

IT'S ABOUT US

100 CHILDREN AGED 7-18 ON CONTACT SESSIONS
IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM



CHANGE FACTORY

CONTENTS

About the qualitative survey

Changefactory Knowledge Centre

Knowledge directly from children

Part 1 The best interests of the child

Part 2 To speak freely

Part 3 Privacy

Part 4 Information

Part 5 Reunification

Children have rights

Today's challenges

National changes are required

Method in the survey

Changefactory Knowledge Centre

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The photos are of participants from the survey

T H A N K Y O U

Dear kind, important, brave, wise you who've chosen to participate in this survey.

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for sharing your experiences and providing your hard-earned advice to Norway. You know what it's like to have contact sessions with your biological parents and what it takes to feel safe enough to talk about what's important about contact sessions. You know how contact sessions need to be decided for it to be right for you and how important it is that the right contact session decisions are made. Norway needs this knowledge.

We believe and hope that Norway will listen to your experiences and take your advice seriously so that the right contact session decisions in the Child Protection System are made for as many children as possible.

Yours sincerely, Changefactory Knowledge Centre

THANK YOU FROM OUR HEARTS





OCEAN PARK
JR. HIGH
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ABOUT THE QUALITATIVE SURVEY

This survey was conducted in 2020.

Background

The Supreme Court of Norway and the EHCR have emphasised that the overriding objective of contact sessions is to facilitate reunification. Contact sessions must be established in a way where the bonds between children and the parents, which the children has moved away from, can be strengthened and developed. No child have submitted complaints to the European Court of Human Rights about contact sessions. There are very few studies looking at what children themselves think about contact sessions.

Objective

What do children think the goal of contact sessions with their parents should be and how do they think contact sessions should be decided.

Method

In order to collect, systematise and convey the summarised experiences and advice from children, we used a participatory and practice-oriented method - the Change method - which was developed in close collaboration with children and youths. The method is based on the research method Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) and is described in further detail at the end of this report.

Participants

100 children between the ages of 7 and 18 participated. The average age was 13 years. We spoke with 20 of the children twice.

98 of the 100 children have had contact sessions. Few of the children who participated in the survey have moved back to their biological families.

The children who participated in the survey lived in Tromsø, Storfjord, Kautokeino, Midtre Namdal, Trondheim, Molde, Hustadvika, Sarpsborg, Sandefjord, Sandnes, Strand, Time, Stavanger, Øvre Eiker, Midt-Telemark, Vest-Telemark, Nordstrand, Bærum, Lillestrøm, Lørenskog and Kristiansand.

Children were invited to participate through Changefactory contacting the leaders in the services working directly with or dealing with children who've had contact sessions. The services were asked to invite children from different age groups and with different experiences. Child Welfare Services from across the country contributed, as well as the Norwegian Foster Home Association (Norsk fosterhemsforening) in Finnmark and the CRUX Foundation.

The main themes of the survey:

- Deciding on contact sessions
- Speaking honestly and explaining what's most important about contact sessions
- Privacy and sharing of information
- Safe contact sessions
- Information about contact sessions
- Objectives for contact sessions
- Reunification

Findings from the survey

60% haven't had a say in deciding how often there would be contact sessions

60% haven't had a say in deciding how long the contact sessions would be

55% haven't had a say in deciding where contact sessions would be

65% haven't had a say in deciding what they'd do during contact sessions

66% haven't had a say in deciding if another adult should be there

62% haven't been able to talk honestly about contact sessions

74% haven't been told who the Child Protection System would share information with

62% haven't received enough information for contact sessions to feel safe

this
is about
my life

1 the best interests of the child

Knowledge from children about



Experiences

Children have different objectives for contact sessions

Summarised experiences

- to not completely lose contact with their parents after children have been moved
- that children themselves have to want to have contact sessions for there to be a point in having them
- to see where they come from and know who their family is
- to get to know their parents and learn something about them
- to visit their biological parents or to meet their families occasionally
- to talk a bit about what they've been doing and ask each other how they've been

QUOTES:

The objective should perhaps be to visit your parents occasionally and to not completely lose all contact with them.

I want them to ask the child what their objectives for contact sessions are and why they want them.

Meet the family and to hear about how they are and tell them about school if you go to school and stuff. Maybe get to know each other again.

Maybe to meet your parents and family, to get to know them and to stay in touch. If you don't have the opportunity to meet them you might never get to know one another.

During contact sessions, we meet our parents again and that's nice, but there can also be some pressure if someone doesn't want it.

You get to hear about how they are doing and talk a bit about what you've been doing.

Children have different wishes

Summarised experiences

- longer contact sessions
- shorter contact sessions
- contact sessions at biological parents' homes
- contact sessions at foster parents' homes
- contact sessions in a public place
- contact sessions in a private place
- to not bring other adults
- to bring someone from the Child Protection System
- to bring a different person the child already knows and feels safe with
- to eat or drink something and talk
- to do activities together
- to meet their biological parents
- to meet siblings, grandparents, or other family members

QUOTES

I would prefer someone from the Child Protection System to be there. Mum tends to come on time then. The woman from the Child Protection System is good at reminding my mum about contact sessions and it's a little nicer when she is there with us.

I don't want an adult from the Child Protection System to be there during contact sessions. I feel safer without them. I feel safe with my mum. It's easier for us to talk when there isn't anyone else there.

With my dad I prefer for someone else to be there. We don't get along that well. We don't really have a lot in common. We're very different.

I want to meet my dad alone. When my siblings came, I didn't really have a chance to speak properly with my dad.

It felt safer when my siblings came. Contact sessions were fun then. I don't get to have contact sessions together with them anymore, it's sad.

I don't like having contact sessions at the café where I used to live, it can be a bit embarrassing to meet people you know when you have contact sessions.

Children who had a say in decisions

Summarised experiences

What children have had a say in deciding:

- how long contact sessions would be
- how often they would have contact sessions
- who would be there
- what they would do
- where it would be
- when it would be

What it's been like for children when they've had a say in decisions:

- children have felt better inside
- they've felt happier and felt important and useful
- they've felt more valuable
- other things in life have also gotten better for them
- they haven't had to do things they didn't want to
- they've felt safer
- they haven't needed to be scared that something they don't want to happen will happen
- they've found that they've regained some of the control they lost when they were moved
- it's felt good to have a say in deciding important things about contact sessions
- contact sessions have become better for the children
- they've trusted the Child Protection System a bit more
- it's become easier to talk to the Child Protection System about things that are bad, painful or difficult

QUOTES

I think it's great that I have a say in decisions. I feel like I'm the main person and that feels good. After all, it's about my life.

If they ask in meetings if I want to meet them, I've said no and they've listened. Then I'm calm and I feel safer.

It's good that I get to decide who's coming. I'm more prepared and know that I'll feel safe with the people who're coming. I don't have to dread it.

It's good, because you don't have to do something you don't want to. I feel relieved when I have a say in decisions. Because my dad does such stupid things that I just don't want to. I told the Child Protection System. I don't want to meet him.

My parents want more contact sessions. But I've told the Child Protection System absolutely not. I'd go crazy if I had to see them even more. Luckily, the Child Protection System listens to me so I don't have to meet them more often.

I feel important when I have a say in decisions. My life feels better.

I trust Child Protection System more when I have a say in decisions. Talking to them feels safer because I know that they'll listen to what I say and do something about it.

