

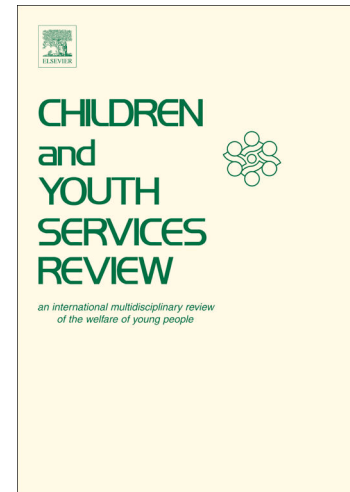
Journal Pre-proofs

Everyday co-parenting in a polymedia environment

Negotiating *when* and *how* to talk about *what* in interconnected communication between professional foster parents and birth parents

Ellen Schep, Keun Young Slidrecht, Wyke Stommel

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Everyday co-parenting in a polymedia environment

Negotiating *when* and *how* to talk about *what* in interconnected communication between professional foster parents and birth parents

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Highlights

- Contact between foster and birth parents is not self-evident and has to be negotiated through instant messaging.
- This study demonstrates how participants create interconnectedness between different modalities and engage in interactional relationship work.
- It highlights the importance of regular contact for shaping and maintaining the co-parenting relationship.

Abstract

Everyday co-parenting in a polymedia environment

In this paper we analyse “interconnected communication sequences” between Professional Foster Parents (PFPs) and Birth Parents (BPs) in family-style group care. Interconnected communication sequences are coherent sequences constructed by participants by use of multiple communication media.

In family-style group care, children live with PFPs and regularly visit their BPs, which implies PFPs and BPs share the care for children. This co-parenting relationship is important in supporting the quality of contact between child and parents, which is essential for the child’s development and wellbeing. However, a harmonious co-parenting relationship is difficult to achieve and maintain.

To gain more insight in the intricacies of the complex PFP-BP relationship, we examine unfolding PFP-BP contact. Specifically, we examine two cases of instant messaging followed by a telephone call between PFPs and BPs. Our analysis disentangles how through text messaging PFPs

and BPs propose to call for a particular reason and plan a call at an appropriate moment for both parties, and how they re-establish mutual availability in the call opening and collaboratively re-invoke the reason for calling. The negotiation of when to talk about what and how proves to be infused with relationship work and thereby instantiates some of the sensitivities of “co-parenting” in family-style group care.

With our empirical analysis of everyday interconnected polymedia communication in different modalities (instant messaging and telephone interaction) in family-style group care, we aim to contribute to knowledge of interactional practices in the field of social work.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Multimodal interaction, Co-parenting, (Professional) Foster Parents, Birth Parents, Interconnectedness

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Introduction

In the semi-professional youth care setting called ‘family-style group care’, Professional Foster Parents (PFP) and Birth Parents (BP) share the care for youngsters who have been placed in family-style group care. The relationship between PFPs and BPs is important, as research shows that many of such placements end prematurely due to a difficult relationship between PFPs and BPs. This difficult relationship can result in transgressive behaviour in the youngster leading to an untenable placement and thus to a breakdown (Vanderfaellie et al., 2018). The attitude of PFPs and BPs towards each other and a harmonious relationship is essential to children but also difficult to achieve and maintain (Chateaufneuf et al., 2018).

Family-style group care is meant to be a form of ‘shared care’. In this shared care, (professional) foster and birth parents share as much responsibility as possible. Therefore, it is relevant to gain more insight into the way PFP and BP shape this care and their professional relationship in day to day practice. Moreover, the question is how various communication media feature in this process, including text messaging and calling (Hospes et al., 2018). Only a few studies examined the use of different modalities (speech and text) and communication media, like text messaging and phone calls, in foster care settings, mainly focusing on the participants choice of communication media as reported in interviews or questionnaires (Ganong et al., 2012; Taylor & Ledbetter, 2017; Russel et al., 2021, Slidrecht et al., 2022). According to Spielvogel and Leathers (2022), a better understanding of which practices contribute to greater collaboration between (Professional) foster parents and BPs is necessary to improve this collaboration for the well-being of youngsters in family-style group care.

In this article, we analyse instant messaging (by WhatsApp) and subsequent calling between birth parents and foster parents. Our analysis disentangles how *through text messaging* PFPs and BPs propose to call for a particular reason and schedule an appropriate moment for both parties, and how they, *in the call opening*, re-establish mutual availability and collaboratively re-invoke the reason for calling. The negotiation of when to talk about what and how, proves to be infused with relationship work and thereby instantiates some of the sensitivities of “shared care” for the children involved. With our empirical analysis of subsequent communication in different modalities (texting and calling) in professional foster care, we aim to advance knowledge of interactional practices in the field of social work (Flinkfeldt et al. 2022).

We first give an overview of previous research into the hybrid and complex relationship between PFPs and BPs in the setting of family-style group care. Then, we review some of the literature on multimedia use and the interconnectedness between various communication media. In the analysis, we disentangle how a PFM and a BP coordinate their communication and activities using these multiple communication media. Finally, we draw conclusions and discuss our findings.

Theoretical background: polymedia in co-parenting interactions

When it is decided that a child is unable to grow up in its own family, family-style group care is an alternative family-like environment where an average of four children can grow up under the care of Professional Foster Parents (PFPs). Family-style group care is a setting meant for children under 18. Generally, they display difficult behaviour due to their troublesome background and therefore they need specialised care. One of the PFPs is fulltime available for the in-home-placed children and, together with their partner, committed to providing a stable and safe environment (Wunderink, 2019). So, family-style group care can be seen as a hybrid setting where PFPs provide specialised care in a family-like setting.

