Is contact with birth parents beneficial to children in non-kinship foster care? A scoping review of the evidence

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A B S T R A C T

Many children in non-kinship foster care maintain contact with their birth parents, although debate continues about whether or not, or under what circumstances, it is beneficial to the child. In this scoping review we analyze the findings of studies conducted over the past two decades that have specifically examined face-to-face contact with birth parents for children in non-kinship foster care, our aim being to determine more clearly when it may contribute positively to the child's well-being. The review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA-ScR guidelines and involved a search of nine electronic databases. A total of 21 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the review, namely primary studies analyzing one or more aspects of these contact visits, written in English or Spanish, and published during the period 1997–2022. In analyzing these studies we grouped their findings according to four broad areas of interest: characteristics of contact visits, appraisal of visits by families and professionals, relationship between contact and fostering outcomes, and impact of contact on children. The four main conclusions we draw from the review are: a) surprisingly few studies have specifically examined the effects of face-to-face contact with birth parents in non-kinship foster care; b) the findings to date are neither conclusive nor generalizable, although they are not generally encouraging; c) under the right circumstances (e.g., adequate supervision, conducted in a context of emotional security for the child), contact can contribute to the child's well-being and increase the likelihood of family reunification; and d) more robust research is needed to guide the development of interventions that can improve parent–child relationships and the quality of contact visits.

1. Introduction

Many children who enter non-kinship foster care are allowed to maintain contact with their birth parents, provided that this is deemed to be in the child's best interests. In addition to enabling children to maintain an attachment to their biological family (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Dozier et al., 2002; Ironside, 2012; Juffer et al., 2014; McWey et al., 2010; Schofield & Simmonds, 2011), it has been argued that contact can contribute to children's identity development insofar as it is an opportunity to understand more about their own and their family's life story, all of which may help them to accept and adapt better to foster care (Argent, 2006; Haight et al., 2003; Haight et al., 2005; Leathers, 2003; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000; Taplin, 2005). Contact visits also play an important role in the process of family reunification, which is a priority goal of child welfare systems in many countries; see, for example, Law 26/2015 in Spain, the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2017) in the USA or the evidence-based reunification framework in the UK (Wilkins & Farmer, 2015).

Not all the findings are positive, however. The review by Quinton et al. (1997), which was a landmark in this respect, drew attention to the fact that contact could also be detrimental to the child and, in some cases, undermine the foster placement. Overall, their review concluded that evidence for the beneficial effects of contact was not strong, and they highlighted several methodological weaknesses in existing research that needed to be addressed. This paved the way for a debate that continues to this day. In fact, the paper by Quinton et al. (1997) was itself soon the object of a critique by Ryburn (1999), who argued that their review offered an inadequate account of the available evidence, with important omissions that would have enabled more accurate conclusions to have been reached. Quinton et al. (1999) then responded to Ryburn (1999), arguing that he had misrepresented their work and reiterating their view that there was insufficient research-based

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evidence regarding the benefits of contact.

A year later, Schofield et al. (2000) published a wide-ranging and detailed analysis of long-term foster care, including an examination of contact visits between children and their birth families. They concluded that although face-to-face contact allowed children to maintain a relationship with significant others, the way in which this was done required careful thought and attention so as to ensure it was beneficial. Taking into account the views of foster carers was also considered important.

More recently, Sen and Broadhurst (2011) conducted a narrative review of the evidence regarding family contact for children in out-of-home foster, kinship, and residential placements. They concluded that good quality contact with birth family members (i.e., tailored to the needs of each individual case and well-planned in terms of frequency and who will be involved), together with effective professional interventions (i.e., supporting both the child and family as necessary), will likely promote placement stability and successful family reunification. However, they also highlighted the need for decisions to be made on a case-by-case basis, given that poorly planned, unsupported, and poor quality contact (e.g., poor relationships between foster children and parents, lack of communication during contact, messages of rejection from parents to children or vice versa) may be harmful to children. In her review of the literature on contact in kinship and non-kinship foster care, Atwool (2013) likewise argued that each case is unique and that there is no rule of thumb for determining when contact may or may not be beneficial. Adams (2012), in a good practice guide for social workers, notes that contact generally functions better when children are fostered at a young age, when they do not present serious behavior or emotional problems, when there is no history of severe maltreatment or sexual abuse, and when the birth family shows a collaborative attitude towards the foster placement.

Finally, the recent review by Boyle (2017) focused on children in adoption and long-term foster care, and which considered both face-to-face and indirect contact with birth families, similarly concluded that contact may only be beneficial in certain cases (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010; Haight et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2005; Sinclair, 2005; Ward, 2009; Wilson et al., 2004). A key variable in this respect was the pre-existing relationship between children and their birth families; if this was adequate, then contact could help to promote the child's well-being. The review also found that outcomes were better when there was a collaborative approach between birth families and foster carers (i.e., foster carers are accepting of the birth family and have an open attitude towards contact).

In summary, research to date has examined the impact of contact with birth parents (both direct and indirect) for children in different kinds of foster placement (kinship, non, kinship, residential), as well as those in adoption. However, there is no review of the literature focusing specifically on the effect of face-to-face contact with birth parents among children in non-kinship foster care. Contact visits may play an important role in this kind of out-of-home placement, insofar as they allow children to maintain an emotional bond with their parents, at the same time as they are adjusting to life with a new family, with whom they must also develop a bond. However, the literature is inconclusive as to whether contact is always beneficial. Consequently, the aim of the present scoping review was to analyze the findings of studies that have specifically examined face-to-face contact with birth parents for children in non-kinship foster care, and to clarify the circumstances under which it is beneficial to the child.

