



Article

The Child Welfare Employees' Constructions of *Contact Visits* for Parents and Children in Public Care

Marianne Buen Sommerfeldt * and Hilde Anette Aamodt

Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, OsloMet—Oslo Metropolitan University, 0167 Oslo, Norway; haamo@oslomet.no

* Correspondence: marias@oslomet.no

Abstract: Following a care order, children and parents are entitled to contact with each other in accordance with the conditions established by the Child Welfare Tribunals. How child welfare employees understand what contact visits can be and how they can be structured in line with the best interests of the child is crucial in their decision making. This article explores the different constructions of contact visits, in terms of how employees communicate their understanding of access arrangements. This article draws on recordings of child welfare employees discussing the structuring and extent of contact between parents and children in public care. The analysis explored the material in line with Luhmann's communication theory and found that the dimensions in which the employees communicated produce the ways in which the contact visits are constructed. The ways in which the contact visits were constructed varied, and the factual dimension, temporal dimension, and social dimension were interdependent in the communication. This article demonstrates the impact of employees' communication in assessing and constructing contact visits for the access arrangements for the individual child and encourages awareness of the factors that are emphasized. This article highlights the need for discussions grounded in social work perspectives to ensure individualized access arrangements. The article contributes to rethinking understandings of how to construct contact visits, while urging critical reflection on the power of child welfare employees in determining how contact visits should be structured.

Keywords: care order; social work; access arrangements; foster children; visitation



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1. Introduction

It is a central goal for children in public care to maintain contact with their biological family; hence, decisions on child–parent contact are of crucial importance when a child moves into public care. In general, children and parents are entitled to have contact with each other in line with conditions set by the Child Welfare Tribunals ([Child Welfare Act 2021](#)). Generally, a care order is supposed to be temporary, and contact visits are means to ensure that a future reunification can be successful. For the individual child, contact visits may serve other purposes; hence, the visits must be created according to individual needs. The contact may contribute to a sense of continuity and to maintaining the child–parent attachment and may have an impact in the process of identity development of the child ([Martínez et al. 2016](#); [Sommerfeldt and Aamodt 2024](#)). Maintaining links with the birth family is valued by practitioners; however, the decisions about the frequency and organization of contact might be a source of conflict ([Atwool 2013](#)). Also, practitioners may find it difficult to know how to decide and what to emphasize when assessing the extent and organization of contact visits ([Sommerfeldt and Aamodt 2024](#)).

In Norway, when a care order is issued, the Child Welfare Tribunals must determine the access arrangements between the child and the parents ([Child Welfare Act 2021](#), § 7-2). The practices associated with contact visits after a care order in Norway have changed after criticism from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ([Alvik 2021](#)). The ECHR has criticized the low extent of contact following a care order as jeopardizing the possibility of reunification between the child and the birth parents ([NIM 2023](#)). When the Child Welfare Tribunals decide on allowing little contact between children in public care and their parents, this can have crucial and potentially irreversible consequences for the biological family ties and can make reunification difficult or even impossible ([Aamodt and Olkowska 2022](#)).

In a systematic review, [Huseby-Lie \(2023\)](#) found wide variation in children's attitudes towards birth family contact, but that many children experience a positive relationship with their parents and want more contact. She emphasizes the importance of working with the child–parent relationship and creating good contact visit experiences for children in care. [Mapp \(2002\)](#) stresses that birth family contact has an impact on the relationship skills and identity development of children in care. She suggests that family contact should be seen as a continuum with a range of opportunities to maintain and/or build relationships. [Boyle \(2017\)](#) conducted a systematic review to examine the impact of birth family contact and found that a positive outcome was more likely when the birth families and foster parents had a collaborative approach. To enhance a collaborative approach, there is a need for skilled social workers. [Martínez et al. \(2016\)](#) highlight the need for better preparation of contact visits, to ensure the quality of the interaction between the children and parents. They found that the quality influenced the child's perception of their relationship with the birth parents, and they highlight the impact of contact visits as a part of ensuring the child's development and well-being. [Lyer et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasize the need for skilled professional support to manage the complex factors involved in preparing and facilitating contact arrangements. This is in line with [García-Martín et al. \(2018\)](#) who studied the views of birth families and found that the social workers play an important role in structuring the contact visits and in involving and preparing the birth families to ensure that the arrangements enable everyday family relationships to take place. This work includes planning of the facilities for the visits. [Clapton et al. \(2022\)](#) points out that parents and children appear to be treated as passive objects rather than as active participants in organizing contact visits. They also found that practitioners lack conceptual clarity about contact visits, leading to interpretations and subsequent decisions that lack structure and consistency.

