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Impact of COVID-19 on care and contact

Experiences in the first COVID-19 lockdown on foster carers and young people in their care

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Partners

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Executive Summary

1. This report summarises the findings from three questionnaires, which were designed to explore the impact of lockdown on young people in and leaving care. Lockdown began in March 2020 to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and had a substantial impact on the lives of many young people in care. At the time of writing, a three-tier system is in place across England, with local restrictions depending on which tier the area is in; social distancing remains in place across the country.
2. The three questionnaires were designed for: young people in care or with care experience; carers; and birth parents. The surveys were open for a month between June and July 2020 and were distributed via an online survey, with additional promotion via newsletters and social media.
3. In total, there were 116 responses to the young people's survey, 302 to the carers' survey and seven to the birth parents' survey. Due to the number of responses from birth parents, their experiences are presented as a 'case study' and should not be considered representative of the experiences of other birth parents. The carer and young person surveys should also not be considered statistically representative of all carers and young people in care; however the response rates were higher and reflect a valuable sample of the care population. For the young people's survey, the average age of respondents was 13 years old with a minimum age of 6; therefore the results should not be considered representative of care experience for young children. As only a minority of respondents were under 11, we use the term 'young people' throughout to generalise findings.
4. Many young people and carers described how lockdown had given them more quality time to spend with families or those they live with; over 90% of those in foster care reported relationships at home had improved or stayed the same during lockdown.
5. There were mixed views on virtual family time. While some felt it was a more flexible and convenient option which gave young people more control over the situation, the lack of physical contact was an issue for some, as was the additional responsibility this placed on foster carers to help manage family time.
6. In respect of virtual contact with social workers / personal advisors, over 80% of young people and 90% of carers felt this was the same or better than their contact prior to lockdown, citing increased availability and convenience. However, some people felt there had been a reduction in the amount of contact, and this was particularly apparent for those who experienced a change of social worker over lockdown and did not have an opportunity to meet them.
7. Experiences of home-schooling were also mixed, with some young people thriving due to the flexibility and one-to-one support from carers, and others struggling with the lack of routine and reduction in social contact. Carers also raised how the individualised attention supported some young people's learning; however some foster carers commented on the considerable responsibility and time commitments of home-schooling.
8. The wellbeing of children and young people varied considerably over lockdown, with some enjoying the experience and increased free time, and others missing the structure of school and relationships with friends and family. Many reported looking forward to lockdown restrictions easing, while also hoping to maintain the increased quality time lockdown had given their families / households.

Introduction and Methodology

Introduction

The lockdown introduced in the UK in March 2020 to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching implications, with many of those in and leaving care facing reduced support from social care and restrictions on time spent with their birth families. While schools remained open for small numbers of young people, data released in April 2020 suggested many young people in care were not attending school over lockdown.¹

Research in Practice was approached by TACT in response to anecdotal intelligence that some young people and carers were reporting improvements in wellbeing during lockdown, particularly related to changes with schooling and improved relationships in the home.

To explore these findings, Research in Practice, in collaboration with TACT, designed three separate surveys for young people in care, carers and birth parents. While we had a positive response with over 100 returns from young people and over 300 from carers, these results cannot be considered representative of all young people and carers, and instead provide a valuable insight into these respondents' experiences of lockdown.

The birth parents' survey received only seven responses. We think this is likely a reflection of the limits of our networks, which are orientated towards work with practitioners and carers. To better understand the experiences of birth parents, and those of brothers and sisters, it is necessary to engage people through different networks and forums; organisations such as the Family Rights Group might be better situated to explore birth parents' experiences. It is also worth noting that, due to the distribution and platforms used in the present research, it is likely that respondents were already receiving a degree of professional support and possessed the means and knowledge to access the internet. Were the surveys distributed through different channels and platforms, different experiences might have been reported.

These surveys focused on foster care, but many of the issues are also highly pertinent to kinship care arrangements. Kinship carers and special guardians often face additional challenges of poverty and of complexities around parent contact in a family context. These inequalities and vulnerabilities of many kinship carers in the face of COVID-19 have significantly amplified the need for support on a par with that offered to foster carers. Issues of digital poverty and (for example, for older carers with less experience of online interaction) skills and knowledge development are particularly pertinent.²

Concurrent research³ has further highlighted digital poverty and the importance of ensuring digital access for parents, carers, young people and brothers and sisters. In addition to relevant hardware and software, access to broadband, data, electricity and phone signal are essential. Practical considerations⁴ are also necessary to ensure those involved have the knowledge, skills and confidence to navigate the technology⁵ and ensure safe and sensitive interactions, with pre-defined boundaries⁶ and attention to safeguarding considerations.⁷

1 www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings

2 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2020/october/developing-virtual-support-for-kinship-carers

3 www.liia.london/covid-19/research-in-practice-covid-19-project

4 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/videos/digital-family-contact-time-sharing-and-building-knowledge

5 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2020/october/developing-virtual-support-for-kinship-carers

6 www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/digital-contact-childrens-wellbeing

7 www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/lockdown-keeping-in-touch

In respect of the findings themselves, some of the issues raised in the surveys have significant implications, in particular for the ways in which social work interactions and contact/family time⁸ are planned and organised. Further discussions informed by the survey findings need to foreground the rights, needs and wishes of the individual children and families we are working with. We would strongly advocate that these should take precedence over financial considerations – challenging though this is – or the preferences of individual social workers in deciding how to arrange meetings and keep in contact.

The survey responses also raise some serious challenges to us all in how school, for many children in care, can be a source of anxiety and upset, the absence of which was welcomed (at least initially) by a number of respondents. It is important to recognise that, when things are going well, school can also be an important protective factor for children and young people in care. The issue raised is not school versus no school; rather how are schools to provide a trauma-informed setting for children to socialise and learn. There is some excellent work going on around the country to achieve this, see for instance Aspland et al (2020).⁹

Due to the dynamic nature of the pandemic, it is important to situate the results in the broader picture; the present surveys were conducted during June 2020, towards the end of the first lockdown but with restrictions to remain for an indefinite period. The findings described below suggest a blended approach to digital and face-to-face communication, however preferences and evidence of effectiveness might change as the situation progresses, and it is important to maintain open communication which centres the needs and wishes of individual children, young people and their families. While the current research throws light on the views of older children, we would strongly advocate the urgent need to enable physical contact between parents separated from babies and very young children wherever safe and possible. Examples of proactive work by local authorities, and evidence on why this is vital for the rights and developmental needs of parents and infants can be found at the links in the footnote.¹⁰

8 We use the term ‘family time’ throughout as this is preferred by young people, see for example:

www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf

9 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2020/february/developing-trauma-informed-practices-in-inner-london-schools-the-itips-pilot-2020

10 www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/parent-infant-contact-in-the-pandemic; www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/projects/safeguarding-babies-during-the-covid-19-crisis

Methodology and tools

Three surveys were developed and piloted by Research in Practice and TACT. The surveys were administered using secure online survey software and were aimed at three audiences:

- > Young people in care or with care experience
- > Carers
- > Birth parents of young people in care

All three surveys were carried out completely anonymously, and no personal or case details related to the respondents were collected. As such, it is not possible to identify whether the young people, carers, and parents are from the same families, and no inferences should be made regarding this.

Respondents were asked to consider their experiences of lockdown and questions covered relationships within foster families (if appropriate); family time with birth families; contact with social care; education; wellbeing and general experiences of lockdown.

The surveys were distributed amongst networks by Research in Practice, TACT and the Children and Families Principal Social Worker Network; they were open for a month between June and July 2020. During this period, lockdown restrictions in England were being gradually relaxed; however social distancing measures were still in place as the survey closed.

Responses were collated and analysed separately for each survey. Averages and response totals were calculated for numerical questions and open-text questions were analysed to identify key themes.

Limitations in methodology

All three surveys were open access and distributed widely amongst the networks of the organisations involved. A large number of foster carers and young people were reached through these means; however the approach was not successful in reaching birth parents.

Due to the low response rate for the birth parents survey, a summary of the limited responses was compiled but should be treated as a case study representing a small number of parents, rather than a more representative sample.

