Constructing Parental Team Spirit:
A Double Case Study of Instant Messaging Conversations Between Birth Parents and Professional Foster Parents

Dr. Martine Noordegraaf
Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

Prof. dr. Carol van Nijnatten
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Abstract

In a micro-analysis of two cases from the Netherlands, Instant Messaging conversations between birth parents and professional foster parents were studied. The study reveals there are three types of activity in Instant Messaging: aligning dialogues, exhchange of information, and relationship building. Aligning dialogues are the most common. These are aimed at coordinating (daily) matters around the youngster's situation. Following aligning initiations, the conversations may change into the two other activity types: (background) exchange of information and relationship building. extenuating educational access challenges a specific foster youth and her advocate experienced as result of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures.

Keywords: Foster Care, Biological Parents, Foster Parents, Instant Messaging, Applied Conversation Analysis

Introduction

Between 2000 and 2018, the number of children in foster care in the Netherlands more than doubled to 18,486 (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2019). 35% of these children stayed in long term foster care for more than two years. The small-scale family set-up is considered a better pedagogical context for children than residential stay in children's homes. This was reason to argue for a larger share (up to more than 90%) of foster care in out-of-home placements (Hermanns, 2008) resulting in new government legislation to favour family-based settings over children's homes (Ministry of Health, Welfare & Sport and Ministry of Justice and Security, 2014).

In this study, we present findings from a double case analysis on ways professional foster parents (PFPs) use Instant Messaging to communicate with biological parents (BPs) on child related topics. Firstly, we elaborate on the context of these interactions and the reason why we focus on the PFP-BP relationship.

Family-Style Group Homes

Due to the high demand for foster care, the pressure to recruit new foster families is considerable. In Dutch child welfare, new small-scale facilities have come into being. In family-style group care, which is the context of this study, four to six children are in residence and receive daily supervision from professional foster parents, who are pedagogically trained and live in a regular neighbourhood (Wunderink, 2019).

Out-of-home placed children experience a radical change when moving from a dysfunctioning family system (birth family) into a new family system with professional parents and peer foster juveniles. During the placement, the child's birth-family continues to play a profound role in the juveniles' life because of its history and presence in visiting arrangements. Parental involvement has been shown to be an important condition for successful placement in care (Barken & Lowndes, 2018; Corradini, 2017; Fuentes, Bernedo & Salas, 2019). Foster parents themselves also indicate that collaboration with birth parents is crucial for constructing a stable environment for foster children (Cooley & Petren, 2020).

When biological parents have difficulty accepting their child's out of home placement, however, they may create opposition rather than cooperation with the other parental subsystem (Konijn, Admiraal, Baart, Van Rooij, Stam, Colonnesi, Lindauer & Assink, 2019). On the other hand, foster parents can be very child-focused and unwilling to collaborate with the child's biological family (Aartsen, Haans & Klein Entink, 2020). This may lead to loyalty stress when the juveniles must choose between the two and can lead to disruption in a placement (Leloux-Opmeer, Kuiper, Swaab & Scholte, 2017; Konijn et al., 2019). To reach collaboration between foster parents and biological parents, the two parental subsystems, as in post-divorce situations,

must relate to each other (Becher, Kim, Cronin, Deenanath, McGuire, McCann & Powell, 2019). Respectful, child-focused communication within such collaboration is crucial in keeping parental alliance, and is linked to the child's wellbeing (Rudi, Dworkin, Walker & Doty, 2015).

Instant Messaging
Both BPs and PFPs also mention open lines of communication between them as of much importance in their relationship (Höjer, 2009; Noordegraaf et.al, 2020). Nowadays BPs and PFPs frequently use Mobile Instant Messaging (WhatsApp) in their mutual communication (Schep & Bent, 2020). WhatsApp is a Mobile Instant Messaging application for smartphones that allows images, video, audio, and location-based messages to be sent and received by individuals or groups of friends (Church & De Oliveira, 2013). We are interested in how BPs and PFPs use Instant Messaging in their communication and what kind of collaboration practices can be found.

Instant Messaging as a means of communication between different parental subsystems or in foster care in general is understudied (Alford, Denby & Gomez, 2019; Dworkin, McCann & McGuire, 2016). Prior studies that have been performed on either co-parental communication (McDaniel, 2015; Quehl, 2017 in: Smyth, Ainscough, & Payne, 2020) or (asynchonous) online communication (Bouhnik, Deshen & Gan, 2014; Stommel & Lamerichs, 2020) helpedfocus our analysis.

