Relationship-based practice and digital technology in child and family social work: Learning from practice during the COVID-19 pandemic

Ruth Copson[1] ⓘ, Anne M Murphy[1] ⓘ, Laura Cook[1] ⓘ, Elsbeth Neil[1] ⓘ, and Pernille Sorensen[1] ⓘ

Abstract

Vital services provided by social workers to children in care or on the edge of care were largely delivered "online" during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper explores the potential impact of these changes on vulnerable children and their families. Relationship-based practice is integral to social work and the shift to digital communication during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to accelerated practice changes and implications for relationship building both with and between service users. Going forward, social workers and other professionals are likely to move to an increasingly hybrid model of communication, combining both digital and face-to-face methods. This article identifies the impact of digital communication on relationships in professional practice, drawing on three studies of digital communication in the UK carried out at the University of East Anglia. The first considered how child protection social workers responded to the challenges of COVID-19, the second looked at how children in care were keeping in touch with their birth families and the third focused on the approaches being taken to moving children from foster care to adoptive families. Five themes related to relationships were identified across all three studies: the significance of the age and developmental stage of the child; the frequency of contact and communication; digital literacy/exclusion; the impact of the lack of sensory experience; and the importance of the relationship history. The article concludes with implications for utilising digital methods in building and maintaining relationships in practice and highlights the need to consider both the inner and outer worlds of those involved.

Keywords

Adopted children, child protection, children in care, COVID-19, digital communication

[1]School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, UK

Corresponding author:
Ruth Copson, School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Lawrence Stenhouse Building, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ. UK.
Email: r.copson@uea.ac.uk

Introduction

Relationship-based practice is integral to social work (Ruch et al., 2018) and effective communication is central in building effective relationships (Simpson, 2016). In Child and Family Social Work (CFSW), social workers need to communicate and build relationships with children and parents, as well as facilitate relationships between people in the child's network. The emergence of digital communication methods has changed the way people navigate their social relationships (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019). Ownership of smart phones and access to broadband are now widespread (Pew Research Center, 2019) but digital communication technologies such as video calling have not, until very recently, been widely used in CFSW. The adoption of digital tools in communication has rapidly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to government-directed lockdowns restricting face-to-face contact. This, along with the overall impact of lockdown restrictions, has led to professional concern regarding the mental health, educational progress and family bonds of children who are supported by statutory children's services (Goldberg et al., 2021).

This paper draws on data from three studies carried out in England during the first national lockdown between March and June 2020. These studies focused on different areas of CFSW, investigating the adjustments that social workers had to make to their practice because of the lockdown. Study one, (Cook & Zschomler, 2020) explored the work of experienced social workers and practice changes with children and families during the pandemic. Study two (Neil et al., 2020b) focused on family contact (Family Time) arrangements for children in care, kinship care and adoption. Study three (Neil et al., 2020a) looked at how social workers were helping children manage the transition from foster care to an adoptive family. All three studies documented a rapid and widespread adoption of digital technology: home visits were replaced with video calls, children's family time switched from in-person to online, and children and their foster carers initially met prospective adopters through online interactions

This paper reports a synthesis of findings from across the three studies, focussing on how the relationship-based work of social workers was affected by the switch from in-person to digitally mediated contact. The analysis considered three types of relationship: between social workers and service users; between children and birth family members and between foster carers, children and prospective adoptive parents.

The benefits of digital communication technology in social work

Several benefits of using digital communication technology in CFSW have been identified. Social workers in Breyette and Hill's (2015) study said that electronic communication had some benefits for their work with young people including 'convenience, increased effectiveness and efficiency, decreased no show rates, improved communications, easier documentation, easier scheduling, and greater connection between client and worker' (p.302). Other studies similarly report that some service users, especially younger people or those who find expressing themselves face-to-face difficult, often prefer digital technology as a mode of communication (Denby et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2012). Young people in Mackrill and Ebsen's (2018) study found communicating with social workers via an app was more immediate and interactions in real time helped them to feel their social workers were genuinely interested in them. As Simpson (2017) has argued, use of mobile phone technology with young people can create a 'sense of presence' (p.94). Mackrill and Ebsen (2018) cautioned however that the technologies are 'only ever as good as the social workers who use them' (p.947) suggesting the app enabled relationship-based practice, rather than replaced the role of the

worker. This finding is echoed by Hammond and Cooper (2013) who reported that benefits of digital life story work with young people were mediated through relationship with the worker.