Furthermore, despite the higher response rates for young people and carers, the responses should not be considered to represent the views of all young people in care or their parents; and instead should be treated as the views of a range of respondents who were reached by these surveys and chose to engage.

Nonetheless, the surveys were able to gather a rich and varied understanding of the experiences of the children, young people and carers who responded, and provide valuable evidence related to their situations and experiences during lockdown.

Results

Overview of surveys

An overview of respondents and findings can be found in the table, with further details in the respective sections below.

Table: Overview of survey responses

Survey (n responses)	Young people's age ranges	Young people's living arrangements	Findings
Young people (116)	6 – 23	74% in foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 96% felt relationships with foster families had improved or stayed the same. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activities they reported doing together included school work, cooking and chatting. > Mixed views on virtual family time; 59% felt this had remained the same and 26% felt it had got worse. > 84% felt contact with social care had improved or remained the same. > Wellbeing varied greatly but many young people were looking forward to lockdown ending and spending time with family and friends again.
Carers (302)	0 – 17+	92% foster carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 89% felt relationships with the child / young person in their care had stayed the same or improved. > Mixed views on virtual family time; 46% felt the quality of family time had remained the same and 37% felt it had got worse. > 90% felt the amount of contact with social workers had improved or remained the same. > Variations in wellbeing were reported and carers generally wanted social contact and schooling to return to normal, while hoping for the increased family time to remain.
Birth parents (7)	5 – 17+	86% in care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > As seven responses were received from birth parents, these were summarised as a case study, to provide an overview of respondents' experiences. > Birth parents appreciated being able to see their children during lockdown, though some felt the amount of family time had reduced. Most found the lack of face-to-face contact extremely difficult. > Experiences of contact with social care varied, with differing reports as to whether it had increased, decreased or stayed the same. Birth parents expressed a wish to receive updates about the wellbeing of their children. > There were also variations in parental wellbeing reported; birth parents generally described looking forward to lockdown ending and being able to see their children face-to-face again.

Young people survey

Summary

- > There were 116 young people aged 6 – 23 who completed the young people’s survey, with 74%¹¹ living in foster care. The average age of respondents was 13.3 years (SD = 3.28).
- > Relationships and connections were key themes emerging across questions and there were reports that, for some, lockdown has led to an increase of quality time with those they live with; 83% of children and young people in foster care reported spending more time with their foster families during lockdown, while 96% felt relationships with foster families had improved or stayed the same.
 - Activities they reported doing together included school work, cooking and chatting.
- > There were mixed views about virtual family time, with 59% feeling family time was the same as before lockdown, 26% feeling it was worse and 15% better. Young people appreciated the flexibility and convenience of virtual family time, but missed being able to hug their family members.
- > The amount of contact with social care over lockdown was generally thought to have remained the same or increased by 62% of respondents.
 - Some preferred the virtual contact while others noted they had had less support, particularly those who had experienced a change of social worker.
- > Challenges which emerged across questions related to a loss of routine and sources of support, such as friends and teachers, who were less available during this time.
- > In general young people reported looking forward to lockdown ending, though some hoped that positive elements, relationships in particular, could be maintained.

¹¹ Responses are rounded to the nearest percentage point

Respondents

There were responses from 116 young people, with an average age of 13.3 years (SD = 3.28, range = 6 – 23).

The majority of young people reported living in foster care (74%, n = 68), with others who were in the care of family / friends (13%, n = 12) or in a children’s home (10%, n = 9) and other arrangements (3%, n = 3) including university accommodation and independent living.

The average length of time young people had been in their current home was 3.9¹² years (SD = 3.93, range .25 – 20.75). Six people reported having moved because of the lockdown, with three of these describing placement changes.

Experiences of foster care during lockdown

Young people living with foster carers were asked how the amount of time spent with those they lived with had changed during lockdown. Results (table below) show 83% reported spending more time together while only 4% reported less time spent together.

Table: Since lockdown started, how much time are you spending together with the people you live with compared to before?

Response	Percentage	n
A lot more than usual	63%	50
A little more than usual	20%	16
About the same as usual	13%	10
A little less than usual	3%	2
A lot less than usual	1%	1

Young people selected which activities they had begun doing together during lockdown and school work was selected most often (60%; n = 44), followed by cooking (59%; n = 43) and spending time together chatting (55%; n = 40). Games (51%, n = 37) and activities in the garden (48%, n = 35) were also selected frequently.

Next, people rated how they felt relationships had changed since the start of lockdown (table). While 60% felt relationships had not changed, 36% thought they had improved and 4% felt they had worsened; the positive impact of lockdown on some relationships is also echoed in the comments discussed below.

Table: Since the start of lockdown, have relationships at home changed?

Response	Percentage	n
We’re getting on a lot better	22%	17
We’re getting on a little bit better	14%	11
We’re getting on about the same as before	60%	46
We’re getting on a little bit worse	4%	3
We’re getting on a lot worse	0%	0

12 Figures are given as decimals (e.g. 0.25 of a year is equivalent to three months).

There were 29 young people who provided further comments about how lockdown had affected them with 12 comments describing experiences which were positive, 9 which were negative and 7 mixed.

Comments most frequently related to impacts on schooling (n = 8), with a mix of experiences reported, from feeling they had “improved on schoolwork”, to an individual finding the experience:

“ *Very hard I am autistic and SN Dyspraxic and not being able to go out has been hard and not seeing friends and not at school mostly I miss my routine.*

Many comments related to missing friends and family (n = 8) and disrupted routines (n = 7); there were also descriptions of how lockdown had impacted behaviour, with four young people who reported improvements in behaviour, and three who reported challenges.

Positive aspects of the lockdown included having more time to do activities (n =4) and opportunities to build better relationships (n = 6):

“ *My foster carers are so lovely to me and want me to do well in my GCSEs ... so they are trying [their] best to help me ... I found it hard to trust them at first because I've had lots of foster [families] but over lockdown they have shown me that they really care even when I haven't been nice to them and we have done lots of fun things with the little ones, so now I hope I can stay with them.*

Contact and family time with birth families

Young people who had been in contact with their birth families in the last year (88%, n = 81), were asked how their experiences of this have changed during lockdown. Young people were first asked about their feelings on phone / video calls and most reported either liking (43%, n = 34) or not minding (43%, n = 34) communicating in this way.

In respect of how the amount of family time changed over lockdown, responses were split fairly evenly, with around a third feeling the amount of family time had increased, a third suggesting it had decreased and a third feeling it had stayed the same. Most communication was by phone (65%, n = 49) and video call (58%, n = 44), while 20 to 30% had used social media or had been able to meet in person.

Most young people (59%, n = 43) felt communicating virtually with their birth families was the same as usual, though around 26% felt it was worse and 15% better. Virtual family time might have been more difficult for those who did not like communicating by phone / video call. When these results are filtered by those who liked / felt neutral about video calls, the spread of results remain the same, however when filtered by those who do not like video calls, no respondents reported family time feeling better and increased percentages reported family time feeling the same (67%, n = 6) or worse (33%, n = 3). However the sample size involved is very small and it is not possible to generalise these findings to other young people.

There were 52 respondents who provided more details about how family time had changed during lockdown. Of these responses 33 were positive, 5 were negative and 14 remained neutral.

The most frequent comments related to lockdown having made family time easier (n = 13), with one respondent stating:

“ *Not having to go into depth about what’s going on in my life and keeping it brief because it is on a phone call rather than face-to-face contact.* ”

Other comments expressed feelings towards developing better connections with birth families (n = 12; e.g. “It feels like my sister is in the room with me”, “My mum told me more about what’s been happening with her”), while others stated how family time during lockdown had stayed the same.

A majority of respondents had a positive experience of family time during lockdown (n = 33), yet these positive responses are individualistic to the young person, as one may experience more contact with birth families as a positive experience, yet another may experience less contact as a positive experience. This can be shown through highlighting two separate statements:

“ *I’m talking to mum weekly rather than see her monthly and I got to speak to her on video phone so could show her where I live and my room* ”

“ *I decided not to see my birth parents. I kind of like that as it takes the away the stress and anxiety I have about seeing them. I have spoken to my brother on Houseparty app. I like that I can see him and can play a game together* ”

The above quote also highlights how lockdown afforded an element of choice and control to some young people, enabling them to “stop when I want to” and “[keep] it brief”.

