisfaction with the quality of contact

The closed survey questions asked children and young people about their satisfaction with the frequency of contact. A key theme within children and young people's written comments, however, related to children and young people's satisfaction with the quality of contact.

Supervised contact

Satisfaction with supervised contacts was affected by the location and type of venue, the behaviour of supervisors, the availability of things to do and the timing of the visit. Children and young people wanted contact to be interesting, outdoors or in large enough rooms, and they wanted to have more privacy. They wrote,

The place is too small, and so I would like it to be longer and outside (it feels more like a family day out that way).8-10yrs

When I see them, I would like to not be in a small room all the time.11-18yrs

Some young people did not like contact centres and felt that there was little there for them as they tended to be set up for younger children. They felt it was difficult to keep conversations going when there was no activity for everyone to engage in, especially if they were not allowed to use iPad or phones.

I don't really like the place me and my mum have contact ... there is not much to do.11-18yrs

Young people complained about supervisors who observed too closely, and children were bothered by supervisors tapping on their laptops:

Why does my contact have to be supervised and watch us? They [supervisors] type on the computer when they are in the room.8-10yrs

I would like to see my mum without anyone being there because I feel like I can't say... I love you to my mum.8-10yrs

I would like to see my mum without social workers listening to everything.11-18yrs

Timing of visits

The timing of supervised contact was difficult for some children and young people, and their families. There were complaints that parents and older siblings could not attend because of their work commitments or that the timing prevented children from joining their friends for after-school activities:

It is all so false and can't happen at the weekends. How stupid is that! I am told the 'contact team' doesn't work at weekends. If that is their job, then they should work when I can have contact ... not just during business hours. It's stupid, stupid, stupid. My mum works and so after school contact is difficult and only an hour! 11-18yrs

I hardly ever get to contact my two youngest brothers. I can't even have their number. The contact times are all almost impossible for me to make it on time or get time off work.11-18yrs

I would rather go to my clubs after school than have contact. I like going to contact on Christmas, birthdays, and half-term and when we have no clubs [after school].8-10yrs

Children and young people were more positive about contact when it was unsupervised, activities were enjoyable, out in the community and more 'natural'. Children (8-10yrs) wrote about what they liked doing with their families:

I like to see Mummy and Daddy. They give us toys when we see them. We go to the museum.8-10yrs

I love to see my family. I love to go bowling. I am happy when I am with my family. 8-10yrs

We go out in the woods and take the dog for a walk.8-10yrs

Young people (11-18 years) commented

Like seeing Dad - we got out to eat. 11-18yrs

Some children and young people also wanted the opportunity to have a sleepover at a family members house:

I want overnight stays. 11-18yrs

My Mum has spoken about starting overnight contact. I want to do this as my brother can already stay overnight. 11-18yrs

I enjoy sleeping at Nans for one night. This happens once every two months. 8-10yrs

Relationships

The relationship between the child or young person and their family members was a key factor in their satisfaction with the quality of contact. The sections on the frequency of contact and no parental contact highlighted how being let down, embarrassed, or treated differently from siblings led to strained relationships. Some of these situations might be avoided by better management and support for all those involved before and after the visit:

I would like my contact to be a bit more structured. My Mum seems to have a lot of control over when she sees me. She is very controlling. 11-18yrs

I feel like every time I see them, I come back generally upset or in some sort of negative mood. I feel I need to see them a little bit less to help me with my emotions. 11-18yrs

It doesn't go well often because I lose it, or my dad loses it, and we argue. 11-18yrs

They're not the most emotionally in touch individuals and sometimes they say things that are just purely bizarre and beyond comprehension. 11-18yrs

Children and young people could also feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by the way their parents acted when they met them:

My Mum embarrasses me during contact by the way she looks and acts. 11-18yrs

I feel uncertain about seeing my Mum. Sometimes she embarrasses me when I see her. 8-10yrs

Local authorities need to ensure that work is undertaken with family members to support them in improving their relationship with their child so that time spent together can be more enjoyable. Some of the difficulties that led to children entering care, such as parental mental health problems, may also be apparent during contact visits and additional support for parents could be put in place.