In co-parental communication, communication in which people are present at the same time (e.g., face-to-face, phone calls and video calls) provide a richer and more emotionally expressive experience than more asynchronous modes of communication (e.g., e-mail, text, messenger) that keep intimacy to a minimum (McDaniel, 2015). This does not mean however that 'present communication' should always be preferred. Quehl (2017) found that the quality of the relationship shapes the mode(s) and nature of the co-parental communication and that high-conflict parents use technology to '(a) restrict the amount of inter-parental communication needed to manage post-separation parenting; (b) reduce the potential for conflict to escalate; and (c) keep a detailed record of events'(Quehl, 2017 in: Smyth et.al, 2020: 191).

Studies on (asynchronous) online communication stresses that online talk has enough qualities to perform a relational function, for instance, by showing empathy towards someone as has been studied in chat counselling (Stommel & Lamerichs, 2020). But also that online talk can reveal incompatibility of language and lack time limits as was pointed forward in a study on Instant Messaging between students and teachers (Bouhnik, Deshen & Gan, 2014).
In our analysis, we scrutinize the relational function and its boundaries of online talk between BPs and PFPs, and come to a first idea on how to use online talk in child welfare situations when two parental subsystems are related to each other. To answer that question, we have come to a first layout of relational activities that BPs and PFPs perform while Instant Messaging.

Methods
To find out more about the relational aspects of Instant Messaging, we have adopted a pragmatic, exploratory, qualitative approach (Patton, 2015). We performed an in-depth study of two cases in which BPs (mostly birthmothers: BMs) and professional foster parents (all mothers: PFMs) use Instant Messaging to communicate about a child for whom they share parental responsibility. We used (applied) conversation analysis as a method to examine the messages in detail (Antaki, 2011: 8). By performing conversation analysis on Instant Messaging, we follow the advice of Meredith (2019; 2020) to enter the online world as researchers to find out both how conversations work when they are not face to face or by phone, but also to help fields adapt to new strategies of communication, which is also the aim of this study.

The studied collection of Instant Messages are part of larger data collection of 13 case studies, that includes interviews, phone call tapes and videos of institutional and informal meetings. The case studied were part of a large research project on colloboration between PFP's and BP's. For publication, all conversations used in this article were translated from Dutch into English. All names of the participants in the conversations were anonymized with fictitious names.

From the dataset of 13 cases, we selected a sample of two cases after an initial analysis of all cases to come to an overall impression on how PFPs and BPs communicate through Instant Messaging. This initial analysis showed there are differences in the relational quality of the interactions. Therefore, for this study, three inclusion criteria were formulated: 1) cases (5/13) that were at an early stage of collaboration (no more than two years),which gives insight into how participants start to construct collaboration and aids in determiningwhether BPs and PFPs need help to make their language compatible; 2) cases (3/5) that use Instant Messaging to communicate because not all BPs and PFPs use Instant Messaging to communicate; and 3) cases (2/3) that represent both constructive and non-constructive collaboration. From the selected two cases for this study, case one has been supplied by a youth care organization as an example of when constructive cooperation is managed, and parents work together as a parental team. Case two is described as an example of when cooperation is a bit more tense, and the parental cooperation is still under construction.

Analysis

From the two selected cases, we studied all conversations between BMs and PFMs using Instant Messaging during a two-month period. In our analysis we used two concepts as a looking glass to the data. That of 'speech act' and 'nextness.' A speech act is the 'sounds or marks one makes to have meaning and that are characteristically said to mean something' (Searle, 1965: 259). Nextness is understanding of an utterance as showed by 'the next action achieved by the co-participant' that is talked with (Mondada, 2011: 543). For our analysis, we formulated the question: by looking at how it is received, what is meant by this utterance? Or in other words: what relational work are the BPs and PFPs doing in this exchange of chats? We made collections of similar types of relational work, studied them in detail with focus on initiative (who started the conversation on what kind of topic) and function (how is the initiative followed up and what kind of relational work is done). We found three types of relational work: name them here, which are discussed below.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent for using the Instant Messaging conversations for scientific purposes was given by both PFPs and BPs. The messages were shared with us by the PFM's, with consent of the BM's and stored in a secure digitale environment. All names and identifying details have been alteredfor privacy purposes.

Descriptive Analysis

As mentioned above, we selected two cases that differ in the quality of collaboration between PFPs and BPs. This qualification was made beforehand by a youth care organisation. The following provides the context in which the Instant Messaging takes place:

Case 1 is regarding a fifteen-year-old girl (Helen), who has been placed under family supervision. Helen's father died a few years ago. Most weekends, Helen lives with her biological mother. During the week, Helen is in family-style group care. This arrangement requires planning and constant communication between the BM and the PFPs. The online communication is handled by the PFM who sometimes consults the professional foster father.

