

Fostering Guidance for safer use of computers, the internet and social media with children and young people

Document last updated: February 2019
Document review due: February 2022

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About this document

Title	Fostering Guidance for safer use of computers, the internet and social media with children and young people
Purpose	Guidance for foster carers and staff within the fostering service regarding staying safe using multi-media
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Approved by	Jenny Boyd, Director of Local Delivery
Date	February 2019
Version number	5
Status	
Review frequency	Three-yearly
Next review date	February 2022

Version Control

Date Issued:	Version	Summary of Changes	Created by
December 2015	4	Update of websites and training resources	Rosemarie Cronin
January 2019	5	Update of websites and training information	Rosemarie Cronin

Table of Contents

Section	Page(s)
Introduction	5
Role of the Supervising Social Worker	5
Training and Support for Foster Carers	6
Foster Carers' Guidance for managing media and e-safety in the household	6
Safer Caring for Foster Carers <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of facebook and other social networking websites	8
Keeping up to date – Information for children, young people and all adults working with them	8
Appendix 1 – Digital Family Agreements	10

Introduction

Use of the internet and social networking has become an essential part of growing up in the 21st century. There are many benefits to such technology and it allows children from an early age to access education, on-line activities and games, worldwide communication and information as well as social networking. Social networking is a huge phenomenon particularly for teenagers. The way that such media can be accessed has also changed and it is no longer confined to a computer but children and young people access sites via their phones, games machines and the internet television.

For some young people the internet plays an important part in how they keep in touch with their friends and family – this may be particularly important for children and young people who may have had multiple placement moves or are moved to different areas as it may be their main means of contact with those they have known in previous placements.

Unfortunately, although there are many benefits of the use of the internet and social media there are also challenges which cannot be ignored. This is the same for all but those who are vulnerable are more at risk of becoming victims. There are also additional issues for looked after children that need to continually be considered, for example, contact with people who may pose a risk to them, as well as their own general safety.

Safeguarding children and young people in this 'virtual world' has become a key part of protecting them and keeping them safe. It is therefore crucial that foster carers have enough knowledge and understanding to help protect the children and young people that they look after while also encouraging the positive use of technology.

Role of the Supervising Social Worker

1. Assessing and supervising social workers should talk to foster carers about e-safety and how they will protect the children and young people in their household. This should be incorporated within their family safe care plan which should be updated with each new placement into the household.

Foster Carers also need to know information about what digital devices the child and young person has access to and how much they use it. Ideally the situation regarding digital and internet safety should be discussed as part of the placement planning meeting which should include the child or young person (subject to age and understanding). Areas that should be discussed and clarified could include:

- the role played by digital and internet technology in the child or young person's life
 - what the child or young person uses it for, e.g. school work, social networking, gaming etc
 - what equipment the child or young person has to enable them to access the digital world
 - what technology might be used to help children and young people stay in contact with people they wish to be in touch with e.g. skype, facebook or other social networking sites and whether there are any restrictions to this.
2. Supervising social workers should continue to discuss areas of e-safety as part of their supervision sessions making it relevant to children and young people in placement.

Training and Support for foster carers

All foster carers should be encouraged to have a basic understanding of the internet and digital technology. It is so much part of society today and it will be part of a foster carers role to help children and young people to make use of the benefits of it and to stay safe. The training programme for foster carers includes e-learning and face to face courses for carers to undertake.

Fostering Network publish a book called “Fostering in a Digital World – a common sense guide”, by Maria Boffey. This is a useful resource for foster carers, giving explanations of what things are, as well as handy tips to help carers work alongside children and young people and teaching them to use the internet in a safe way. It covers topics such as online grooming, sexting, cyber-bullying, parental controls, use of facebook, twitter, skype, online gaming etc. This book is available for distance learning where carers are expected to read and complete some short answer questions.

Foster carers should be encouraged to ask for support if they need it regarding the world of digital technology. Some will find it easier to keep up to date than others and if foster carers are finding it difficult they should talk to their supervising social worker, the child or young person’s social worker or talk to other foster carers.