Next, young people were asked what they had not liked about family time and comments overwhelmingly related to a lack of face-to-face or physical contact (n = 33), missing “hugs” in particular.

Contact with social care

The next set of questions related to the impact of lockdown on young people’s contact with social care.

When asked how lockdown had impacted the amount of contact with social care, 21% felt it had increased, 33% decreased and 41% that it stayed the same. In respect of how they felt about the amount of contact during lockdown, 68% felt it was about the same and around 15% each felt it had improved or got worse.

There were 52 young people who responded to the question of how lockdown had made things better with social workers / personal advisors, with a majority stating nothing had changed or improved in terms of contact (n = 33).

Some young people discussed how they preferred non-physical contact with social workers / personal advisors (n = 8), for example:

“ *[I]t is nice to sometimes be able to phone her rather than her coming to the house because it makes me feel more like I’m with a real family when I don’t have a social worker coming all the time.* ”

When asked if lockdown had made experiences with social workers / personal advisors worse, 57 young people responded, with a majority stating that their experiences with social workers / personal advisors had stayed the same (n = 39).

However, a smaller number of young people responded that they have had less support during the lockdown period (n = 5), with some young people experiencing a transition of social worker / personal advisor (n = 6), and in some cases reporting not having had the opportunity to meet their new social worker / personal advisor:

“ *My social worker left but because of lockdown we couldn't say bye and I haven't been able to properly meet my new social worker.* ”

Young people were also asked to rate their experiences with social care before and during lockdown out of 10, with 10 being 'really good'. The average rating before lockdown was 5.1 (SD = 3.84) and during lockdown was 4.76 (SD = 3.73), displaying a very slight¹³ decrease in experiences.

School

Young people who responded to questions about their school situation most frequently reported being secondary school students (48%), followed by primary school (28%) along with young people in other educational institutions, including PRUs and universities. Four reported not going to school.

The table below displays the types of schooling young people have taken part in during lockdown. Home-schooling with a carer and online lessons with their regular school were reported most frequently and on the whole, young people “liked” or found the experience “okay”; though a smaller number reported not liking the experience.

Table: Have you taken part in any of the following during lockdown?

Response	Yes, and I liked it	Yes, and it was okay	Yes, but I didn't like it	No, I have not taken part in this	n
Home-schooling with a carer	26%	30%	17%	27%	88
Online lessons with my regular school	18%	26%	7%	49%	82
Virtual school with my local council	1%	5%	0%	93%	75
Attended school in-person	10%	16%	1%	73%	80

Next, young people were asked what they have liked about how school has changed since lockdown, with 64 responses. A number of young people stated that they have had more free time during the lockdown period (n = 12), with some stating that they have liked not going to school (n = 11), while others appreciated the support they were getting from their school or carers (n = 7), which in some cases was more personalised than they might have received in the classroom. Having more time to focus on particular tasks (n = 4) and fewer distractions (n = 3) were also appreciated.

¹³ This difference is not statistically significant (t(110) = 1.66, p > .05).

“ I haven’t had to do much work because I should have been doing my exams, so I’ve been able to relax. Also, I have been able to start doing some work in preparation for 6th form.

“ It’s more relaxed - If my Carer sees I’m not getting much done she will either help or seek help for me or tell me to quit and chill

In contrast to the latter question, young people were also asked what they have not liked about how school has changed since lockdown. Of the 66 young people who responded to this question, many highlighted that they missed seeing their friends at school and seeing their teachers (n = 29). There were also comments relating to finding working at home difficult (n = 7), for example due to not understanding the work, or feeling “ignored” in online chats.

“ I don’t like that during school on-line chats I feel that I’m being ignored. I don’t like that I’m not able to talk to my friends or my teachers.

Wellbeing

Next, young people were asked to rate their agreement / disagreement to a series of positively worded statements out of 10, with 10 being ‘strongly agree’.

Table: Please rate how much you agree / disagree with the statements below:

Response	Average (out of 10)	SD	n
I have kept in contact with my friends during lockdown	4.3	3.72	116
I have been able to spend time outdoors during lockdown	5.98	4.12	116
I have someone I can talk to about what’s on my mind during lockdown	6.22	4.09	116
I have been able to manage my emotions during lockdown	5.01	3.89	116
Overall, I have felt happier during lockdown	4.09	3.66	116
I am looking forward to lockdown ending	6.66	4.14	116

Overall, the scores fall in the middle of the scale, suggesting average wellbeing, with considerable variation between respondents. The lowest rated statements related to feeling happier during lockdown and keeping in touch with friends, while the highest rated related to having someone to talk to and looking forward to lockdown ending.

Young people described numerous activities to keep themselves occupied during lockdown, including spending time gaming / playing (n = 20), doing exercise and sport (n = 20) and doing school / college work (n = 20). Various indoor activities (n = 23) were also described such as reading and baking, while seven young people did more activities with family / carers they were living with.

“ *Beginning of lock down when the weather was good I spent time in the garden and went for walks.*

Eighty five young people commented on what they have been doing less of during the lockdown period, with a number stating that they have not been able to see their friends or family members (n = 37). This is due to the social distancing measures that have been enforced by the government in order to reduce the spreading of COVID-19. Yet one young person described how the latter has been a good thing, as it has supported them in keeping away from potentially negative influences:

“ *Seeing my friends which is sort of a good thing as sometimes when I'm with them I do things I know I shouldn't.*

In addition to this, some young people stated that they had been doing less homework during lockdown (n = 17), which may be a result of less regulation from teachers or simply because less work may be set. Others reported less exercise / sport (n = 14), time spent outside (n = 12) and time attending clubs (n = 11).

Within the last few questions there were some comments about the mental health implications that lockdown has had on a young person, with self-isolation likely to have a particular impact mental health:

“ *[M]y mental health got bad, felt like that there was actually enough support. [I]t was to the point I ended up in hospital, I feel quite alone.*

Looking ahead

There were 73 young people who responded to the question of what they would like to stay the same when lockdown ends. The most frequent response was young people stating that they would like to have the same amount of quality time with foster families (n = 15), as the lockdown period had brought many young people and their foster families closer together:

“ *I want to keep doing things with my foster parents and maybe keep seeing my mum a bit less.*

In addition to spending more quality time with families, nine young people wanted “nothing” to stay the same, while others expressed feelings of wanting the current standards of hygiene and cleanliness to stay the same (n = 2). Other comments included maintaining the culture of social solidarity and kindness (n = 3), while one young person stated that they would like the environmental changes maintained (n = 1), in respect of how there have been less emissions and air pollution during the lockdown period:

“ *Less pollution so the air and sea is clean.*

Many of the 85 young people who commented on what they would like to return to how it was before, discussed how when lockdown ends they hope to see both friends and family again (n = 35), as lockdown measures have been implemented to restrict interactions between households, limiting young people’s contact with both friends and family:

“ *Meeting with friends without needing social distancing.*

Furthermore, the young people who responded to this question also highlighted that they hope for school and college to return to normal (n = 20), as both institutions have adapted to the situation of lockdown and have been teaching students online, rather than the standard face-to-face interactions.

Nine young people had been looking forward to returning to clubs and activities, while eight young people wanted “everything” to return to before; others expressed excitement about going back to restaurants and fast food venues (n = 8):

“ *It will be nice to be able to go to cafes and restaurants and things, and to be able to see my big sister.*

Carers Survey

Summary

- > There were 302 carers who completed this survey, 92% were foster carers and the children and young people in their care ranged in age from 0 to 17+ years.
- > Most carers (89%) felt their relationship with the child or young person in their care had remained the same or improved, citing more time, less pressure and a closer bond. However, for some their relationship with the child or young person had been strained.
- > Over half of children and young people were reported by carers to have taken part in virtual family time and this was felt to be broadly the same (46%) or slightly worse than normal (37%). For some there were positive impacts such as less travelling and family time being more relaxed, but concerns were raised around children and young people missing face-to-face contact, and supervising virtual family time being an additional pressure for carers.
- > Carers broadly felt they had received similar or increased levels of contact with their social workers during lockdown (90%). Some carers noted that virtual contact was responsive and that social workers were easier to access because they were less busy due to reduced travel; however, some carers did miss face-to-face support.
- > Carers reported mixed views around school depending on the needs of the child, with 37% feeling the change in schooling had not impacted the family, 26% feeling it had improved things and 38% feeling it had made things worse. Home-schooling was noted as flexible and in some cases improving the quality and quantity of learning. Many carers felt one-to-one time was beneficial, especially if the child had additional needs.
 - However carers raised concerns about the potential impact of reduced social interactions, the lack of routine and challenges with motivation. The considerable additional pressure home-schooling placed on carers was also raised.
- > Carers' reports suggest that lockdown has had a varied impact on children and young people's wellbeing. For some it has been very positive, reducing pressure and slowing the pace of life, for others there has been less change, and for a final group lockdown has been detrimental for their wellbeing, increasing anxiety and removing routines. For some carers this has been an extremely challenging time, supporting children and young people with little opportunity for a rest or break and often juggling other challenges.
- > Looking ahead carers hoped that increases in family time and the kindness and community spirit of lockdown would continue, whilst a large number wished to see a return to normal regarding social contact and a return to school, leisure activities and family time.