Benefits of digital communication in facilitating children's family contact time

Looking now at digital contact in relation to children's family contact, a recent rapid review summarising findings from 16 studies (Iyer, Albakri et al., 2020) found that relationships between children and family members can be facilitated by the more immediate and less formal nature of digital communication. For children who move around the care system, using digital communication technology can help them achieve some continuity in relationships (Wilson, 2015). Although digital contact can allow young people more freedom and control over contact plans, professionals and carers can experience challenges around setting boundaries and supervising such contact (Iyer, Albakri et al., 2020). For adopted young people, digital birth family contact can be helpful when it is planned, supported by adoptive parents, and where it is supplementary to off-line relationships (Greenhow et al., 2017; Neil et al., 2015) This latter point echoes one of the main conclusions from Iyer, Albakri et al.'s (2020) review, that digital contact is best used to enhance rather than replace face-to-face contact.

Where parents work with children to help them enjoy and participate in video calls, this can create a sense of contact as a whole family bonding activity (Ames et al., 2010). This aligns with recent calls for a family centred approach in facilitating children's family contact, where children's carers or adopters and birth parents can work together in supporting the child's participation (Iyer, Boddy et al., 2020).

Risks of using digital technology to facilitate relationships

Digital communication risks losing sensory and contextual knowledge which is important for relationships (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014). Home visiting is a 'deeply embodied practice in which all the senses have come into play and movement is central' (Ferguson, 2018, p.65). Writing about delivering psychotherapy via Skype, Bayles (2012) argues that technological modes of communication compromise the quality of non-verbal information that can be exchanged, which in turn affects the transfer of emotions that is important between professional and service user.

For children, the loss of contextual knowledge that in-person contact allows is particularly important, and this is a major limitation in the usefulness of digital contact between children and their families (Iyer, Albakri et al., 2020). For video calling to allow very young children to maintain connections with family members, adults need to scaffold interactions (Strouse et al., 2021). This involves knowing how to use the technology and set up the calls, as well as supporting children to stay engaged when they get bored, walk off screen, or struggle with the conversation (Ames et al., 2010; Iyer, Albakri et al., 2020). Around the age of four, children can understand the nature of video calls as both real but not present (Bennette et al., 2021).

Touch is central in both building relationships with children, and checking their welfare (Baeza et al., 2019). The lack of touch in digital encounters may therefore hamper direct work with children. For children's family contact, some parents and children feel that meeting through technology does not have the same feel as meeting in person (Iyer, Albakri et al., 2020). Without physical contact, parents cannot demonstrate their hands-on parenting skills, and babies cannot build attachments to their parents, potentially impeding progress towards reunification (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020). This same limitation applies to introducing children to their adoptive parents. Typically, adoptive parents make multiple visits to the child in their foster family, gradually taking over hands-on care as

the child learns to trust their adoptive parents (Neil & Beek, 2020). There is no research exploring the role of digitally mediated contact in introducing children to their adoptive parents.

Digital communication with service users can create ethical dilemmas within relationships, particularly around information management, privacy and boundaries in the context of the increased availability being online affords (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Bryne & Kirwan, 2019; Mishna et al., 2012; Reamer, 2015). For example, service users may view social workers' reluctance to use digital messaging as a sign of lack of care or interest (Simpson, 2017) or they may be frustrated when social workers are reluctant to engage via their preferred platforms (Willoughby, 2017).

Where young people are using digital technology to communicate with professionals, this may expose them to other risks such as cyber bullying, loss of privacy or harmful contacts (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). The vulnerability of young people in and on the edge of care is likely to carry over into vulnerability online (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). Possibly because of the risks associated with online communication, including unplanned contact with birth family, a 'rhetoric of risk and harm' has tended to prevail in family placement practice (Simpson, 2016, p.96).