Children who got to decide too little

Summarised experiences

Reasons given to children about why they couldn't have a say in decisions:

- they're too young to have a say in decisions
- they have to wait until they're older, then they can decide more

What it's been like for children when they haven't had enough of a say in decisions

- they've become sad, angry or uneasy
- children have felt internal chaos
- they've gotten used to adults making decisions without them
- they've given up and stopped telling the Child Protection System what they think
- contact sessions have felt like something children are forced to do
- it's been hard to say no to contact sessions when children don't want to go
- they feel bad when they've said no to contact sessions and gone after all
- they haven't felt safe with their biological parents and contact sessions have made it more unsafe
- they've felt worthless and it's felt hopeless
- they've felt that they're just waiting to become old enough to make decisions about contact sessions

QUOTES

They say "We make the decisions, you're a child and you can make your own decisions when you turn 16." I feel frustrated because they don't understand shit and I actually know a lot, even if I'm 13.

I don't want to see my mum. It isn't safe and we would just start arguing. When I told them, the Child Protection System said "Are you completely sure? It's your mum and she's entitled to see you, so we can't stop contact sessions completely." I didn't bother making a fuss about it anymore, so I still have contact sessions with her. But it doesn't feel good at all.

I don't get to decide anything because of my age. I notice that I'm not taken seriously because of my age. They've told me that when you're 15 you can have a say about it. So I'm really looking forward to turning 15.

I find it hard to set boundaries now. Because I've never been listened to when I've tried to set boundaries earlier in my life. I didn't want to see my dad, but they didn't listen. So I've gotten used to doing things that aren't good for me.

It's felt like shit not being able to decide whether I should meet my mum more often. In a way, I've learned not to have my mum in my life. I have a little brother now too, who lives with my mum. It isn't exactly fun being used to not spending time with her.

I don't want to meet my mum, just my dad. The Child Protection System says that it has to be equal, so I have to meet mum as well. So because I want to see a person I love, I also have to meet someone I don't love.

It feels like a use of force when we have to have contact sessions with parents we're afraid of. It's scary. The Child Protection System doesn't understand how scary it is to be sent to contact sessions.

It's stupid that I didn't have a say in decisions. They're our parents, so if we don't have a say in decisions then there's no point in deciding anything at all. It isn't the Child Protection Systems' parents, it isn't happening to them.

Advice

We all have to have a say in decisions

We've all been asked what we want to have say on in contact session decisions. The question was "What decisions about contact sessions do children your age have to have a say in?" Those of us who are 7 years old gave the same answers as those of us who are 18 years old. We want to have as much of a say in decisions as each other and about the same things regarding contact sessions, so that it becomes safe for us.

We're the ones having contact sessions and we have to have a say in decisions for it to be safe. The adults can't decide what's best for us or how contact sessions will be without us. We have to have a say in decisions so that we can feel like we matter in our own lives.

We're the ones who have to live with the decisions that are made. We have to have a say in deciding whether we want to meet them and how the contact sessions will be. That's the only way contact sessions can feel both right and safe for us.

This is what we have to have a say in deciding

Whether we want to have contact sessions

We have to have a say in deciding whether or not there will be any contact sessions. We're different, so you'll never know or guess what'll be best without asking us. We have to have the opportunity to say what we want, regardless of whether or not we want to meet our biological parents and whatever the reason is.

Who we have contact sessions with

We have to have a say in deciding who we'll have contact sessions with. We have different relationships with different people. Our biological parents might not be the people who're the most important for us to meet. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, family friends or other adults can be the most important for us to have contact with.

Who should be there during contact sessions

We have to have a say in deciding whether or not there will be anyone else there during contact sessions. Family friends, relatives or other people can't just suddenly turn up. If that happens, contact sessions can suddenly feel very unsafe. If our biological parents want someone else to be there, we have to be asked first.

How often we should have contact sessions

We have to have a say in deciding how often we're going to meet our biological parents. When a decision involves more contact sessions than we want, we can end up feeling very tired or unsafe, have nightmares and worry a lot. It can often affect how we do at school and how we are with friends. If a decision involves less contact sessions than we want, we might feel very sad, angry and spend a lot of our time thinking and worrying about our biological parents. Not getting to see the people you love, or to only see them a few times a year hurts.

How long contact sessions should last

We have to have a say in deciding how long contact sessions should last. We know best how long it feels OK to spend with our parents and when it's too long. If contact sessions last longer than we want, we might feel tired and get bored during the contact session. If it's too short, then we might feel sad because we actually wanted to stay longer and it could be a long time until next time.

Whether it should be supervised

We have to have a say in deciding whether or not contact sessions should be supervised. You need to ask us what will be safe. Supervision can be important for making it OK for us to meet our biological parents, but it can also make it feel unsafe and bad. We might feel like we're under surveillance. Supervised contact sessions when we don't want it might make us not want to have any contact sessions. When decisions that we don't agree with are made, it can determine how contact sessions will be.

Who can supervise

If contact sessions have to be supervised, we have to have a say in who it can be supervised by. It has to be an adult we feel safe with. If we don't have a person we feel safe with, it could be an adult from the Child Protection System. We need to get to know the person and feel safe with them before the contact session. The Child Protection System needs to ask us in good time beforehand what we think about the person and whether we want them to be there during contact sessions.

Where we'll be

We have to have a say in deciding where contact sessions will be, so that it's safe and enjoyable where we're meeting. We often know the answer to this question. The types of places that feel safe for us are often different. This is why the Child Protection System has to ask each and every one of us where we feel safe and where we feel unsafe. We might have bad memories from some places or feel unsafe in others. They need to ask us, often. Where contact sessions will be isn't something that should be decided for a long period at a time.

What we'll do during contact sessions

We have to have a say in deciding what we'll do during contact sessions. This is important for the contact sessions to be enjoyable. We won't want to go if we have to do something we don't want to do. It becomes boring and we're unable to look forward to contact sessions. We might get fed up, want to go home sooner or eventually no longer want any contact sessions.

When contact sessions should be

They have to fit into our life for us to want to go to them. This is why it's important that we have a say in deciding when contact sessions will be. It's hard when contact sessions are scheduled for days when we actually want to be somewhere else. We have to be able to say when we want to, and they need to fit around school, friends, leisure activities and other things. Sometimes we might not want to have contact sessions on a specific day or week because there're so many other things happening. Then we need to be able to move it to a different day.

Let our answers be important

Ask us if we want to have contact sessions, who we want to have contact sessions with, how often we want contact sessions, what we want the duration of the contact sessions to be, whether we want supervised contact sessions, who we may want the supervisor to be, where we want to go, what we want to do when we have contact sessions and when contact sessions are convenient for us.

Listen to what we say and take our answers seriously, regardless of how old we are. Ask us alone or when we're with an adult we feel safe with so that we can answer honestly. Ask openly without putting pressure on us. Don't have any expectations about what we might say.

Always ask us why if you don't understand our answer. There are usually very good reasons why we feel the way we do. You need to always understand fully before you make a decision. It might be a very important decision. You can't make a decision if we have not been able to talk safely.

Check with us regularly

You need to check with us regularly to see what we think about contact sessions. What we think about the duration and the frequency. It's weird having to decide how much we want to see our biological parents for a full year. Things can happen that make us want more or fewer contact sessions. What makes contact sessions feel safe can change a lot. We need to have the opportunity to change our minds. The Child Protection System needs to ask us regularly so that we can change it if we want to.

We are children and a lot happens in our lives in a short period of time. That's why plans can't last for a long period of time. What feels safe and right to us might vary in different periods. It can become scary if a fixed time is scheduled for a long period of time. Something might happen and things might need to change for us to feel safe. If we change our minds, you need to be curious and ask us why. There are always good reasons why.