When children grow up in family-style group care, contact with their birth parents is important. Research in foster care shows that contact between children and parent(s) is crucial for the child's well-being and the development of their identity (McWey et al., 2010; Biehal, 2014; Haight et al., 2003; Leathers, 2003; Sanchirico and Jablonka, 2000; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). The quality of contact between BPs and their children depends on the collaboration between BPs, foster parents and social workers (Andersson, 2009; Boyle, 2017) and their commitment to this contact (Biehal, 2014; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). A difficult relationship between BPs and (professional) foster parents can lead to a placement breakdown (Vanderfaellie et al., 2018). For placement permanence of youngsters, the BPs participation and agreement for their children to grow up in the (professional) foster family works protectively (Ainsworth, 2018; Konijn et al., 2019).

In the co-parenting relationship PFPs and BPs have a different position. A Danish study on the co-parenting relationship between BPs and foster parents, speaks of a relationship 'based on incompatible role requirements' (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020; p 1), involving different emotional and rational motives or incentives. Derived from interviews with BPs, BPs were found to feel inferior in this relationship as 'failing parents' (Höjer, 2009). They may also feel vulnerable due to a 'loss of control', the anxiety of losing close contact with their children and the absence of clear rules or a clear framework for visits (Nesmith et al., 2017). Furthermore, BPs feel they have much important information about their child, which foster parents are not always open to (Höjer, 2009). Foster parents sometimes have difficulties working together with BPs, as they are afraid that BPs would threaten their parenting role (Nesmith et al., 2017). More generally, Järvinen and Luckow (2020) conclude that BPs and foster parents struggle with how to practice 'the principle of the best interest of the child in the co-parenting relationship' (p.15).

As stated, a positive attitude of PFPs and BPs towards each other and a harmonious relationship are essential to children in 'shared-care' situations but also difficult to achieve and maintain (Chateauneuf et al., 2018). Spielfogel and Leathers (2022) found that foster carers who were focused on collaboration with BPs saw them as key partners. This means that foster parents and BPs actively shared information concerning the child and parenting strategies. Another study emphasised the importance of foster parents' willingness to share parental power ('power sharing'), i.e. to actively share responsibility and care with BPs (Nesmith et al., 2017). Moreover, it was found that foster parents' empathy and engagement with BPs strengthens the cooperation (Nesmith et al., 2017).

According to PFM and BP in a Dutch study, collaboration takes place through BPs' visits to their children, evaluation meetings, and telephone or instant messaging contact about practical or financial decisions like medical questions or buying clothes for children or chatting about the children's well-being (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018). As we have seen, various studies pointed out the importance of the collaboration between foster parents and BPs. However, less attention is paid to how foster parents or other caretakers like PFPs construct and accomplish this collaboration with BPs. Therefore, a better understanding of which practices contribute to greater collaboration is necessary (cf. Spielfogel and Leathers, 2022).

Interconnected polymedia interaction

Today's social interactional landscape consists of the use of multiple modalities interchangeable in continuous communication sequences (Segerstad & Weilenmann, 2013). As a case in point, text messaging and calling are common activities that may be sequentially tied, i.e. where text messaging may precede a call or vice versa (Laursen, 2012). Nowadays we live in a polymedia environment in which: 'users exploit the differences among media to suit their interactions and manage their relationships' (Madianou 2014: 330). Each modality presents participants with different communicative features (Androutsopoulos, 2021). While text messaging is written and asynchronous, offering emoji and other visual tools (GIFs, images, etc), calling is in spoken language and audibly (not physically) co-present, including tone of voice, pitch, silences and breathing as meaning making practices. While text messaging affords contact outside "real time" and does not require "on the spot" response, calling – being co-temporal and in oral mode – allows a certain intimacy and dealing with sensitive matters (Laursen, 2012). The same applies for voice messages, which also seems to be the preferred choice when it comes to complex issues (König, 2024). These characteristics of modalities are exploited in continuous contact and relational work.

Research on interconnected polymedia interaction is still relatively scarce. Laursen (2012) examined the transition from text messaging to calling in friendships of Danish youngsters by looking at how the call opening related to the prior text messaging. she identified one type of telephone conversation following text messaging that is particularly relevant to our data: the resumption of conversation after a closed text message exchange (Laursen, 2012, p.92). Although the text message exchange was closed (i.e. not requiring a response), the texting typically included a later appointment, and it was at the approximate time of the appointment that the call took place. This allows for the orientation to the call as continued interaction as the reason for calling. According to Laursen, by reference to the appointment made in text messaging, "the caller invokes a close relationship to the callee because he shows a high orientation towards their continuing business and presupposes that the other can make the link with ease" (2012, p. 94). Hence, transitioning from one modality to another creates opportunities for interactional relationship work. As explained above, the relationship between foster parents and birth parents is hybrid and complex. We may expect parents to manage boundaries between work and personal life in their communication with each other (Mols & Pridmore, 2020). They can take advantage of different communicative opportunities to deal with the relationship (Madianou and Miller, 2012: 8).

In recent years, several studies have been conducted to identify interactional practices in social work.

For example, Paoletti (2013) analysed the use of storytelling by social workers to talk about delicate issues. A study by Jorgensen (2019) provided a detailed analysis of a meeting between a social worker and the parents of a baby just placed in a foster family to identify how negative emotions are displayed and dealt with in this meeting. However, little is known about the interactional practices between professional foster parents (PFPs) and birth parents (BPs). We previously examined instant-messaging between PFPs and BPs focusing on updates about the youngsters and how PFPs and BPs responded to

these updates (Sliedrecht et al, 2022). We found that through updates BPs worked to display responsibility, and PFPs subtly empower BPs as parents.