Finally, for digital communication to aid relationship building, both professionals and service users need access to technology, the means of getting online and skills in managing the technology. Knowledge gaps exist in social work (Taylor, 2017) as well as among foster carers (Finn et al., 2004). Young people may be more familiar with technology than older people, but it is important not to over-estimate their digital literacy (Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

COVID-19 and vulnerable children

Children in care and on the edge of care were an already vulnerable population before the introduction of social restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The potential negative effects of social restrictions on vulnerable children include a lack of access to supportive services, including health, education and social care; restriction of social opportunities in contact with peers; the onset or aggravation of mental health difficulties; compulsive use of social media or online gaming; and increased exposure to violence in the home (Singh et al., 2020). Stresses on children and families may lead to higher numbers of children entering care (Peet & Teh, 2020). These effects have been described as 'collateral damage' (Crawley et al., 2020) of restrictions primarily intended to protect adults from the virus.

For children separated from their parents and living in residential, foster, kinship or adoptive care, social restrictions also severely limited children's contact with family members. Children's responses to using online methods are likely to vary (Monserrat et al., 2021) and where they have little access to digital methods, feelings of missing and worrying about family have been reported (Haffeejee & Levine, 2020). For children where reunification with parents was a possibility, professionals have expressed strong concerns that a lack of in-person contact jeopardises the prospect of parent-child reunification (Goldberg et al., 2021). However, concerns have also been raised about children being rapidly discharged from care without proper assessment of the home situation and support being in place (Wilke et al., 2020).

In summary, the benefits and risks of using digital communication methods in CFSW have been examined in previous literature. More recently, emerging research has also considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including restrictions in face-to-face visits, on vulnerable children, families and the professionals that work with them. However, what is not clear is how a rapid shift to digital communication methods may impact relationship-based practice in CFSW and the long-term implications of this period of rapid change.

Methods

A thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) of three purposively chosen qualitative studies was employed. This focused on relationships and contact between family networks, carers and practitioners. The aim of the synthesis is 'to produce new knowledge by making explicit connections and tensions between individual study reports that were not visible before' (Suri, 2011, p.63). This paper extracts findings from the three studies, which were undertaken in the UK during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–May 2020), focussing explicitly on digital technology and relationships in social work.

Study 1

This study examined how social workers responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in their work with children and families. Telephone interviews focussing on the impact of the pandemic on practice were undertaken with 31 child and family social workers from nine local authorities. The sample included: two service managers, 10 team managers, 10 senior social workers and nine social workers. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-stage model of data analysis to identify the possibilities, risks and future implications of virtual social work practice. Four themes were identified which are reported elsewhere (Cook & Zschomler, 2020).

Study 2

This rapid research was undertaken to understand what means agencies were putting in place to support children in care, kinship care and adoption to stay in contact with their birth families, and how this was working for those involved (Neil et al., 2020b). Data were collected via semi-structured telephone interviews and an online survey. The survey ($N = 197$) was completed by 63 foster carers, 56 professionals, 37 kinship/special guardians, 15 birth parents/relative, 14 other carers, 11 adoptive parents and one young person. The interviews ($N = 24$) were with 16 professionals, four birth parents, two foster carers and one adoptive parent.

Study 3

This was a project already underway that was disseminating a practice programme (based on six key principles) to support positive moves of children from foster homes to their new adoptive family (Beek et al., 2021). Lockdown provided an opportunity to collect additional data so that practice guidance could be offered on applying these principles during the pandemic (Neil et al., 2020a). Semi-structured telephone interviews with practitioners and managers across 15 adoption agencies were carried out, focussing on the positives and negatives of using digital technology to assist with these transitions. The data were analysed using a top-down approach where the principles of the practice model were the key categories of analysis.

All three studies were granted ethical approval from the University research ethics committee.

The process of synthesis worked as follows

1) Findings from the three studies were re-examined to identify the advantages and barriers when using digital technology in relationship-based social work practice.
2) A thematic synthesis across the three studies enabled five themes to be developed.

3) Within each theme, additional thematic analysis took place to develop them further and ensure nothing was missed. To further increase rigour, the research teams met regularly to discuss the findings across all three studies. Researchers worked across the three projects for this final stage of analysis and the writing up of findings.

Findings

Across the three studies, five overarching themes were identified in relation to digital communication and relationship-based practice.

Age and developmental stage of the child

The age and developmental stage of the child was a key consideration in making digital forms of communication (primarily video calls) successful when building and sustaining relationships, with benefits generally increasing with the age of the child.

Infants and young children. Adults' relationships with infants are typically developed through physical proximity, touch, eye contact and facial expressions. Without these, it was harder to establish and sustain reciprocal interactions with babies and toddlers using digital methods. As one social worker summarised, interactions 'can't just be visual for this age'.