Case 2 is regarding a twelve-year-old girl, Miranda, who is living in family-style group care under a family supervision order. Miranda's parents divorced after she was placed out of home. The BM is ambivalent about the placement. She is happy with the way the PFMs (a same-sex couple) interact with Miranda but is struggling with feelings of loss because perspective has changed towards permanent care and she sometimes has different opinions from the PFMs on what is best for Miranda. Both PFMs have Instant Messaging conversations with the BM. In one exchange, the ambulatory care provider and the BF are also included.

Pattern of Interacting

The following table shows how the conversational turns are distributed in the cases and what kind of content is exchanged (Table 1: Overview of interactional pattern per case). The table also provides an overview of the conversational initiations (who begins the conversation), conversational turns (how many exchanges take place), emojis, images, and screenshots:

Features of interaction/ Case	Case 1 BM	Case 1 PFM	Case 2 BP	Case 2 PFMs
Initiation of conversations	34	2	12	28
Conversational turns	284	153	141	120
Emojis	34	24	43	24
Images	41	1	1	7
Screenshot	43	0	0	0
Photo	0	0	0	4

Table 1: Overview of interactional pattern per case

There is a difference in the number of initiatives taken by the biological parents and how many conversations take place during the two months of the case study. Case 1 shows significant initiative from the BM, who sends a lot of images and screenshots (from Instant Messaging conversations with the daughter who lives with the PFM). In case 2, the PFMs take more initiative and send pictures than the BP.

Due to privacy issues, images, photos, and screenshots are excluded from our analysis. However, we included all emojis because they provide valuable information on how the respondents interpret each other's texts and on how they want the other to interpret theirs. That is, non-verbal reflections appear as emojis which add pragmatic information to written text (Skovholt, Gronning and Kankaanranta, 2014). Emojis may also communicate positive affect that may help maintain and enhance social relationships (Riordan, 2017). The combined effect of text messaging and e emojis increases information richness, leading to perceived playfulness that has a driving role in facilitating social connectedness (Hsieh & Tseng, 2017).

Interaction Analysis
Three types of interaction were found in our data:
1.   Aligning initiations aimed at coordination and planning for the child.
2.   Informing initiations aimed at sharing and involving each other.
3.   Relational initiations aimed at togetherness and mutual affirmation.
The types of interaction are distributed among the cases as follows in table 2 (Table 2: Types of interactions per case):

Type of interaction/ Case	Case 1	Case 2	Total
Aligning initiation	16	30	46
Informing initiation	17	8	25
Relational initiation	3	2	5
Total	36	40	76

Table 2: Types of interactions per case

In case 1, most of the initiations are aimed at aligning coordination and planning, which may be explained by the fact that the child lives with her birth mother every weekend. Relational initiations are the least common, likely because the nature of the PFP-BP relationship is task-related. In contrast to findings from our literature review, there were no irrelevant or nonsensical messages as has been seen for instance in Instant Messaging between teacher and students (Bouhnik, Deshen & Gan, 2014).

Type 1 Aligning Conversational Initiation
Type 1 is characterized by a conversational opening by one of the parents to exchange information on the child or to coordinate care. This may be directly aimed at planning or may be formulated as a message about the child's condition or behaviour.
On some occasions the conversation is devoted to aligning the pedagogical policy of BP and PFM. On other occasions, after discussing arrangements, other issues are discussed. In table 3 (aligning interpretation), we show an excerpt from case 1 in which the BM initiates an aligning conversation in which an interpretation of the child's behaviour is shared and agreed upon:

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	07:41	BM	Has Helen made a screen shot yet?
2	07:41	PFM	No, a screen shot of what?
3	07:42	BM	Of the group app where she said she would be working on Saturday.
4	07:42	PFM	No not yet. Will check this afternoon
5	07:43	BM	😲. It's like this, Helen and I had a discussion about Pete. She wanted to go to Pete's but didn't get her way. I wanted to explain to her why, but she didn't want to listen. But what's frustrating is that she twists everything, so that Pete gives an opinion and Helen does what Pete suggests. So she pits Pete against us. And that's what we're arguing about.
6	07:59	BM	Isn't that destructive behaviour? I'll send it to (name of professional worker at the group home). And I think Helen should be more open with you guys.
7	08:04	PFM	We'll see what we can do about this. I agree with you.