Research has also found that the parent–foster parent relationship has a great impact on the child. [Nesmith et al. \(2017\)](#) highlight the importance of the parent–foster parent relationship in the quality of the parent–child visits. They found that foster parents' recognition and involvement of the parents had a great impact on their relationship with each other which also influenced the quality of the parent–child contact. This is supported by [Chateauneuf et al. \(2018\)](#) who found that the quality of the relationship varied, and that how well and how often the contact visits took place influenced this, in addition to characteristics of the birth parents and the attitudes of the foster parents. They emphasize that this relationship influences the overall quality of the placement, and that a conflicted relationship could jeopardize the stability of the child. Furthermore, [Andersson \(2009\)](#) emphasized that the child's relationship with the foster parents is intertwined with the relationship between the birth parents and the foster parents.

Theory and research can inspire the questioning of social work practices and assessments of the individual child ([Ulvik 2002](#)). There is research on various aspects of birth family contact for children in care, but we have not found research that specifically addresses the content of contact visits or the constructions of what contact visits might be.

This article explores how child welfare employees construct contact visits, when discussing the frequency and structure of birth family contact for particular children.

2. Material and Analytical Strategies

2.1. Empirical Material

This article is part of a study that examines decisions about contact visits between parents and children in public care. The empirical material consists of recordings of child welfare employees discussing the extent and structure of contact for specific children and their parents. A total of 25 child welfare services in Norway were contacted, and 5 of these decided to participate in the project. The employees themselves recorded their discussions, while the researchers were not present, but collected the recordings afterwards. The recordings were collected in 2020 and 2021, with 45 recordings in total. Each discussion lasted around 20–120 min, and four to seven employees participated in each discussion. The recordings are transcribed, and names and places are anonymous. The employees were encouraged to record whenever they discussed contact between parents and children in care. This resulted in discussions of different cases with different backgrounds and considerations to be attended.

2.2. Analytical Strategies

Both researchers listened to the recordings individually, took notes, and transcribed and discussed them with each other. In previous analyses, we have explored how employees' express expectations when discussing contact visits (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022) and how the employees construct being a parent when the child is in public care (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2024). We have also explored understandings of culture in discussions about contact visits for minority ethnic families (Sommerfeldt and Aamodt 2024).

In this article, we analyzed how employees construct contact visits when discussing specific cases with each other. The analysis is grounded in a constructivist view of science and was in line with Luhmann's theory of communication (Luhmann 2000; Aamodt 2019). In the analysis, we have considered the communication as our object of research, that is, the communication alone, regardless of *who* is speaking and *why*. This entails that our attention is focused on the utterances as communication, and the accounts are not interpreted as related to the motives, meanings, or the backgrounds of the employees. Nor did we consider the communication as good or bad practices; we have simply analyzed the communication as a verbal utterance. While listening to the recordings repeatedly in our earlier analysis, we became interested in exploring the constructions of the contact visits. We noticed that the employees communicated in different ways about their understanding of contact visits, so we wanted to analyze this more thoroughly.

For this article, we reread the transcripts to identify constructions of contact visits throughout the material. We looked for utterances that expressed the structuring and organization of contact visits and understandings of the content of the visits. In doing so, we used Luhmann's (2000) perspectives on communication to identify how different constructions emerged in the material.