2. Method

2.1. Design and eligibility criteria

We conducted a scoping review in accordance with the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018). The start year established for the search was 1997, chosen

as this was the year in which the aforementioned pioneering review by Quinton et al. (1997) was published.

Peer-reviewed reports focusing on children in non-kinship foster care who had face-to-face visits with one or both birth parents were included if they were: a) primary studies analyzing one or more aspects of these visits; b) published during the period 1997–2022; and c) written in English or Spanish. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included so as to consider a diversity of measures regarding visits. We excluded studies that: a) analyzed contact visits but did not distinguish between different types of foster care (non-kinship, residential); b) were focused on highly specific scenarios within the context of non-kinship foster care (e.g., exclusively children who had been sexually abused); c) did not distinguish between face-to-face visits and other types of contact with birth families (telephone, etc.); and d) were not primary studies (e.g., systematic reviews or *meta*-analyses, theoretical papers, theses).

2.2. Information sources and search strategy

We began by conducting an electronic search of the following nine databases: *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *Medline*, *ERIC*, *APA PsycArticles*, *Psychology Database, APA PsycInfo, SciELO,* and *Dialnet Plus*. The most recent search was executed on March 4, 2022. The search strategy was drafted by an experienced researcher and further refined through team discussion. The following strategy was used: presence of the terms (*"Foster care"* AND *"contact"* OR *"Contact visits"* OR *"Face to face contact"* OR *"Parental visitation"*) in the title, abstract, and/or keywords of publications. We also conducted a manual search of the reference list of all retrieved publications to check whether the initial electronic search had missed any articles that merited screening for inclusion.

2.3. Selection of sources of evidence and data extraction

All potentially eligible records identified through the search (120 articles) were analyzed independently by two researchers to examine whether they met the criteria for inclusion. They then discussed their respective interpretations to reach a consensus, as a result of which 96 records were excluded. The remaining 24 articles then underwent detailed reading by all the research team. Three of these articles were subsequently excluded for the following reasons: the sample in one study included cases of both kinship and non-kinship foster care, without differentiating the results for each context (Kertesz et al., 2022), while the other two studies focused on highly specific scenarios within the context of non-kinship foster care – one study examined emergency foster placements (Bernedo et al., 2013), and the other focused exclusively on children who entered foster care due to sexual abuse (Steenbakkers et al., 2018). A total of 21 articles were therefore included in the review. Next, all the researchers independently charted the data from the articles, discussed the results, and continuously updated the data-charting form in an iterative process to determine which variables to extract. The data extracted from the 21 articles were then recorded in two tables. One (see Table 1 below) collated the descriptive characteristics, namely author(s), year of publication, country in which the study was conducted, the methodological approach (quantitative or qualitative), sample characteristics, and age of foster children, while the other (Table 2 below) recorded the study aims, data collection procedures, and main findings, the latter providing the focus of analysis in the present review (i.e., under what circumstances are contact visits beneficial for children in non-kinship foster care).

3. Results

A total of 21 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. Fig. 1 shows the flow diagram for study selection and inclusion.

Table 1 shows the main descriptive characteristics of the 21 studies,

Table 1
Main characteristics of the studies included in the systematic review.

#	Study	Country	Method (Approach/Design)	Sample	Age of foster children (years)
1	Bueno & Pérez (1999)	Spain	Qualitative (Case study)	8 children	1–6
2	Haight et al. (2002)	USA	Qualitative (Phenomenology)	28 birth mothers 13 foster mothers 24 child welfare workers	2–5
3	Leathers (2003)	USA	Quantitative (Correlational)	199 adolescents	12–13
4	León & Palacios (2004)	Spain	Quantitative (Correlational)	120 children	–
5	Haight et al. (2005)	USA	Quantitative (Experimental)	20 children 20 birth mothers	2–6
6	Moyers et al. (2006)	UK	Qualitative (Phenomenology) and Quantitative (Correlational)	68 adolescents	11–17
7	Torres-Gómez et al. (2006)	Spain	Quantitative (Correlational)	110 children/adolescents (55 non-kinship, 55 kinship)	2–18
8	Salas et al. (2009)	Spain	Quantitative (Correlational)	95 children/adolescents 72 birth families 69 foster families	1–18
9	McWey et al. (2010)	USA	Quantitative (Correlational)	362 children/adolescents	7–15
10	Molero et al. (2011)	Spain	Quantitative (Descriptive)	80 children/adolescents	0–17
11	Taylor & McQuillan (2014)	UK	Quantitative (Descriptive)	35 foster families 107 social workers	–
12	Salas et al. (2016)	Spain	Quantitative (Correlational)	104 children/adolescents 86 foster families 10 social workers	5–17
13	Delgado et al. (2017)	Portugal	Quantitative (Descriptive)	221 children/youth 140 foster families 2 fostering service teams	$M = 15.14$ (children/youth)
14	Delgado et al. (2018)	Portugal	Qualitative (Phenomenology)	10 children/youth	7–22
15	Lee et al. (2018)	USA	Quantitative (Descriptive)	64 fathers	$M = 39.20$ (fathers)
16	Aurrekoetxea & Pozo (2019)	Spain	Qualitative (Grounded theory)	48 adolescents (10 non-kinship, 38 kinship) 13 professionals	12–18
17	Fuentes et al. (2019)	Spain	Qualitative (Phenomenology)	16 children/adolescents 9 foster families 8 social workers	1–16
18	García-Martin et al. (2019)	Spain	Qualitative (Phenomenology)	35 children/adolescents 23 birth families	0–16
19	McWey & Cui (2021)	USA	Quantitative (Correlational)	211 children/adolescents (101 foster home, 82 kinship, 28 group home)	6–17
20	Salas et al. (2021)	Spain	Qualitative (Phenomenology)	20 children/adolescents 16 birth families 7 social workers	5–17
21	McWey et al. (2022)	USA	Quantitative (Correlational)	343 children/adolescents (45.5 % foster home, 32.4 % kinship, 22.1 % residential/group home)	11–17