Respondents

The carers' survey was open to any carer, whether foster carer, kinship carer or a carer in a residential care home. Details of the survey and a link were publicised via TACT and Research in Practice to contacts including local authority teams and private foster care networks.

In total 302 responses were received from carers, 92% of which were from foster carers, 6% were from a family member providing care and 3% from people providing care in a residential children's home.

Children and young people in household

Carers reported caring for children and young people across age groups, from 0 to 17+ years, with less representation of younger children (below the age of 5 years). Most frequently children and young people were between 14-16 years old.

In respect of the amount of time spent with the children and young people in their care during lockdown, over 75% of carers reported spending a lot more time together than usual; less than 3% reported a little or a lot less than usual.

There were 260 comments about which new activities their families had taken part in during lockdown; the table below shows a summary of the most common activities.

Home schooling activities were most commonly reported (n = 90). Other popular indoor activities included baking and cooking (n = 42), games (n = 39) and arts and craft (n = 35). Outdoor activities included walking (n = 52), gardening (n = 24) and outdoor games or activities (n = 20); comments frequently noted doing these activities together as a family. A small number mentioned activities linked to supporting children with an additional need such as physio, massage, therapeutic work or sensory activities (n = 5).

Table: Frequency of activities reported

Type of activities	Description	% of total respondents ¹⁴	n
Indoor activities	Home school / home learning	35%	90
	Cooking/baking	16%	42
	Games ; board games and online games	15%	39
	Art and craft	13%	35
	Indoor P.E. / yoga	3%	9
	Watching TV/films	3%	7
Outdoor activities	Walks/dog walks	20%	52
	Gardening	9%	24
	Outside games and activities/keeping fit/ sport	8%	20
	Bike rides	6%	15
Others	Life skills: budgeting, food shopping, decorated, housework	5%	14
	BBQ/eating together/picnic	3%	7
NA	No new activities	33%	85
	More of the same because of extra time	2%	6

14 As respondents were able to select / list more than one option, totals do not add up to 100%

When asked about the relationship with children and young people in their care, 38% felt they were getting on a lot or a little better than before lockdown, 52% felt it was about the same and 11% a little or a lot worse. This is broadly similar to the figures young people reported in their respective survey.

Table: Since the start of lockdown, has your relationship with the children in your care changed?

Relationship	Percentage	n
We're getting on a lot better	23%	63
We're getting on a little bit better	15%	40
We're getting on about the same as before	52%	141
We're getting on a little bit worse	8%	22
We're getting on a lot worse	3%	7

There were 160 carers who explained their answers and comments illustrated how they felt the relationships had changed. More comments illustrated positive changes and included having more time together (n = 25) and establishing a closer bond (n = 15). Carers commented that children and young people in their care experienced less pressure or were more relaxed (n = 13) and reasons were given such as not being at school, fewer demands on time and less peer pressure.

Carers also noted they experienced less pressure: Not having to attend school was felt to have improved relationships for some (n = 10) and, since lockdown, they had got to know their child or young person better (n = 8). A smaller number of comments illustrated negative changes and included that the period had been very intense (n = 9) and that some children had returned to school (n = 7). Some carers responded that they had a good relationship with the child or young person they cared for prior to lockdown (n = 28), while others noted that they had experienced both improvements and periods of challenge during lockdown (n = 14). A similar number noted that the impact of lockdown upon relationships varied depending on the age or needs of the child, noting that sometimes younger children had found it easier than teenagers, or some children with particular needs had experienced greater challenges (n = 13).

Table: Frequency of themes

Theme	% of total respondents ¹⁵	n	
Improved relationship	More time together, quality time and time to talk	16%	25
	Closer/bond with child or young person	9%	15
	Less pressure/more relaxed	8%	13
	Home school / not attending school is an improvement	6%	10
	Know children better	5%	8
Worse relationship	Very intense / no break for carer	6%	9
	Child / young person had returned to school because of dysregulation or to give carers a break	4%	7
Other themes	Good relationship anyway	18%	28
	Good and bad days; some challenging and highlights	9%	14
	Different experiences for different aged children, or different needs, young children generally more positive experience than teens	8%	13
	New placement	5%	8

¹⁵ As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

Family time and contact with young person's birth family

Over 60% of young people were reported by carers to have taken part in virtual family time during lockdown, with 37% having not taken part, and 2% of carers not sure.

Changes to the amount of family time during lockdown was varied with 29% reporting lots or a little more than usual, 35% about the same and 35% a little or a lot less than usual.

However, the majority felt relationships between children and their birth families were 'about the same' (74%), with 10% reporting it was much or a little better than usual and 16% reporting it was a little or much worse.

Table: Has the relationship with their birth family (or families) improved during this time?

Response	Percentage	n
It has been much better than usual	3%	6
It has been a little better than usual	7%	12
It has been about the same	74%	130
It has been a little worse than usual	14%	24
It has been much worse than usual	2%	3

Over half (53%) of carers reported arranging virtual family time without help whilst 32% had support from a social worker. A smaller number of others commented that they received help from contact centres (n = 5) and a sibling's carer (n = 2) with one carer noting the challenge of using online methods whilst remaining anonymous.

Almost half of carers felt the quality of family time had been about the same (46%); just over a third (37%) felt it was a little or a lot worse; whilst 17% reported that it had been better than usual. When these results are filtered by those who liked / felt neutral about video calls, the spread of results remain the same, however when filtered by those who do not like video calls, 8% of respondents (n = 2) reported the quality of family time feeling better, 33% (n = 8) reported the quality of family time feeling the same and 58% (n = 14) felt it was worse. However, it is important to note the small sample size involved and it is not possible to generalise these findings.

Table: Overall, do you think the quality of birth family contact has been better or worse during lockdown?

Response	Percentage	n
It has been much better than usual	5%	8
It has been a little better than usual	12%	21
It has been about the same	46%	80
It has been a little worse than usual	30%	52
It has been much worse than usual	7%	12

Carers were asked what they have liked about how family time arrangements have changed since lockdown and 130 answers were given. Some responses stated there was nothing they liked (n = 15) and 9 reported there was no difference. The most common theme was that travel time was reduced because family time was taking place virtually (n = 31), including 5 responses noting less travelling for children and young people and 9 responses noting less travel time for the carer or other children in the household.

Virtual family time was felt to be more relaxed for the child or young person by 22 carers; some comments noted the lack of travelling as a reason for the reduction in stress. Some carers (n = 8) noted that the changes in family time arrangements were more child-led and gave the child or young person greater control. In particular, the ability to arrange a call (or not) and to finish calls when the child or young person was ready, rather than having a fixed time.



They have been when its [suits] all parties and once conversation has run out the contact has finished rather than having to wait for a time to be reached to finish.

Some carers noted they felt changes to the duration (n = 4) and frequency (more contact n = 7 and less contact n = 2) of family time had been helpful but with mixed comments about both more and less contact being beneficial.

Reference was made to the fact that virtual family time was safe and avoided the need to try to negotiate socially distanced visits and having to go out (n = 4), particularly if there was a family member at higher risk. Carers also noted that virtual family time reassured children and young people that their birth families were all right (n = 3), in particular grandparents. Virtual family time was noted to have allowed some contact to be maintained (n = 7).

