

Maintaining links

Resource demands and social work attitudes in respect to parent-child access in a statutory child welfare agency

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This paper investigates the demands on social work resources in the north east region of the Department For Family and Community Services in South Australia, and examines the attitudes of workers to the question of access. Twenty three social workers, working predominantly in Child and Family Teams, were interviewed. A two part questionnaire was devised. The initial data covered information relating to the frequency, duration and supervision of access visits. The second part of the questionnaire used a semi-structured, open-ended format in order to explore social workers' knowledge and values in respect to access. The results of these interviews are presented and the implications for policy and practice in relation to statutory social work are discussed.

There is much research evidence that supports the notion that regular contact with the natural parents is important for the child's development and self esteem. Fanshel and Shinn (1978) in their longitudinal study of children in foster care, found that the well being of children was influenced by patterns of parental visiting and that family visiting was the best predictor of discharge of children from foster care (p.483). However, despite the importance of on-going contact with the natural family, 57% of the children they studied were unvisited by their parents at the conclusion of their research. Proch and Howard (1986) summarised the risks to the child if parental visiting was not maintained. These included: the risk of losing long-term contact with their families; the decreased likelihood of reunification; and losses in terms of intellectual, social and emotional performance.

Paulin (1992), in exploring visiting and attachment issues for long-term foster children, found that visiting by extended family had a positive effect on the foster children's sense of identity, and attachment to their biological families.

Researchers have also shown that there is a high correlation between frequent, positively orientated visiting and short term placement, and infrequent negatively orientated visiting and longer stays in care (Milner 1987). Regular visiting and contact between the natural parent and child minimises the risk of the family establishing a new homeostatic balance without the child, and helps to maintain the child in his or her family.

Surveys of children in care have also found that frequency of contact with the natural family is an issue frequently raised by children themselves. Fletcher (1993) found that a third of children living in foster care and one quarter of those living in residential care did not have as much contact with their family as they would have liked. These children also stated that they were not allowed to visit friends and neighbours from where they used to live. The responses of the children studied revealed that while many children felt safer in care and protected from earlier experiences, they also felt dumped by a care system which stigmatised them.

The importance of maintaining regular contact with the natural family is not just an important factor in foster care, but also effects many other aspects of work with children.

Borgman (1985), in a study of delinquent boys in correctional institutions, found that regular visiting by families was associated with less major misconduct, and for the older boys in the sample, less immature defiance, abusive language and childish social behaviour with peers. He therefore concluded that it was desirable that staff facilitate family involvement.

Studies of access in relation to divorce and separation have also provided evidence in relation to its importance in contributing to positive child outcomes. For example, McDonald (1990) in a review of the literature, stated that continuing a relationship with the absent parent through visitation processes produced a more positive outcome for children of divorce. Also, the self esteem of boys who saw the non-custodial parent at least once per month was shown to be significantly higher than the self esteem of boys who saw the non-custodial parent less than once per month.

Research has shown that contact:

- can make the child feel less rejected by his or her parents;
- promotes a child's adaption to and sense of security within placement;
- increases the child's understanding of why he or she was separated;

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- promotes the child's intellectual and emotional development;
- enables the child to develop a stable sense of self and identity;
- enables the child to develop a realistic picture of his or her parents.

Despite these findings, evidence has shown that there are still many children in care who do not have access to their families.

The issues of lack of resources and lack of policy direction are continually raised by social workers in public welfare departments as factors mitigating against successful family visiting routines. In South Australia, changes in Departmental policy toward policies of family preservation, and court practices favouring more frequent access, may well mean that the demand on resources in this area will increase in the future. In anticipation of this increase in demand, a survey of social worker workloads and knowledge in relation to access, was commissioned by the north east region of the Department for Family and Community Services in South Australia. The purpose of this research was to assist the region to develop a greater understanding of current resource, practice and policy issues in relation to parent-child access for children in foster placements.

Access research

Field services in the Department for Family and Community Services in South Australia are currently divided into team structures, larger offices have three social work teams. Intake and Assessment teams manage the initial enquiries, assessment and investigation of cases. If situations remain unresolved or require longer term social work intervention, they are then referred to either the Child and Family team or the Adolescent and Family team.