Table 3: Aligning interpretation

In this example, BM is worried about her daughter Helen's relationship with Pete (Helen's boyfriend) and that he is turning her against BM. BM thinks that Helen is lying about having to work and asks the PFM to help her to check on her daughter. The BM wants her daughter to be more open with PFM about this issue. The PFM's response is ambivalent. On the one hand, the PFM acknowledges the BM's problem description by saying that she agrees (line 7). On the other hand, the PFM says that this pedagogical issue will get future attention and creates room for other views on this issue (after talking with Helen). It is relevant that the PFM does not react instantly to the BM's account (line 5) and responds only five minutes after the BM's insistence and strong qualification (line 6). The BM's reaction (emoticon in line 5) is a display of gratitude and confidence in the PFM. This excerpt shows that aligning is not exclusively about making specific scheduling arrangements but is also about exchanging pedagogical views and trying to agree on how pedagogical strategies should be pursued. Contrary to face-to-face interactions, Instant Messaging creates the possibility of postponing reactions without being threatening. In this case, BM's urgency in her message (line 6) may be neutralized by an intermission.

On other occasions, usually one of the PFPs brings up an issue that must be agreed upon and stresses the need for making precise arrangements. This may be interpreted as a wake-up call for the biological parent. An example is given in excerpt 2 from case 2 (Table 4: Aligning agreements):

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	22:05	PFM	Hi hi, BM – good morning we will put off (location) for a while yet, as agreed, until Miranda is a bit older 👍 BF – Wednesday 15th (location) is fine 👍 Miranda says it was supposed to be from 9:00 to 21:00. That's very long to be together, so I think we have to make clear agreements with Miranda about how the day will go and what to do if something goes wrong along the way 👍
2	22:28	BM	Ok. I'll get back to you next week. 👍

Table 4: Aligning agreements

In the above excerpt, the PFM responds to a previous message about the BM's plans to take Miranda for a day trip to a large city. The PFM wants a clear understanding about how the parents will manage if Miranda gets overstressed because of her personal problems. The meta message in this excerpt is that clear agreements are indispensable, and the threefold use of the thumbs-up emoticon seems to be an implicit call for explicit parental confirmation of the appointments. The BM's reaction is less intense and might be intended to remove any tension that is hidden in the PFM's remarks. Finally, the thumbs-up emoticon is a comforting message that mutual agreement will be achieved.

Aligning initiation and evaluating the relationship
Many aligning initiations are followed by further interaction. These conversations are often accompanied by reflective emojis. An example of the co-occurrence of aligning and evaluation from case 2 is presented below (Table 5: Aligning followed by positive evaluation):

In this example, the PFM sends a message about Miranda's positive feedback about the weekend with her mother and inquires about the BM's reflections. The BM elaborates on Miranda's positive visit and attributes this success to Miranda herself (turn 2: 'she really did her best' and 'she can do it'). The PFM seizes the opportunity to emphasise the use of firm agreements (made by the PFP) and reinforces this with two thumbs-up emojis, thus claiming part of the success. The BM responds with very positive feedback to the PFM, agreeing to their share in the success (turn 4: 'your approach') and uses extreme case formulations (turn 4: 'delighted', turn 5: 'brilliant' and 'so happy now again') and numerous positive emojis to display full agreement (Whitehead, 2015).

But not all reflections on the relationship are positive. In the next example, from case 2, the same PFM reveals her negative evaluation of the BM's sloppy approach to the appointments (Table 6: aligning followed by negative evaluation):

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	17.03	PFM	Miranda is just back, in great form (mother's name). She says noise didn't bother her much: calls it a fresh start. How was it for you??
2	17.08	BM	Exactly as you said. She really did her best and so wasn't bothered by noises. She can do it. It took some effort and she has learned not to be so annoying. (brother's name) also enjoys spending time with her. We had a good time together, the 3 of us, we really did 😌 (brother's name) misses the chat with Miranda. He has great fun with her
3	18.27	PFM	Good to hear that being firm has done her good 👍 👍 she has apologised for her behaviour here as well.
4	18.42	BM	She said sorry here too. Thanks for your approach and support. I'm delighted with you guys and Miranda is too. 👍
5	18.44	BM	You guys are brilliant! 👏 👍 I'm so happy now again 😌 👍

Table 5: Aligning followed by positive evaluation

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	23:38	PFM	Hello (BM's name), Miranda announced when she came home that tomorrow's visit is cancelled and that she's going to you on Tuesday instead? We've heard nothing from you about this. In future, could you please check with us first whether this is OK?
2	08:49	BM	Hi (PFM's name) That's right. I have an interview this afternoon with (name of researcher) about the relationship between the group home and the parents. I meant to Message you about that yesterday or today. I'll phone later today about yesterday.

Table 6: Aligning followed by negative evaluation

In this example, the commanding tone of the PFM ("from now on") is striking; it is an indirect, negative evaluation of the BM. There are no mitigating remarks or emojis, so that the 'request' seems more like a command. The BM does not return the aggression and calmly explains the reasons for her omission. Later, the PFM proposes to confirm the visiting arrangements and commit to the times in the schedule for the next meeting.