listed in chronological order of publication. The majority of studies (n = 13) used a quantitative methodology, mainly involving a descriptive or correlational analysis; only one followed an experimental design. One study used a mixed-methods design, combining a correlational analysis (quantitative) with a phenomenological approach (qualitative). The remaining seven studies were qualitative in nature: five used a phenomenological approach, one was specifically informed by grounded theory, and one was a case study.

Table 2 summarizes the aims of each study, the data collection procedure(s) used, and the main findings. In analyzing these studies, we grouped their findings according to four broad areas of interest: characteristics of contact visits, appraisal of visits by families and professionals, relationship between contact and fostering outcomes, and impact of contact on children.

3.1. Characteristics of contact visits

Most of the studies provide data about the percentage of foster children who have face-to-face visits, where and how often visits take place, the family member(s) involved, and whether or not the visits are supervised by care workers, among other aspects (e.g., Leathers, 2003; León & Palacios, 2004; McWey et al., 2010; Moyers et al., 2006; Salas et al., 2016). Between 50 % and 85 % of children are reported to have a visitation agreement, most commonly involving the birth mother. Visits

usually take place at least once a month, in the majority of cases under supervision in an indoor venue (e.g., Haight et al., 2002; León & Palacios, 2004; Molero et al., 2011; Torres-Gómez et al., 2006).

Two of the studies reviewed (Haight et al., 2005; Salas et al., 2021) analyzed the behavior of participants during visits through direct observation. Haight et al. (2005) studied the behavior of mothers before and after an intervention designed to enhance parent–child interaction during visits. They found that mothers in the intervention and comparison groups did not differ significantly in the quality of emotional expression and support during the visit. However, mothers who had received the intervention displayed more behavioral strategies for supporting their children during leave-taking, although they were also less inventive when it came to maintaining their child's involvement at this point in the visit. Salas et al. (2021) conducted an in-depth descriptive study in which they observed and rated the behavior of birth parents, children, and social workers during visits (examining the style of interaction, parenting strategies, topics of conversation, exchange of gifts, toys/play, among other aspects). Although a large number of positive parent and child behaviors were observed (respecting turn-taking, topics of conversation, and age-appropriate toys, etc.), many parents struggled to interact with their child or to manage negative behaviors. Regarding the overall rating of visit quality, negative behaviors predominated in 30 % of the visits observed, while in 40 % there was a similar number of positive and negative interactions. It should also

Table 2
Variables studied in relation to visits and the main findings.

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
1	Bueno & Pérez (1999)	To analyze the emotional and behavioral reactions of children during visits.	Structured observation of child behavior (focal sampling).	Negative emotional reactions more common at start of visit (sadness and indifference vs happiness). Positive emotional reactions more common at end of visit (happiness vs indifference). More minutes of negative reactions (crying, cold expression) than positive reactions (smiling) during the visits.
2	Haight et al. (2002)	To explore participants' views about how to enhance the quality of visits.	Individual, semi-structured, in-depth, audio-recorded interviews with birth mothers, foster mothers, and case workers.	Factors identified as relevant for improving the quality of visits: Historical/ Contextual factors (i.e., services, more frequent and consistent visiting schedules, parents' and child's feelings about the separation). Visit preparation (i.e., quality of preparation for the parent and child, quality of support for child in the transition to and from visits). Characteristics of the visits (i.e., physical context, quality of parent-supervisor interaction, duration, parent–child relationship/ interaction, emotion expression/ communication). Characteristics of the post-visit (i.e., quality of child's reaction to visit, quality of support for child, match between child's expectations and visits, cancellations of visits).
3	Leathers (2003)	To analyze children's conflicting allegiances in relation to parental visiting.	Case files and telephone surveys (questionnaires and interviews) with foster	Bond with birth mother: positively related to frequency of visits and loyalty conflicts. Bond with foster

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
			parents and case workers.	parents: negatively related to the bond with birth mother, frequency of visits, and loyalty conflicts. Stronger conflicts of loyalty when children have a strong bond with both families (foster and birth).
4	León & Palacios (2004)	To identify aspects of visits related to family reunification.	Case files from child protection agencies and questionnaires completed by social workers.	No reunification was more likely in cases where visits were supervised. Reunification was associated with more frequent visits and greater satisfaction with visits among families.
5	Haight et al. (2005)	To evaluate an intervention designed to enhance mother–child interaction during visits.	Intervention and clinical interview with mothers.	Mothers' intervention group (IG) vs control group (CG): No differences in the quality of their emotional expression and support of their children during visits. IG displayed more behavioral strategies for supporting their children during leave-taking. IG were less engaged and inventive during leave taking.
6	Moyers et al. (2006)	To examine foster carers' involvement in contact arrangements for adolescents and the impact contact has on the young people, their foster families, and on placements.	Case files, semi-structured interviews (young people, foster carers, and social workers) and standardized measures.	Contact for the majority of adolescents was problematic and had a significant impact on placement outcomes. Findings at 1-year follow-up: Problematic contact remained so in the majority of cases. Improvement in contact was associated with supervision by social workers. Contact difficulties predicted placement disruption, but the absence of contact was not directly related to outcomes. Over half of the