Knowledge from children about

2

speaking
freely



Experiences

62% haven't been able to speak honestly about what's important to them about contact sessions

Children who were able to speak honestly

Summarised experiences

Why children have been able to speak honestly:

- they felt safe with the adult in the Child Protection System
- the adult in the Child Protection System felt kind
- they've felt like they could trust the adult
- they've had a say in decisions about contact sessions
- they've said when they've become so scared of having contact sessions and have wanted put a stop to them
- because they're used to speaking their minds regardless of whether they feel safe around the person they're speaking with

QUOTES

I felt that I could trust her. She was much more open and didn't need everything to be on her terms.

I have someone who always discusses things with me before making decisions. And she always asks if there is anything I want to add before she meets with the school, BUP (the clinic for child and youth psychiatry) and stuff. It's a lot easier for me to bring something up with her.

She knows me and knows that I sometimes do things that don't always sound OK. I know that I can call her if I need to. You can't trick children to get information. Duty doesn't override trust.

I've told them everything. They're kind. They do kind things and they look after me. She shows that she cares. That's good, and when they make decisions about contact sessions, it ends up being great.

The one I have now is really kind. I can tell from her body language when she talks. She's happy. It's difficult to say anything about my days with mum when their body language feels mean and they don't listen.

There's something different about her. She seems like she cares. She has a bit more empathy and actually wants to listen. She shows it through her body language and when I talk during meetings, I'm not just talking to a wall.

I just said it. I was fed up and when my parents denied stuff I just couldn't be bothered anymore.

Children who weren't able to speak honestly

Summarised experiences

Why children haven't been able to speak honestly:

- it hasn't felt safe enough to tell
- they haven't known who would get to know what they've told
- they haven't wanted their biological parents to know what they've said
- they've been afraid that adults would become sad and disappointed
- they've been afraid that they'd be shouted at or punished
- they haven't known if the adult from the Child Protection System actually cared
- the language and body language adults have used has felt weird or mean
- they've felt unsure about whether the Child Protection System would do anything about what they tell them
- they haven't felt like the Child Protection System takes what they say seriously
- they've been afraid that what they say might be twisted by adults

What it's been like for children when they haven't been able to speak honestly:

- painful feelings have built up inside
- it's made it hard to talk about what was important
- it's felt very scary because contact sessions have been decided all wrong

QUOTES

I'm kind of afraid of saying anything because I don't know what happens with what I say. I don't know if they believe me. And I worry that they could suddenly do things and make decisions that would create more drama. Because that wasn't exactly what I meant. That's why I don't really say a lot to the Child Protection System.

You know in Chinese Whispers, what ends up being said at the end can be different to what's said at the start. So the reality suddenly becomes completely different. That can happen when we tell the Child Protection System stuff too.

I don't think I'll tell the whole truth. If you have something you might want to tell but then you just aren't able to. You can't do it. You don't want your parents to know about it. It's like the words gather in a lump that's stuck. It hurts if you can't get the words out before the lump bursts.

If I'm afraid or find the person scary, then I'm scared to let them know. Then I might be hurting inside. The lump becomes larger and it gets harder and harder to say it.

I didn't tell them that mum was drinking because I was scared they'd move me back to the institution. I was scared that they wouldn't listen to what I had to say. I couldn't speak honestly with them when they didn't listen. A mother who drank felt safer than an institution.

I feel unsafe around the Child Protection System regardless. If I'm at home then the Child Protection System comes and keeps an eye on what we're doing. I don't want to talk to them anymore because they don't really listen to what we say anyway.

I'm kind of
afraid of saying
anything
because I don't
know what
happens with
what I say

Advice

Ask questions we understand

You have a responsibility to ask questions in a way that makes us understand what you mean. This also applies to the youngest of us. When you ask questions using lots of difficult words, it becomes difficult for us to understand what you're actually asking. It's good if you can ask the question differently, if we don't understand. This makes it easier for us to give you the important answers we carry inside. You need to remember to ask everyone, even if you think that some of us might already understand.

Ask open but specific questions

To find out what's important to us you need to ask questions about what we want contact sessions to be like. It's good if the questions are specific. It makes it easier to answer them. You need to ask the question in a way so that we understand that whatever we answer is ok with you. You may have many reasons to have opinions about contact sessions. Maybe you have children of your own and know how hard it can be not to see your children. Maybe you think it would be best for us to spend time with our biological parents. We might feel pressured if we can sense your opinion.

Keep asking

We often don't say everything all at once. We often don't answer honestly before we trust you and that can take time. Show us that you really want to understand what's important to us about contact sessions, and that you believe us and what we say. This is why it's important that you keep asking. When you ask us questions about contact sessions, it's important that you ask properly, don't just jump from topic to topic. This will help you understand what we mean by the things we say. Sometimes life changes and the way we think about contact sessions can change too. That's why you need to keep asking, even after we've given an honest answer. Then we'll be able to tell you what's changed.

Listen in order to understand

We can feel that you're listening when you let us talk without interrupting and when you ask questions to try to understand. Based on the questions you ask, we quickly realise whether or not you've listened properly to what we've said. It's good if you don't have your questions ready in advance, like a script, but actually listen to what we say. Sometimes the words you use might make us not talk. When you use the same words all the time, it can seem as though you're not listening properly when we're speaking.

Show us that you're paying attention

For us to be sure that you're listening, you need to show us using your entire body. If you're on your phone, taking notes or focusing on something else, we can feel unsure about whether you're listening properly. Then we might not be able to tell you what's most important to us about contact sessions.

Don't have too many opinions about the things we say, it's enough for you to listen. If you have a lot of opinions about what we say, it can feel as though we're saying the wrong thing or that you're not taking us seriously. Try not to stress or make us feel like you're in a rush. This can make us sad and feel that what we're saying isn't important enough. We might also stop talking. Give us an honest explanation if you're feeling stressed. We need to understand that it isn't about us.

Get to know us a bit

When we get to know you, it may feel safer to tell you what's important to us about contact sessions. We won't talk to just anyone about everything and it's virtually impossible to tell someone if you can't trust them. It's nice if you can just talk to us about completely normal things to get to know us a bit. Tell us about your pets if you have any or something else you care about. Be yourself and give of yourself. Try to find out what we care about and talk to us about it.

Shows us that you're deserving

Before you can think that we can tell you anything important, you need to work to make us trust you. It's easier to tell someone a secret if you know them and feel safe with them. For us to trust you, we need to feel that you're honest and that you tell us the truth. How can we tell you the truth if we can't trust you to tell us the truth?

You need to talk to us first in order to develop trust. There are many reasons for this. When you speak with us first, it feels like you're trying to cooperate with us and that makes it easier to trust you. It's also important that you talk to us before you speak to our foster parents and biological parents. We might be afraid of hurting their feelings with the things we say and this might make us not be completely honest about what we think about contact sessions. Sometimes we might not be honest because we've been told what to say at home.

You need to find out why if we don't tell you anything. Perhaps we don't feel safe around you or maybe we're afraid of what'll happen if we say something. There's always a reason if we don't tell. If we don't feel safe enough to tell you, you need to ask us if there's someone else we trust that we can talk to.

Talk to us alone

We need to know that we have the right to talk to the Child Protection System alone if we want to. Few of us dare to say that we want to talk to you on our own if adults we depend on are present when you ask. Always ask us when we're alone and tell us that we have the right to bring someone we trust when we talk to you, someone who doesn't need to be a biological parent or foster parent. Know that even if we once said yes to our biological parents or foster parents being there when we talk to you, this could change. Therefore you always have to ask again who we want to be present when we talk to you.