According to Luhmann (2000), all communication varies around three dimensions of meaning: the factual dimension, the temporal dimension, and the social dimension. The factual dimension is the topic of the communication, for example the case in question and the decision-making in the child welfare organization. The temporal dimension is about *when*, in the present, past, and the future. The social dimension comprises *who* and the relational aspects of the matter in question. In our analysis, we explored how the employees communicated these three dimensions, how the dimensions interrelate, and the impact of emphasizing the dimensions differently in the discussions. The three dimensions formed

our categorization of the material in which employees expressed constructions of the visits. In the results section we will present the constructions of the contact visits organized by these three dimensions.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

Sikt (the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) has recommended this project. It was a great concern of ours that the employees participated voluntarily, and we therefore had a dialogue with the heads of department in the child welfare offices about how to ensure this. Discussions were only recorded with the consent of the employees present, and the managers were aware of the importance of ensuring voluntary participation.

Anonymity was an important concern, and we asked the employees not to use names in their discussions. If the employees forgot, we anonymized names and places in the transcriptions, and the empirical material contained no identifiable, sensitive information about third parties.

3. Results

In our analysis, we found that employees' communication varied and seemed to follow different types of logic when discussing what contact visits may be. We found [Luhmann's \(2000\)](#) theoretical perspectives on communication dimensions to be a fruitful way of analyzing the material. We found that the dimension through which the employee communicated produced the ways in which the content and structure of contact visits were constructed. In the following, we will present the results of the analysis. We will then discuss how Luhmann's three dimensions may be relevant and helpful to child welfare employees in discussing and deciding on contact between parents and children in public care.

3.1. The Factual Dimension

The topics of the discussions vary, but in many of the discussions, the employees communicate matters related to the case proceedings. For example, employees communicate the importance of their parent-child observations as a part of their professional work with this family. Thus, facilitating situations in which observations could be conducted emerged as central in these discussions. In the following excerpt, the contact visit is constructed as a situation for observing and documenting the interaction as a part of the case proceeding. In this excerpt the employees discuss a mother's ability to activate her son when they are together:

A: The foster parents need to be present during the visit, because of the mothers' inability to activate this boy. She has said herself that she is not interested in playing with cars and those sorts of things.

B: The visits are every second month? Yes? So, they meet quite often.

C: We were thinking about moving the visits to our offices, where they can do things together and we may easily participate and observe.

A: Yes, and we need to make sure that she doesn't say things that are contrary to the placement, like small hints as "you might move back home someday".

B: If they are to meet more often, she will need help to interact with and activate the boy. A specific activity that will fill the amount of time.

In this excerpt, the factual dimension emerges as communication about the case proceedings, and case management seems to produce the way the contact visit is constructed. They communicate observations about the mother's ability to play with her son and the

need to observe and to make sure that she does not say things to her son that go against the child welfare decisions. The contact visits are constructed as arenas for conducting observations that will be documented regarding further case proceedings. The construction of the visits focuses on direct interaction, which is consistent with a central concern in this case: the mother's inabilities in parent-child interactions. The factual dimension produces how the employees talk about structuring the visits, and when the mother fails to meet the expectations to activate her son, the consequence is that the child welfare service keeps the annual amount of contact as it is, instead of increasing the annual amount. The factual dimension produces communication on the mother-son relationship in the social dimension, and on a suitable time frame for observations in the temporal dimension.

In another discussion, the factual dimension emerges as predisposing the character of the contact when visiting the biological parents:

A: The parents share bed with one child each when they come visit at home. So, I think that they need some guidance on how things should be. So that they maintain a good relationship, but still, don't go back to old habits.

B: I think it was quite difficult in the last conversation when I realized that the youngest girl sleeps in a double bed with the father, and the oldest with the mother, and that they had no objections to this. I felt I had to pull myself together a bit in how I commented on this and what I said. But I think that now that we have the custody, we will tell them that this is not okay. A seven-year-old girl. . .

The factual dimension of the communication, i.e., the topic of the discussion, is how the issue of custody interrelates with possible parenting practices. In this case, the Child Welfare Tribunal has issued a care order, and the employee communicates that this gives the child welfare agency a mandate to determine where the children should sleep during home visits. What reason and impact sleeping together may have had for the children, or the sense of continuity it may provide to continue doing the same, is absent from the discussion. Nor is there any exploration of whether sleeping together is a preferred, adequate, or unacceptable way of structuring the sleepovers.