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
				adolescents had contact with someone rated as detrimental to them. Contact with maternal grandparents was associated with successful placements and with improved relationships between young people and their foster carers during the placement.
7	Torres-Gómez et al. (2006)	To examine the self-concept of children in non-kinship foster care.	Case files and child self-report questionnaires.	Self-concept was better among children who had no visits or supervised visits, as compared with cases that allowed unsupervised visits. Children whose visits were with family members other than the parents had a better self-concept and reported less anxiety and more happiness/ satisfaction with visits, as compared with children who maintained contact with one or both birth parents.
8	Salas et al. (2009)	To analyze the characteristics of foster placements and the views of social workers about visit quality.	Case files and questionnaires completed by social workers.	Mothers whose child was taken into care due to neglect were more likely to fulfill the visitation arrangement. The quality of the parent–child interaction during visits was most commonly rated as average or poor by social workers.
9	McWey et al. (2010)	To examine depression and externalizing behavior problems among children in foster care.	Interviews and surveys with children, caretakers, and child protective services agencies.	More frequent contact with the biological mother was associated with lower levels of depression and fewer externalizing behaviors.
10	Molero et al. (2011)	To describe the characteristics of visits and explore the perceptions of	Case files, semi-structured interviews with social workers, and	The majority of children were satisfied with the characteristics of visits (e.g.,

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
		those involved in them.	questionnaires completed by foster children, foster carers, and birth parents.	frequency, duration, the persons who visited) The majority of children and their foster carers considered that visits had an impact on their lives (both positive and negative). The majority of birth parents considered that visits had a positive impact.
11	Taylor & McQuillan (2014)	To explore the factors related to placement disruption.	Questionnaires completed by foster carers and social workers.	Disruptions were more prevalent in cases where visits were less frequent and supervised. The majority of foster carers and social workers considered that visits had contributed to placement disruption.
12	Salas et al. (2016)	To analyze the characteristics of contact visits and to examine the quality of the emotional relationship that the children have with both their foster carers and their birth parents.	Case files, interviews with social workers, and questionnaires completed by foster children, foster carers, and birth parents.	Degree of child-parent interaction during visits was rated by social workers as low or very low in almost a third of cases. The quality of child-parent interaction during visits was rated by social workers as poor or very poor in over a third of cases. Children who experienced poor quality visits perceived less warmth and more criticism/ rejection from the visiting parent.
13	Delgado et al. (2017)	To explore foster carers' and professionals' perceptions regarding the association between contact and fostering outcomes.	Questionnaires completed by foster carers and fostering services teams.	Contact was not determined to be essential to long-term placement. High percentage of children expressed positive reactions during and after the visit, but this did not influence the perception of placement success. Significant differences between foster carers' and professionals' perceptions regarding several

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
14	Delgado et al. (2018)	To explore the experiences and views about family contact of foster children, foster carers, parents, and social workers.	Focus groups with foster children and interviews with foster carers, parents, and social workers.	aspects of foster care, especially children's reactions during visits. Perceptions of relationships and of the difficulties associated with visits revealed considerable disagreement among those involved: Most foster children considered it important and good to be in contact with their parents, and they saw this experience as mostly positive. However, they were concerned about the relationship between foster carers and their biological parents. Main difficulties associated with visits: Foster carers: relationship with the family of origin. Parents: financial problems. Social workers: relationships with the family of origin and logistical aspects.
15	Lee et al. (2018)	To gather information about fathers' involvement with their child in foster care, the relationship with the child's mother, barriers to involvement with their child, and the relationship with caseworkers and agencies.	Face-to-face surveys (fathers).	The majority of fathers did not feel close enough to their child, and they were not satisfied with the time spent together.
16	Aurrekoetxea & Pozo (2019)	To explore which aspects of parental visitation arrangements bring stability to family foster placements.	Case files and interviews with social workers.	Parental visits provide an important opportunity for intervention in family foster care. Negative messages during visits (especially from mothers) and loyalty conflicts are related to

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
17	Fuentes et al. (2019)	To analyze the benefits of and problems associated with contact visits.	Focus groups (foster carers and social workers).	unstable placements. Both foster carers and social workers agreed that visits were useful for maintaining foster children's attachment to their birth family, for enhancing their psychological well-being, and for helping them to understand the real situation of their birth family. Regarding difficulties, both foster carers and social workers highlighted problems of coordination between fostering agencies, the Child Protective Service, and foster families, as well as a lack of support and preparation for participants in contact visits. Foster carers also considered that birth parents saw them in a negative light and that visits could produce a conflict of loyalty in the child.
18	García-Martin et al. (2019)	To explore the views of birth parents about contact visits and how they might be improved.	Face-to-face interviews with birth families.	Parents felt that visits helped children to understand more about the family's situation and contributed to their physical and psychological well-being. It was also an opportunity for parents to see how their child was doing and that the child's needs were being met. Aspects that could be improved: excessive supervision during visits, wanting to see their child more often and for longer, treatment on a personal level by social workers, characteristics of