Let us choose where

It might be nice if you sometimes talk to us somewhere other than an office. Ask us where we would like to talk. Maybe we can go for a walk or do something fun together. This can often make it easier to tell you things than in an office. We need to feel like more than just a case to you and that you really do want to help.

Do something about what we tell you

In order for there to be any point in us telling you what's important to us about contact sessions, you need to show us that you'll actually do something about what we say. When we tell you things, we do it because we trust that you'll take it seriously and try to do something about it. If nothing happens, we might give up and stop telling you things. What's the point of telling you what's important about contact sessions then?

We know that you can help and sometimes that's the reason we can tell you. Then you need to take what we say seriously and do something about it. If things can't be the way we would like, you need to explain why. Be completely honest and don't try to hide the real reason behind big words. Many of us have heard words like lack of resources. When you use words like that, it becomes impossible for us to say anything back. Give us an honest explanation why it can't be done and work with us to find a different solution.

Knowledge from children about



3
privacy

Experiences

74% haven't been told who the Child Protection System would share information with

Children who got to stay in control

Summarised experiences

How children have gotten to stay in control:

- they've known what would happen with what they've told
- adults have asked children what information they can share and who they can share it with
- adults have explained why they've had to share information

What it's been like for children when they've gotten to stay in control

- it's felt safer
- it's been easier to tell honestly
- it's been easier to trust the adult they're speaking with
- it's become safe enough to tell more
- they've known who'll know what they tell
- they've known that nothing bad will happen
- they've had a say in deciding what's in their own best interest

QUOTES

She asked "Is it OK if I tell your mum and dad?" I said yes and was allowed to choose who could know.

I feel a lot safer when I know, even though it probably isn't terrible to share the information, I just feel safer.

I feel much safer. She lets me know before she tells anyone.

If I don't want her to share it, then she doesn't tell anyone. This is important. It's like talking to a friend and telling her a secret, then that person can't share it.

I know that this is something we can discuss and talk about. It feels safe.

He starts by saying that he won't share it. He says it before, during and after and I trust him quite a lot. It's good that he says it so often.

Children who've had control taken from them

Summarised experiences

How children have had control taken away:

- they haven't known who'll get to know what they've told or what they get to know
- they've noticed through their biological parents' behaviour that something has been shared
- biological parents have behaved strangely or not shown any reaction when children have told them something themselves
- adults have been angry with children even though the children haven't told them anything

What it's been like for children when they've had control taken away:

- they've become scared, angry, sad or unsure
- it's become very scary for children to lose control over what information will be shared
- they've felt that this is yet another thing they've lost control over
- they've stopped telling what's most important
- they won't tell anything from the start
- they've stopped talking when what they tell is shared
- they've lost trust in the Child Protection System
- it's been hard to rebuild trust

QUOTES

The times I haven't known what would happen to what I said, I felt a mixture of everything. I felt angry and sad. I wish I knew who'd get to know what I said.

People who don't know me discuss me and view me as a case. They try to give advice because they think they know what'll be the best for me. Even if they haven't met me. I don't know who they are and I don't know what they know about me.

I think they told my dad what I said. I noticed by the way he acted. He didn't react when I told him. I understood that oh, someone 's told him.

If I told them something that would hurt my mum, she was told. So I was always afraid to talk and hurt her feelings.

I don't know what dad knows. He's told me that I have said this and that and that's because he's been told by the Child Protection System. This led to conflict. You feel betrayed.

I am afraid of my mum because she's scary. It was very scary when they told her without me even knowing. What is the point of opening up if they still tell them?

It seems like they listen more to my mum and dad. They kind of have the right to decide, not me. My mum listens to the Child Protection System and does everything they say. As long as she does what they say, they let her decide and then she can also have opinions about my life. But it doesn't always end up right.

Advice

Don't share information

When we tell you something, remember that we chose you and not everyone else. Perhaps we feel safe around you, perhaps we told you to see whether we could trust you. Not sharing what we told you to others without our knowledge helps us decide whether we can trust you. Surely no adults would talk about anything bad or painful to someone if they'd shared it.

Remember that what we tell you might be secrets we've carried for a long time. We rarely tell you everything at once. Often you've only heard a small part of it. This is why you shouldn't share information without explaining why you're thinking of doing it - not to our biological family, not to the foster family, the school, BUP (the clinic for child and youth psychiatry), the GP or others in the Child Protection System.

Make an agreement with us if possible

If you think something has to be shared, you have to try to make an agreement with us first if possible. If you do that, you may be able to keep our trust. Be honest with us and tell us why you think you need to share the information. Ask us if it is OK if you share it. If we say yes, make an agreement with us about what you can share, what you can't share, who you can share it with, how you'll share it and when. We usually know best how to tell our biological parents. If you can make a thorough agreement with us about this, we'll feel more in control of our secrets and our lives.

If we say that you can't share the information, you need to find out why. You need to make sure that you understand the reason we don't want you to, before you share it. There's always a reason. In order to figure out what's in our best interests, you need to know what we think will happen if you share. What the risks are, both inside ourselves and around us.

4 information

Knowledge from children about



Experiences

62% haven't been given enough information for contact sessions to feel safe

Children who were given enough information

Summarised experiences

What children have gotten enough information about:

- where contact sessions would be
- how long contact sessions would be
- when they would be
- who would be there
- what would happen
- why contact sessions have been cancelled
- what children can have an opinion about

What it's been like for children when they've been given enough information:

- contact sessions have become safer because they've known enough about what would happen
- they've been able to speak up if any decisions about contact sessions haven't suited them
- they've been able to speak up if contact sessions have been decided in a way they didn't want
- they've felt calmer inside and less upset when they've been told why contact sessions have been cancelled
- it's become easier to tell what they want for contact sessions
- they've gained the belief that contact sessions can be right for them

QUOTES

Before contact sessions, I find out what we'll do and stuff and that's nice because I have the chance to let them know if I'd rather we did something else.

In the beginning, I thought it was my fault that dad didn't come for contact sessions, but now they've told me that it's not my fault that he doesn't come. Knowing that makes me feel calmer.

I feel happy when they tell me what we'll do, because it means that I can tell them if there's something I don't want to do and look forward to it when it's something we do want to do.

They tell me where we'll be and that means I can know that it's somewhere that's good for me. Then I can start to look forward to it.

I think it's nice when they tell me when it'll be so that I don't have to worry about contact sessions being on a day that doesn't suit me.

I don't want to find out about contact sessions just a week before. I have an agreement about this with the Child Protection System. They tell me when it'll be at just the right time.

They made an agreement with me about when they'll give information about contact sessions. They used to tell me a really long time in advance and I would think about it for nearly a whole month. This meant I couldn't think about anything else. Now I find out a week before.

Children who were given too little information

Summarised experiences

What children haven't been given enough information about:

- what parts of contact sessions children can have an opinion on
- when contact sessions would be until they've suddenly had to go to a contact session
- their biological parents and their relatives
- they've gotten to know a little, but noticed that something has been held back

What it's been like for children when they haven't been given enough information:

- it's become hard for children to give their opinions
- they've become uneasy or dreaded going
- they've become scared and uncertain
- they've started to have less trust in the Child Protection System
- they've started to think that bad things might have happened in their family
- they've lost focus to do other things

QUOTES

They don't give me all the information. That makes me wonder. It seems like they tell the people I live with more than they tell me. They tell me to go to my room and then they continue talking. They say that they're going to talk about adult stuff, but it's about me.