Supervision and guidance are topics that come up in many of the discussions. In the following excerpt, the employees discuss a case where an eleven-year-old girl has been in an emergency foster home for one month and has met with her parents three times during that time. Prior to the placement, the family received parenting guidance as an assistive measure. Due to neglect, alcohol abuse, and partner violence, the Child Welfare Service issued an emergency care order. The employees discuss how to arrange contact visits over the next few months while investigating the child's future needs. In a lengthy sequence, the employees communicate issues of supervision and guidance.

A: The girl says she no longer gets hit by the parents, because someone helped them to stop doing this. (. . .)

B: Why don't you tell us a little bit about how the guidance measure worked when this was going on?

A: Well, the family therapist experienced that the initial guidance at start was fruitful, but the last year she has felt that she didn't get anywhere with the guidance. She says it's no point proceeding with guidance, the parents lack the ability of reflecting upon what happens and why. They need specific and concrete advise. Like, when she told the parents when the girl was 6 years old, she didn't need an iPhone, and now that she is 11, the parents still haven't provided her with a phone. So, she has travelled all the way to the city, walking around alone with no phone.

B: Has the guidance been with the two of them together or individually?

A: It has been a little of both

(. . .)

B: And what is the planned frequency of contact visits?

A: Now during this emergency placement, it is once a week for two hours. (. . .) If we are to propose a care order to the Tribunal, I think once a month is appropriate. We can offer guidance but I'm not sure if they are interested. But I think we will need to have supervision on these contact visits, at least to begin with, until we see how it goes. And the visits can't be at home in their small apartment.

B: So, how about 12 times a year, four hours each time? Just a thought. . .

A: Yes, maybe so. But if they are to be together for four hours, they will need help in how to fill these hours.

B: Maybe the supervisor can help them out?

In this excerpt, the factual dimension of the discussion is guidance and supervision and the parents' ability to make use of this. The employees are concerned about past guidance, and they take this experience into account when deciding on the future need for guidance or supervision. A need for supervision is established, and in the following communication, there is no construction of what a contact visit entails, leaving it to the parents and the supervisor to figure that out. As we can see, the factual dimension produces the social dimension to be about the parents, together or individually, and the temporal dimension to be about how many hours is appropriate each time and whether the parents will need guidance on the content. In the next part, we will show how the temporal dimension emerges in the material.

3.2. The Temporal Dimension

In many of the discussions, the starting point is the annual scope of contact visits in the specific case. In these discussions, many of the employees communicate the number of times per year, i.e., eight times per year for the father and four times per year for the mother, and the number of hours each of the parents and child are entitled to. In our material, when a time indication is the outset of the discussion, a construction of the visit may not occur, and the content of the visit seems to be implicit in the communication.

For example, employees communicate the temporal dimension as an annual number and as time taken away from the foster family's interaction with the child:

When we are going to decide on the contact visits between these children and the father, we must look at it as a whole package. Altogether, how much contact should these children have with their biological parents? How often will they have to leave their foster home? This must be a part of the calculation on the annual scope of contact visits. And how stressful should it be for the foster home?

In this discussion, the communication of the employees is focused on the time spent and the total amount per year, and in the subsequent discussion, they do not communicate the content of the visit or what the visit is supposed to mean for the children. The visits are discussed in the context of calendar planning and are based on the annual scope defined in the legal system.

However, in some discussions, the time specification is followed by constructions of the visits. In these discussions, the available time defined by the annual scope determines the construction of the contact visit. In the following example, the father and daughter (6) are entitled to six contact visits per year, one hour each time, but the father wants 12 visits per year:

A: They usually meet outside somewhere and go for a walk and visit a playground. The visit is supposed to last an hour, but I have said that an hour and a half is also ok. So, he picks her up, and brings her outside, and they play a little and then he returns her to the foster home after an hour or so.

B: But if we are to increase the number of times they meet a year, they could do like people do with friends of the family? Like, come over for a cup of coffee and a little chat, like a normal visit from someone in the network?