In the next excerpt, from case 1, we see another example of both aligning and referring to the relationship, but in this case the evaluation includes some irony (Table 7: Aligning followed by ironic evaluatio

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	18:27	BM	Helen hasn't eaten anything. She felt sick. She felt sick yesterday too, and seems to have felt very sick on Wednesday. Looks very unwell and exhausted. Exhausting too 😄 you can have her back 🤪. I think she's going to be ill. Sinuses full.
2	18:28	PFM	🎉🎉🎉🎉 Thanks for letting us know. We'll keep an eye on her.
3	18:31	BM	Oh sure and I see that she's infatuated with Pete. But she doesn't see her own qualities and that Pete isn't any more than what we see. Just a lad of 20, but this is typical, I suppose.

Table 7: Aligning followed by ironic evaluation

In this example, the BM reports Helen's physical condition and ironically mentions that her daughter is exhausted and exhausting. This is accompanied by a phony laugh emoticon which is intended to be sarcastic rather than literal (see Thompson & Filik, 2016). The BM thus displays her faith in the good relationship with the PFM (who will understand the irony) and reveals her awareness that raising a teenager is quite a job. The PFM sends no less than four flower emojis to wish Helen well. The PFM's response shows that the mother's information is received as welcome additional information and leads to a further report of the BM's observations of her daughter.

It is noteworthy that the BM switches easily from ironic to serious exchanges of thoughts, which supports the idea that parental attunement benefits from informal relational work, such as making fun of one another's parental tasks. It is a demonstration of parental team spirit to which everyone contributes to the best of their ability.

Aligning initiation and advice-giving
Next to evaluation as a follow-up from an aligning initiation, there are also instances where after an exchange of information, advice is given as in the excerpt from case 1 in table 8 (Table 8: Aligning followed by advice-giving)

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	16:09	PFM	You can ring via the app
2	16:10	BM	Sure. I'll ask Helen for the number. I think she wants to go to Pete, and I didn't allow her to go.
3	16:11	PFM	Ok. You can google the number yourself
4	16:11	BM	Ok
5	16:11	PFM	More confidential perhaps 😄

Table 8: Aligning followed by advice-giving

After an aligning topic initiation ("Helen is allowed to work on Saturday, but I don't believe her"), BM asks to check Helen's movements. The PFM does not respond to that request and instead suggests that the BM checks herself. BM often submits pedagogical problems to the PFM. In contrast to other excerpts, the PFM now has suggestions to make, and formulates her advice as actions the BM may take ("You can ring …", and "You can google …"). By pointing to concrete behavioural options, the PFM's advice is quite straightforward although it is formulated as an option for consideration. Her warning (line 5) is mitigated verbally ("perhaps") (see Linell & Bredmar, 1996) and non-verbally by an emoticon with a wry smile.

Type 2 Informing Initiation
This type of topic initiation in Instant Messaging conversations has an illuminating rather than an aligning nature. The conversations start with a narrative that provides all kinds of background information rather than attempting to plan concerning the child. An example from case 2 of such informing initiation is given in table 9 (Informing followed by positive feedback).

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	17:24	PFM	[[Photo of two sleeping girls (including Miranda) on the back seat of a car with the text: tired but happy after a day at the theme park (with three zzz emojis)]]
2	17:25	PFM	[[Group photo of 7 girls (including Miranda) from the group home in front of the theme park]]
3	18:10	PFM	Nice photos. 👍 Looks like they've had fun.
4	18:14	BM	Great they've had a good time
5	19:04	PFM	Yes, they had a great time and had fun together 😄 😄

Table 9: Informing followed by positive feedback

In the above excerpt, the sending of pictures provokes positive feedback from both parents and a reconfirmation from the PFM. In the next excerpt from case n1, however, the information that is shared is way less scripted and more vulnerable (Table 10: Informing disclosure).

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	07:49	BM	I've gone over Helen's life again to see what we're missing and to find what we're looking for and I realise that Helen has been missing a lot of basic needs. She has always stood on the sidelines, and her dad really favoured [Helen's sister].
2	07:50	BM	So Helen received little affirmation. Validation, recognition etc. I'm starting to understand it all a bit better.
3	07:50	PFM	Wow! Great insights.

Table 10: Informing disclosure

The BM tells the PFM about her efforts to understand her daughter's history and the many dramatic events her daughter went through. The PFM reacts with an expression of admiration and verbalizes the positive outcome of the BM's efforts. The BM's disclosure is a demonstration of her confidence in the relationship with the PFM, and feeds further deepening of that relationship. In a constructive relationship, the conversation partners seem to build on the fundament of trust in each other, creating a new foundation of trust for future cooperation (compare Van Holen et al., 2019).