I feel very irritated and angry and ask a lot of questions when I'm not told enough. I get a little unfocused because I think about it a lot.

They haven't told me what I can have a say about or have opinions about. So I haven't really said anything. I haven't known I could.

I don't get to know anything about my family. They might be dead for all I know. It's been a very long time since I saw my dad and I think about how he's doing a lot.

I didn't get any information about contact sessions. "They just said that you're going to a contact session now." I didn't even know what contact sessions were.

They don't give me any information about what'll happen during contact sessions. That makes me not trust the Child Protection System. I think I would've felt safer if I knew where and when it would be.

Children who weren't told why

Summarised experiences

What children haven't been given enough information about:

- why contact sessions decisions were made the way they were
- they've noticed that adults have held back information about the reason

What it's been like for children when they weren't told why:

- they've thought about the real reason for contact sessions being decided that way
- they themselves have created painful or scary reasons to why it's been decided the way it has themselves
- they've put the blame on themselves and thought they were the problem
- they've thought that it's been their fault that contact sessions wasn't decided the way they wanted

QUOTES

The Child Protection System gave me a reason. But the reason was that I had to see my mum because she was entitled to see me. Not a good reason if you ask me.

I never got a good reason, the best reason was that it was because that was what they'd decided.

I wonder why I'm never allowed to have contact sessions with my dad. The Child Protection System hasn't told me the reason. I should get to know more because then I don't have to take so much time out of my life to wonder about it.

I've been given some explanations but the reasons are very thin. I answer back and I'm like my own lawyer. I notice that their reasons aren't very strong. I can come up with ten better reasons.

It's important to know why I can't see them more. I used to think that mum and dad didn't want to see me more often, but then I realised that they weren't allowed to see me more often.

What I think is very bad is that they won't tell me why they've decided it that way. I don't get to see my paperwork until I'm an adult so it's kept secret from me until then. I want to know, but I'm not allowed.

I'm not allowed to meet my grandparents and my aunts. I haven't been told anything but I haven't asked either. I get very sad because I miss them. I wish I knew why I'm not allowed to meet them.

I wasn't told why I'm not allowed to meet them. They just said I couldn't. That made me think a lot. I thought I was the problem and that it was my fault that I wasn't allowed to meet them.

we need
to know
how our
parents
and others
in our
family are

Advice

We need to know before contact sessions

When we get enough information about how contact sessions can be and what we can have an opinion about, it becomes easier for us to say something about it. There are many things we need to know for contact sessions to feel safe. When we're told these things, we can feel safe in knowing that contact sessions will be nice for us.

What we can have opinions about

Tell us that we have the right to have opinions about contact sessions and that you want to know what we think. We need specific examples of what we can have opinions about and what choices we have. This makes us feel important. Tell us that we can say anything about contact sessions, even that we don't want them, without our biological parents being told. That makes it easier to be honest.

Who will be there

We need to be told in advance who will be present during contact sessions. We need to know which adults and which family members will be there. Then we can prepare and it'll be easier for us to speak up if there's someone we don't want to be present.

When and where

We need to know that contact sessions will be somewhere safe, where we won't bump into someone we don't want to see. We need to be told the date and time and you need to check with us to make sure it doesn't clash with other plans. Many of us may have plans with our friends, school and leisure activities. It can really suck if it clashes with things we've looked forward to or that are important to us.

How long

It's important to know the exact time, both when it starts and when it ends. Then we'll know enough to form an opinion about the duration. This means we can let you know if we think it's too short or too long. This means we don't have to do it during the contact sessions.

What we'll do during contact sessions

Before contact sessions, we need to know what we'll be doing. We want to know this because this helps us know whether we'll do something we've wanted to do or something we haven't wanted to do.

How the others are doing

We need to be told how our biological parents are doing and how the others in the family are. Some of us only see them a few times every year and we often think about them and get worried. We also want to know when things aren't going well. We've lived with them and we know that there can be ups and downs. We feel calmer when we know.

Why contact sessions are cancelled

When contact sessions are cancelled, you need to give us as much information as possible about why there wasn't a contact session. When you only give us a little information, we feel unsure as to whether you're telling us everything and whether it's true. We might worry and wonder whether it's our fault that it didn't happen.

Give us honest explanations

It's important that you make agreements with each of us about what we want to know about contact sessions, when we need to be told and how we should be told. We have different reasons and explanations for when, how much and how we need to be told. This can be crucial for how we experience contact sessions and how we'll feel inside. You have to give us honest explanations.

We need to know why contact sessions have been the way they have. It's very important that you tell us thoroughly when something has been decided differently to what we wanted. If we don't get to know, we might stop telling you things. If we'd like to have contact sessions but you refuse or give us very few, you need to tell us why. You need to do this with humility. This helps us understand better.

5 reunification



Knowledge from children about

Experiences

Children who were reunified against their will

Summarised experiences

What it's been like for children who've been moved back against their will

- it's become very serious
- they've become very sad and had painful feelings inside when their wishes and opinions haven't been taken into account when deciding where they would live
- they've become angry or sad
- they've done bad things because of painful feelings inside
- they've lost faith that the Child Protection System can help

QUOTES

I let them know that I didn't want to live there. The next day I saw my mum's car coming up the driveway. They'd just talked to her without me knowing.

When I'd told the Child Protection System that I didn't want to move home, I got a text that said that dad will come and pick you up. It was a statement, not a question.

Even though they said I could speak to them about anything, I felt a bit like "Can I actually talk to you about anything?". No-one asked me directly whether I wanted to move home.

I remember the day when my mum picked me up because I was moving home. I got a really bad feeling inside because I didn't want to. But I couldn't tell my mum that I couldn't live with her. They'd just decided that I'd move home without asking me.

I wasn't ready to move home. They could've understood that if they'd asked me properly.

Advice

Don't move us before we've spoken safely

You have a huge responsibility if you're considering moving us back to where we used to live. Where we will live is often crucial for safety. Moving back can be incredibly scary for some of us and for others it might be something we've longed for.

You can't have already decided to move us back when you speak with us. That makes it hard for us to say what we think. We can sense that you've already made a decision and that what we say doesn't really matter.

You need to make sure that we can speak safely. That means that you need to start by giving us information about what you're thinking. And you need to tell us what you do with what we tell you. You also need to ask us if there's anyone we feel safe with and we can speak completely honestly with. We need to talk somewhere safe where adults can't pressure us. All of this can be crucial for us to speak safely.

It's important that we're the first ones you talk to about us moving back. If you speak to our biological parents first, then it might feel impossible for us to speak honestly about whether or not we want to move back. That's because they'll realise that it's us not wanting to move back if we say no. We might be scared to hurt their feelings or that they'll get upset if we say we don't want to move back. You also need to ask honest and specific questions and let us know that anything we answer is OK.

If we've had the opportunity to speak honestly and we want to move back, then we can move. But you need to continue looking out for us for a few more years. You need to continue asking us how things are going and if it feels safe to live there. Also, tell us that we can change our minds and that it's completely fine. We can be scared to say that we've changed our minds.

Don't move us if we don't want to

Where we'll live and who we'll live with is not a decision you can make over our heads. It's too important a decision for you to make without us. You should never move us back if you aren't sure we actually want to move back to where we lived before. There's a reason we were moved. Our biological parents have had their chance. Now it's our turn to choose what's best for us. It's our life.