Six respondents noted that virtual family time allowed carers to supervise and to understand the interaction, helping them to support the child afterwards. A further five carers felt that the changes family time between siblings, allowing more meaningful interaction, sometimes because virtual family time was taking place one-to-one rather than as a family group; two carers noted improvements with other family members.

Five carers noted they had been able to maintain some face-to-face family time. Other comments made by small numbers of carers included that virtual family time had allowed birth families to have contact when their child was much more relaxed or to take part in an activity such as reading a bedtime story (n = 2), and that the lack of professional input also made family time more relaxed (n = 2).

Table: What have you liked about how contact arrangements have changed since lockdown?

Theme / comment	% of total respondents ¹⁶	n
Less travel time and waiting	24%	31
> less travel time and waiting for carer or other children	7%	9
> less travel time and waiting for child	4%	5
Less unsettling for child / child more relaxed	17%	22
Nothing	12%	15
No difference	7%	9
More child-led and has more control	6%	8
Virtual family time has maintained some contact	5%	7
Frequency of family time:		
> more regular/consistent family time (but short - is better)	5%	7
> less family time - children more settled	2%	2
Carer can supervise virtual family time and they understand what has happened	5%	6
Sibling family time is better virtually	4%	5
Have maintained face to face family time during lockdown	4%	5
Duration of virtual family time is more flexible can be positive (but flexibility to move or change can be negative, or child doesn't want to end call)	3%	4
Virtual family time is safe in terms of COVID-19; don't have to go out or worry about social distancing	3%	4
Virtual family time provides reassurance birth family are ok (COVID-19 concerns especially for grandparents)	2%	3
Separate virtual family time with particular family members is better	2%	2
Other comments:		
> children like it more	2%	2
> birth family get to see engaged child as less stressed or to do an activity e.g. bedtime story	2%	2
> less professional input; more relaxed	2%	2

Carers were then asked what they have not liked about how family time arrangements have changed since lockdown. In total 129 responses were given, 13 of which stated there was nothing they disliked. The most frequently noted theme was that children missed face-to-face family time (n = 24) and within that that young children specifically found virtual engagement a barrier (n = 6). Frequently, carers also reported that children found virtual or telephone family time difficult (n = 18); specifically finding it difficult to know what to say, less personal and not the same as face-to-face family time (n = 12).

16 As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

“ *Child enjoys spending time with mum and dad and a call is not the same*

“ *Virtual contact is much less personal. My young person sometimes feels the conversation is forced and doesn't flow the same as direct contact*

The second most frequent theme was that carers felt significant additional responsibility having to supervise family time and lead conversations during the call (n = 21). Within this additional responsibility carers felt that it was intrusive as birth families could see their homes (n = 6) and that they were responsible for organising and sometimes chasing birth families to make arrangements (n = 5).

“ Having to use my own phone, parents seeing our homes and other children in the house if not very carefully managed.

“ It's difficult to manage the boys and Mum at times, if she says anything inappropriate I have to say something to her.

“ No supervision or anyone setting boundaries other than me and that's not my role!

Comments also noted that changes to family time in lockdown had led to a loss of boundaries for carers; the timing of calls, duration, frequency and notice period to arrange or change arrangements leading to less control (n = 17).

COVID-19 related concerns also featured within responses (n = 11). Some carers noted accepting virtual family time because it was safe (n = 4) whilst others reported feeling pressure from birth families to meet face-to-face when the carer did not feel social distancing rules would be observed (n = 4). A small number of comments reported that either the child, young person or carer had been upset by birth families not observing social distancing or breaking lockdown regulations either during face-to-face family time or this being evident during virtual family time (e.g. being at someone else's home).

It was noted that virtual family time had a negative impact on some relationships (n = 6) such as between the child and birth family when the family group was large or if the child was younger as these factors were barriers to effective use of online platforms; larger numbers of people on call made interaction more challenging and younger children found online formats more difficult.

In total, five carers noted that there was less support from professional services for children and young people before, during and after family time, while two felt that virtual family time had had a significant negative impact as it had brought the birth family into the “child's safe space”.

Table: What have you not liked about how contact arrangements have changed since lockdown?

Theme / comment	% of total respondents ¹⁷	n
Child missing face-to-face physical family time	19%	24
> child's age means need they need face-to-face family time and it is hard to engage virtually	5%	6
Child struggles with virtual / phone family time:	14%	18
> not enough to say / less personal / not the same	9%	12
More responsibility on carer having to supervise family time and lead conversations	16%	21
> carers felt it is intrusive into their home	5%	6
> organise and chase birth parents to arrange family time	4%	5
Loss of boundaries / control and increased flexibility (e.g. any time, length of call, notice period, changing numbers or arrangements)	13%	17
COVID-19 related concerns:	9%	11
> pressure from BF to meet face-to-face when carer does not feel they will observe rules	3%	4
> COVID-19 concerns mean carer will accept virtual family time because it is safe	3%	4
> birth family not socially distancing upsetting child or carer	2%	3
The negative impact on different family members relationships with child particularly when the child is young or there are larger numbers of family members in the household;	5%	6
> virtual family time impacting on siblings	2%	3
Lack of support for child around family time before, during and after	4%	5
> emotional response to family time (bringing BF into child's safe space)	2%	2
Nothing	10%	13

¹⁷ As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

Contact with social workers during lockdown

Carers most frequently reported being in touch with their social worker(s) weekly (34%), fortnightly (19%) or monthly (22%) during lockdown.

Table: How frequently have you been in touch with your supervising social worker(s) during lockdown?

Response	Percentage	n
Most days	2%	7
More than once a week	12%	34
Weekly	34%	97
Fortnightly	19%	55
Monthly	22%	62
Less than once a month	8%	22
I have no ongoing contact with a social worker	3%	10

Half of carers reported this was about the same as normal (51%) with 29% feeling it was a little more than normal, and 11% a lot more than normal. 10% said it was a little or a lot less than normal.

Table: Do you feel you've been in contact with your supervising social worker(s) more or less than usual during lockdown?

Response	Percentage	n
A lot more than usual	11%	29
A little more than usual	29%	80
About the same as usual	51%	139
A little less than usual	7%	20
A lot less than usual	3%	7

Over 70% of the carers who responded suggested that they felt about the same regarding the amount of contact they had had with their social worker, 13% felt it had been a little better and 8% a little worse.

Table: How do you feel about the amount of contact you've had with your social worker(s) during lockdown?

Response	Percentage	n
It has been much better than usual	6%	16
It has been a little better than usual	13%	37
It has been about the same	70%	194
It has been a little worse than usual	8%	23
It has been much worse than usual	2%	6

Carers were asked whether anything about lockdown had made things better with their social worker. Of the 171 responses, 71 replied "no" with a further 8 replying they had been allocated a new social worker just before lockdown and 6 stating there was no change. A further 34 responses said that things were very good regarding contact with their social worker prior to lockdown and that in lockdown this had continued.

The most common theme relating to how things had been better was that they had received more contact and that contact had been better quality (n = 16).

“ *My [social] worker had made frequent calls to check on me and how things were. She told me she is just a phone call away anytime I need her and she had been keeping in touch as well.* ”

Carers (n = 12) noted that the ability to have virtual contact when needed was supportive and noted this no longer involved either the social worker or carer having to travel. A further 12 comments noted that their social worker was easier to contact and felt this was because the social worker was not having to travel to meetings, visits and appointments.

“ *More accessible as working from home and not out and about.* ”

Smaller numbers of carers commented that virtual contact and phone calls had been useful (n = 8), that virtual contact or calls felt less intrusive and shorter, which this was felt to be beneficial (n = 5).

Carers were then asked whether anything about lockdown had made things worse with their social worker. There were 176 responses to this question with 108 stating “no”; a further 8 stated “no” because the relationship was positive already, while 2 stated “no” because the relationship had previously been poor and remained so.

The most common theme that made things worse between the carer and the social worker was considered to be the lack of face-to-face contact and acknowledgement that virtual contact was “not the same” as face-to-face interaction (n = 21). In particular, carers who had new social workers during lockdown reflected that it was harder to establish a relationship virtually and that frequent changes in social worker or gaps in having a social worker were particularly hard during lockdown (n = 8).