Feelings and Emotions

Contact could evoke strong feelings and emotions. Young people wrote about missing family members being, *desperate to see them more*. They reported feeling sad, angry, and unsettled in their placements if contact was not as often as they wished. Young people spoke about wishing contact occurred more frequently *so that I don't feel butterflies when I see them* as it could be both *fun and scary* and the anticipation of the meeting left everyone feeling tense.

Children and young people also worried about family members. This was a particular concern for young people who were unaccompanied asylum seekers, but there were also worries about parents who were ill or struggling with problems. Girls also wrote about the effect on siblings of a lack of contact:

I have contact with my mum and sisters once per month and that is too little for me. I have a 4-year-old sister and that is worse for her. 11-18yrs

I would like to see my mum more often. However, she's had knock-backs that she made herself see us less. There also could be more help with the parents in a way they could have more support and how they could help them. 11-18yrs

Involvement in decision-making on contact

There were 127 (4%) text comments specifically on being involved in decision-making around contact; most (101) of which were written by young people (11-18yrs). There were slightly more comments about feeling included (54 comments) rather than excluded (44 comments) from decision-making, Children (8-10yrs) provided fewer comments, but more were negative. Young people who wrote positively about their involvement reported that they felt that they were being listened to, their views were respected, or they were trusted to manage their own contact arrangements.

At the minute I don't want to go to contact ... I know that if I want to go, I can tell my foster careers and my teacher.8-10yrs

I'd like to see my mum and nan and granddad. My Social worker is working with me and my foster carer towards this.11-18yrs

I arrange my own contact - there are no restrictions. I see them if, and when I want to.11-18yrs

I will not see my mum. I am not pressured into seeing them, unlike last time I was in care. I find that being listened to in this manner is very good. It makes me feel significant.11-18yrs

Others felt that they did not have a voice and that decisions about contact were taken solely by the social worker or occasionally their foster carer. Some young people felt that decisions about contact had been made some time ago and had not changed in line with their increasing age and current circumstances. Others felt that contact frequency was reduced without them understanding the reasons for the decision. Comments on lack of involvement in decision-making included:

I used to see Mum and older brother three times a week. It has been cut down to once a week and this makes me sad. I don't know why contact was cut down. 8-10yrs

I would like to have a say on how often I see my birth family.8-10yrs

I do not want to see my brother or dad. I see my mum too little. Nobody listens when I tell them that I do not want to see a member of my family. Every decision about contact with my family is made for me.11-18yrs

I don't think that my social worker and the other people understand that I do not want to see my dad.11-18yrs

Because the social doesn't decide anymore... my foster mum does. I don't get to say when I want to see my mum next.11-18yrs

Some of the younger children complained that they did not know when their next contact would be:

I don't actually know how much time there is before my next contact.8-10yrs

Helping a child know when contact is due to take place could easily be rectified by, for example, having either a visual calendar or using phone calendars. Research on well-being suggests that children and young people who feel they have some control over their lives do better educationally, are less prone to depression and anxiety, and have greater resilience in the face of adversity (The Children's Society, 2015). The child's right to information and involvement in decisions that affect their lives are set out in Article 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC 1991). Not all children and young people felt that their rights were being upheld and there was work that social workers needed to do to improve children and young people's involvement. Linked to wanting to be involved in decision-making were comments about the need for more information on families.

Lack of information

A previous analysis (Staines & Selwyn, 2020) of Bright Spots survey data showed the positive effect on well-being and felt security if children and young people understood the

reasons they were looked after. Similarly, comments on contact emphasised the *need to know* and for accurate information on how contact arrangements had been established and understanding why there was no contact with specific members of the family.

Children and young people were particularly concerned that they did not know the identity of their fathers or of having siblings they had never met.