We're the only ones who know what it's like to live with the family you want to move us back to. Our opinions have to be the most important when this decision is made. There can be many reasons why we don't want to move back. We may have bonded with our foster family and we might feel safer there. We may still feel uncertain that our biological parents have changed enough and whether it's safe to move there. We may have a life that involves friends, school and leisure activities that we would have to leave behind.

QUOTES

The Child Protection System should speak to the child who'll be moving home. If the child doesn't want to, they should be allowed to stay where they are.

I was placed in a foster home for a reason, I need to be able to decide whether or not I want to be moved back to my biological parents.

You were ditched by your parents when you were little, they didn't help when you needed them, but now they want to see you. I don't want to live with them now. It isn't easy to forgive when they've ditched you.

Many have had a bad childhood. If they don't want to return to their parents, then they shouldn't be forced to.

Family isn't always the most important thing. Even though it's family, they're not always the safest.

I might say what they want to hear and then I feel guilty if I have to tell them where I want to live in front of my parents.

When you live back home again, it's very hard to get in touch and say that you don't want to live there anymore.

You need to make absolutely sure that I want to move. You need to keep an eye out for a while afterwards to make sure things are ok. At least for a few years.

CHILDREN

HAVE

RIGHTS

UN'S CONVENTION
ON THE RIGHTS OF
THE CHILD



Children have procedural rights

under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was incorporated into Norwegian law through the Human Rights Act in 2003 and will, in the event of conflict, take precedence over provisions set down in other legislation, see. Sections 2 and 3 of the Human Rights Act. The Norwegian Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) all take precedence over other legislation. Many Norwegian special laws were written before 2003 and have therefore only been partially updated in line with the UNCRC. Nevertheless, the Norwegian special laws must be understood and interpreted in light of children's rights.

The most important aspect when it comes to the legal protection of children is that actions and decisions relating to them are done in a way that is right for the child. Therefore it's essential to ensure that the process before decisions are made is correct. Pursuant to the UNCRC, the ECHR and the Norwegian Constitution, children have four basic rights in process: in all actions that affect children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration, children have the right to express their views freely, children have the right to receive information and children's right to privacy must be safeguarded. These rights apply to all children, both as individuals and as a group, and dictate how public authorities must approach case management, decisions and rulings. The duty to safeguard these rights is triggered when performing an action that affects children, not only in legal processes.

Children's procedural rights aren't adequately incorporated in special legislation relating to children. Children aren't given enough information, they are rarely given the opportunity to speak in a way they

perceive as free and safe and their right to privacy is not adequately safeguarded. When these conditions aren't met, it becomes difficult to decide what is in the best interests of the child as set down in the UNCRC. This leads to inadequate information available in cases and decisions that are made on insufficient grounds. This poses a challenge in terms of the legal protection for both children and parents and also applies to cases where decisions about contact sessions are made.

The procedural rights must be understood and applied in relation to each other. In order to establish what's in the best interests of the child in each case, the child must have the opportunity to speak freely. In order for the child to speak freely, the child must receive appropriate and understandable information and the child's right to privacy must be safeguarded. National authorities, educational institutions and anyone working with children have a duty to know and safeguard the fundamental rights of children in process. How these rights should be applied in practice isn't well enough known.

Based on Changefactory drawing attention to children's procedural rights, an important unanimous decision was made in the Storting in May 2020: "The Storting asks the government to review children's legislation to ensure that it is in accordance with the principles set down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and children's rights to be heard, decisions being taken in the best interests of the child and children's right to privacy." This means that the Ministry of Children and Families was given the large-scale and important task of ensuring that national laws and regulations implement the fundamental rights of children in law pursuant to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

How to decide what's in the best interests of the child

The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions and decisions affecting a child. This relates to actions and decisions that both directly and indirectly affect children.

The consideration of the best interests of the child must be decisive when contact sessions are decided. To find out what is in the best interests of the child, the Child Protection System must ensure that the child has received adequate and understandable information, that the child gets to express its views freely and that the child's right to privacy is safeguarded. These are the fundamental rights of children in process, which must be met before deciding what is in the best interests of the child.

The child has a right to receive information

The child must be given the necessary information to be able to speak freely. Information must be provided in a considerate and understandable manner. This means, among other things, that the child needs to be given information about the situation and the case, the information the Child Protection System has access to, which decisions will be made and what alternative solutions exist. Information must be repeated when necessary. Throughout the process, the child must also receive new information relating to their case. The right to information is a prerequisite for children to speak freely about the decisions that will be made and is therefore crucial.

The child has a right to speak freely

All children have the right to speak freely in all situations that affect them. The child must always get to express its opinion about what it believes would be in its best interest in the situation in question. In the event that different solutions than what the child wants are chosen, the child must get to speak about what they think about that solution.

Professionals can't decide what will be in the best interest of the child without the child being given the opportunity to speak freely. This right does not require consent from parents or others with parental responsibility. General comment no. 12 on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child describes a duty to "ensure conditions for expressing views that account for the child's individual and social situation and an environment in which the child feels respected and secure when freely expressing her or his opinions".

The child's right to information and the child's right to privacy are prerequisites for the child to speak freely. The child must not be subjected to undue influence or pressure and, as far as possible, it's important to ensure that the child can speak with someone they trust and in a place where they feel safe. When something is to be decided, the child must get to speak directly to the person who'll be making the decision, if the child wants to. Alternatively, ensure that the child's views are shared in a way the child feels is safe.

The child isn't heard if the child doesn't feel it has been heard freely. Nor is it enough for children to just provide their views about contact session decisions: the child's views have to form the basis for decisions about the best interests of the child, and its views must be weighted in accordance with their age and maturity. Here, it's especially important to give weight to whether the child's views have remained the same over time. Whether the child's views are in accordance with recognised practices or the assessment of professionals can't be decisive in the weighting of the child's statements. If the child's views aren't going to be given weight, the impact on the child's development when making decisions that contradict the views of the child must be assessed, documented and justified. It must also be assessed, documented and justified whether the action and decision impacts the child so favourably that it clearly outweighs the disadvantages of acting in contradiction to the views of the child.

What's in the best interests of the child must be decided based on a specific assessment of the needs of the child in question. The child must get to express its opinions about its needs, and the child's statements must, as far as possible, be of decisive importance. The child must be heard on all considerations that will be included in the specific assessment of the best interests of the child.

The child has a right to privacy

Legally speaking, a child and their parents are not the same person. Legislation that describes the duty of confidentiality generally also applies to the relationship between children and parents. Children's right to privacy has however ended up being overshadowed in different regulations. In many situations, the parents' right to information about the child will be considered without taking the child's right to privacy into account. In the same way as for adults, safety in relation to the processing of sensitive information is essential for children's trust. Without trust, the child's right to speak freely cannot be fully safeguarded.

Children with rights as a party can consent to the sharing of information. Children without rights as a party have the right to express their views before anything the child has said or done is shared with parents or other professionals. The child has to know what can happen with what the child says before a conversation. If any of what the child says is shared with parents or professionals, the child must be informed. If the child doesn't want information about them to be shared, there needs to be a legal basis for sharing. If there is a legal basis and something the child has said or done is going to be shared, the child must be informed before anything is shared. Regardless of age, the child must get to express their views before the decision to share information is made. This also applies to principle of necessity cases, as long as it is possible to obtain the view of the child.