Education and schooling during lockdown

Slightly more than half of children were attending secondary provision (54%), with primary provision being the second most frequent schooling option (43%) and thirdly college (14%). Other options included the child or young person not attending school (6%) or another form of education such as a school for children with additional needs (n = 18) or a nursery or preschool (n = 14).

Table: Where does the young person (or young people) typically go to school? Select all that apply for the young person or young people you care for

Response	Percentage	n
Primary school	43%	122
Secondary school	54%	154
Pupil Referral Unit	3%	9
College	14%	40
Doesn't go to school	6%	17
Other (please specify)	15%	44

The table below displays carers' reports of the types of schooling young people engaged with during lockdown, and how they found the experience.

Table: Has the young person (or young people) taken part in any of the following during lockdown:

	Yes, and they generally liked it	Yes, and they neither liked nor disliked it	Yes, but they generally disliked it	No, they have not taken part in this	n
Home-schooling	37%	19%	23%	20%	273
Online lessons with their regular school	27%	16%	8%	49%	264
Virtual school with their local council	7%	4%	1%	88%	239
Attended school in-person	30%	7%	3%	61%	258

Over three quarters of carers had been involved in some form of home schooling with the child or young person in their care (77%, n = 218) with only 23% not having been involved (n = 66).

Carers were then asked about the positive impacts of changes with schooling; 238 responses were received, with the most common themes displayed in the table. Of these responses, 41 reported no positive impacts and 2 reported no changes.

The most commonly cited themes were that the flexibility of home schooling allowed learning to be tailored to the needs of the child or young person (n = 45) and that it had improved the quality and quantity of learning (n = 40). In terms of flexibility of home-schooling, comments noted this was felt to be more enjoyable for children and young people and less pressured, allowing learning to occur at a pace that suited them. For some, this flexibility had allowed carers to support filling gaps in learning and to consolidate learning. The quality and quantity of learning was felt to have improved, with children and young people producing more and better quality work. Language such as “excelled”, “thrived”, and “come on leaps and bounds” was used by carers to describe how the change in schooling has impacted some children and young people’s learning.

“ Previously our foster son has had multiple moves in his life. With many school moves, which has had an [effect] on his educational needs. As he is a shy child he has seemed to slip through the net, most of his life. During living with us, whilst in lockdown, we have had the opportunity to work with him and notice the gaps in his educational work. This has given us the opportunity to work with him to improve his understanding, and improve his educational work. Although we feel that he will still need additional support when school reopens.

-

“ They are producing more work and better quality work. They do not have the pressures of school dictating when they need to do each piece of work. If they want to do their maths last or their reading first then they can do this but at school they have to follow the set timetable.

Some carers referenced children with special educational needs or disabilities such as learning difficulties or autism, and how the flexibility and one-to-one time allowed children's learning to progress over lockdown.

“ *Both children have learning difficulties and need lots of time to understand basic processes. Home schooling has allowed us to better appreciate the massive gaps in their knowledge and work patiently and repetitively to try and fill these.*

-

“ *13yr old with dyslexia has discovered he is “not stupid”. I’ve spent hours 1:1 differentiating his work, explaining it [to] him I’ve purchased apps i.e. Nessy and he is thriving asking me if I would home school him. I’ve been struggling to get him assessed by educational psychologist this time has been so good for him he has more time and personal input.*

Of note is that some carers cited improvements in their own understanding of the child or young person's learning and abilities (n = 29) as a key positive impact of changes to schooling.

Relatedly, some carers felt that one-to-one support and attention was beneficial (n = 26) and changes to schooling had had emotional benefits for the child or young person, helping them to feel more confident, settled and happier with reference to their learning and / or family life (n = 24).

“ *Younger [child] has had constant one to one help from myself, she has thrived and worked extremely hard and she is very proud of what she has achieved in the last few months*

-

“ *He has been much more relaxed and happy, No pressure has settled him*

-

“ *Enhanced our family bond, spending quality time together.*

Table: What positive impacts has the change in schooling had?

Theme / comment	% of total respondents ¹⁸	n
Children / young people home schooling:		
Flexibility of home schooling to suit the needs of child or young person	19%	45
Improved quantity / quality of learning	17%	40
Carer is more involved in learning and knows child's abilities have improved	12%	29
One-to-one support is better	11%	26
Emotional benefits from schooling changes: more settled / secure / improved family relationships / happier	10%	24
Less distractions and better concentration at home compared to school	8%	20
Home schooling has shown child is behind and/or highlighted educational needs	7%	16
Less time home schooling than at school so more family time	5%	11
Increased support from school including more contact between carer and school	4%	10
Less stressful morning routine and no travelling to school	3%	7
Less behavioural issues	3%	6
Home school gives structure and focus to the day/routine	3%	6
Young person has needed to take responsibility for their own learning / motivate themselves	3%	6
Child or young person learning wider skills	1%	3
Improved attendance	1%	3
No issues of teachers 'not liking child' or picking on them	1%	3
Children / young people going to school:		
Small groups have improved attainment	2%	5
Better social interaction	1%	2
Benefited from routine of still going to college/school	1%	3
None	17%	41
No change	1%	2

Some carers noted differences between children in their care, listing how each specific child had been impacted by changes in their schooling, highlighting the fact that individual children have responded differently depending upon many factors; their educational and learning needs, past experiences, current experiences of learning and relationships at school and home to name just a few factors.

In respect of any negative impacts of the changes in schooling, 244 open text responses were given of which only 28 felt there were none. A large number of carers felt that changes to schooling in lockdown had resulted in negative impacts upon children and young people's social interaction and that they had missed spending time with friends (n = 82). Some carers felt this could have a long-term detrimental effect on children and young people and in particular carers noted the negative impact on children and young people who already struggled with social interaction with peers.

¹⁸ As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

“ *The lack of social interactions. Both of our YP struggle socially and the lack of a social setting has meant that they have not been able to work on these issues.*”

“ *Lack of social interactions. Our oldest has had no social meetings set up and our youngest has had just one.*”

Other key themes included the loss of learning and educational progress that had occurred because of lockdown (n = 27) and the challenge of motivation and willingness to learn in the home environment (n = 22).

“ *Caused a lot of anxiety and stress both in worrying about what he is missing out educationally and also in the detail. It took a lot of negotiation with our child*”

The lack of routine of home learning (n = 18) was discussed by carers and a similar number of carers also felt that their child or young person was reluctant to engage in home schooling (n = 17).

Responses also highlighted the challenges brought about by changes in schooling resulting in carers having no time to themselves and being exhausted (n = 14), highlighting how this change had been very stressful for carers (n = 12), with comments including “I’m shattered”, “it’s exhausting”, “I have no free time at all. These are very long days” And “very stressed”.

Some carers noted that the change in schooling had had a negative impact on their relationship with their child or young person, in particular where they had struggled with the lack of separation between home and schooling (n = 13).

“ *[It] has put a huge strain on our relationship to get him to do school lessons. I feel that I have a responsibility to get him to do some lessons and he just doesn’t want to.*”

A variety of other negative impacts were cited by carers about the change in schooling, including carers noting they do not have the expertise to teach (n = 11), the challenge of getting support when learning virtually (n = 11) and an increase in challenging behaviour (n = 11).

Table: What negative impacts has the change in schooling had?

Theme / comment	% of total respondents ¹⁹	n
Missing friends / social interaction / long term impact	34%	82
Loss of learning and progress / limited time learning	11%	27
Lack of motivation / boredom / unwillingness to learn in home environment (one carer noted boredom of routine too)	9%	22
Lack of routine	7%	18
Child / young person did not want to do it	7%	17
No respite / carers exhausted	6%	14
Negative impact on relationship between carer and young person / child (no separation between home and school) but one reported this settled over time	5%	13
Stressful for carers	5%	12
Carers noted their lack of expertise as teachers and struggling to help with maths	5%	11
Harder to get support with learning and lack of feedback	5%	11
Increase in challenging behaviour by child or young person	4%	10
Blurring of roles and boundaries; parent-teacher, home-school meaning child / young person unwilling to engage in learning at home	4%	9
Child or young person missing contact with teachers	3%	8
Negative impact on mental health	3%	8
Negative impact on regulation	3%	7
Increased distractions of being at home	3%	7
Loss of 1-1 support at school or specialist support	3%	7
Challenge of not understanding online work	3%	7
Challenge of trying to teach different aged children at different stages	2%	5
None	11%	28
No changes as been in school	0%	1

When asked overall, how the changes in schooling impacted on their family the responses were mixed, with more feeling that there was no impact or a negative impact; 38% of carers reported that it was a little or a lot worse than usual, 37% about the same and 26% a little or much better than usual.