I have siblings that I don't know, which is not good. I don't even know them. 11-18yrs

Some wrote about a general lack of information on what had happened in their families; information that in most circumstances social workers should have been able to supply,

Sometimes I wonder what happened to my mum and dad. 11-18yrs

The lack of information created anxiety:

I don't understand why my mum can't keep me safe. I think my Grandmother will die soon because she is old. I miss them. 8-10yrs

I don't know why I don't see my dad. I worry about it because he might be dead. 8-10yrs

I feel like SWs are keeping a big secret about my dad as I know he is a risk because they say so. But can I see him supervised? I've never had a dad and I really want to meet him. 11-18yrs

There were also comments about information being withheld by young people's mothers, information that social workers might not know,

I want my mum to tell me who my dad is and for my social worker to find him. He got another girl pregnant and left and my mum is very angry about that. 11-18yrs

Although only mentioned in two comments having a photograph was important if contact was not possible. Photographs help retain memories (children sometimes express a fear of forgetting what their families look like), can have an impact that words alone do not, and be used therapeutically to explore childhood events.

I'd like to know about and see my brother who has been adopted. I don't have a photo or know how he is.8-10yrs

I don't have any contact with my birth family, but I would really like to see pictures of my mum because it would make me feel like I am actually seeing her in person. I would love to see my brother and get to know anything possible there is to know about him.11-18yrs

Complexities of contact

Family life is complex. For children and young people who are looked after the complexities were magnified and were typified by the following comment:

There is one brother I don't see because he is adopted. I find it hard with my mum because I don't see her much and don't know much about her and what to talk about. I don't know anything about my Dad. I don't know if he is very nice or not. I feel nervous and scared.11-18yrs

Children and young people had parents who they did or did not want to see and parents who did or did not want to see them. There were siblings in different countries, different parts of the UK, different types of placements, living with stepparents or still in the family home with parents. There were also siblings they had never met. There were also concerns about missing information on fathers and understanding their family histories. One young person wrote,

Due to conflict and issues, my family is just extremely complicated. I feel close to my brother and sometimes my sister but other than that I'm not close with anyone.11-18yrs

Some young people wrote that their feelings about contact were how they were feeling now and those feeling might change in the future. Young people who wrote positively about seeing their family members reported that they felt that they were being listened to,

their views were respected, or they were trusted to manage their own contact arrangements.

None of the comments from children and young people gave any indication that contact was being used as an intervention to help repair relationships. Parents did not seem to be supported to ensure contact went well or that relationships were re-established. For example, one young person wrote.

More effort needs to be put in with helping me gain a relationship with my father. 11-18yrs

Some children and young people felt that the timings of contact visits prevented relatives from visiting due to work commitments or that relatives had not had financial help given the distance that some had to travel. Younger children felt unhappy if they had to miss out on after school clubs and activities in order to attend contact.

Where contact took place was also important. Contact centres were described as small, lacking any privacy, with little to do, and not conducive to a relaxed visit. Contact visits were preferred when more everyday family activities could take place such as going to the park, walking the dog, or going for a meal.

Children and young people often complained that contact plans did not take into account, which family members they wanted to see or how often. Plans predominantly involved parents and siblings but children and young people wanted to see other relatives such as grandparents, aunts, cousins, and their pets. Children and young people wanted to be involved in decisions about how often and where they should see their family members. Younger children were not always supported to understand why decisions on family contact had been made and some did not know when they would next be seeing their parents. The findings also highlighted how a small minority of children and young people

continued to see family members despite feeling unsafe or scared during contact. They felt that their fears had been ignored by social workers.