Twenty-three social workers were surveyed on the topic of parent-child access. Cases were selected on the basis of the child being placed in a foster care placement. Access was defined as face-to-face contact between at least one of the natural parents and the child, although some attempt was made to also explore how many children had contact with other significant people. The social workers worked

Table I Number and type of access visits

No of cases	221
Unsupervised	87
Supervised	89
Supervisor	
Social worker	31
Community aide	44
Other	14
No access	45

predominantly in Child and Family Teams in the North East Regional district of the South Australian Department For Family and Community services.

The survey had two main aims. The first was to try to gain an indication of the extent of access currently occurring within the region, with particular emphasis on supervised access commitments. The second aim was to explore the knowledge, attitudes and values of workers in respect to the issue of access, in order to develop clearer policy and practice guidelines and consider ways in which the future needs of parents and children could best be met.

Method

A two part questionnaire was devised to examine the above areas. The first part of the questionnaire dealt with the numbers of children currently having access, and the frequencies and duration of supervised access visits. It also sought information regarding who was presently supervising access arrangements and the perceived extent of social work time involved.

Table II Frequency of supervised access and number of hours

Frequency	No. of cases	Total hours	Median	Average
weekly or more	15	66	4 hrs	4.4 hrs
fortnightly	14	35	2 hrs	2.5 hrs
monthly	24	56.5	2 hrs	2.4 hrs
quarterly	8	35	2 hrs	4.4 hrs
parent/child request	14			
unspecified	14			

The second part of the questionnaire used a semi-structured, open-ended, format in order to explore worker's knowledge and values in respect to access. A face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended format was chosen as this provided sufficient structure to allow for the comparability of data, while providing enough flexibility to allow the respondent to clarify questions and the interviewer to clarify answers and explore additional areas of interest.

Results

As can be seen from Table 1, approximately 39% of access visits are unsupervised and 41% are supervised. Of the supervised access, 35% is by a social worker, 49% by a community aide, and 15% by other people, including extended family, foster parents or other agencies. However, 20% of children are currently having no access at all. Reasons given for this included:

- the child had been in long-term foster care for some time and access had not occurred (42%);
- parents had not initiated or kept access appointments (22%);
- natural parent or foster parent had moved interstate (13%);
- child did not want contact (1%);
- court had ordered no access (1%);
- not specified (21%).

Approximately 66% of those children having access also had some contact with extended family, though this rarely (less than 2%) included access with former foster parents.

Adding the weekly, half of the fortnightly, and quarter of the monthly access hours, plus allowing for half an hour travelling time each way, suggests that a conservative estimate

of the time the region is involved in access is 127.5 hours for the region or 25.5 hours per office per week if evenly divided. However, it is clear from the survey that the amount of access differs greatly across offices, with some offices being involved in significantly more access than this and other offices involved in less. This calculation also does not take into account the amount of time social workers spend organising, preparing and debriefing access visits or rearranging cancelled visits. When social workers were asked to estimate how much time they thought they spent organising and supervising access, they stated that, on average, they would spend approximately four hours per week organising access and two hours per week supervising access. However all social workers raised the issue that access often did not occur in manageable weekly amounts. Workers stated that, particularly around school holidays, they would spend large blocks of time (eg, three days per week) on access issues.

Workers' knowledge and values about access

The purpose of access

The majority of responses included the following reasons why access is important:

- children need to maintain links with their natural families;
- to help the child in the formation of identity;
- it is an essential element of the reunification process.

A typical response was:

Access is important so that children can maintain links with their parents and families. This assists them in the formation of their identity. It helps them to know where they came from and helps to keep them in touch with significant people in their lives, and provides them with an opportunity to have positive experiences with their natural family.

Other reasons mentioned included:

- to aid in the gathering of information as a means of assessment;
- to increase attachment to the natural parent;
- to help the child develop positive self esteem;
- a means for teaching parents skills in interacting with their child.