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
				the contact venue, including other families having visits at the same time in a shared space, difficulty of getting to the contact venue (travel costs, long journey).
19	McWey & Cui (2021)	To test if more frequent contact with biological parents predicted less time in out-of-home care, and if it was associated with better mental health outcomes.	Interviews and surveys with children and caretakers, and standardized measures.	More frequent contact with biological mothers was associated with fewer cumulative days in out-of-home care. The positive effect of contact with biological mothers on a shorter length of time in out-of-home care was stronger for youth who experienced neglect as compared to those who experienced physical abuse. More frequent contact with both mothers and fathers was associated with fewer mental health symptoms. More contact with biological fathers was related to more mental health problems for youth who experienced sexual abuse compared to neglect.
20	Salas et al. (2021)	To identify situations and behaviors occurring during contact visits which are likely to impact a foster child's well-being.	Video-recording of the behavior of participants in visits (birth parent, child, and social worker).	Large number of positive behaviors among parents and children. Need for improvement in several areas (e.g., several parents struggled to interact with their child and used negative parenting strategies). Social workers often interfered with or interrupted the parent–child interaction, rather than facilitating it.
21	McWey et al. (2022)	To test the interactive association	Interviews and surveys with children, and	More frequent contact with biological parents

Table 2 (*continued*)

#	Study	Study aims	Data collection procedure(s)	Main findings
		between current caregiver involvement and contact with biological parents on youth externalizing symptoms.	standardized measures.	was not associated with youth externalizing symptoms. Higher levels of current caregiver involvement were associated with fewer externalizing symptoms in youth, and this protective effect was stronger when there was more frequent contact with biological parents.

be noted that interventions by social workers were commonly rated as negative, the main issue being interference with the parent–child interaction.

3.2. Appraisal of visits by families and professionals

Most of the studies reviewed included some form of appraisal of visits (perceptions, opinions, benefits, difficulties, among other aspects) by those involved, primarily social workers, foster carers, and birth parents (e.g., Aurrekoetxea & Pozo, 2019; Delgado et al., 2017, 2018; Fuentes et al., 2019; García-Martin et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002; Leathers, 2003; Lee et al., 2018; León & Palacios, 2004; Molero et al., 2011; Moyers et al., 2006; Salas et al., 2009, 2016; Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). For social workers, the potential benefits of visits are that they allow children to maintain an attachment with their birth family, thus contributing to their identity development and helping them to understand more about their family's situation and why they have been fostered (Fuentes et al., 2019). However, it is also considered that visits can expose children to inappropriate messages from birth parents and create conflicts of loyalty with respect to their birth and foster families (Aurrekoetxea & Pozo, 2019). In terms of how the quality of visits could be improved, the social workers in some studies highlighted the need to provide birth parents with better information and to ensure that they are adequately prepared and supported (Fuentes et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002). Two studies by Salas et al. (2009, 2016) found that social workers considered the degree and quality of parent–child interaction to be poor in the majority of visits. Delgado et al. (2017), however, found that according to professionals, most children experienced happiness and well-being both during and after visits. The main difficulties reported by professionals in that study were travel costs and the birth parents not respecting agreements.

With respect to the views of foster carers, Fuentes et al. (2019) found that they, like social workers, saw visits as an opportunity for children to maintain an attachment with their parents and to develop a more realistic view of the family situation. However, they too recognized the possibility of children receiving negative messages from their parents, and of loyalty conflicts emerging (Aurrekoetxea & Pozo, 2019; Fuentes et al., 2019). The foster carers in some studies also wanted more information, preparation, and support from professionals, as well as improved collaboration between the foster and birth family and more preparation for children regarding visits, which they felt should be adapted to the specific needs of each child (Fuentes et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002). In the study by Delgado et al. (2017), foster carers were less likely than professionals to consider that children experienced happiness and well-being during and after visits. However, they agreed with
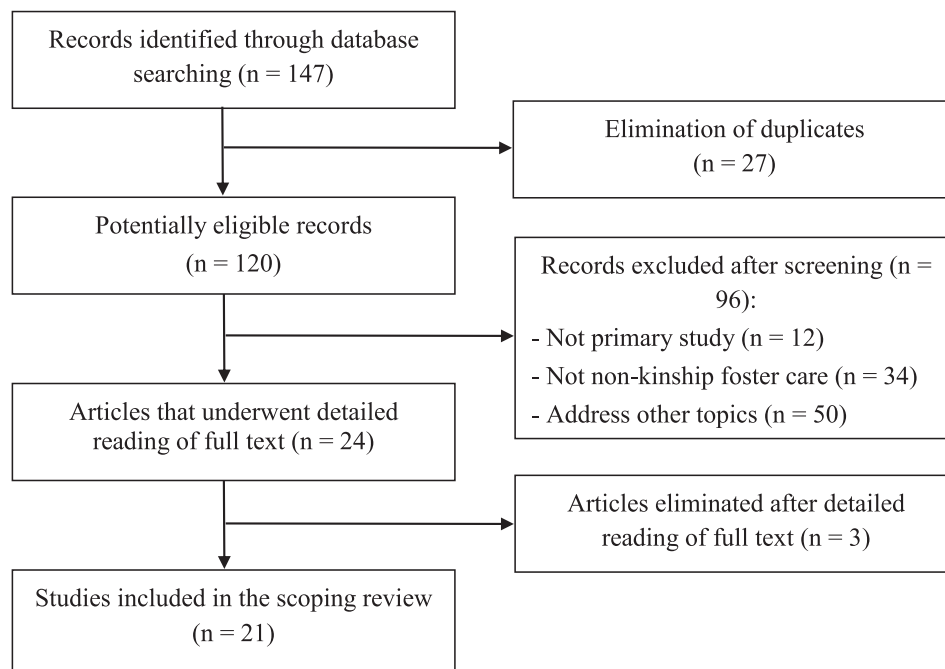
Fig. 1. Flow diagram showing the process of study selection and inclusion.