In order to provide more insight into the collaboration between PFPs and BPs, in this article we analyse two cases of interconnected polymedia communication (text messaging and phone call interaction) between PFPs and BPs. These cases allow for scrutiny of the embeddedness of co-parenting in everyday life beyond relatively single, isolated moments of interaction (Mols & Pridmore, 2020). Therewith, this analysis contributes to knowledge of interactional practices in the field of social work (Flinkfeldt et al. 2022) and the relationship between PFPs and BPs more specifically.

Methods

This paper focuses on two cases of interconnected interactions in a polymedia environment, taken from a dataset of conversations between 13 pairs of Professional Foster Parents (PFPs) and Birth Parents (BPs) over a period of two months. The 13 pairs were selected by three youth care organisations and categorized as long (more than 2 years of collaboration- five cases) or short (less than 2 years of collaboration- eight cases) and good (self-assessment – eight cases) or ambivalent (self-assessment – five cases) (see Hospes et al., 2018). The data comprise instant messaging (by WhatsApp) conversations and phone calls between PFPs and BPs during this period, collected as part of a wider research project on cooperation between PFPs and BPs (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018). Before data collection, all participants (and when applicable the legal guardian) were informed about the study and research procedure and gave their informed consent. Prior to data collection, PFPs installed an app on their phone that enabled the recording of all phone calls with BPs. The WhatsApp messages were transferred by using the chat export functionality of WhatsApp. The WhatsApp messages include text, emoji, images, and videos.

The participants who feature in the two cases under scrutiny here are a Professional Foster Mother (PFM) and a Birth Mother (BM) who share the care of four children between 12 and 18 years old. These siblings are placed together and full-time in family-style group care, which had started 3 years and 10 months prior to data collection. These adolescents live in PFPs home, but visit their BPs on occasion (weekends, holidays). Hence, it may be assumed that the co-parenting relationship had grown over the years. During the period of data-collection, PFM and BM had contacted on average twice a week through instant messaging and once a month in a telephone call. At the time of the data collection they evaluated their co-parenting relationship as ‘good’.

Data collection

The data were collected as part of a research project focusing on the cooperation between PFPs and BPs in family-style group care (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018). In this project, several types of data (interviews, videorecorded evaluation meetings and WhatsApp messages) were collected to gain insights into key factors in successful collaboration between co-parents. We chose to study the phone calls and instant messaging from a conversational analytical perspective (see section Analysis) to understand how the collaboration unfolds in day to day communication in this particular care context. During data sessions, we noticed that during instant messaging interactions, participants sometimes refer to contact by phone. We found 13 instant messages, in the interactions of 6 pairs, in which participants proposed to call, for example:

Excerpt 1 - Case 6 – 08- 09- 2018 ‘Grandpa died last night’

1 08-09-2018[BM]: Opa Jansen is vannacht overleden

Grandpa Jansen died last night

2 08-09-18 15:58[PFM]: Gecondoleerd!! Morgen maar even bellen?

Condolences!! Shall we call tomorrow?

Studying those instances, we became interested in the follow-up call. Although it has been investigated which medium is chosen for what kind of information (e.g. King et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2021), little attention had been paid to how participants switch from one medium to another and how these different moments of interaction are connected. Our data enabled us to examine the details of interconnectedness between the instant-messaging interactions and phone calls (cf. Laursen, 2012). We selected two stretches of instant messaging and the subsequent (mobile) phone calls for detailed analysis (see below), case 1 called: ‘catching up’ and case 2 ‘worries about Nathalie.

The data are in Dutch; fragments included in this article are translated into English by the authors. The translations are made as literal as possible, sometimes leading to awkward wording in English. Names of the families, children and locations have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Analysis

We applied the method of Conversation Analysis (CA), a research method to analyse ‘naturally occurring’ interaction. CA provides tools to analyse interaction in detail, identifying specific interactional practices and gaining insight into how participants achieve mutual understanding and how they get “things done” (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). This approach has also been proven useful for studying how *digital* interaction such as instant messaging is built up post by post (Giles et al, 2015; Sliedrecht et al., 2022).

In analysing the data, different steps were taken. First, the phone calls were transcribed using CA transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004). Second, the conversations were analysed turn-by-turn and post by post to explore what actions were done by both of the participants (Schegloff, 2007). Next, we examined the connection between the messaging and the phone call opening (cf. Laursen, 2012). During the process of analysing, multiple data sessions were held by the authors to reach consensus on the analysis, as is common in Conversation Analysis research (ten Have, 2007)..

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Analysis

The analysis of PFM and BP's interaction via instant messaging and/or phone shows how both participants orient to the contingencies (i.e. issues that may be applicable to the situation) and entitlements (i.e. assumed rights) (Curl & Drew, 2008) of making an appointment. Via instant messaging, PFM and BM collaboratively arrive at a day and time for a phone call, while orienting to relational aspects like 'who is available when'. The instant messaging-sequence is a closed text message exchange (cf. Laursen, 2012) that projects the phone call as a continuous social action. In the following, we examine the two cases of interconnected communication in detail.

Case 1: Catching up

In Excerpt 2, the participants work towards an appointment for a call, that is presented as a regular activity (cf. Drew & Chilton, 2000). So instead of just calling BM, PFM proposes BM to *plan* a phone call to catch up. The instant messaging takes place in the evening, between 8.25 and 9.37 pm.

Excerpt 2 - Case 4 – 23-05- 2018 'Catching up'

1 23-05-18 Hoi hoi, zullen we binnenkort weer bellen?
 20:26-
 [PFM]:

Hi hi, shall we call some time soon again?