TODAY'S MAJOR CHALLENGES

Children have different objectives for contact sessions

The Supreme Court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) emphasise that the overall objective of contact sessions must be to facilitate reunification between children and biological parents. Contact sessions also have an intrinsic value independent from the prospects of reunification, but it mustn't expose children to undue hardship. The courts find that sufficient contact sessions must be established so that the bonds between parents and children can be strengthened and developed.

Different children have different views on what the objective of contact sessions should be for them specifically. However, none of the children in this report have said that their objective for contact sessions should be reunification or returning. Knowledge directly from children shows that it feels scary if Norway has reunification as the objective for contact sessions for all children. More frequent contact sessions when the child would prefer fewer contact sessions can also weaken the bonds between children and parents. Fewer contact sessions when the child wants more can have the same result. In future decisions on contact sessions, Norway needs to be conscious of this knowledge from children.

Children don't get to honestly express their wishes

Many children aren't given enough information to honestly express their wishes about contact sessions. They don't know about the possibilities or what they're allowed to have an opinion about. Many children don't know what happens with the information they share with the Child Protection System. When discussing contact sessions, it can be difficult to speak honestly when they don't know whether their biological or foster parents will get to know what they say.

When children lack information and don't know what the Child Protection System does with the information they share, they often don't feel safe enough to share their wishes. When the Child Protection System doesn't have this information, the decisions made about contact sessions can become completely wrong. Children point to the same challenges when contact session decisions are made by committees and courts. Children who want to see their parents more might end up seeing them less and children who don't want to see their parents might end up having to meet them against their will. It's difficult to make contact session decisions that are right for children under the current Child Welfare Act and practices.

Children don't have a say in decisions

Children are all different and contact sessions can't be decided in the same way for all children. For many children, the contact session decisions have been different from what they wanted. For contact sessions to be decided correctly, the most important thing is that children get to honestly express their wishes and that what they say, as far as it goes, is of decisive importance. When children disagree with the decisions or their wishes aren't taken seriously, some end up feeling coerced into contact sessions. To have to meet parents more or less or against their will can become a serious issue in the child's life.

When children don't have a say in decisions about contact sessions, they rarely feel that contact sessions are safe or right. At the same time, the child often loses trust in the Child Protection System, which may contribute to less informed decision-making in the future. Children also want to have a say in deciding whether they'll have contact sessions with siblings or others they're close to.

NATIONAL CHANGES ARE NEEDED

The experiences and advice from the children who participated in this survey are serious. Their knowledge is especially serious in light of recent developments in the field of child protection in both the Supreme Court and the European Court of Human Rights. If Norway wants to take this new knowledge seriously, there needs to be some fundamental changes. Here, the Ministry of Children and Families will have a special responsibility to ensure that the provisions on contact sessions in the new Child Welfare Act are revised to include knowledge obtained directly from children and the fundamental rights of children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are supportive of contact session rules being a separate chapter in the new Child Welfare Act because contact session decisions are incredibly important for the children they relate to.

What the children find important needs to be the focus. Decisions about contact sessions that are in the best interests of the child can't be made without the child having had the opportunity to speak freely. The best interests of the child must be based on a specific assessment of the needs of the child in question, in which the rights of the child in process are safeguarded. An important unanimous decision was made in the Storting in May 2020:

"The Storting asks the government to ensure that the proposals for the new Child Welfare Act and Children's Act are in line with the principles set down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to be given information, be heard, for decisions to be in the best interests of the child and children's right to privacy."

Here is some specific input for the new Child Welfare Act:

The New Child Welfare Act must safeguard children's procedural rights

In order to decide on contact sessions, the Child Welfare Service and national decision-making bodies must ensure that they have a sufficiently broad and informed basis for making decisions. This means that the child has to be given enough and understandable information before expressing an opinion, and the child must be allowed to speak freely and safely without being influenced or pressured. Children may find it difficult to speak safely to the Child Protection System and in legal processes. They don't know whether the things they share will be shared with their biological parents or other adults. Therefore, it's important to safeguard children's right to privacy so that children feel safe and retain their trust in the Child Protection System. In order to ensure that contact session decisions are made on a correct, factual basis and in the best interests of the child, where the child gets to express their views, the case needs to be examined and documented thoroughly.

The new Child Welfare Act must ensure specific contact session assessments

This qualitative survey clearly shows that different children have different needs and wishes about contact sessions. Therefore, it's important to ensure that contact sessions are decided on a case-by-case basis, which has also been stressed by the Supreme Court. Neither the Supreme Court nor the ECHR state that children need to attend a specific number of contact sessions each year. Decision-making bodies therefore have broad discretion when it comes to deciding on contact sessions. The current Child Welfare Act states that decisive emphasis must be placed on making contact session decisions that are in the best interests of the child.

In particular, we support the Ministry of Children and Families' proposal for the new child's best interest provision, which specifies that the decision must also be made based on a "concrete assessment of the needs of each specific child". It has also been suggested that this wording be included in the provision on the assessment of contact sessions. These clarifications are important and correspond with knowledge obtained from the children in this report.

For children, it's crucial that contact sessions aren't decided based on general or unilateral assessments because all children are different and have different wishes. Here, the Child Protection System, judicial bodies and national decision-making bodies will have a particular responsibility for ensuring that children can speak freely and safely. Overall, this will help ensure that contact session decisions are assessed for each specific child.

Children's opinions must be emphasised to safeguard their human dignity

It's not enough for children to express their views about contact session decisions. Their opinions must be listened to and emphasised, regardless of their age. Children's right to express their opinion helps uphold their human dignity. Kirsten Sandberg writes that:

In addition to their right to express their opinion in itself upholds children's human dignity, children's statements may also be of significant importance to the information available in a case. Safeguarding this right will therefore be crucial to the perspective of the child in its real sense, which means viewing the circumstances through the eyes of the child. (Sandberg, Kirsten, "Barns rett til å bli hørt" i Barnekonvensjonen ("Children's right to be heard" in the Convention on the Rights of the Child). Barns rettigheter i Norge (Children's rights in Norway), Njål Høstmælingen, Elin Saga Kjørholt and Kirsten Sandberg (ed.) 2nd edition (Oslo 2012), p. 90-118).

Both younger and older children in the survey point to cooperation as being important to them. Getting to participate in decision-making processes and being heard in cases that are important to them helps safeguard children's autonomy and sense of human dignity. The children who've had a say in deciding the extent of contact sessions have felt important, useful and valuable. Not having to do something they didn't want to do gave them a sense of safety. Children explain that they've felt less worried and scared that something they didn't want to happen would happen.

The new Child Welfare Act must safeguard children's right to contact sessions with siblings and others the child is close to.

Knowledge obtained directly from children shows that most children want to have contact sessions with siblings or others they are close to and feel safe with. Biological parents aren't always the most important for children to meet. They want to have the opportunity to have a say in deciding who to have contact sessions with because they already know who are important to them. The Ministry of Children and Families' suggestion that children should also have the right to contact sessions with siblings in the new Child Welfare Act matches the knowledge from children. At the same time, we also believe that the contact sessions provisions should recommend that the child should have the right to contact sessions with others they're close to if the child wishes it.

Most of the children request a more flexible contact session arrangement, where there's no need for committee or court proceedings to decide on contact sessions with siblings or others who are important to them. If such contact sessions could be decided by the Head of the local Child Welfare Service, it would lead to a smoother and less formal process for children. The child's life and who they want to have contact sessions with can change more quickly than the county social welfare board. We believe that this is in accordance with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendations. We refer to the following statement in general comment no. 14, paragraph 84: *In the best-interests assessment, one has to consider that the capacities of the child will evolve. Decision-makers should therefore consider measures that can be revised or adjusted accordingly, instead of making definitive and irreversible decisions.* We therefore propose that the county social welfare board, during the initial consideration, have the opportunity to delegate decision-making authority to the local authority on these matters if the child wishes it.