All workers considered that the issue of access should be an important part of the case plan particularly when reunification was being considered.

Is access beneficial for the child?

The majority of workers felt that, generally, access was beneficial for the child as it provided a means whereby children could maintain a relationship with their natural families. It helped to reassure the child that his/her parent were OK, and helped the child to have a real understanding of his/her family as opposed to a fantasised picture of the natural family being wonderful and perfect or alternatively horrible and frightening.

In the majority of cases I think access is beneficial for the child. It gives the child a sense of reality. Without access the child creates a 'fairy godmother' or 'monster'. Without access the child creates their own sense of reality.

Yes, I believe access is beneficial as it serves as a means of providing a sense of continuity in their lives. It also reduces the drama of foster care as it provides a sense of reality and puts the family into perspective.

The majority of social workers felt that access was not beneficial to the child if there was a likelihood that the parents could re-abuse the child, or if access was too traumatic for the child and the child stated that they did not want it to continue.

I don't believe access is beneficial where there has been extreme violence or a continuing threat of violence, where there is a lack of control exhibited by family members, or in cases of sexual abuse where the child is frightened or feels threatened.

Should access be varied?

Social workers unanimously agreed that access arrangements needed to be reviewed and varied in accordance with the child's developmental needs, and changes in circumstances or changes to the case plan.

Younger children need more access because they forget and developmentally cannot maintain an image of the person or relationship, whereas older children are better able to do this and also often have increased commitments in terms of school and friends so don't need access as frequently.

Access needs to vary in accordance with the needs of the child. Some-

times arrangements are tried and they don't work so need to be changed in order to meet the needs of the child and the circumstances.

Who should supervise access?

Social workers considered that a social worker was needed to supervise access if there were any difficulties, such as if the case was before the court, if information and assessments were required about parent child relationships, or if parents needed guidance in appropriate parent-child interaction. It was generally felt that routine access could be supervised by either a community aide, foster parent, or extended family member depending on who seemed to be most appropriate.

Who supervises access depends on the nature of the case. Where a case is going to trial the social worker must supervise for the purposes of assessment.

It depends on the circumstances. If a case is going to court or is contentious, or there is a risk of harm to the child then a social worker needs to supervise. If this is not an issue, then supervision could be done by volunteers or a member of the extended family.

However some workers drew attention to the fact that the Departmental social worker may provoke the antagonism of the natural parents and that access would best be done by a skilled, independent person.

In many cases it needs to be someone who has good expertise, good observation skills and is not emotionally involved with the case. The social worker involved with the case may not always be the most appropriate person as the natural parents may feel angry toward this person and this may get in the way of good parent child interactions.

Many people were in favour of foster parents being more involved in access and felt that greater efforts needed to be made to move toward open fostering arrangements where positive contact with the natural family was encouraged, though they also acknowledge the tensions that often exist between foster family and natural parents.

Who should supervise depends on the nature of the case but ideally it would be great if it could be done by the foster parent in as natural a setting as possible, even though this is often not possible.

Training for access

Generally, people did not consider that community aides received enough specific training in relation to access, though some workers were not sure what training was given and others felt that training was adequate.

Social workers felt that training needed to cover the following areas:

- observation and recording skills;
- communication and listening skills;
- conflict resolution and assertiveness skills;
- knowledge of departmental philosophy and policy in relation to access;
- knowledge about the aims and purposes of access;
- child development and behaviour;
- practical skills in facilitating positive interaction, knowing when to step in, how to supervise etc.;
- knowledge about child abuse and domestic violence;
- knowledge about the case;
- knowledge of resources;

The main issues related to access

Many workers spoke of the difficulties with foster parents in relation to access. Many foster parents experienced access visits as highly threatening to either the child or to the stability of the placement. Workers felt that this was particularly true of those who had been foster parents for many years and had not kept abreast of changes in the Department's philosophy and practice.

Many workers were also critical of the court system. They felt that few people within the court system had a detailed knowledge of child development and behaviour, and that access was often organised for the benefit of the natural parent rather than in accordance with the child's needs and wishes. Workers also felt that arrangements needed to be more flexible and recognise the need for regular reviews.