2 23-05-18 Zeg maar wanneer 😊
 20:37-
 [BM]:

You say when 😊

3 23-05-18 Uhm, kun jij vrijdagmiddag? Of maandagmiddag? Ik weet
 21:17- niet tot hoe je moet werken. Mag jij de tijd zeggen. Of
 [PFM]: een andere dag als deze niet uitkomen

*Uhm, is Friday afternoon possible for you? Or Monday
 afternoon? I don't know what time you finish work. Just
 tell me what time. Or another day if these don't suit*

4 23-05-18 Uhm vrijdag kan ik rond 13.00 thuis zijn en maandag rond
 21:25- half 2 als ik geen inval heb krijg mijn rooster voor
 [BM]: volgende week morgen

Uhm I could be at home around 1.00 pm on Friday and Monday around 1.30 pm if I don't have to stand in for someone tomorrow I will get my schedule for next week

- 5 23-05-18 Oh ja, dat heb je ook wel verteld. Dan toch eerst maar je
21:31- rooster even afwachten 😊
[PFM]:

Oh yes, you told me that already. Then let's wait for your schedule first 😊

- 6 23-05-18 Hahaha ja dat is goed maar als je zoiets hebt van deze
21:34 - vrijdag komt het beste uit dan kan dat rond 13.00 uur
[BM]:

Hahaha yes that's fine but if you think this Friday suits best, then around 1 pm is possible

- 7 23-05-18 Uur
21:34 -
[BM]:

p.m.

- 8 23-05-18 Zullen we dat dan doen?
21:34 -
[PFM]:

Shall we do that then?

- 9 23-05-18 Ik vind het prima doen we
21:36 -
[BM]:

Fine with me let's do it

- 10 23-05-18 👍 📅
21:37-
[PFM]:

The first post is a colloquial greeting (hoihoi) immediately followed by the proposal to call again soon so without any pre-topical talk like 'how are you' (Schegloff, 1968: 1076). This proposal thus projects another – interconnected – future interaction (on the phone). Notably, PFM does not provide a specific reason for wanting to call. Instead, the design of the

proposal (*call again soon*) presents calling as a regular activity of the two and thus a routine in co-parenting. In other words, in instant messaging a future call can be constructed as the kind of call to catch up/ keep in touch (cf. Drew & Chilton, 2000 for how this is done in habitualised call openings). The rest of the text interaction, which takes place roughly within an hour after this proposal, is related to arranging *when* to call.

Second, in the sequence of “making an appointment” it is apparent how the participants attend to the *other’s* contingencies (working hours) and presumed interests (Curl & Drew, 2008). The fact that PM does not just call already signals this other-attentiveness (showing engagement with the other (Bolden, 2006)), but it is also observable in BM’s response to post 1. “You say when” (post 2) displays an orientation to what suits PFM whereby BM presents herself as available and overtly willing to call, underscored by the emoji. Next, PFM suggests two options for the call, expanding with explicit orientation to BMs contingencies in terms of working hours and offering BM to choose a time or another day (post 3). Then, rather than choosing one option, BM reviews both days in terms of availability and adds exact times when she could make it with a substantial uncertainty for the second option (post 4). Thus, she leaves it to PFM to choose either option.

Rather than picking the Friday 1 pm. option, PM responds with an “oh yes” receipt (post 5), implying she should have known about BMs schedule (Seuren et al., 2015). Hence, PFM again orients to BMs contingencies, proposing to wait with scheduling the call until after BM has received her working schedule (post 5). Then, BMs next post starts with laughter particles (post 6). These seem to respond to PFM’s display of accountability and relieve the implied self-deprecation (Petit-Jean & Morel, 2017: 12). In the rest of the post, BM re-orient to the appointment making, suggesting the option of Friday 1pm. in terms of PFM’s interest (“if you think this Friday suits best”). This way PFM and BM eventually arrive at an appointment, which also closes the messaging.

In sum, the participants use instant messaging to prepare a phone call, notably orienting to the other’s contingencies and thus displaying sensitivity to the relationship. We also saw that proposing a call does not necessary include a reason: calling is constructed as a routine in co-parenting, with the children and their well-being as ever available topic. The day and time of calling are however all but routine (in contrast to the routine calls examined by Drew and Chilton, 2000). The course of making an appointment is fused with other-attentiveness regarding availability and interest, with BM as limitedly available and PFM’s initiative and interest in a call as recurrent orientations.

Two days later, BM and PFM call for more than two hours (2 hours, 11 minutes, and 40 seconds). The exact time of the call is unknown. However, given the information of the instant messaging presented above and line 2 of the phone call below, the call appears to be taking place somewhat later than planned:

Excerpt 3 Phone call, Case 4 - 25-5-2018 ‘Catching up’

-Phone Rings-

1 BM ho:aʔi::

hi

(0.6)

2 PFM ho::ii::

hi

(0.4)

3 <jij dacht die belt niet meer>

you thought she's not going to call any more

(1.2)

4 BM nou:: (.) ik was al bezig en ik denk 'khou de telefoon

well (.) I already started and thought I will keep the phone

5 wel bij me=

with me

6 PFM =ha ha ha ha[ha

ha ha ha ha ha

7 BM [hja

y(h)es

8 PFM maar komt wel uit da'k nu nog bel?

but does it suit that I still call now?

(0.9)

9 BM ja ja ja

yes yes yes

10 PFM o::ké (0.8) nee 'k was effe in gesprek met uh met

okay I was briefly talking to eh

11 Nigel ook en ik denk dat vind k uh (0.5) toch even

to Nigel also and I thought that was eh (0.5)

12 belangrijkerhh dus dat ga ik eerst even doen hahaha

a bit more importantthh so I will first briefly do that hahaha

13 BM hheehee

14 (.)