METHOD IN THE SURVEY

Conducting the survey

The children were given information about why the survey was being conducted, that what they said would be anonymous and that they could choose how much or how little they wanted to say, as well as what we would use their answers for. They were also told that they could change their minds and withdraw from the survey if they wanted to. Consent was obtained from guardians in accordance with current regulations.

The sessions with the children were held individually or together with other children and were conducted around the country. The sessions took place in work rooms in libraries, hotel meeting rooms, cafés, spaces borrowed from the local authority and the Changefactory offices in the different regions. The researchers tried to find spaces in the children's communities, in a room that felt safe for the children.

Based on knowledge from children, the researchers started by taking the time to make the children feel safe about participating. This was achieved through researchers and children getting to know each other a bit by playing games and chatting.

For reasons of privacy and each individual participant, researchers worked to help ensure that a child's story or family didn't become the focus in their answers. The focus was on their experiences with the systems and giving advice to these systems.

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide and methodological tools when meeting with the children. One-on-one meetings were done as in-depth interviews. The method tools were connected with different parts of the interview guide. Which method tools to use was considered on a session-by-session basis. The researchers were flexible and occasionally made changes to the method in order to make adjustments for each group and each child they spoke with. These adjustments were made without diverging far from the starting point.

Main themes and issues:

- How much children were allowed to have a say in decisions about contact sessions and what decisions they feel children their age should have a say in deciding
- To what extent the children have been able to speak honestly about important topics with adults in the Child Protection System and what it takes for them to be able to speak honestly
- The children's thoughts about the things they tell
- What do you need to know in order for contact sessions to feel safe?
- What do children need to know before contact sessions?
- The children's thoughts about what the objectives of contact sessions could be
- How should the Child Protection System make decisions about children moving back
- What advice on contact sessions do the children have for the Child Protection System?

In-depth questions were asked about the experiences and advice. Participants were informed that everything that was written down would be anonymised. After the sessions, the researchers were available to the participants in order to provide support and answer questions.

After 100 children had contributed to the qualitative survey, the researchers spoke to 20 of the children one more time. This was to ensure additional in-depth answers to what remained as summarised experiences and advice from the first round. This also ensured that the researchers hadn't misinterpreted or misunderstood the material they'd collected.

Examples of methodology tools used in groups:

Feeling-photos: The children took a photo of what it felt like when they had a say in decisions and what it felt like when they didn't have a say in decisions.

Splitting paper in two: The children split a sheet of paper in two and wrote or drew what felt good and what didn't feel good when spending time with their parents. After the assignment, they gave advice about what they would have liked to be different.

Advice to Erna: A picture of Prime Minister Erna Solberg where she'd been turned into a cardboard cut-out was used here. The children got to stick notes with advice onto the Erna figure about how decisions about contact sessions should be made.

Recipe for contact sessions: The children created a recipe for how contact sessions should be - drawings and stickers were used to highlight what was most important

Raising fingers: Children were asked what it felt like inside when they've spent time with their parents and raised one to ten fingers.

Smiley: The children were asked how much they'd had a say in decisions about contact sessions and how they'd been allowed to express their opinion, and used smiley stickers to explain how much they agreed.

In a row: The children were presented with different statements about how much information they'd been given about contact sessions and moved to the middle, right or left in a row depending on how much they agreed with the statement.

The method tools are used to initiate thoughts about the topics being raised. One important principle is that the children present pictures or posters and elaborating on why they've chosen e.g. a number or symbol or said that they agree or disagree. Researchers are trained in asking detailed questions to obtain important experiences and advice from children.

The list above includes a selection of the tools that were used. Detailed descriptions can be obtained by contacting Changefactory.

Summarising the knowledge

The material that was collected was anonymised continuously. When everything had been collected, the anonymised material was thematically sorted into a joint document. The answers that were repeated by many children, in many places throughout the country, were systematised and summarised as the main findings in the report.

Each percentage is calculated based on how many have answered the question.

The children's own explanations were used to summarise experiences and advice. The researchers who collected the knowledge, systematised the answers and counted how many of the children gave the same answers. The children's own explanations were used to summarise the knowledge. This was done without any interpretation from adults. Changefactory has made a conscious choice to use this approach, as no amount of interpretation would make the knowledge any clearer than when it comes directly from the children. By interpreting the knowledge, we risk losing the clear message from the children.

When the experiences in the report are summarised, participants in the qualitative survey and other children with experience from the same service read through the report. The children give input and feedback before the report is completed.

CHANGEFACTORY

KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

Why knowledge directly from children?

Children and young people have to feel that the school, kindergarten, support services, police and legal system are safe and useful for them. Children and young people all over Norway have experiences from meeting these systems and advice on how they can be the best possible. Authorities, professionals and students often lack this knowledge from children and young people, when frameworks and what constitutes good practice are to be determined, nationally and locally. Therefore, it must be brought in to a much greater extent and, together with other knowledge, be part of the knowledge base, in order to develop and ensure the quality of good systems for children and young people.

More than 10 years of collecting knowledge

For more than 10 years, Changefactory (CF) has systematically collected experiences and advice from children and young people about how they experience school, kindergarten, support services, the police and the legal system. In 2017, the Prime Minister opened Changefactory Knowledge Centre, to collect knowledge from children and young people about the public systems. As far as we know, there are few knowledge centres in Europe whose main purpose is to gather and disseminate knowledge directly from children and young people about the systems they are in. CF seeks collaboration with similar organisations.

Participatory and practice-oriented method

In order to collect, systematise and disseminate summarised experiences and advice from children and young people, a participatory and practice-oriented method is used. CF has called it the Changemethod. The Changemethod has been developed in close collaboration with children and young people. It greatly considers that children have the right to express their opinion, in ways that feel safe for them. The method consists of process descriptions and tools that help many diverse children and young people to participate. It's based closely on a participatory method used in action research, called Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

Safety is most important

The experiences and advice are collected directly from children and young people in sessions or interviews. The sessions are organised with an emphasis on ensuring that they are experienced as safely as possible for the children and young people who participate. The adults who facilitate are, among other things, trained by children to meet children and young people with openness and human warmth. This is based on the main findings from children about what adults have to be like, in order for children to be able to tell honestly.

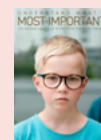
Experiences and advice are summarised

Experiences and advice from the sessions are documented in transcripts and other written and visual documentation. The data is summarised and systematised. No links are made to theory. Experiences and advice that are repeated by many children and young people in many places in the country, become the main answers. We call this knowledge directly from children.

Children and young people present

The knowledge from children is presented in reports, films, podcasts, books and online. Participants in the qualitative surveys can also be invited, as pros, in communication and professional development. The pros present knowledge directly from children to politicians, national authorities, professionals and students.

Selected publications



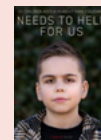
Understand what's most important

Advice from 110 children on what the Child Protection System has to do so that children will be able to tell what's most important



They think they know best

Advice from 152 children on how it has to be in residential childcare institutions for it to feel safe living there




Needs to help for us

Advice from 101 children on how family guidance has to be done so that it feels safe and helpful for children



Angry on the outside, hurting on the inside

Advice from 101 children on how to meet children who are angry and use violence



it has
to be
right
for us

CHANGE FACTORY