After her disclosure, the BM extensively reports about Helen's father (not in excerpt – maybe it should be included?) and labels this as child neglect and abuse. The PFM stays out of the discussion by saying that she is not the one to judge and instead directs her compassion to what happened to the BM.

Informing Initiation and Evaluating the Relationship

On other occasions providing information leads to mutual exchange as in seen in the next excerpt from case 1, presented in table 11: Informing followed by mutual exchange.

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	20:07	BM	Wonderful 😃. I've been allowed to tell my story to the new staff of the Salvation Army. To help them with their future clients. But your "act normal" approach helped me enormously to stop playing the victim. This meant so much to me as an "angry, or not listened to, or pitiful mother". 🖤 🖤 🖤 🖤. That we're all people. Wonderful, wonderful wonderful
2	20:08	PFM	O fantastic that you've done that, for club people!! Proud of you!
3	20:09	BM	Proud of Muke and Dartha 🫘 🫘 🫘 🫘. Have you any idea of how wonderful the work is that you do!
4	20:11	PFM	Haha Muke and Dartha 😄. No, but good to hear. Super that you can be inspiring. Your pain and the choices you made can now contribute to healing for others. That turns bad into good 🖤. Think of my colleague at (name organisation)
5	20:16	BM	Yes, I was asked again to help inspire other clients
6	20:16	PFM	Great!
7	20:16	BM	Yes I think so too. You guys, so much empathy. 🫘
8	20:17	PFM	You're a sweetheart 🫘

Table 11: Informing followed by mutual exchange

The above Instant Messaging conversation starts with the BM reporting on the lecture she gave as an 'experience expert' for child welfare workers and mentioning how she used the PFM's helpful approach to find her self-confidence as a person. This compliment is reinforced by four heart- emojis, demonstrating the BM's huge gratitude. That leads to further mutual compliments about each other's achievements (lines 2-4, 6-7) and a direct positive display of affection (line 8).

In all these informational subtypes, important relational work is done, ranging from direct giving of compliments to opening about the troubled past that preceded the out-of-home-placement. By these positive interactions, the relationship between birth parents and professional parents is enriched and deepened.

Type 3 Relational Initiation

This type of initiation is purely focused on the relation itself as exemplified in the next excerpt from case 1 (Table 12: Relational initiation):

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	09:49	BM	[[internet greeting card at Easter]]
2	10:40	PFM	Happy Easter to you too 🫒

Table 12: Relational initation

The BM sends her best wishes in an internet greeting card, thus demonstrating her liking for the PFM. The PFM not only returns that wish but adds a kiss in an emoticon and so actively reinforces the mutual affection.

Relational Initiation and Aligning

In the final excerpt from case 2, as presented in table 13 (Relational followed by aligning), this Instant Messaging conversation starts with a relational remark by the BM and is followed by a schedule-related question within the same message. The BM shows her empathy towards the PFM and probably her daughter. BF reinforces BM's message with two emojis. The visit arrangement is confirmed and accompanied by further mutual positive emojis:

Turn	Time	Texter	Text
1	16.06	BM	Hi (PFM's name) and (PFM's name). Great that you're going on holiday. Have fun. ⚪ 🌼 🏞 Where are you off to? Can you let me know when it's my Saturday in June?
2	16.51	BF	👍 ⚪
3	18.18	PFM	We're going to (name of country) 👍 (mother's name), your Saturday is 9 June.
4	18.26	BM	Have fun 👍 😊 Thanks for letting me know 👍

Table 13: Relational followed by aligning

Conclusion

Instant Messaging is an important medium in child welfare for building and maintaining relationships between birth parents and foster parents. It helps to create a clearly demarcated parental system in relation to the child and prevent the creation of undermining coalitions between the child and one of the parents against the other parents.

We found three types of Instant Messaging activity. Aligning dialogues are the most common, which are aimed at coordinating (daily) matters around the child's situation. The most frequent contact initiations are also aligning in nature and prompted by the need to plan concerning the child's well-being. Following aligning initiations are (background) information giving and relationship building.

The informational type shows a wide range of issues, varying from disclosures about the (problematic) family history and specific parental difficulties, reporting on daily concerns, to small talk and sending nice pictures. In this category, there are dialogues that address the precursors to the current problems with the child, which were the reason for the child welfare intervention. These more reflective utterances are especially significant as they are often efforts to come to terms with a troublesome family history and pave the way for a better mutual understanding. Sometimes narratives that are less related to the child's situation are also put forward. The provision of information is often preceded by an aligning conversation opening but is also frequently the topic of the initiation.