Lack of time and resources to make access effective was also frequently cited as a major issue.

The attitude of the foster parents toward access is frequently a problem, with foster parents often not liking or trusting the natural parents.

There is a need for the regular review of access arrangements as situations change and a need for much greater flexibility especially in relation to court ordered access.

Getting it right, organising and debriefing, and dealing with foster parents are all major issues. There needs to be more resources and more time allocated in order to do it properly to ensure that access is meeting the child's needs.

What could be done to make access a more effective process?

There were many different responses to this question. Some of the more common ideas included:

- better recruitment, education and training of foster parents and community aides;
- better resources, particularly in relation to appropriate places to hold access when close supervision or a controlled environment is required;
- better understanding and training for social workers on what the research has to say about access;
- clearer guidelines and policy;
- better liaison with fostering agencies about access as they frequently support the foster parent rather than being focused on the needs of the child.
- a well co-ordinated, independent, access service staffed by professional people that could handle, arrange and supervise access, and provide the case manager with a report;
- better review procedures in relation to access;
- greater flexibility with access arrangements.

It is really important to work with the foster parents and foster agencies to resolve issues. I'm not sure that foster parents understand how important access is for the child.

People need to know more about the purpose of access and better training is needed. Children also need to understand access and have this explained to them.

A place needs to be set up where access can occur. The environment needs to be child-centred with lots of toys and an outside play area with a sandpit and children's gym, and a grassed area for playing ball. There needs to be facilities that

allow supervision to occur without being overly intrusive to the parents and child. It would be great if this could be run by another professional agency that could supply observation reports and could also supervise access in natural environments or the home.

There needs to be an accurate assessment of each situation and a clear understanding of the purpose of access. The access plan needs to reflect what the purpose is, and there need to be regular assessments and reviews of the access arrangements and whether or not they are meeting the child's needs. Access needs to be far more flexible. This is a very complex issue and one in which I personally would like more training in.

Discussion

The scope of the data had several limitations. Firstly, not all social workers working in child and family teams were available to be interviewed due to other commitments. The final data, therefore, does not reflect the full extent of access currently occurring within the region. Secondly, a decision was made to exclude one office from the survey due to time limitations and the rural location of this office. This also limited the data. While access is predominantly an issue for child and family teams, access also occurs in intake and assessment and adolescent and family teams but this data has not been included. Finally, an examination of access does not give a full indication of the demands on office resources in respect to transport and community aide costs as community aides are also used for transporting children to and from appointments and to different fostering arrangements. Despite these limitations, however, the data does provide some useful information in respect to the demands of access within the region.

The research on social work knowledge and attitudes in relation to access, revealed that social workers in the north east region had a good understanding of the purposes of access, and the benefits for children in maintaining regular contact with their natural parents and family. However, this research also highlighted the gap between understanding and practice. One of the most disturbing findings of the research was that twenty percent, or one in five children, had no access

at all and for many children access was very spasmodic and infrequent.

There are many possible explanations for this lack of fit. Firstly, the attitude that the social worker communicates to the natural parent is an important factor in the motivation of parents to continue regular visiting. Gibson and Parsloe (1984) found that many natural parents felt that as they were considered by the Social Services as 'unfit' parents, they were therefore not entitled to the same rights as other parents. The number of children for whom access had not occurred or had been severely restricted, together with the strong child focus of social workers within F.A.C.S., suggests that many natural parents may be 'forgotten', particularly if they appear ambivalent about contact. There seems to be little acknowledgment at a practice level of the degree of stigmatisation often felt by natural parents, or of the long-term help and support often needed for them to maintain regular contact with their children.

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The prevalence of a number of social stressors is also an element in many families whose children are placed in foster care, and this is often exacerbated by isolation and alienation, resulting in a lack of support systems available to help assist families in dealing with this stress. The focus of social work intervention is frequently on the child and the need to maintain the stability of the placement, to the neglect of support for the natural families. If the Department is to realise its goal of family preservation, it is important that social workers make an effort to see parents frequently and consistently over the course of the placement, continually recognise and evaluate progress made by the parents, and provide regular support and resources to enable parents to pursue the relationship with their child.