professionals that the main difficulties were travel costs and the birth family not respecting agreements. Finally, Moyers et al. (2006) found that 34 % of the foster carers they interviewed felt that the current contact arrangement was not in the best interests of the young person, and almost half (49 %) considered that there were difficulties in the young person's contact with family members. These difficulties took the form of unreliable attendance at visits by birth parents, inappropriate amounts of contact, lack of safety or risk during contact, replay of negative relationships, and a negative influence on their own relationship with the young person. Importantly, 41 % of foster carers said that these difficulties related to visits had a negative effect on them and on other children in the foster family.

Regarding the views of birth parents, those interviewed by García-Martín et al. (2019) considered that visits helped children to understand more about the family's situation and contributed to their physical and psychological well-being by maintaining an emotional bond with their parents. It was also an opportunity for them as parents to see how their child was doing and to be reassured that his or her needs were being met. In terms of how visits might be improved, the parents in some studies mentioned, among other aspects, being treated better on a personal level by professionals, improvements to the contact venue, more flexibility with regard to how often and how long they saw their children, and more respectful supervision (García-Martín et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002). In the study by Lee et al. (2018), the majority of fathers surveyed did not feel close enough to their child and were not satisfied with the time spent together.

3.3. Relationship between contact and fostering outcomes

Some studies have analyzed the relationship between the characteristics of contact and how foster placements evolve over time (e.g., stability, disruption, emotional bond). Aurrekoetxea and Pozo (2019) reported that negative messages from the birth mother during visits and the child's experience of loyalty conflicts were associated with unstable placements. Moyers et al. (2006) found that contact with maternal grandmothers was associated with good outcomes at one-year follow up, as well as with better relationships between young people and their foster carers during the placement. In the study by León and Palacios (2004), family reunification was more likely when contact was more

frequent (at least fortnightly), and in 75 % of cases where reunification occurred, visits took place either in public places or at home.

Research has also examined the relationship between the perceived quality of visits and fostering outcomes. In the study by León and Palacios (2004), 86.2 % of families who achieved reunification were considered by professionals to have had satisfactory or very satisfactory visits; conversely, in 60 % of cases that ended in a permanent separation, visits were rated as unsatisfactory or highly unsatisfactory. For their part, Taylor and McQuillan (2014) found that 31 % of social workers and 59 % of foster carers considered that contact visits had been a factor in placement disruption. In the one-year follow-up study by Moyers et al. (2006), contact difficulties identified by foster carers in the first interview (e.g., unreliable or inappropriate amounts of contact with birth families, re-enactment of negative relationships during visits) predicted later placement disruption. Finally, McWey and Cui (2021) found that more frequent contact with biological mothers was associated with a shorter length of time in out-of-home care. This positive effect of contact with biological mothers was stronger for youth who had experienced neglect as compared to those who had been subject to physical abuse.

3.4. Impact of contact on children

The impact of contact on children has also been examined in some studies (Bueno & Pérez, 2009; McWey et al., 2010; McWey et al., 2022; McWey & Cui, 2021; Torres-Gómez et al., 2006; Salas et al., 2016). Bueno and Perez (2009) conducted a systematic observation of young children (age 1–6 years) and recorded more minutes of negative emotional reactions (crying, cold expression) than positive ones during visits; however, sadness and indifference were more common at the start than the end of visits. In a study involving both children and adolescents, Torres-Gómez et al. (2006) found that self-concept was better among those who had no visits or supervised visits, as compared with cases that allowed unsupervised visits. In addition, young people whose visits were with family members other than the parents had a better self-concept and reported less anxiety and more happiness/satisfaction. In the study by Salas et al. (2016), those children whose visits were rated by social workers as being of poor or very poor quality perceived less warmth and more criticism and rejection from the visiting parent. McWey et al. (2010) found that children who had no contact with their

biological parents scored higher on externalizing behavior problems than did children with sporadic or frequent contact. More frequent contact was also associated with lower levels of depression. A recent study by McWey and Cui (2021) found that more frequent contact with both mothers and fathers was associated with fewer mental health symptoms among youth in out-of-home care. However, when taking into account the reasons for the child being taken into care, more contact with biological fathers was related to more mental health problems among youth who had experienced sexual abuse compared to neglect. In a similar vein, McWey et al. (2022) reported that more frequent contact with biological parents was not associated with externalizing symptoms in youth. However, they also found that higher levels of current caregiver involvement were associated with fewer externalizing symptoms, and that this protective effect was stronger when there was more frequent contact with biological parents. Finally, Leathers (2003) found a positive correlation between the frequency of visits and the strength of the bond with the birth mother, and a negative association between visit frequency and the bond with foster carers. Accordingly, children who had a strong bond with both families (birth and foster) experienced greater conflict of loyalty.