Foster Carers’ Guidance for managing media and e-safety within the household

Foster carers have an important role to play in helping and encouraging young people to access the benefits of communication technology in the safest way. Foster carers do not require extensive knowledge and experience of communication technology to be able to help. Everyday parenting skills like sharing an active interest, supervision and developing the young person’s ability to keep safe can be very useful. However, there are basic computer awareness courses available for adults and it may be useful for foster carers to access these to help build up their own confidence with using the computer. Below is some guidance to help foster carers and all those in their household to stay safe within the world of media and technology:

1. Foster Carers should actively use the internet with children and young people, encouraging an open dialogue and asking about what they are doing. This may well help with the carers understanding as well as give an opportunity for the carer to know the kind of things that the child or young person is doing.
2. Talk to the child or young person about what they are doing when they on the computer or using games machines etc.
3. It may be helpful to set up rules or a family agreement regarding internet use and this may need to be for individual children depending on their age and maturity. This may include amount of time spent on the computer as well as safety online. (See Appendix 1 for a suggested template which is associated with the Fostering in a Digital World book and are available as templates which can be adapted via the website link in the book).
4. Check out what the child or young person knows. It can be easy to assume that all young people are experts in technology and know how to protect themselves online. Children who may have missed schooling may also have missed this teaching at school.
5. Limit the amount of time that can be spent on the internet – it should be an activity but not the sole activity available!

6. Use security software to try to reduce the risk of virus, adware etc. Never share your passwords with the children and young people.
7. Install parental controls appropriate to the age of the child or young person. This should be done on TV's and gaming machines as well as on computers.
8. There are search engines which are set up for use by children which may be useful for young children. With older children search providers and internet security software can be filtered which should allow unsuitable material to be filtered out. Foster carers should familiarise themselves with the filter option as a means of monitoring material.
9. Foster carers should try to familiarise themselves with how social networking works so that they can be aware of the risks. This includes internet chat where children and young people can visit chat rooms online, chat to others that they are playing an online game with or chat individually with another person who is on line. Facebook is for those who are over 13 years of age, however, if a false date of birth is put in there are no checks so children under 13 may access it. If a foster carer discovers that a child or young person has accessed social networking sites inappropriately they should talk to the young person and the social worker and supervising social worker.
10. Access websites which give guidance on safety on the internet etc (see below). The good ones will keep up to date and give useful guidance regarding current risks.
11. Foster Carers should check the history on computers. It will show websites that have been visited.
12. MOST IMPORTANT – foster carers should talk to children and young people about the positive use of media and the internet and also the risks involved. Teach them the SMART tips listed below
13. Do not be afraid to ask the child or young person questions about what they are doing. For example, how much personal information do you give out on the internet? What do you enjoy about using facebook or other social networking sites? Do you feel safe on the internet? What would you do if you do not feel safe?
14. If a foster carer has any concerns regarding a young person accessing inappropriate material, being bullied, bullying others, having contact with people that they shouldn't or any other issue relating to their access to the media, talk to the social worker and the supervising social worker.
15. Care should be taken if use of the internet or digital technology is going to be used as a sanction for poor behaviour. It would be inappropriate for children and young people not to be able to use it to access information that they need to research as part of their education. It would also be important not to restrict contact arrangements which may be agreed as part of the care plan and make use of digital technology. However, foster carers may want to limit the use of digital/internet technology but they need to bear in mind the length of time that this is restricted for and to be realistic about children and young people accessing what they wish to access via other devices.

Safer Caring for foster carers

If the right protection is not in place, the computer could potentially be misused by someone in the foster carer's household. This could include:

- The computer becoming infected by a virus, destroying important personal documents
- A foster carer's own personal information could be accessed which could potentially make them vulnerable to fraud e.g. access to bank accounts or online accounts
- Downloading of illegal or pornographic images
- Accessing and digitally altering photographs
- Using a fake identity on a social networking site.

It is therefore important that foster carers apply appropriate caution, are aware of who is using the computer and use password protection where necessary.

Children and young people may bring their own computer/games console etc in to the foster home. If this occurs it is best to discuss openly, ideally at the placement planning meeting, as to how this can be used. Just because it is the child or young person's equipment does not mean that the foster carer should not have rules around its use and how to keep a child safe on it as a good parent would.

Use of facebook and other social networking sites.

Foster carers should not make information publically available about the fact they are a foster carer and should be careful not to post online any information or photographs of children or young people that they look after.

Foster carers should consider very carefully before agreeing to be a "friend" to family members of the children or young people that they look after. This could risk potential conflicts or repercussions at a later date. Foster carers should also discuss the use of facebook or other social networking sites with their own children so that they do not compromise privacy and confidentiality by putting a comment or photograph on the site about the looked after child or young person. Consideration should also be given to whether it is appropriate for foster carer's own children to "friend" another child in placement on social networking sites and also whether a foster carer should become an online "friend". Depending on privacy settings friends and sometimes friends of friends can have access to private information that you would prefer they didn't have access too.