A: Yes, I can't see that increasing the number of visits will do her any harm? She always looks forward to seeing her father.

B: But when she gets older, it will probably be a bunch of other things she would like to do in the weekends?

C: We can see how this goes, they seem to have a good time together, and as long as they do, I suppose this is for the child's best interest.

In this excerpt, we see that the amount of time frames the contact visit construction. Since the father and daughter are supposed to be together for one hour every six months, the content of these visits must be defined within this hour. A walk to the playground or a chat and a coffee are communicated as appropriate content of the visits. The construction of the visits is communicated through the temporal dimension, which interplays with the factual and social dimensions in that the temporal dimension produces limits on how the visits can be structured and carried out. Instead of exploring different ways in which these visits could have been structured, the construction of the visits is determined by the temporal dimension.

Another discussion about two parents and their daughter (10) is similar in how the temporal dimension produces constructions of the contact visit:

A: She comes visit in the foster home for a couple of hours, so I think they can do this like a traditional coffee visit. They can also prepare this together while the parents are there, so that it will take a little time to organize, and this is also nice to do together as an activity. They can serve juice, coffee and something simple to eat like crackers with cheese or cookies. And then they could take a walk in the garden or something like that. Most people have a kind of routine around what you do when you have such visits. That was kind of my reference. They can do things that comes naturally following the coffee, like play games, or football or play with the cat.

B: Yes, I guess there is something about if it was supposed to be three or four hours then something more would have had to happen, but when it's just a couple of hours then it's perfectly fine to drink coffee and, for example, play football in the garden. Then maybe drinking coffee takes about an hour and then there's some time left that they fill as it comes naturally.

In these examples, the employees communicate the temporal dimension when talking about the visits, which produces constructions of the contact visits according to this logic. In discussions that are communicated according to the temporal dimension, the constructions of the visits seem to aim at creating content within a time limit by finding activities to fill the amount of time. They draw parallels with other visit practices that are similar in terms of the time spent, although these visits are relationally and contextually different from contact visits.

When the communication is framed by the annual scope of the visits, the employees ground this in the legal decision in the case. Many employees refer to the Child Welfare Tribunals or the court system when discussing the extent of contact visits, and discussions following such references are rooted in a set amount of available time.

3.3. The Social Dimension

In some of the discussions, the employees explore the social dimension in different ways. The social dimension is communicated by exploring *who* the child needs to develop and/or maintain a relationship with and how to facilitate social practices and enhance the child's relationships. The social dimension is also addressed as a spatial issue by valuing being together in certain places. In general, the discussions in which employees emphasize the social dimension as primary led to extensive contact visits for the child.

In two of the discussions where the social dimension is addressed, the employees communicate that a wider network is valuable for the child. In the following excerpt, the employees express the child's need to experience belonging in an extended family network.

A: What I want for her, is that she can experience that she is a part of a functioning family network. So, belonging to a network will be more important than organizing for contact with each and every one. The network has a greater value than spending time with them one by one. I want it to be a natural belonging, and that we facilitate this through experiences.

B: It's hard to get a grip on what has been their family tradition, but I understand they have had some trips together and some family gatherings.

A: I think they need a history together, and then it might be necessary that we arrange something, rent a place, organize for the foster homes to come there, and aunts and uncles and grandparents, like a family get together.

B: This can be in addition to ordinary contact visits from the parents.

The employees communicate the social dimension by highlighting the value of an extended family network. This communication leads to the idea of organizing an annual family reunion and renting a suitable place for this. This is an example of a discussion rooted in the social needs of the child, and the construction of contact visits develops on the basis on these considerations. The social dimension can represent what was before the care order but also what might be and how the child welfare employee can contribute to the development of traditions and experiences.

In the following, the employees communicate the social dimension as a spatial issue, by emphasizing the importance for a girl (11) and a boy (14) to spend time with their mother in their home:

A: They also need to feel like they're coming home. (. . .). Just be with their mom, see that she's ok. And just hang around, be in their home.

