Mobile Phones and Contact Arrangements for Children Living in Care

# Keywords

* Contact
* human rights
* looked after children
* mobile phones
* placement stability
* safeguarding

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## Topics

* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Digital and socio-cultural environment
* Access, inequalities and vulnerabilities

## Sample

108 looked after young people aged 16 to 18 years

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Other

## Other PolicyMaker Implication

Safeguarding

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Other

## Other Stakeholder Implication

Child welfare practitioners

# Abstract

This paper reports the findings from the first UK study to examine the use of mobile
phones by looked after children. Contact with family and friends is important, but it
has sometimes to be carefully managed to avoid unintended consequences such as
placement instability. The study examined the ways in which mobile phone technology impacts on contact, drawing on the experiences of children and young people in
foster-care and residential care, and of policy makers, social workers, foster parents
and residential care staff. No guidance was available that addressed the issue of mobile phone contact arrangements for looked after children and young people. Three
years on from the start of the study, this remains the case in the area where the study
was conducted, resulting in variation in the way mobile phone use for contact is managed; the issue appears only to be specifically addressed when identified as a problem. The position of mobile phone facilitated contact as a recognised form of contact
requires review. The evidence suggests it should routinely form part of children’s care
plans, and that residential staff and foster parents need to be adequately prepared
and supported for the dynamics of mobile phone facilitated contact.

# Outcome

77% of young people "reported that their mobile
phone was essential for their social life. The main cause of argument between young people and their foster parents revolved around not being allowed to use their phone after a certain time at night. Most young people were adamant that foster parents should not be allowed to read
their texts (65 per cent). Some were unsure about this and 16 per cent thought foster parents should be allowed to read texts. Just over half of young people who completed the questionnaire said their foster parent had checked their phone messages (52 per cent). Those in residential care reported using their mobile phone to maintain regular contact with social work staff, including their field worker or key worker in the home, with more than half saying that such contact
occurred either on a daily basis or once or twice a week. Compared with those in foster-care, fewer children in residential care said that social workers had given them advice in the areas described
above, and fewer said there were rules about mobile phone use or that they had been involved in setting these rules. As with young people in foster-care, most were adamant that their texts should not be read. The only difference was that a higher number said their phone had not been
checked by a carer. However, the low response rate makes these data hard to interpret." (MacDonald et al., 2016: 841)