4. Discussion

This review has analyzed the findings of studies that have specifically examined face-to-face contact with birth parents for children in non-kinship foster care, the goal being to clarify the circumstances under which it is beneficial to the child. Given that contact is considered to be an important factor in the success or otherwise of non-kinship foster placements, a first and somewhat surprising result of the review is how little this issue has been investigated (21 primary studies published over a period of 25 years). Further research is therefore necessary to determine more clearly when contact can make a positive contribution to children's well-being.

In analyzing the 21 studies, we grouped their findings according to four broad areas of interest: characteristics of contact visits, appraisal of visits by families and professionals, relationship between contact and fostering outcomes, and impact of contact on children. Regarding the characteristics of visits, the key results come from studies that have analyzed the behavior of those involved. Salas et al. (2021), for example, found that many of the birth parents they observed appeared to lack the skills required to interact with their child or to manage negative behaviors. Furthermore, 80 % of interventions by social workers were rated (by the researchers) as negative, usually because they interfered with the parent–child interaction. These findings highlight the need for targeted family interventions that can help to improve the quality of contact visits and, therefore, promote the child's well-being (e.g., Bernedo et al., 2020). This is supported by the results of the review by Bullen et al. (2017), who concluded that individual family support and group programs have the potential to improve parent–child relationships and the quality of visits.

Studies that have gathered the views and perceptions of families and professionals regarding contact visits also report findings of interest. Generally speaking, social workers consider contact to be beneficial insofar as it allows children to maintain an attachment with their birth family, thus contributing to their identity development (e.g., Fuentes et al., 2019), although they also highlight the potential for negative effects and the need for improvements (Aurrekoetxea & Pozo, 2019; Delgado et al., 2017; Fuentes et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002). It is worth noting that in the study by Salas et al. (2016), social workers rated the quality of child-parent interaction during visits as poor or very poor in over a third of cases, and those children who experienced poor quality visits perceived less warmth and more criticism and rejection from the visiting parent. Clearly, therefore, professionals are aware that contact is not always a positive experience for the child, and they recognize that work is required to improve the quality of visits. In this respect, it is important to ensure that professionals have the opportunity to acquire the skills needed to manage and supervise visits, and also that adequate preparation and support is provided to all those involved (children, birth parents, and foster carers). Professionals also need to be aware of and understand the available resources and tools that can help them to fulfill their role. Examples of such resources include the good practice guide to planning contact in permanent placements developed by Adams (2012), or that by Slade (2010) aimed at helping professionals plan and manage supervised contact between biological families and children in complex cases.

Regarding the views of foster carers, studies suggest that despite acknowledging that visits are an opportunity for children to maintain an emotional bond with their parents, they also have a number of concerns; these include birth parents giving their child negative messages about the foster family, the possibility that the child will experience loyalty conflicts, and, more generally, a lack of information, preparation, and support from professionals (Aurrekoetxea & Pozo, 2019; Fuentes et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002). Notably, a considerable proportion of foster carers in the study by Moyers et al. (2006) felt that contact was not in the child's best interests, and also that the difficulties it produced had a negative effect on their family, while in the study by Taylor and McQuillan (2014) the majority of foster carers considered that contact had been a factor in placement disruption. Although more in-depth studies with larger samples are required, these findings, which suggest that contact can have detrimental effects, are consistent with the conclusions of Quinton et al. (1997) following their review of the literature.

Studies that have explored the views of birth parents about contact visits suggest that they too are dissatisfied, particularly as regards inflexible visitation arrangements (e.g., frequency and duration of visits, and the conditions associated with them) and what they perceive to be excessive supervision by professionals (García-Martin et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2018). It is worth noting here that in the study by León and Palacios (2004), the majority of families that achieved reunification were considered by professionals to have had satisfactory or very satisfactory visits. Although there may be a bidirectional relationship between these two variables, it nonetheless highlights the importance of working to improve parent–child interactions so as to increase the likelihood of positive fostering outcomes. As regards areas for improvement, the travel costs associated with attending visits was highlighted by families and social workers in some studies as an issue that needed to be addressed. However, this may be specific to the countries in which these studies were carried out, namely Spain (García-Martín et al., 2019) and Portugal (Delgado et al., 2017), where, in contrast to the situation in other countries, these travel costs are not covered by the public child welfare system.

Regarding the relationship between contact and fostering outcomes, the findings are inconclusive and point in both directions. Aurrekoetxea and Pozo (2019), for example, highlight the role of the birth mother, insofar as negative messages from her during visits, and conflicts of loyalty in the child, were associated with unstable placements. With respect to the frequency of visits, those studies that have found a relationship with placement outcomes suggest that more frequent contact with birth parents is associated with a greater likelihood of family reunification (León & Palacios, 2004) and a shorter length of time in out-of-home care (McWey & Cui, 2021). However, more frequent contact strengthens the bond with birth parents, rather than with foster carers, and it can produce loyalty conflicts in children (Leathers, 2003). These results are consistent with one of the conclusions reached by Boyle (2017) in her review, namely that the pre-existing relationship between children and their birth families is a key factor when it comes to fostering outcomes; accordingly, if this relationship has been generally adequate, then contact visits (of greater frequency) are more likely to strengthen the bond with the birth family, to promote family reunification, and to contribute to the child's well-being. One finding that needs to be considered here is the role of family members other than the birth parents. In this respect, Moyers et al. (2006) found that contact with maternal grandparents was associated with successful placements

at follow-up and with improved relationships between young people and their foster carers during the placement. This suggests that if birth parents are unable to create a healthy climate during visits, thus undermining the stability of the placement, the possibility of contact with other relatives (such as grandparents) with whom there was a positive pre-existing relationship may offer children a connection to family and support their well-being.