B: I suppose things will be back to how it used to be, and the kids will probably have to make the food themselves and so on?

A: Yes, but I guess, if they are allowed to just come home, and stay there every second or third weekend, and maybe an afternoon a week?

B: I agree, they know their mom, and this won't do any harm if we arrange for the practical things to be taken care of, that there is money, and there is food.

The employees communicate that being at home and being together with their mother is important, regardless of the activities or direct interaction between them. The home as a place with a psychosocial impact related to the mother's presence, even if she is not able to attend to their needs, is communicated as important for these two children. The employees communicate this as a social dimension in addressing the home as a place of belonging and being together with their mother in the same place as valuable.

Another example in the material also communicates the social dimension as a spatial matter, by expressing the neighborhood and local community as significant. The following

discussion is about a father and his two daughters where the employees communicate “hanging around in the neighborhood” and doing activities in the local community as important when they come visit. The employee argues the following:

For the father, it's not just him being with the kids, but he is also concerned about the children being able to be with children in the neighborhood. I don't know if he has any special children in his neighborhood in mind, or if it is just hanging around in the local community. But if the contact visits are sleep overs in the weekend, they have plenty of time to do something together, have dinner together, and just hang around in the neighborhood.

The employee communicates the social dimension in that the construction of the visits must allow time for the children to socialize in the neighborhood as well as to be with their father. When the social issues are addressed, the construction of the visits takes shape based on this issue. In discussions where the social dimension is clearly communicated and emphasized, the scope of the visits is often expanded to meet the needs raised.

Another example of communicating the social dimension is in discussions addressing the significance of the parent–foster parent relationship. In one discussion the employees communicate challenges with foster parents that undermine the significance of the biological parents. This leads them to construct contact visits where parent–foster parent contact is minimized to protect the boy from confusion and conflicting interests. In the following excerpt, the situation is the opposite; in this case, the foster parents recognize the biological mother, and the cooperation has developed from conflict to dialogue. Initially, the boy did not want any contact visits, but the child welfare employees worked to develop the mother–foster parent’s relationship to create contact in accordance with what they perceived to be the boy’s needs.

A: I think the boy has come quite far in terms of a healing process. (. . .) Now there are very good visits. And there are quite natural visits with the extended family, and the foster home with the mom present.

B: It is such a cooperation with the foster home. The mother is happy that he's living there, while she is working to get her life together to be able to get him back

A: It's incredibly great that, the foster home and her, it's as natural as possible somehow

B: This is so important. Things calm down a lot when there is a proper structure around the visits, and at the same time a contact between the foster home and the mother has developed. Rather than arranging strictly around so and so many hours, and with a fixed frequency. We can be a lot more flexible. (. . .)

A: Also, the Family Network Meetings last time was really good, because they were all there and expressed their preferences, and I wrote it up on the board. I suggested some adjustments, and we all agreed upon how to do it the next six months.

This example shows the impact of the foster parents’ recognition of the biological family and how important this can be as a part of building well-functioning contact visits. As the discussion continued, the employees emphasized the importance of creating and healing the boy’s relationship with his mother for his psychosocial development and identity process. The employees also emphasize the impact of the contact being “as natural as possible” and that this dialogue between the foster family and the mother allows the boy to belong to more than one family. This is an example of communication in the social dimension which produces communication in the temporal dimension to include flexible time management and the factual dimension to include topics such as dialogue, network meetings, and the boy’s psychosocial development. Furthermore, this exemplifies how the different dimensions in the employees’ communication interplay and produce

constructions of the contact visits. It seems to be crucial which of the dimensions dominates and thus which considerations are emphasized when the employees decide on the extent and structure of the contact visits.