Despite these barriers to engaging young babies, many social workers, carers and parents found ways to adapt digital methods to the age and developmental stage of children. This could play a vital role in starting and sustaining relationships between children and birth parents, and children and their future adopters. Digital contact acted as a bridge between the child's two worlds (foster and birth family or foster family and adoptive family). Collaboration between and scaffolding by adults was key. Carers needed to be positive about calls, giving the child clear signals that they were comfortable with interactions with birth/adoptive parents. Successful interactions depended on foster carers fitting calls around the child's routine, mood, attention span and likes/dislikes to avoid additional stress. For example, this could be achieved by videoing active toddlers at play as opposed to attempting to sit them in front of a screen, or by parents/adopters reading stories and singing nursery rhymes. The provision by workers of child-friendly guidance for video calls led to more successful and enjoyable calls for all.

An important scaffolding role for professionals was to help adults understand and respond to young children's emotions, behaviour and reactions during calls. Some professionals debriefed parents and carers after contact to "help them offload thoughts, feelings etc...". Managing adults' expectations was key, particularly around the length of time that a young child could concentrate on a call. Professionals emphasised that short calls may be best and that it is ok for children to dip in and out of video calls, with this not being read as rejection or failure.

Slightly older infants and young children could recognise (or begin to recognise) adults on the screen through voice and sight, building familiarity and readiness for later interaction in-person. This was particularly important for transition to adoption; through a series of repeated video calls with adopters, children aged 12–18 months began to gradually recognise their prospective adopters and started to build a relationship. One child '...was touching the screen on FaceTime, calling them mummy and daddy'.

The use of observation was also used as a positive way to facilitate relationships in both family contact and adoption transitions, even if the child could derive no direct benefit. Carers recorded children's play and routines, allowing unobtrusive observation of the child. This was especially

valued by adopters in providing a window into the child's preferences and routines. For birth parents, seeing and observing their infant on the screen provided much needed reassurance that their baby was well and helped them to retain an important sense of connection.

Older children and adolescents. Creativity was also key in engaging older children. In all three studies, a strategy of show and tell was useful, for example, asking the child to bring a toy or object to show the adult on the end of the call to facilitate discussion or play. Adults needed to select age-appropriate activities geared towards the child's interests during video calls, and some used imaginative play and games, as well as using backgrounds and emojis on video platforms to capture children's attention. Some workers used their own children's toys to engage play through the screen – 'I had a worker who was playing Barbies with a child and so the worker had a couple of Barbies at her end…and the child had got Barbies that she was playing with…'. These methods, combined with the use of observation of the child at home, could provide social workers with information about the caregiving environment and child's experiences.

Unexpected benefits of digital communication were identified for adolescents and young people. As one social worker stated, communicating online was familiar for young people and messaging or video calling their worker was 'more their world'. Most adolescents were already maintaining relationships with peers and family members via digital methods. Family contact plans, therefore, did not change as significantly for adolescents as for younger children. For many young people, online communication with others, especially professionals, allowed them to speak more openly and could feel less intimidating.

Digital communication led to a shift in the relationship dynamics between children and people in their network. The less direct nature of online communication invited greater participation from young people. For instance, one professional talked about working with a teenager who had been invited to 'every talk and meeting' but did not want to attend in person. Once the meeting was conducted virtually, however, 'he actually joined in and shared his views'. There was also a sense that older children and young people could manage contact with adults in their network more independently, giving them a greater sense of control, for example, by walking away from the camera if uncomfortable.

The frequency of contact

Overall, digital technology was useful for increasing flexibility and frequency of contact between children and families, carers, prospective adopters and professionals. It thereby had the potential to strengthen relationships, but its use was not without challenges in terms of boundaries and potential intrusion into everyday life.

The increased use of digital communication methods changed the frequency of contact within social work relationships. In general, it was found that a little and often approach to communication was being used, which had both advantages and disadvantages. Professionals described a tendency towards more 'chit chat phone calls and messages with families', on an ad hoc, informal basis, as opposed to longer, in-person visits. The short concentration span of young children sometimes led to briefer, but more frequent interactions with their parents/future adopters – 'sometimes the calls only last five or 6 minutes as they don't want to sit'. What also perhaps led to this shift in frequency was the exhausting nature of digital communication, requiring more cognitive effort to read social cues. As one social worker stated:

> We're more tired... because I think it's just more intense seeing children online, keeping them engaged, trying to really be there for your families and, sort of, offer that support, which is very different doing it virtually.