The third type of topic is relational; which are remarks that directly touch on the affiliation between birth parents and professional parents. In only a few occasions a conversation opens with a remark that directly concerns this relationship.

From another perspective, these three activity types represent various stages of the cooperation and the quality of the working alliance. In the aligning phase, the relationship is initiated and most of the attention is aimed at making good arrangements around the child. The conversations often involve no more than passing

on information and confirming previously made appointments. We name this phase constructive when it is building a new relationship. It has also appeared to create a good opportunity to show one's trust, approval, and goodwill.

The informative phase offers the possibility to deepen the affiliation. This is, for example, when a birth mother reflects on the troubled life of her child or refers in an ironic tone to the problems she used to have as a mother bringing up a child. This is relevant because it gives insight into how the problems around the child developed, but also creates the opportunity for birth parents to show, indirectly, their approval of the current pedagogical setup.

The relational phase is aimed at a direct confirmation of the good relationship and shows respect for the other, compassion for difficult feelings, and well wishes.

At all stages, planning around the child will remain a central topic and we do not expect that to disappear in collaborations that last longer than two years. The presence of reflective narratives and direct relational evaluations, however, demonstrates that the relationship involves more than merely planning. Likewise, the presence of relational remarks and emojis shows that those involved feel free to express their affection.

Instant Messaging enables swift and direct conversations like in face-to-face communication but is less impersonal than most other non-face-to-face communication types. The use of emojis creates an extra meta-communicative layer in the conversations. In our data, no signs of incompatibility of language between BPs and PFPs were found, although sometimes tones of voice differ as shown in table 6. This type of interaction can easily evolve in a more conflictueus interaction, but in our data the BP of the PFP prevent the conversation from going in such direction. We do not see irrelevant and nonsensical messages in our data but did find messaging in late hours. We do not know how the professional foster parents in our study experience this and what kind of rules are set but late hour messaging may be a reason for other professional foster parents to avoid using Instant Messaging to construct relationship with biological parents.

The two cases in this study differ. In the first case, a positive relationship had already been established and there was a smooth, high frequency visiting arrangement in place. This enabled the BP to often start a conversation on Instant Messaging and to reflect on her own position. In the second case, the PFP were more directive and focused more on parental compliance than on deepening the relationship. Future study is necessary to learn more about the conversational patterns in complex child welfare interventions and to give some advice on whether Instant Messaging should or should not be used in highly conflictuous relationships within foster care.

While Instant Messaging is not a new phenomenon, its communicative advantages have been scarcely evaluated. This study is explorative, and we only analysed two short-term cases. Future study may find out more about the reasons for PFPs to use or avoid Instant Messaging. Future research may shed light on this as well as on the use of Instant Messaging in other types of family interactions such as stepfamilies or kinship care.

References

Aartsen, Y., Haans, G. & M. Klein Entink. *Opgroeien in twee families. Pleegkind zijn samen met ouders en pleegouders.* Amsterdam: SWP.

Barken, R. & Lowndes, R. (2018). Supporting family involvement in long-term residential care: Promising practices for relational care. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(1): 60-72.

Becher, E. H., Kim, H., Cronin, S. E., Deenanath, V., McGuire, J. K., McCann, E. M., & Powell, S. (2019). Positive parenting and parental conflict: Contributions to resilient coparenting during divorce. *Family Relations*, 68(1), 150-164.

Bouhnik, D., Deshen, M., & Gan, R. (2014). WhatsApp goes to school: Mobile Instant Messaging between teachers and students. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 13(1), 217-231.

Church, K., & De Oliveira, R. (2013, August). What's up with WhatsApp? Comparing mobile Instant Messaging behaviors with traditional SMS. In *Proceedings of the 15th international conference on Human-computer interaction with mobile devices and services* (pp. 352-361).

Cooley, M. & Petren, R. (2020). A qualitative examination of coparenting among foster parent dyads. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 110, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104776

Corradini, F. (2017). Foster care and residential care: what factors affect the type of placement of children? An Italian study. *Foster Care*, 1(2): 71-91.

Dworkin, J., McCann, E., & McGuire, J. K. (2016). Coparenting in the digital era: Exploring divorce' parents' use of technology. Divorce, Separation, and Remarriage: *The Transformation of Family*, 10.

Fuentes, M., Bernedo, I. & Salas, M. (2019). What do foster families and social workers think about children's contact with birth parents? A focus group analysis. *International Social Work*, 62: 1416 –1430.

Hermanns, J. (2008). Verschoven gezag. Methodisch werken in de voogdij. Woerden/Utrecht: CoAct Consult/Collegio.

Van Holen, F., Geys, L., West, D., Gypen, L., & Vanderfaeillie, J. (2019). Characteristics of successful foster families according to Flemish foster care workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 107, 104519.

