Unsupervised contact in an age of new technology Possible solutions

Jenny Simpson

Staff Tutor, Social Work

Faculty of Health & Social Care

Contact

"Contact remains a mixture of art and science" (Triseliotis, 2010)

+

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 (Delfrabbro et al., 2002)

Sustain placement stability (Thomas, 2005)

Perspectives on contact and social media

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)

The Open University

An alternative explanation ?

+

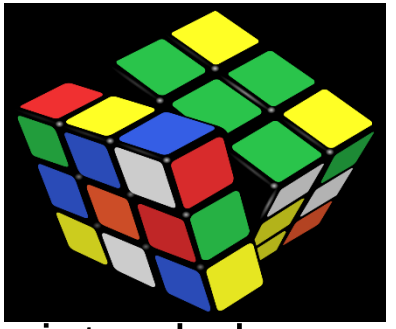
Attachment Theory

Childhood Attachment		Adult Attachment
Secure ▪ Distress when mother leaves ▪ Greets mother when she returns	→	**Secure** ▪ Comfortable in relationships ▪ Able to seek support from partner
Avoidant ▪ Does not seek mother when she returns ▪ Focuses on environment	→	**Dismissing** ▪ Greater sense of autonomy ▪ Tend to cut themselves off emotionally from partner
Ambivalent/Resistant ▪ Very upset at departure ▪ Explores very little	→	**Preoccupied** ▪ Fears rejection from partner ▪ Strong desire to maintain closeness

Implications for social work practice

"….to make sure they [social workers] fully understand the implications of social networking for contact so that planning take 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)

References

Batmanghelidjh, C Terrorised and terrorising teenagers – the search for hope in Teenagers and Attachment, Worth Publishing, 2009

Biehal, N 'Reuniting Children with their Families: Reconsidering the Evidence on Timing, Contact and Outcomes', British Journal of Social Work, 37, pp. 807-823, 2007

Bomber, L M, Survival of the Fittest in Teenagers and Attachment, Worth Publishing, 2009

Bowlby, J, Attachment and loss. Volume1: Attachment. New York: Basic Books, 1969

boyd, D and Marwick, A, Social Privacy in Networked Publics: Teen Attitudes, Practices and Strategies Oxford Internet Institute's: A Decade of Internet Time Symposium on the Dynamics of the Internet and Society, 22 September 2011

British Association of Adoption and Fostering Agencies (BAAF), see Fursland Op.Cit.

Carrick-Davis, S, Introduction and Welcome to Munch Poke Ping Conference, 19 November 2012

Children's Rights Director for England, Keeping in Touch: A report on children's experiences, Ofsted, 2009

References

Dahl, R E ‘Adolescent brain development: A Period of Vulnerabilities and Opportunities’ New York Academy of Science 1021 pp1-22, 2004

Delfrabbro, P H; Barber, J G and Cooper, L (2002) The Role of Parental Contact in Substitute Care, Journal of Social Service Research, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 19-39.

Galvan, A; Hare, T; Voss, H; Glover, G; and Casey B.J. ‘Risk-taking and the adolescent brain: who is at risk?’ Developmental Science 10:2, pp8-14, 2007

Geddes, H, Attachment in the Classroom, Worth Publishing, 2006

Howe, D, ‘The impact of histories of abuse and neglect on children in placement’ in Schofield, G and Simmonds, G (eds) The Child Placement Handbook: Research, policy and practice, British Association of Adoption and Fostering, 2009 pp.47-61

Kemshall, H, ‘Risk Assessment and Management: An Overview’ in Lishman, J (ed) Handbook for Practice Learning in Social Work and Social Care, Jessica Kingsley, 2007

References

McWey, L M and Mullis, A K ‘Improving the Lives of Children in Foster Care: The Impact of Supervised Visitation’, Family Relations, 53, pp. 293-300, 2004

Partridge, B C ‘Adolescent Psychological Development, Parenting Styles and Pediatric Decision Making’ Journal of Medicine and Philosophy 35, pp518-525, 2010

Quinton, D; Rushton, A; Dance; C and Mayes, D ‘Contact between Children Placed away from Home and their Birth Parents: Research Issues and Evidence’ Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry 2:3, pp393-413, 1997

Reyna, V F and Farley, F ‘Risk and Rationality in Adolescent Decision Making’, Psychological Science in the Public Interest 7:1, pp1-44, 2006

Romer, D; Duckworth, A L; Sznitman, S and Park, S ‘Can Adolescents Learn Self-Control? Delay of Gratification in the Development of Control over Risk Taking’ Prev Sci 11, pp391-330, 2010

Schofield, G ; Ward, E and Young, J Parenting while Apart: Experiences of Parents of Children Growing Up in Foster Care, Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council, 2009

References

Steinberg, L 'Risk Taking in Adolescence: New Perspectives From Brain and Behavioural Science' *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16:2 pp 55-59, 2007

Sunderland, M, The Science of Parenting: Practical guidance on sleep, crying, play and building emotional wellbeing for life, New York: DK Publishing, 2006

Triseliotis, J 'Contact between looked after children and their parents: A level playing field?' Adoption and Fostering 34:3, pp59-65, 2010

Wilson, K; Sinclair, I; Taylor, C; Pithouse, A and Sellick, C Fostering success: An exploration of the research literature in foster care, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004