15 PFM ja=

yes

16 BM =ja dat loopt niet zo lekker (0.8) hoorden ik

yes that is not going very well (0.8) I heard

(.)

17 PFM nee ja t'is is per dag wel een beetje wisselend,

no yeah i-it is a bit different every day

18 maar hij eh (1.3) ja hij gaf ook aan vanmiddag

but he eh (1.3) yeah he also said this afternoon

19 jullie zijn zo chagrijnig de laatste tijd

you are so grumpy lately

After the reciprocal greetings, PM accounts for calling later than what was agreed upon ("you thought she is not going to call anymore"), which typically occurs after the initial greetings (Drew & Chilton, 2000). BM, in response, indirectly affirms that she was awaiting her call (line 4-5). Then, PFM explicitly ratifies whether BM is still available, showing she does not take BM's availability for granted (line 8). Since the phone call is noteworthy later than planned, they renegotiate and re-agree this is still the right time to call. Notably, PFM does not give a reason for being late (yet) but solely attends to what the delay may mean for BM.

After availability is re-established, PFM presents an account for being late: a conversation she 'just briefly' had with Nigel, BM's son (line 10-12), who is living with PFM. So, PFM suggests that caring for the child (in real time) was legitimately more important at that moment than the appointment to call with BM (talking about care). The post completion laughter (line 12) works to "modulate or neutralize" the disaffiliative action (Shaw et al. 2013) of prioritizing talking to Nigel to calling with BM. BM responds with laughter (line 13), refraining from any explicit response to the delay.

As PFM's conversation with Nigel was spatially and temporarily proximate it may also be taken up as a first topic (cf. Drew & Chilton, 2000), which is also what BM does in line 16. She nominates Nigel as a topic (Button & Casey, 1984), since it 'is not going well' (line 16). PFM starts reporting about Nigel (line 17-19) and PFM and BM share their worries about him (from line 19 onwards, data not shown).

In other words, how to talk (by phone), when to talk (day and time), situationally arranging availability on the phone and displaying accountability about delay are found at the surface level of the interaction, while calling is constructed as a regular activity between these two people. Contact between PFM and BM is planned via text messaging and eventually “done” by telephone. Via messaging, PFM and BM negotiate *when* to talk, but not about *what*. Throughout making the appointment, both participants orient explicitly to the contingencies of the other, be them related to work or care duties. The delay of the arranged call is accounted for with the child needing care at that very moment. PFM’s laughter displays the sensitivity of being late and justifying that with a reason which is also in BM’s interest. Relatedly, BM explicates her (continuous) availability, despite delay and thus presents herself as a dedicated and reliable (co-)parent. The ‘current-ness’ of the account – the conversation with Nigel – evolves into the first topic: Nigel’s problem(s).

Case 2: ‘Worries about Nathalie’

The second case of the same Professional Foster Mother (PFM) and Birth Mother (BM) also consists of successive interactions through instant messaging and later a mobile phone call. This time the interaction is about the 16-year-old Nathalie (the older sister of Nigel). As can be seen from the time stamps, the instant messaging interaction takes place during 10 minutes in the morning, from 9.57 am. to 10.07 am.

Determining when to call

In this instant messaging-conversation, BM and PFM share their worries about Nathalie and make an appointment for a phone call to further discuss this. PFM initiates the interaction at 9:57 am.

Excerpt 4 - case 4 – app - 04-06-18: ‘Worries about Nathalie’

- 1 04-06 Hoi hoi, ik zag jou mail en sluit me daar volledig bij
 09:57 – aan.
 [PFM]: **Hi hi, I saw your email and I completely agree.**
 2 Ik maak mij ook echt zorgen om Nathalie.
 I am also really concerned about Nathalie.
 3 Komt het jou uit als ik jou vandaag even bel?
 Does it suit you if I briefly call you today?
 4 Hoi ik ben blij dat wij niet de enige zijn die het zien.
 04-06 Dank je wel.
 09:59 – **Hi I’m happy we’re not the only ones who see it. Thank**
 [BM]: **you.**
 5 Ja dat is goed zou het richting einde dag kunnen of komt
 6 jou dat slecht uit ivm de kids
 Yes that’s fine would it be possible towards the end of
 the day or does that not suit you because of the kids
 Dat is goed. Vind het wel belangrijk dat we weer even
 7 contact hebben.
 8 **That’s fine. Think it’s important that we briefly have**
 contact again.
 04-06 Hoe laat kan ik bellen?
 10:00 – **What time shall I call?**
 9 [PFM]: Vanaf 15.00?
 After 15:00?
 10 Ja dat komt heel goed uit
 11 **Yes that suits very well**

04-06 Oké top
 12 10:01 - **Okay great**
 [PFM]: Ik vond Nathalie Ook stiller dit weekend
 13 04-06 **I thought Nathalie was also quieter this weekend**
 10:02 - Oké, zij verdween gisteravond ook gelijk naar boven toen
 14 [BM]: zij terug was.
 15 04-06 **Okay, she also immediately disappeared upstairs when she**
 10:02 - **came back.**
 [PFM]: Oké ik denk dat het misschien te maken heeft met een
 16 04-06 grapje die Jaimy en Lenneke vertelde over een chocolade
 17 10:02 - paashaas die Nathalie had open gemaakt in de winkel toen
 18 [BM]: ze heel klein was en dat vond Nathalie niet leuk
 19 04-06 **Okay I think it may have to do with a joke that Jaimy and**
 10:03 - **Lenneke told about a chocolate easter bunny that Nathalie**
 [BM]: **had opened in the store when she was very young and**
 04-06 **Nathalie didn't like that**
 10:04 -
 [PFM]:

04-06
 10:07 -
 [BM]:

PFM initiates contact (lines 1-3), similar to Excerpt 2, with a package post (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008) consisting of a greeting, a reason for contact and follow-up posts aligning (Stivers, 2008) with BMs concerns about Nathalie and proposing to call later that day. The reason is an email sent by BM about 16-year-old Nathalie, which PFM explicitly agrees with: “hi hi, I saw your e-mail and I completely agree” (line 1). Unfortunately, the email is not part of our dataset. However, on the basis of PFM’s post it can be deduced that she also received the email: “I saw your email”. making it relevant to and interconnecting it with the instant messaging conversation (Laursen, 2012). Apparently, there is a shared concern about Nathalie as we can see in the assessment of PFM in line 2: “I’m also really concerned about Nathalie” (Pomerantz, 1984), which is also presented as the reason for contact. Thereby, PFM orients to the institutional collaboration: their co-parenting relationship. The proposal to call displays other-attentiveness, asking if it suits to “briefly” call today, that is, a short call on a moment suitable to BM.

There is more to note about the proposal. First, the proposal is phrased as ‘Does it suit you if I briefly call you today?’ (line 3) instead of ‘can you call me’ or ‘shall we call’, which was the case in Excerpt 2. “I call you” leaves little room to say no, i.e. it displays high entitlement (Curl & Drew, 2008) to propose or request a call. This is related to the time frame ‘today’, which implies the call is urgent to some extent. Relatedly, the proposal of PFM to call BM is probably due to the costs of calling; PFM is always the one who calls BM.¹ Third, the proposal implicitly invokes calling as the preferred way to talk about the problem (Laursen, 2012; Madianou, 2013).

In terms of structure, BM’s response (line 4) mirrors that of PFM: a reciprocal “hi”, a response to the agreement about the e-mail, and a thank you. So, BM explicates an appreciation of PFM’s shared stance towards the problem (“it”). She uses “we”, probably referring to her and her partner, the stepfather of the children.

Then, BM accepts the proposal to call and moves on to arrange the time displaying sensitivity to the contingencies of care (lines 5-6), and thus acknowledging PFM’s part in care for the children. PFM accepts the proposed time (‘that is fine’), expanded with a reason why potentially any time would be acceptable: “Think it’s important that we briefly have contact again” (lines 7-8), overruling

¹ Probably, BM has a prepaid phone leading to relatively high costs.

contingencies (cf. Laursen, 2012). Notably, PFM implicitly affirms that calling is the preferred modality for contact in spite of the ongoing instant messaging.

In lines 9-12, the participants arrange the precise time to call, which could have closed the instant messaging as any further business could have waited until the call (as the preferred channel) later that day. However, BM expands her confirmation with a first-hand assessment (“I thought Nathalie was also quieter this weekend” line 13), indirectly offering additional reason to be worried about her. The assessment is based on ‘this weekend’ when the girl stayed with BM. PFM agrees with a reciprocal first-order account from ‘last night’ when the girl stayed with PFM. Hence, each draw on their own epistemic domain as terms of agreement (Heritage & Raymond, 2005), which arguably upholds a knowledge asymmetry having differential access to events. However, BM then presents a candidate explanation for the observed “deviant” behaviour, namely a first-order past experience of Nathalie that had been brought up while she was staying with BM together with her sisters. There is no uptake from PFM to this potential explanation, and BM does not (yet) display the relevance of an uptake which implies further exchange could wait until the planned call.

To summarize, the instant messaging-interaction is used by PFM and BM: 1. To raise an issue, specifically a problem; 2. To propose that it needs to be talked about and; 3. To arrange an appropriate moment to have a phone call about it, displaying sensitivity to each other’s contingencies. Like in the first case, this shows how participants create interconnectedness between their interactions through various modalities, and that each modality is ascribed a specific function: instant messaging for raising an issue for discussion and arranging an occasion to talk and calling as the modality for the activity of having the conversation proper, probably related to the sensitivity of the problem (cf. Laursen, 2012).

The phone call

A few minutes after 3 pm. – the arranged time to call – BM sends a message asking PFM to call again, see line 1 below. In the instant messaging interaction (excerpt 4, line 9), PFM proposed that she calls BM, which we analysed as potentially related to the costs of calling. It seems that PFM indeed did call BM at the agreed time, but that BM’s line was busy upon which PFM left a message on BM’s voicemail (line 12). In this context, BM asks PFM in an instant message to call her once more, rather than calling PFM herself.

Excerpt 5 - case 4- phone call – 04-06-2018: ‘Worries about Nathalie’

- 1 BM: 04-06 15:04 Zou jij nog een x kunnen bellen
Could you call one more time
- 2 *ring* (briefly after 15:04)
- 3 BM: hjo:ji::
hi
- 4 PFM: hoi hoi:: hehe=
hi hi hehe
- 5 BM: =heh ik was effe met Miranda in gesprek.
=heh I was just talking to Miranda.
- 6 (.)
- 7 PFM: j↑a[:ik]
yea[:]
- 8 BM: [die] belde me. Uheh
[she called me. Uheh
- 9 (.)
- 10 PFM: ik was al druk aan het kletsen tegen de ↑voicemail hh
I was already busy talking to the answering machine hh
- 11 hehe[hehehe
- 12 [eh jahaha:

- BM: *[eh yeahaha:*
 13 (.)
 14 .hh ik denk lekker handig is dat.
 PFM: *.hh I think how great.*
 15 .hh j(h)a:,
 BM: *.hh y(h)eah:,*
 16 ja: hh nee: maar het verbaast ons niet h_oor jouw mail die *yeah:*
 PFM: *hh no: but it does not surprise us [hoor*] the email*
 17 je stuurde uh:::-
that you sent uh:::-
 18 (1.0)
 19 nee Miranda die zou jou ook nog effe:- >effe bellen.<
 BM: *no Miranda she would also still brief:- briefly call you*
 20 ohw:: ik hoor nu >piep piep< misschien dat ze het nu
 PFM: *ohw:: I hear >beeb beeb< maybe she is trying it now.*
 21 probeert. Dat w_eet ik niet.
I don't know.
 22 (0.3)
 23 ow=okee heh hh=
 BM: *oh=okay heh hh=*
 24 =maar goed, die belt vast wel terug. (h/n)↑ee want ik vond
 PFM: *=anyway she'll call back. (h/n)o because on Friday I also didn't*
find
 25 haar vrijdagguh ook niet zo u::h- (0.5) <en donderdag toen
her very u::h (0.5) <and Thursday when
 26 ze kwam-> (.)ik had zoiets van n_ou (0.3) >weet ik niet<.
 27 BM: *she came-> (.) I was like well (.) >don't know<*
 (1.0)
 28 PFM: hmnee.
hmno.
 29 een beetje: >inderdaad< somber, geen uh- haar ↑ogen stonden
a bit: >indeed< gloomy no uh- her eyes were
 wat duiste:r (.) en
a bit da:rk (.) and

*hoor = untranslatable Dutch tag

PFM complies with the request to call once again (line 2). The intonation of the mutual greetings is marked (lines 3-4). The first is stretched and produced with clear contours upwards and downwards, arguably orienting to the expected, planned and requested occurrence of the call (Schegloff, 1986). The return greeting by PFM is also stretched and followed by laughter. By doing so, PFM affiliates with BM's greeting (Jefferson, 1979). Then, BM produces an account for not having been available (cf. Drew & Chilton, 2000: 142) despite the appointment as she suggested to be available from 3 pm onwards (see Excerpt 4, line 10) and turned out to be unavailable. Thus, BM displays an orientation to the interconnectedness between the instant messaging and this phone call (Laursen, 2012). Being on the phone with Miranda, the (family) guardian of the Birth Family of Nathalie, is presented as the reason for not answering PFM's initial call. So again, as in example 1, the contingencies of care are treated as a valid reason for not being available as planned (departures from their routine, Drew & Chilton, 2000). That it was Miranda who called (line 5), not the other way around, further reduces BM's culpability for being occupied. Both accounts are followed by laughter (lines 5-8), probably making the trouble of not reaching the other lighter (cf. Jefferson 2004). BM accepts this latter account explicitly and affiliatively with laughter (line 12). PFM evaluates her "chatting to" the voicemail, implying she thought she was talking to BM, discovering later it was the voicemail she was talking to. The ironical "I think great is that" (line 14) marks the discovery of this mistake, which may have been sparked by the incoming instant messaging post of BM asking to call her once more. BM aligns and affiliates with laughter (line 15), not further going into the trouble of reaching each other.

Next, PFM brings up the reason for calling (line 16). It was PFM who initiated the instant messaging proposing to call about this (and agreeing with what BM wrote in an e-mail to Miranda), and now it is PFM again who presents the reason. This time it is not the agreement with BM's email which is highlighted but a "lack of surprise" about the email. This topic initiation, explaining why it was no surprise, is projectably incomplete signalled by "uh:::" but is cut off due to another incoming call ('I hear beep, beep' line 20) at that very moment. After a silence, BM self-selects offering a potential explanation for this incoming call: Miranda was also going to call PFM.

PFM responds to BM's announcement that Miranda was going to call, agreeing it might be her. However, she accounts for not responding to the incoming call, alluding to the norm that callers who do not reach their intended recipient will try again later (line 24). By bringing in Miranda, the complexity of the co-parental relationship and the care setting which they are part of becomes tangible: the family guardian knows about the situation, probably due to the email that was sent to her and is also involved because of her legal role. Having dealt with the competing incoming call, PFM returns to the main topic (line 25) launching a story on her similar/ congruent ("too") impression of Nathalie: "because on Friday I didn't find her very...[positive]". Thus, PFM presents a reciprocate, affiliative assessment based on her first-hand knowledge (Heritage, 2011; Pomerantz, 1984), similar to the instant-messaging interaction, where PFM also agreed with BM's assessments (in line 2 "also worries", in post 14 "okay last night she disappeared upstairs right away") but this time BM's assessment is implicit. The phone call continues for 45 minutes and 45 seconds, in with PFM and BM both share first-hand knowledge examples that underline the worries about Nathalie (data not shown)

In sum, the telephone call is sparked by a specific reason ("worries about Nathalie") and legitimized as such by the participants :. *When* to talk (day and time), *how* to talk (on the phone) and the reason for having contact is arranged and planned through instant messaging. Throughout the instant messaging interaction BP and PFM orient to contingencies of the other in planning the phone call, like work and care duties. At the agreed time, the line of BM was busy, and she asks by an instant message if PFM wants to call again. BM displays accountability for not being available at the agreed time due to a call with the guardian of Nathalie at the same time, adding that the guardian was calling her. She explicates that the guardian will call PFM too, which underscores the importance of their co-parenting relationship. This second case shows how participants use various modalities to interact with each other in a context of parenting *trouble*. Besides it makes explicit how the care system (involvement of the legal guardian) is interwoven in the co-parenting relationship.