Table: Overall, how has the change in schooling impacted on you as a family?

Response	Percentage	n
It has been much better than usual	12%	32
It has been a little better than usual	14%	37
It has been about the same	37%	98
It has been a little worse than usual	26%	70
It has been much worse than usual	12%	31

¹⁹ As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

In explaining their reply to this question, 146 carers commented. Overall, there were more replies giving explanations of negative impacts on the family, although experiences varied and some found it to be a positive time.

The most frequent themes involved concerns regarding the strain and extra work placed on carers (n = 27) and the lack of a break or opportunity for self-care for carers (n = 18). The challenges of home schooling when the child or young person lacked motivation to complete tasks was also considered an issue (n = 14). Other negative impacts upon the wider family included that the child or young person had struggled (n = 12), an increase in aggressive or challenging behaviour (n = 10) and the loss of or lack of support from school (n = 8).

For a smaller number of families there was an overall positive impact including no longer having to travel to school, which resulted in less pressure and more time (n = 12, and the child or young person being more emotionally regulated which had a positive impact upon the family (n = 9).

Impacts of lockdown upon wellbeing

Responses to questions about children and young people's behaviour suggest an even spread of experiences between those who have found it has been a little or much better than usual (32%) the same (35%) or a little or much worse than usual (32%). Carers reports of children and young people's wellbeing were also varied but with more indicators of positive changes as shown in the table below.

Table: How has their wellbeing changed during lockdown?

Response	Percentage	n
It has been much better than usual	16%	45
It has been a little better than usual	21%	59
It has been about the same	39%	110
It has been a little worse than usual	19%	55
It has been much worse than usual	6%	16

Carers were able to explain their answer to the question above, with 117 responses. There were 42 comments which noted broadly negative changes to the child or young person's wellbeing and 45 noted broadly positive changes in wellbeing, again illustrating the varied experiences of lockdown; 12 carers reported both positive and negative changes in wellbeing either for the same child over time or for different children. Positive comments often referenced lack of pressure:

“ *Less stress more relaxed as no outside pressure*

Whereas negative comments often referenced 'difficult behaviour' and strong emotions such as anxiety:

“ *The 6 year old has really struggled with his emotions and has become very anxious and also aggressive both verbally and physically.*

Looking ahead as lockdown ends

When carers were asked what they hope stays the same after lockdown ends, 230 responses were provided. Themes most frequently reported were that time for family activities remained (n = 41) and that the kinder, caring and more tolerant sense of community remained (n = 34).

“ *The amount of time we spend as a family and realise the simple things in life are free!* ”

Carers also hoped that the improved relationship and bond with their child or young person remained (n = 29), alongside a slower pace of life and more time (n = 28).

“ *The closeness with my elder placement, doing more [together], people not rushing round all the time.* ”

The benefits of virtual meetings, training and supervision were also noted by carers (n = 25) and whilst in other question responses it was noted that face-to-face contact is valued, it is also clear that some virtual contact would be valued.

“ *I enjoy the virtual contact with professionals. Save petrol. Still work from home. Some good points for the planet.* ”

Table: After lockdown ends, what do you hope stays the same?

Theme / comment	% of total respondents ²⁰	n
Time for family activities	18%	41
Kinder / community spirit / tolerant / caring	15%	34
Improved relationship between child and carer / closeness / bond	13%	29
Slower pace of life / everyone having more time	12%	28
Virtual meetings / training / supervision	11%	25
Changes around learning / school work / being more involved / less pressure / positive attitude	7%	17
Less traffic and driving / environmental / climate change	7%	16
Social distancing / staying safe / hygiene	7%	15
Happier children (more secure and relaxed)	4%	9
Daily exercise	3%	8
Nothing	6%	14
I don't know	2%	4

20 As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

Carers were asked to comment on what they hoped returned to how it was before, when lockdown ends. Comments came from 246 carers and the most frequent themes were hopes that being able to socialise, see friends and family and in particular have physical contact and be able to give hugs would return (n = 108), both for themselves and the children and young people they care for.

“ *Seeing more friends family and celebrating the special occasions missed during lockdown*

-

“ *Schooling and children been able to play with friends and camping*

-

“ *The children managing their social development with peers and teachers. Physical contact with family and friends - being able to hug others again!*

Carers also hoped that school / nursery / college returned to normal for their children or young people (n = 59):

“ *Children's education. Our children need to get back to school asap*

-

“ *School. While he has adapted well to his new routine he misses his old one*

The ability to enjoy leisure activities, holiday and travel were also noted by carers as something they were keen to return to normal (n = 49) along with family time between children and young people and their birth families (n = 21).

Table: After lockdown ends, what do you hope returns to how it was before?

Theme / comment	% of total respondents ²¹	n
Being able to socialise / go out with family and friends, including physical contact (hugs) and celebrations	44%	108
Schools / college / nursery reopen fulltime	24%	59
Holidays / travel and leisure / sport activities	20%	49
Everything returns to normal	11%	28
Family time with parents and / or siblings	9%	21
Out of school activities	7%	17
Adults can have a break and be refreshed (and catch up on housework)	6%	15
Routine	6%	15
Shopping returns to normal	4%	10
N/A or don't know	2%	4
Nothing	1%	2

When asked for any other comments the most frequent theme was that it had been a very difficult time (n = 24) and that there had been a financial burden upon carers because of lockdown, with some carers suggesting a need for recognition of their significant hard work during this time (n = 15). However, there were reflections that it had been a positive time (n = 13) and that there had been positive impacts upon relationships and education (n = 15), highlighting the great variation in experiences throughout this time.

²¹ As respondents were able to list more than one theme, totals do not add up to 100%

Birth parents

Summary

- > Seven responses were received to the birth parents' survey and as a result responses are presented as a case study, to give an overview of respondents' experiences. This cannot be considered representative of the experiences of other birth parents.
- > Birth parents who engaged with virtual family time with their children appreciated the flexibility afforded by this method, however missed face-to-face contact and being able to give hugs. Some difficulties in respect of technology and arranging family time with foster carers were also described.
- > There were mixed views about experiences with social care with some birth parents feeling contact had increased and others feeling it had decreased. Some birth parents also expressed a wish to receive updates from social care about the wellbeing of their children.
- > There was also a mixed response to questions about wellbeing, however overall birth parents rated their wellbeing as fairly low. In general, birth parents were looking forward to the easing of lockdown restrictions and hoped to resume face-to-face family time with their children.

Respondents

There were seven responses to the birth parents' survey; possibly due to the distribution channels available being more accessible to young people and carers. Due to the number of responses, the views expressed in this section cannot be considered representative of all birth parents, but can provide a valuable insight into the experiences of the seven respondents.

Six respondents had either one or two children aged five and over living in care, while one had a child who was living with them and receiving support from a social worker.

Respondents were first asked about their views on communicating by phone / video calls, with around half liking and half not liking these methods of communication.

Contact and family time with children

Four respondents had been in touch with their children living in care, through a mixture of phone and video calls. Three provided comments describing challenges with the "cost of calls", weak phone signal and the logistics of making arrangements with foster carers.

There were also advantages to these methods of communication; three people appreciated the potential for contact at all times of the day, while one parent described an advantage of video calls as "I can see her".

Half of respondents reported their child's foster carer had been involved with family time while the other half reported they had not. One person had not been able to see their children since lockdown began and expressed a wish for local authorities to ensure some contact continued through lockdown; this parent felt that their children's foster carers had "refused video calls".

Two people felt they had 'a lot less' contact with their children during lockdown, one 'a little more' and one 'about the same'. The length of family time also varied, with two parents reporting shorter but more frequent calls and one parent feeling they spent the same amount of time together as before; one person commented that family time had been "more often" and felt it was "good it could continue during lock down".