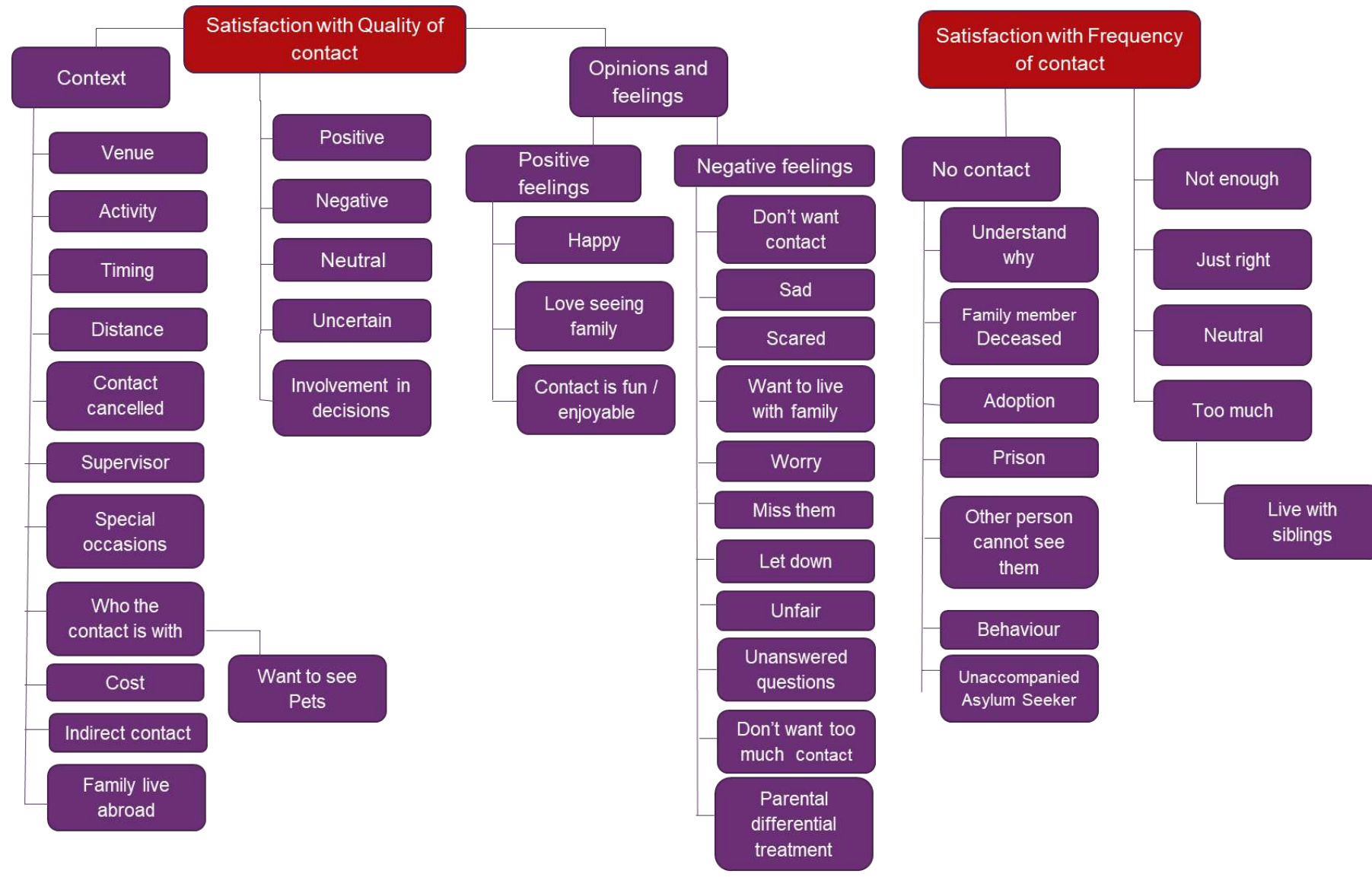
Contact visits could help repair fractured relationships, provide children and young people with an understanding of why they were looked after, and enable all family members to work towards the goals in the care plan. Based on children and young people's comments the opportunity to do so seems to be being missed. Active management of contact may have been occurring but was not mentioned by young people. Instead, arrangements seemed to have been 'set' and lacked flexibility. Our findings and the comments provided by children and young people could help improve experiences of contact and be of benefit to all. Recommendations developed from the findings can be found at:

www.coramvoice.org.uk/staying-connected-report.

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Appendix: Coding Framework





bright spots

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This report was written as part of the Bright Spots Programme. The Bright Spots Programme is a partnership between Coram Voice and the University of Oxford, funded by the Hadley Trust.

For more information about the Bright Spots Programme go to:

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Download other resources related to this report at:

www.coramvoice.org.uk/staying-connected-report

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