Conclusion and discussion

Youngsters who grow up in family-style group care benefit from a harmonious co-parenting relationship between their Birth Parents (BP's) and their Professional Foster Parents (PFPs). Nonetheless, a harmonious co-parenting relationship is difficult to achieve and maintain (Chateauneuf et al., 2018). The purpose of this paper was to shed light on everyday interaction in this sensitive and complex co-parenting context. We analysed two cases of everyday interconnected polymedia interaction (Laursen, 2012; Madianou, 2014) between PFPs and BPs, through instant messaging and calling. Conversation Analysis (CA) was used to disentangle how PFP and BP manage and negotiate *when* and *how* to talk about *what* in detail. The two cases of interconnected polymedia interaction, the two cases provided the ability to study how the participants manage their co-parenting relationship and suit their interactions by use of different communication media, specifically instant messaging and telephone calls (Madianou, 2014), and how they make use of the advantages of each medium (Madianou and Miller, 2012). The analysis shows the effort it takes for PFP and BPs to create an environment to keep in touch (cf. Drew & Chilton, 2000) in order to discuss co-parenting issues on a regular basis and herewith construct their collaborative relationship.

First, the analysis revealed that it is not self-evident *when* PFP and BPs talk to each other; this has to be negotiated. PFP and BP make use of instant messaging to plan the telephone call (cf. ‘interconnected sequences’, Lauren, 2012): they determine an appropriate time to call and agree on the reason for contact (catching up (case 1) or a specific issue (case 2)). However, in both cases one of the participants was not available at the agreed time and in the opening of the telephone call they re-established their availability and presented an account for being late related to care. This indicates that contact between BPs and PFPs is interwoven, and may interfere, with care practice (cf Mols & Pridmore, 2020). So although instant messaging and telephone contact in principle afford 24/7 availability, our data showed that calling availability of BM and PFM is by no means self-evident.

Second, the analysis makes tangible *how* participants create a context to keep in touch about co-parenting issues. Throughout the conversations participants display continuous other-attentiveness and they orient to contingencies and entitlements of the other party (Curl & Drew, 2008). We see persistent other-attentiveness: they take the agenda of the other party into account and orient to care for the children as of primary importance. In the two cases we disentangled the ways in which PFPs and BPs on the one hand focus on their collaboration and on the other hand share responsibility in taking care of the child (Järvinen and Luckow; 2020; Nesmith et al., 2017).

While earlier research indicated that instant messaging is used for keeping the other party updated on events in the life of the youngster (Slidrecht et al, 2022), the current analysis revealed a preference for calling in some cases. By proposing to call rather than to deal with matters through instant messaging, participants make their medium preference explicit (cf. Madianou and Miller, 2012). In Excerpt 4, BM extended the messaging beyond the calling appointment to discuss the issue with Nathalie, but the fact that PFP did not respond to this, also seems an orientation to calling as the preferred medium for the conversation proper in case of a problem. If calling is the preferred medium, one might expect participants to just pick up the phone when relevant. The fact that participants do not just call at a self-selected moment, but jointly plan a moment to call implicitly treats unplanned calls as intrusive. A telephone call has to be responded to in real time, which may interfere with everyday care for the youngster. As we saw, even planned calls may turn out to conflict with other aspects of care. Hence, various norms related to the use of communication media impact the PFP-BP collaboration and relationship.

Third, *what* is discussed between PFP and BP is related to their co-parenting task. Routinely, participants keep each other updated (Slidrecht et al., 2022) about the shared care. They construct their call as a regular event and develop a first topic locally in the opening of the call (case 1), talking about ‘noticings’ concerning the immediate local environment (cf. Drew & Chilton, 2000: 150) and talk about the youngster(s) as relevant talk. However, in case of urgency, regular contact moments do not suffice. In case of a problem like “worries about Nathalie”, participants present this as the reason for calling in the preceding instant messaging interaction. When a youngster is staying with PFP, PFP has first-hand-information about the youngster and BP is dependent on the information provided by PFP.

Recommendations for practice

Our findings highlight the importance of regular contact between PFPs and BPs. The analysis showed that the interaction itself works as an activity through which the co-parenting relationship is shaped and maintained. Although mere contact does not inherently lead to better collaboration between PFP and BPs, awareness of the function of having contact may contribute to more commitment to the co-parenting relationship.

As our analysis made clear that a lot of interactional work is spent on planning calls and accounting for delays, it may be recommendable that PFPs and BPs discuss their expectations and preferences with regard to contact in an early stage of collaboration. Social workers can facilitate these discussions. Having insight into the contingencies of the interaction between PFPs and BPs helps social workers to be sensitive for the social impact that is inherent to PFP and BPs relationship.

In general, the analysis provides a basis for reflection on communication between PFP and BPs. In this paper we focused on the interconnectedness of media, but these instances indicate that emotional intricacies and power dynamics play a role in communication between PFP and BPs (Höjer, 2009; Nesmith et al., 2017). In order to enhance a solid basis between PFP and BPs, supervisors can address these issues in counseling conversations.

Recommendations for further research

As our analysis is based on two cases of interconnected polymedia interaction, further research into the use of various communication media in care is needed. One relevant question in this regard is how the communication (medium) is specific to dealing with delicate issues or disagreement compared to less problematic, everyday care issues. A second question is related to other parties relevant to the care context. In the two cases we examined we saw references to other moments and modes of contact (e.g. e-mail, contact with the family guardian). Future research could take a wider angle to the communication landscape in everyday co-parenting and also include participants' own reflections on (the quality of) their communication and relationship.

In sum, our analysis provided a unique insights in everyday interaction in a semi-professional youth care setting. It showed that interaction through various communication media *is* 'doing' co-parenting. Both parties displayed responsibility for each other and for the ongoing and planned interaction. This underlines the importance and value of detailed analysis of interaction in a difficult and complex context such as youth care. Thus, our analysis of everyday interconnected communication through different modalities in family-style group care contributes to the growing body of knowledge of interactional practices in the field of social work (Flinkfeldt et al. 2022).

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