Three people noted aspects of family time which they felt had been worse during lockdown; all three comments related to it being "hard not to physically see my children", or having the amount of time together hugely reduced, with concerns raised about potential long-term impacts on the parent-child relationship.

Contact with social care

Most respondents had been in touch with their child's social worker monthly, with one in touch weekly and another who did not know their child's social worker. There were varied reports of how the frequency of contact had changed over lockdown, with responses mixed as to whether people felt it had increased, decreased or stayed the same.

Comments about support from social care were also mixed, with parents suggesting it could be more frequent and that they would like calls / updates about the wellbeing of their child. One person felt social care had been less available during lockdown, while another suggested lockdown had been an "excuse for social care to be dismissive".

Wellbeing

Six respondents rated statements about their wellbeing and experiences during lockdown. As with other questions a range of experiences were reported and individual responses varied from 0 to 10. Averages suggest fairly low wellbeing overall with low ratings for time spent outdoors (mean = 3, SD = 2.94) and 'overall I have felt happier during lockdown (mean = 3, SD = 3.61). The highest rated statement was 'I am looking forward to lockdown ending' (mean = 6.5, SD = 4.61).

Three comments expressed parents' wishes to see their children more often after lockdown ends. One person expressed frustration with the social care system and the pain of being apart from their children throughout their answers, noting "I hope adoption is abolished".

Once lockdown ended, three people wanted to return to face-to-face family time, held at the same frequency as before lockdown, though one person felt it would never return to how it was before.

As well as support from social care, one person who was living with their child described support from the child's teacher and how this had supported their experiences in lockdown.



[W]e have good days and we have bad days with help from [child's] teachers we are getting better ... we are working together with school

Discussion

Survey responses presented a varied picture of experiences during lockdown; some young people thrived from the flexibility and increased time at home; while others struggled with the lack of routine and with missing friends and family members.

Some clear advantages of virtual family time emerged, with carers and young people commenting on the flexibility and convenience of reduced travel. However, many respondents noted the lack of physical contact as a barrier, with young people especially missing being able to hug their parents and siblings. Despite this, some young people felt more in-control, for example through the ability to end virtual family time on their terms. Carers also highlighted how younger children struggled with virtual family time, with many reporting difficulties in engagement. Carers also raised the additional responsibilities of arranging family time and some concerns over maintaining anonymity where their home and contact details might be visible to birth parents.

It is worth noting that, while carers reported caring for children and young people of all ages, the responses from children and young people were skewed towards teenagers. This will likely impact responses, for example around the experiences described above with virtual family time for young children.

Although the responses from birth parents cannot be considered representative, important points were raised about access to technology. These comments highlighted the need to ensure both birth families and young people have access to appropriate technology, data and phone / internet signal. These components are easily overlooked but essential to enable virtual family time. As the present survey was conducted online, it is likely respondents already possessed a degree of digital literacy and the means to access the internet. Further work to hear the voices of those who are not able to regularly access the internet might offer further insight in this area.

In general, contact with social care was considered by many to have remained broadly the same over lockdown, however there were smaller numbers of respondents who felt it had improved or worsened. While some felt virtual contact with their social workers was preferable, others felt the amount of contact had reduced slightly during lockdown, which was particularly challenging for those who had a new social worker over the period. Overall, 84% of young people and 90% of carers felt contact with social care had remained the same or improved. This suggests there could be an appetite for exploring additional models of contact with social care and further consultation on this point could be beneficial.

The benefits of virtual family time and contact with social care suggest there could be a place for this alongside face-to-face contact for those who want it. Novel ways of conducting virtual family time, such as through online games and apps, could work particularly well for brothers and sisters. However, careful consideration would be required to ensure it was safely managed and offered to complement face-to-face family time. Other aspects which might require consideration include arrangements for those who have supervised family time and arrangements for younger children who might struggle to engage virtually. As noted above, the voices of younger children were not as well captured in the present surveys and further work to hear the views of children of all ages would be beneficial.

Various experiences with schooling during lockdown were described, with some young people reporting more free time and appreciating one-to-one support from carers, while others found home-schooling more challenging, missing their friends and the structure and support offered by school. Perhaps unsurprisingly, carers reflected on the additional pressures and responsibility of educating the young people in their care, and the reduction in what might have been 'free time' while young people were in school.

While most young people and carers reported relationships in their household were “about the same as before”, around a third reported improvements in relationships and comments across questions referenced opportunities to spend quality time together and strengthen relationships. This was also a key theme in aspects people hoped would remain after lockdown is eased. Feelings of community solidarity and kindness were highlighted by some young people and carers as a change they would like to see maintained.

As respondents were not asked about their life prior to lockdown, it is difficult to determine whether the changes in relationships were present across all respondents, or whether they were more common in those who already had a strong relationship prior to lockdown (or vice versa). It is also important to note that although stronger relationships were reported by many, concerns were raised for relationships outside the home, especially by birth parents, that the reduction in family time over lockdown could have long-term consequences.

Responses and experiences differed greatly. Any longer term changes which are considered, would need to be developed through further consultation with young people and families, and offered as one option; indeed in many cases, it was the flexibility, choice and control of virtual family time which appealed to young people, carers and birth families.

Overall, lockdown added some pressures and responsibilities for carers in particular, whilst all respondents were impacted by the changes to routines. Some reported feeling less stress and more opportunities to build relationships, while others described an increase in challenging behaviour or an impact on their mental health. The theme of relationships was raised throughout responses, with some young people and carers reporting strengthened relationships and expressing a wish for the increased quality time afforded by lockdown to continue.

Implications for practice

1. Where age-appropriate, virtual family time can be a valuable tool in some cases, giving young people control of the interaction, including when it ends and how it occurs. However, care should be taken in maintaining boundaries and ensuring young people are still able to have important physical / face-to-face family time – particularly with brothers and sisters – wherever safe and possible.
 - a. Considerations should also be given to younger children, who might struggle to engage virtually and without physical ‘play’ stimuli.
 - b. Video games and apps might also be explored as options for connecting virtually, for brothers and sisters in particular.
 - c. There might also be an appetite from foster carers for additional support around arrangements and supervision of virtual family time.
2. Social workers making use of virtual and remote contact are able to maintain relationships with families where there are pre-existing relationships, and this may in fact be an approach which enables more regular communication. However, where relationships are being established, a face-to-face relationship is important.
3. Where virtual communication and contact with birth families and social workers is utilised, it is important that this complements, rather than replaces face-to-face contact and is offered as an option for those who wish to engage this way. Flexibility and control were central to the benefits described for these methods of contact.
4. The increase in quality time foster families spent together during lockdown was commented on by many young people and carers, with a large majority feeling that their relationships had improved or stayed the same during this time. This finding highlights how for many, dedicated time together can promote foster family relationships.
5. Although the majority of young people and carers seem to have benefitted from additional time together in the household and the relationship building that goes along side this, it has not been positive for everyone, and a case-by-case approach is crucially important. Furthermore, despite some benefits, most young people were still keen for lockdown to end due to the absence of contact with their friends and extended network outside of the household – including school friends.
6. Access to technology and a stable telephone / internet connection are both essential for people to engage in virtual family time. It is important to ensure young people, carers and birth parents have access and support to use these; further work might also engage with young people and families who are unable to access the above, to explore how they might best be supported.
7. Further work might also be necessary to hear the voices of younger children and those unable to engage with this survey. For instance, virtual family time may not form a suitable alternative for children who struggle to engage and care should be taken to consider individual circumstances when recommending digital approaches. Further consideration should be taken for young people with physical or learning disabilities who may be less able to engage with these technologies, and further research is necessary before making any recommendations in this area.
8. In summary, the present lockdown has highlighted some positive messages as a result of social care adaptations, including increased time as a family and the use of technology to increase the frequency of communication between social care practitioners and families. However, there are also some cautionary notes related to ensuring any use of digital alternatives is done with young people in a way that gives them choice and control of their relationships, and also acknowledges the importance of relationships outside of their home with friends and extended family. Crucially, digital substitutes can be a valuable tool for social care practitioners, but only when used in a strengths-based and person-centred way; the COVID-19 lockdown has provided some valuable lessons which may support practice going forward.

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