For some, this more frequent contact worked well. Many young people preferred text exchanges or 'short bursts' of contact with their social worker, with the option to switch off their video to avoid the gaze of the worker. It generally allowed for more flexibility, particularly given that it did not involve any travel time. Where children lived with carers some distance from their prospective adopters or birth relatives, frequent contact via video could help build relationships and ease transitions. This increase in contact levels did, however, require some adaptations. Workers who chaired meetings in the professional network talked about the need to adjust the length and timing of calls to suit the needs of the child and family, as well as use digital platforms accessible to families.

A greater frequency of contact could create additional demands, for example, on foster carers' busy home lives. A lack of guidance and 'wanting to do the right thing' left some foster carers attempting more than they could manage when trying to maintain relationships between birth family members and children. High levels of digital contact required planning, time and could take an emotional toll on both carers and parents. These demands became unmanageable for carers who looked after several children, or where the child had contact with numerous family members. The supervising social worker of one carer who had children with a large extended family commented 'Initially she said that she will get the children to speak to each family member once a week, but it seems the carer may have bitten off more than she can chew as it's getting a bit much'.

In replacing most face-to-face contact between parents and their children with video calls, there were concerns raised about reduced duration of contact. For example, one carer noted 'what was 6 hours a week face-to-face is now barely an hour a week on Skype'; some parents found these time reductions unfair and distressing. One professional suggested, however, that 'digital technology should replicate the requirements [for contact] agreed to before the lockdown … Otherwise it will be hard to pull this back once lockdown is over'.

The usefulness and frequency of digital contact was, in some cases, constrained by poor relationships, perceived risk, suspicion and blurred boundaries. When using a messaging platform like WhatsApp, some workers felt they would 'almost always be on for young people', and concerns about maintaining appropriate relational boundaries led to some reluctance about using the platform. In safeguarding, some social workers expressed concern that high frequency communication was focused on risk-monitoring rather than meaningful support, which could be oppressive or intrusive. Carers who were concerned about confidentiality and intrusion into their home life appeared less keen on increased frequency of family contact. Others worried that parents took advantage of more informal arrangements, for example, getting in touch on days outside of an arranged contact plan.

Digital literacy/exclusion

Developing and maintaining relationships through digital methods required certain skills and access to resources. Digital poverty included not having access to Wi-Fi, an internet-ready device, or not being able to afford phone credit, and this was highlighted as an issue for many parents. One worker explained that 'you can't do a video call because you're mindful of not wanting to use their data'. Quality of internet access could also impact relationships. These issues were not only disruptive but upsetting for families and frustrating for professionals, putting parents at a particular disadvantage:

…(T)he group of professionals all had access to Microsoft Teams, so we could actually see each other during the conference, whereas the family members, the parents were dialled in. So, they could hear everything that was said but they couldn't actually see people.

Digital competence was an issue raised across all three studies. Some parents struggled to use digital technology, for instance one father with learning disabilities required support from his sister to engage in contact with his child via video calls. Some foster carers lacked confidence and were uncomfortable with using new technology. Additional support and guidance were generally provided to carers by professionals, however, social workers were described as 'not the most tech savvy of folk' by one manager. They had to grapple with new technology and digital platforms themselves, learning and adapting in a very short space of time. These skills then had to be passed on to carers and parents, but it was often a joint undertaking and shared learning experience:

The challenge has been the professionals' own issues with using technology. There is a long chain of people trying to get carers on Skype when the supervising social worker doesn't know how to do it themselves.

Whilst some professionals and carers struggled with new technology, many young people were already confident with these methods. In some circumstances, young people themselves became the 'tech experts', helping adults to manage technology during meetings. This altered the power dynamics and could help build young people's confidence and increase participation, for example, by chairing their own review meetings. This preference for digital was not true for all young people, however. Some lacked confidence and were not comfortable with virtual conversations.