Finally, only 6 of the 21 studies (Bueno & Pérez, 1999; McWey et al., 2010; McWey & Cui, 2021; McWey et al., 2022; Salas et al., 2016; Torres-Gómez et al., 2006) specifically analyzed the impact of contact on children, which is surprising given that the primary goal of foster care is to protect the child's welfare. The evidence from three of these studies suggests that in many cases contact is not a positive experience for children. Bueno and Perez (1999), for example, found that children were more likely to show negative emotional reactions during visits, while Torres-Gómez et al. (2006) reported that self-concept was better among children who had no contact with birth parents or only supervised visits. The potentially negative impact of contact was also highlighted in the study by Salas et al. (2016), who found that children whose visits were rated by social workers as being of poor quality perceived less warmth and more criticism and rejection from the visiting parent. The results reported by McWey and colleagues are more positive, insofar as more frequent contact with the biological mother was associated with lower levels of depression and fewer externalizing behaviors (McWey et al., 2010; McWey et al., 2022) and fewer mental health problems in youth (McWey & Cui, 2021). It is unclear, however, whether these results reflect a point raised by Adams (2012), namely that visits are more positive, and therefore take place more often, when children exhibit fewer behavior problems. Experimental studies are therefore needed to shed light on the direction of the relationship between the frequency of contact visits and behavior problems in children. The question of children's clinical readiness for visits is also an issue that requires more in-depth investigation, especially as regards those young people who present more severe behavioral disturbances and for whom more specialized interventions may be needed to prepare them for contact.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is the role of technology and the potential benefits and disadvantages of indirect contact between children and birth families (e.g., through video conferencing). During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual visits were introduced by some child welfare agencies as a way of maintaining mandated contact while respecting public health directives (Collings et al., 2020; González-Pasarín et al., 2021; Seay & McRell, 2021), and it remains to be seen whether this experience will lead to a broader approach to contact in the future, with an array of options being made available along an indirect-direct continuum. Whatever the case, this is clearly an area that merits further inquiry.

In summary, the evidence is inconclusive regarding the effects that face-to-face contact with birth parents may have on children in non-kinship foster care. This may in part be due to differences in sample characteristics, including the age of the children involved, as well as to the use of different methodological approaches. Further research on this topic is clearly warranted.

4.1. Limitations

This review has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the studies included were conducted in just four countries (primarily the USA and Spain), and hence the findings may not reflect the diversity that exists in the larger child welfare population. For example, most of the studies describe visits as occurring under supervision in an indoor venue, an arrangement that many families felt was unsatisfactory, but other countries may well have different approaches to contact. In addition, although the majority of studies report that the sample reflected the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the country in which they were carried out, some studies were conducted in geographic areas (e.g., Spain) with limited ethnic diversity in the foster care population.

A further limitation to consider is that the majority of studies included in this review were descriptive and did not establish strong relationships between variables. Moreover, they did not generally compare groups of children with and without contact visits. Another limitation relates to those studies that have examined the views of the different parties involved (birth families, foster carers, and social workers), insofar as they offer an inconsistent picture, possibly due to bias or lack of objectivity in the data collection procedure. More importantly, hardly any studies have sought the opinion of foster children themselves regarding their experience of contact with their parents. Given that the crucial question is to what extent or under what circumstances contact is beneficial, it would seem essential to include children as a source of information.

5. Conclusions

This systematic review has analyzed the findings of 21 studies that have specifically examined the effects of face-to-face contact in non-kinship foster care. The results overall are neither conclusive nor generalizable, although they are not generally encouraging. Nevertheless, the analysis of findings according to four broad areas of interest (characteristics of contact visits, appraisal of visits by families and professionals, relationship between contact and fostering outcomes, and impact of contact on children) does help to provide a more objective overview of current knowledge. In our view, there are three main conclusions to be drawn from the review: a) almost all participants (birth families, children, and professionals) regard visits as an opportunity for children to maintain an emotional bond with their parents, although there are several factors (e.g., birth parents giving their child negative messages about the foster family, the possibility that the child will experience loyalty conflicts, a lack of information and support from professionals, and poor collaboration between the foster and birth families) that may, as Quinton et al. (1997) noted, undermine the placement and the child's well-being; b) there is a clear need for specific family interventions aimed at improving the quality of visits and, therefore, children's well-being; c) professionals need to be aware of and understand the available resources and tools that can help them to fulfill their role. With regard to the latter, and by way of a general conclusion, the potential benefits of contact are more likely to be realized if professionals draw on existing good practice guides (e.g., Adams, 2012; Bernedo et al., 2020; Taplin et al., 2015) and pay close attention to those aspects which, according to research, are associated with a more positive experience. In practical terms, and in addition to ensuring that they themselves have the skills needed to manage and supervise contact, professionals must aim to provide families and children with adequate support and information, be alert to the messages that parents give their children and intervene when necessary, and encourage collaboration between foster and birth families.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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