Hsieh, S. H., & Tseng, T. H. (2017). Playfulness in mobile Instant Messaging: Examining the influence of emoticons and text messaging on social interaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 69, 405-414.

Höjer, I. (2009). Birth' parents' perception of sharing the care of their child with foster parents. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 4, 161-168.

Konijn, C., Admiraal, S., Baart, J., Van Rooij, F., Stam, G., Colonnesi, C., Lindauer, R. & Assink, M. (2019). Foster care placement instability: A meta-analytic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 96,

Leloux-Opmeer, H., Kuiper, C. H., Swaab, H. T., & Scholte, E. M. (2017). Children referred to foster care, family-style group care, and residential care:(How) do they differ? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 77, 1-9.

Linell, P. & Bredmar, M. (1996). Reconstructing topical sensitivity: Aspects of facework in talks between midwives and expectant mothers. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 29, 347-379.

McDaniel, B. T. (2015). "Technoference": Everyday intrusions and interruptions of technology in couple and family relationships. In C.Bruess (Ed.), *Family communication in the age of digital and social media* (pp. 228–245). Peter Lang Publishing.

Meredith, J. (2020). Conversation analysis, cyberpsychology and online interaction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 14(5), 285-294.

Meredith, J. (2019). Conversation analysis and online interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 52(3), 241-256.

Mondada, L. (2011). Understanding as an embodied, situated and sequential achievement in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(2), 542-552.

Ministry of Health, Welfare & Sport and Ministry of Justice and Security (2014). *Jeugdwet wettekst*. Den Haag: Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport en ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie.

Noordegraaf, M., Schep, E., Andriessen, D., Bergenhenegouwen, H., Otten, R. & Van Nijnatten, C., (2020). Een relationele route tot gedeeld opvoederschap. Resultaten van onderzoek naar het samen opvoeden door ouders en gezinshuisouders. *Journal of Social Intervention:Theory and Practice,* 29 (6): 21-42.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*(4th ed). SAGE.

Pleegzorg Nederland. (2019). *Factsheet Pleegzorg 2018*. Opgehaald op 10-04-2020. https://pleegzorg.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Factsheet-pleegzorg-2018-DEF.pdf

Quehl, K. (2017). *Divorce in the digital age* (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University).

Riordan, M. A. (2017). Emojis as tools for emotion work: Communicating affect in text messages. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 36(5), 549-567.

Robinson, A., Kruzich, J., Friesen, B. Jivanjee, P. & Pullmann, M. (2010). Preserving family bonds: Examining parent perspectives in the light of practice standards for out-of-home treatment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 75, 632-643.

Rudi, J. , Dworkin, J. , Walker, S. , & Doty, J. (2015). Parents' use of information and communications technologies for family communication: Differences by age of children. Information, *Communication & Society*, 18(1), 78–93.

Schep, E., & Bent, D. (2020). De ingewikkelde relatie tussen gezinshuis en ouders. *Kind & Adolescent Praktijk*, 19 (4), 22-28.

Searle, J. R. (1965). What is a speech act. Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language: *A Concise Anthology, 2000*, 253-268.

Skovholt, K., Pronning, A. & Kankaanranta, A. (2014). The communicative functions of emoticons in workplace e-mails:*. *Journal Of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 780-797.

Smyth, B. M., Ainscough, G., & Payne, J. L. (2020). Modes of communication between high-conflict separated parents: Exploring the role of media multiplexity and modality switching. *Journal of Family Communication*, 20(3), 189-205.

Stommel, W., & Lamerichs, J. (2020). Empathy displays in Dutch chat counselling: Showcasing a microanalysis of online data. *Applying Linguistics in Illness and Healthcare Contexts*, 159.

Steege, M., van der (2012). Gezinshuizen in de jeugdzorg. De kennis verzameld en de stand van zaken. Utrecht: Nederlands Jeugdinstituut.

Thompson, D. & Filik, R. (2016). Sarcasm in written communication: Emoticons are efficient markers of emotion. *Journal Of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 21, 105-120.

Whitehead, K. A. (2015). Extreme-case formulations. T*he International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*, 1-5.

Wunderink, A. (2019). *Factsheet Gezinshuizen: de aantallen in 2018*. De Glind: Gezinspiratieplein.

Authors

Dr. Martine Noordegraaf (corresponding author: mnoordegraaf@che.nl) is educationalist and Professor of Youth and Family at a University of Applied Sciences in Ede, The Netherlands. This University offers bachelor and master programs in professional fields. Her main interest is on institutional conversations in different social work settings.

Prof. dr. Carol van Nijnatten was trained as a developmental psychologist. He is emeritus professor of social work in child welfare at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.