Professionals needed to be proactive in identifying who required practical, financial and emotional support with digital methods to limit exclusion and enhance relationship building. With formal meetings, phoning in advance for a discussion with the family to explain what to expect and troubleshoot any technological issues that might prevent participation was important. However, the support provided was not always consistent. When foster carers experienced issues, they were quickly addressed by social services, for example, laptops were provided, or a boost to broadband speed was funded. Some parents were provided with smart phones or money for credit, but for others their needs were unmet. Kinship carers felt unsupported in using digital for facilitating contact arrangements:

Advice and financial and emotional support would be highly valued in our complex circumstances but has not been forthcoming in any shape or form.

Lack of sensory experience

Relationship building usually involves an element of physical and sensory interaction such as touch and eye contact. In all three studies this lack of sensory experience was perceived as a barrier to relationship building. For infants and young children starting or maintaining relationships with their birth parents or prospective adopters, lack of touch and physical handling was identified as a significant issue. Without being able to touch, there were extremely limited opportunities to build important attachment relationships and it was almost impossible for birth parents to bond with and provide comfort to their young babies who had recently been placed in care. For some children, the lack of touch could intensity feelings of grief and distress – 'it left him feeling the loss of her hugs'

and parents equally missed being able to provide physical affection and reassurance to their children:

> I need to have physical contact with my children. Times like these they need to be assured they are safe by their parents constantly. I need to be able to hug, kiss and tell them I love as much as possible.

In relationships between children and their prospective adopters, digital methods were only used as preparation for an eventual physical meeting, with acknowledgement that whilst digital communication was useful, the tactile element needed to occur 'sooner rather than later' prior to a move. Some sensory elements of the transition were still being maintained, such as soft toys smelling of the adopters being given to the child, or the adopter's perfume being introduced in the carer's home.

For social worker-service user relationships, the lack of rich sensory, social and contextual cues could cause concern regarding the ability to assess and observe children's welfare accurately. One worker noted

> ...you feel like you're maybe not getting as full a picture as you would if you'd been into a family's home. Because, you haven't been able to sit and observe some of those things...How they interact, what the room looks like, what it feels like when you walk into that house, I think we miss out on some of those subtler things.

The losses in terms of being able to read and respond to people also had implications for relationship building, managing risks and professional judgement. Professionals were unable to ensure a child was speaking openly without a parent listening or were unable to read body language. Some workers found it more difficult to provide reassurance or demonstrate empathy to service users through a screen. This led to some situations being riskier and harder to manage, for example, when in a meeting with a young person who suddenly left

> ...because I couldn't see the body language and interact as I would normally... I didn't have an opportunity to pick up on the build-up to the explosion of anger, which I would have normally if I'd been in a room.

The perception of risk, however, varied between different areas of practice. People appeared more comfortable using virtual methods in areas of practice with perceived lower risks such as fostering and adoption, than in safeguarding assessment work, where it was felt that in-person contact provided a fuller picture.

The importance of the relationship history

The starting point and quality of existing relationships was important. Digital communication appeared to be useful in sustaining existing relationships, but could be less effective in initiating new relationships, unless those involved were committed, motivated and supported to build them. Social workers reported that digital communication worked best when they had a positive prior relationship with families – '...we've been able to chat in a quite relaxed manner, but I think I've quite lucky because I know the families I work with quite well'. Their concerns were instead with the impact of digital communication on starting new relationships

> I've used Teams with one client we've got, who is at a boarding school... I hadn't actually met the client, so it's very difficult. I mean, it is a face-to-face business, social work, and doing it remotely without being able to talk to someone face-to-face is very difficult.

In managing family contact arrangements social workers sometimes needed to pro-actively support relationships, giving advice 'based on building communication, collaboration and empathy between parents and carers'. This included 'pre-meeting calls' between the adults, as well as 'giving foster carers ideas about what parents might be feeling'. Relational boundaries needed to be reset by professionals when contact shifted to digital. Some workers used new contact agreements to manage this. Consistency in professional relationships, for example, when calls were supervised by the same worker from previous face-to-face contact were reported to be helpful. Where support was not provided from professionals, particularly with new relationships, challenges could arise. Some carers reported they were 'left to it' when facilitating and supervising contact between children and their birth family. In some cases, this lack of support caused confusion, concern and anxiety for carers, particularly where relationships with parents were strained or where there was no pre-existing relationship.