Fanshel and Shinn (1978) found that parental visiting was linked to the amount of casework activity invested in a case, and that such activity explained a significant amount of unique variance in respect to parental visiting. They concluded that more careful monitoring of parental visiting, and judicious casework intervention when visiting falters, should be a prime responsibility of an agency involved in foster care.

The research also found that many social workers were concerned about the attitude of the foster parents toward access and that this could often have a significant influence on the frequency of contact that the child had with the natural family. The view of access as being disruptive to the stability of the long term placement of the child was a particular issue with foster parents and added to the tension between foster families, social workers and natural parents, often making access a difficult process for the social worker and child. Many social workers spoke of the need for better training of foster parents with the need to move toward more open fostering arrangements. Departmental social workers were also anxious that this work be extended to include private fostering agencies, as such agencies frequently operated in a strong supportive role for foster families, often to the detriment of the best interests of the child.

The research also emphasised the structural forces which served to inhibit access. It is important that structural factors mitigating against access are taken into account, as failure to do so is the equivalent of blaming individuals for their poverty. Social Service Departments often lack resources. The survey revealed that many workers are aware of the importance of access in the child's life, but lack both the time and physical resources to ensure that this receives a high priority. Many workers commented on the lack of a suitable, child-focussed venue where supervised access could occur, and the lack of trained people who could assist parents in developing positive interactions with their children. Too often social workers felt that current workloads left them little time to engage in constructive work with their clients, but instead placed them very much in a case management role. Case management is a useful strategy if adequate community supports exist to provide essential

services to clients. In the case of parent-child visiting, however, there is little skilled external support available to assist with facilitating quality family visits. Instead, this task is often left to under-trained and under-supported community aides.

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Social workers also mentioned the lack of clear policy direction from the Department in relation to access as another factor which worked against positive practice. The vagueness of current policy and lack of minimum practice standards around the issue of access allows broad staff discretion. The degree of this discretion, particularly in relation to suggested frequency, could implicitly discourage visiting in those circumstances where resources to support visiting were scarce, when foster parents were particularly opposed to access, or where parental visiting had been allowed to lapse for some time. Fanshel and Shinn as early as 1978, were voicing concerns about the need for stronger agency policy and practice in this area.

It ought to be mandatory for all agencies to keep a log on the visitation of parents to their children in foster care. This information should be readily available as part of the computerised management information systems currently being developed in this area of service. The requirement that this information be available should be formalised into state law, and agency practices in this regard should be carefully monitored by the state departments of social services ... (p. 484)

Hess and Proch (1988) consider that if the agency is serious about the importance and value of access, then agency resources must promote visiting plans. Such policies need to include:

- low and varied caseloads;
- placement resources;
- flexible hours;
- private and comfortable visiting venues;
- financial assistance for parents.

There is therefore much that needs to be done at a legislative and policy level to ensure that strong links are maintained with the natural family.

The analysis of access trends within the region revealed that the present demand could be roughly equated to one social work salary per office. Access is therefore taking up an increasing amount of time and resources. This trend is likely to increase as changes in Departmental policy place an increasing emphasis on family preservation and reunification and courts continue to award more frequent access in line with this policy. It is therefore important that statutory social work departments continue to search for more efficient and effective ways of responding to this increase in demand.

Conclusion

There is little theoretical justification for breaking links between parents and children, but tragically this often happens, if not intentionally, then through neglect and lack of understanding within social welfare departments. Research has revealed a consistently significant association between the frequency of parental visiting and the child's discharge from care. In addition, research findings have shown that visiting frequency influences children's well-being while in care. As case worker activities can exert an important influence on visiting patterns, it is essential that Departmental policy and practices support continuing work with natural families. Statutory Departments therefore need to establish appropriate training programs for social workers, foster parents and community aides, and to develop appropriate resources and services which will encourage and assist long-term visiting by natural families. ♦

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