4. Discussion

The employees' discussions vary in whether they communicate constructions of the contact visits at all. When constructions do occur in a discussion, the circumstances in which the employees communicate and the issues that are given priority vary. In many of the discussions, there seems to be an implicit understanding of what contact visits are, how they can be structured, and the content of the visit. Luhmann's communication theory has allowed us to identify ways of constructing contact visits and the impact of the communication dynamics on the outcome of the decision-making process. The three dimensions of communication are interrelated and mutually conditioned. When the temporal dimension dominates, the employees discuss the annual scope of contact visits and the amount of time the child will spend with the parents each time. This leads to the factual dimension revolving around case proceedings and the legal concerns and the social dimension involving only the parents as parties to the case. When practical concerns and professional work with the case proceedings dominate the factual dimension, this produces constructions of the contact visits in terms of who and how and makes the temporal and social communication contribute to the fulfillment of practical issues in the professional case work.

The employees communicate all three dimensions in the discussions and whether one or the other dominates varies throughout a discussion. However, the analysis shows that which dimension is recurrent and prominent throughout a discussion has an impact on the decision-making process. In discussions in which the temporal dimension dominates, the decision-making process seems to be less flexible in the design of the contact visit in question. The construction of the visits is often not communicated, or it is designed to fit within the time frame. Similarly, in discussions where the factual dimension is prominent, the institutional logics of the child welfare professional practices seem to produce constructions of the visits. The discussions in which the social dimension is consistently communicated stand out in the material, as the employees in these discussions explore to a greater degree flexible solutions to complex situations. The relational aspects of the child's needs are emphasized as important in these discussions, and the employees construct the visits to meet these needs.

When the temporal dimension is particularly prominent in a discussion, it is often linked to the legal facts of the matter being discussed, such as the annual scope decision of the Child Welfare Tribunal or the court system. This is reasonable because the employees must decide on a proposal for an annual scope when the case is brought before the Child Welfare Tribunal or the court system. Also, it is understandable because the employees are obligated to uphold the tribunal's or court's decision as the minimum extent of contact visits to which the child and parents are entitled. However, it is evident that a discussion dominated by the temporal dimension leaves little room for social work perspectives and social work professional judgment. These discussions clearly demonstrate that there is a legal expectation that employees relate to access arrangements in terms of an annual scope, while the content is not an explicit requirement in the same way.

The analysis shows that communication that is particularly characterized and governed by the temporal dimension, in the sense that a number and a time limit are defined, makes social work perspectives less visible. A time limit leaves little room for the construction of contact visits grounded in social work perspectives on the needs of the child and the uniqueness of the family. In communication on the social dimension, social work

perspectives are more relevant as a way of exploring how to construct the contact visits. In these discussions, social work perspectives inform how the child's relationships can be created, developed, and maintained and how contact visits can be constructed for this purpose. When the social dimension dominates the discussion, the relational needs of the child produces communication in the temporal dimension, and the factual dimension is shifted from case work to how structuring of the visits can meet the individual needs of the child in question. At the same time, this shows how a lack of focus on social and relational issues can have profound consequences for children in public care and their parents and for the development of the relationships between foster parents and parents.

5. Conclusions

Deciding on the extent of contact between parents and children in care is a task that has a great impact on the parties involved and on the further development of their relationship. In legal terms, these decisions are about determining the amount of time that the child and parents are entitled to spend together in the future. However, whether the time spent together is in the child's best interest depends on how the contact is structured and organized. This article shows that constructing contact visits individually, as is required, requires reflections grounded in social work perspectives to ensure the structuring of contact visits in numerous ways are dependent on the family in question rather than a general norm.

The article clearly demonstrates the power of the child welfare services in considering how the construction of contact visits affects how the contact is arranged. Subsequently, an evaluation of the quality of the visits is of great importance in the following assessment of access arrangements. Furthermore, contact between the child and the parents, as well as the parent–foster parent relationship, has a profound impact on the child–parent relationship and the psychosocial development and identity formation. Taken together, these issues influence the possibilities and likelihood of future reunification.

This article contributes to highlighting how child welfare employees can develop ways of discussing and organizing contact visits, by raising an awareness of the three dimensions of communication. The analysis inspires questioning of the constructions and implicit understandings of the content of contact visits and revitalizing the impact of social work knowledge on the decision-making process for children in care. The construction of individualized contact visits requires a professional work culture that allows for reflection and creative solutions, enhancing different practices adapted to the individual child and family. To this end, we hope that this article can serve as an inspiration.

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