Where children found face-to-face contact with parents distressing, virtual contact could go one of two ways. Either it worked better, as it 'took the emotion out of contact', or poor existing relationships led to digital contact feeling stilted and unnatural, with some children experiencing distress at having video calls in the 'safe space' of their foster home.

However, in some situations digital methods offered additional opportunities to build relationships. Some carers, who were communicating more with parents than they ever had before, valued the opportunity to see the birth parents in a different light – 'It has also enabled us to have a little window into their life, environment and lifestyle'. When there was already an established positive relationship, there were fewer concerns about home intrusion and privacy – 'It doesn't feel overly intrusive as mum and siblings know my home'.

In the context of children moving to adoption, foster carers and adoptive parents used digital methods to build successful relationships with each other from scratch, driven by commitment to the same goal of helping the child move. The levels of involvement could be intensive, and dynamics were not always straightforward in the emotionally charged context of the child's impending move

> ...sometimes this is working brilliantly, sometimes relationships remain tricky. For example, for one foster carer they found [it] all too much, whereas others are providing great information such as providing high quality crib sheets on the child.

Discussion

Drawing on three studies carried out during periods of restricted in-person contact due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this article has examined the use of digital technology in facilitating relationships between social workers and service users, children in out-of-home care and their birth families, and foster carers, adoptive parents and children in the lead up to adoption. Across the three studies, five key themes were identified.

Firstly, we found that the age and developmental stage of the child greatly influenced the extent to which they could build or maintain relationships using digital technology; the least benefits were for babies and young children and the most for teenagers. Secondly, we found that digital technology allowed greater flexibility, with communication tending to be 'little and often'. This could benefit relationships, as this way of communicating could feel more natural, and could allow social

workers, parents and adopters to learn more about children's everyday experiences and routine, but it also had disadvantages. Thirdly, we found that digital literacy and exclusion influenced how technology could be used to promote relationships. Digital exclusion appeared to have a disproportionate effect on families from poorer backgrounds, including kinship carers and parents receiving intervention from children's services. Fourthly, we found that digital communication was limited in terms of sensory experience. For babies and young children whose relationship needs are based around touch and physical proximity, digital contact could be less meaningful. For social workers conducting child welfare visits, the loss of sensory, social and contextual information could compromise their ability to assess the welfare of children. Finally, we found that the relationship history played a key role in the effectiveness of digital communication. Initiating new relationships was challenging, but video calls could assist with preparing adopters and children, or birth parents and children, to connect in real life.

Whilst lockdown restrictions have now eased and some face-to-face interactions have resumed, consideration still needs to be given to the management of digital communication, given its continued use in many areas. Our findings echo themes from the literature reviewed earlier; that digital communication has particular benefits for social work with young people and adolescents (Denby et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2012) but is a much more challenging medium for young children and babies (Ballagas et al., 2009). For teenagers, our findings suggested that digital communication could alter the dynamics of young peoples' relationships with professionals, presenting opportunities for greater participation in decisions about their care. While it is important not to overestimate young peoples' digital literacy (Livingstone & Brake, 2010), there is scope for innovation in the use of digital communication with young people, for instance, through involving young people in plans for digitalisation of services. For younger children, the format of video calls needs to be adapted to suit the age and developmental stage of the child, making calls playful and engaging to maximise children's involvement. For infants and children whose relationship needs are based around touch and physical proximity, professionals may need to prioritise in-person contact as an essential activity, especially for babies where reunification is the plan or when there are safeguarding concerns that are impossible to monitor virtually.

The benefits of digital contact in professional practice include flexibility and convenience. Digital contact can facilitate more frequent contact, creating greater connections between professionals and families (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2021; Pink et al., 2021; Simpson, 2017; Wilke et al., 2020). In relation to birth family contact, face-to-face meetings can feel too infrequent and formal to allow for a sense of family connection. Instead, children and their relatives can feel like strangers to each other (Neil, 2010). The greater frequency that digital contact affords may help surmount some of these problems and can supplement in-person contact. Digital contact should be included in the range of options that can be used to promote the family connections of children in out-of-home care (Iyer, Albakri et al., 2020), focussing on how it can support building relationships between children, carers and parents. Consideration needs to be given to what support is on offer, particularly given the additional responsibilities for carers managing digital communication between children and their birth families.

Our findings suggest that digital poverty can have profound effects on parents' and carers' ability to participate meaningfully in contact with their child, access their social worker and participate in online meetings and reviews. It is therefore vital that social workers and local authorities provide targeted support to enable service users to participate in digital communication. The findings highlighted a key role for social workers in addressing barriers to digital participation on a case-by-case basis. This could include addressing practical issues such as access to technology, but crucially, also engaging with people's concerns about digital communication and their anxieties about the

wider context in which digital contact is taking place. Local authorities could consider replacing travel grants for families to attend meetings/contact with grants for Wi-Fi/additional data.

Existing studies describe social work as an embodied, emotional and sensory practice (Ferguson, 2018; Muzicant & Peled, 2018). There has therefore been skepticism about whether genuine, meaningful communication can take place online, particularly in situations requiring empathy and emotional communication (Bayles, 2012). Our studies found that digital communication did indeed have limitations in these areas, in line with other emerging research into virtual visits in CFSW during the pandemic (Pink et al., 2020). This suggests that the role of in-person visits in social work must be maintained in most circumstances. However, Ferguson et al. (2021) found that the improvised and creative work undertaken by social workers during this time of drastic change still allowed for caring relationships to be built. This approach could therefore be utilised beyond the pandemic through hybrid communication (Pink et al., 2021). Our studies reflect this, especially in the development and maintenance of relationships for children in adoption or foster placements.

An interesting finding from our studies was that the apparent drawbacks of digital communication could in fact be advantageous in some circumstances. The very fact that digital encounters were less direct and emotional transfer less immediate could prove useful for some emotionally intense situations, for example, when working with young people who find it hard to share their feelings with professionals. The fact that digital calls could be less emotionally charged was also helpful for some children and young peoples' contact with their birth parents, suggesting this could be an intermediate option for those children and young people who want to sustain a connection with their parents without the intensity of in-person meetings.

There is a lack of research into the role of digitally mediated contact in introducing children to their adoptive parents. Addressing this gap in the literature, our findings suggest that there are benefits of digital contact for children's transition to adoption. Video calls can create a sense of familiarity and ease between children and their adoptive parents, gradually paving the way for physical contact and hands-on care. This use of video calls may be particularly advantageous for inter-country adoption or where children are planning to move long distances, though in addition to, rather than instead of, face-to-face contact.

Strengths and limitations

The three studies outlined in this article capture the impact of digitally mediated communication on relationships in CFSW. Strengths of the study are that the experiences of professionals, foster carers, kinship carers, adoptive parents and birth parents have all been captured, allowing the topic to be examined from multiple perspectives. The data were collected rapidly as the issues around using digital technology unfolded, therefore participants could describe experiences that were both pressing and current in their lives. This has brought the opportunities and drawbacks of digitally mediated communication into sharp relief. This has allowed us to draw out the implications of digital communication for CFSW and lessons for future practice.

In terms of the study limitations, the three projects were undertaken at a time of unprecedented change in CFSW during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this, the findings may not reflect best or current practice, which has since continued to evolve. It is possible that there will be additional innovations, possibilities and challenges through future periods of social distancing. The perspectives of children and young people were not directly sought in this study, and whilst some more recent international studies have gathered children's views on the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns (Haffejee & Levine, 2020; Montserrat et al., 2021), further research on children's perspectives of digital contact is warranted, as also highlighted in the recent rapid review by Iyer, Albakri et al. (2020).

Conclusion: Relationship-based practice and digital communication

Social work is an inherent relationship-based profession (Ruch et al., 2018). A distinctive aspect of relationship-based social work is its engagement with service users' internal worlds (sense of self, emotions and identity) and external worlds (housing, finance, access to internet etc.) (Schofield, 1998). For this reason, the switch to digital communication during the pandemic was not just a technical or bureaucratic challenge. Social workers needed to engage with service users' inner worlds, such as their anxieties about doing things differently, their feelings about not being able to have in-person contact with their children, and children's feelings about not being able to see their parents face-to-face, as well as their outer worlds, including practical issues such as access to the internet and the functionality of video calls. The findings presented in this paper suggest that digital communication is most effective when both the inner and outer worlds of those involved are considered.

ORCID iDs

Ruth Copson   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4456-8533
Elsbeth Neil   https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5655-7498
Pernille Sorensen   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8751-4500

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