Keeping up to date – Information for children, young people and all adults working with them

The world of technology is changing fast and for the most up to date information it is best to access reliable websites. However, there is also a chapter in the Safer Caring book (published by Fostering Network, 2012) which that includes a chapter called "Safer Caring in a Digital World" which ideally carers should read. These chapters include useful information as well as helpful tips to manage some of the issues which could arise from the digital world. All carers are provided with a copy of this book.

Fostering Network also have an information sheet regarding Social Networking and Facebook. Foster carers can access this from the member's areas of the Fostering Network Website on www.fostering.net

Coram BAAF publish a book called “Foster Care and Social Networking – A guide for social workers and foster carers” by Eileen Fursland. This is a helpful and practical book that carers and staff may find useful.

Also the” Fostering in a Digital World – a common sense guide”, published by Fostering Network in 2013 is a good resource.

Although such documents and books can be useful if giving basic information, they do go out of date very quickly so it is important that these are not the only source of learning about social media.

Children need to be taught from an early age how to use technology in a safe way and it is important that foster carers talk to the children and young people about staying safe and about the risks involved.

Foster carers should ensure that young people are aware of the SMART tips see www.kidsmart.org.uk :

- **Safe** - Staying safe involves being careful and not giving out your name, address, mobile phone number, photograph, school name or password to people online.
- **Meeting** - Some people you have contacted in cyberspace can be dangerous. Only do so with your parent or carer’s permission and when they can be present.
- **Accepting** - E-mails or opening files from people you don’t really know or trust could get you into trouble - they may contain viruses or dangerous messages.
- **Remember** - Someone online may be lying and not who they say they are. Stick to public areas in chat rooms and if you feel uncomfortable simply get out.
- **Tell** - your parent or carer if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried.

Some very useful websites are:

www.getsafeonline.org

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

www.ceop.police.uk

www.childnet-int.org

These websites include information for children and young people of different age groups as well as advice for parents and carers. On some you can also ask them to send you up to date information so you can try and stay ahead of the game! There is information on the websites regarding use of the internet, chat rooms, mobile phones, gaming and the television. They will give tips on staying safe and also provide advice as to parental controls that you may be able to set up.

The Essex Safeguarding Children’s Board website also has information on it about keeping children safe including a section on online safety (www.escb.co.uk)

Digital Family Agreement

The digital family agreement is a checklist that foster carers can use to direct discussions with all the children and young people in the home. It’s designed to help foster carers establish guidelines and expectations around digital use and behaviour. Some fostering families are comfortable using it as a signed agreement. Others prefer to use it simply as a checklist to direct conversation. Either way, it’s an ideal way to help foster carers find common ground about using digital technology in the home.

You can use this template as it is or amend it as required, for example, to reflect any specific concerns reflected in any risk assessments or adapting it for younger children.

Digital Family Agreement

We agree to follow these rules when we use the internet, mobile phones or games consoles.

We will keep ourselves and others safe by:

- Keeping all personal information such as home/school address, telephone numbers and passwords private.
- Not letting strangers know where I am by tagging photographs or identifying your location on apps such as Foursquare or Facebook.
- Only become friends with people on Facebook if I know them in the real world and promise to use the privacy settings in any services I use.
- Never arranging to meet somebody that I have met online in the real world without my foster carer’s or parent’s knowledge and permission.
- Telling my parents or foster carer if I feel uncomfortable about anything I have seen online or if someone is making me feel uncomfortable or scared online. I will block anyone who offends me or makes me feel awkward.
- Respecting other people online by only sending or posting friendly messages.
- Only downloading files from trustworthy and legal sources. If I am unsure, I will ask our foster carers/ parents. We understand that downloading music, games and films for free can sometimes be illegal and infringe copyright.
- Not opening messages or email from people that I don’t know. I will also delete any unwanted email or spam messages without opening them.
- Asking a parent or foster carer before registering or signing up for things online, including competitions and social networking websites.
- Only buying products or services online once I have permission from our parents/foster carers. This includes in-app purchases such as power-ups, restricted levels, virtual money, special characters and boosts.

We will be good digital citizens by:

- Helping to stop cyber bullying if I know it is happening. I will let my parents or foster carers know.
- Only posting photos or videos online of friends, birth family and foster family after we have got permission to do so.
- Never sending unfriendly messages online.
- Asking a parent or foster carer before registering or signing up for things online, including competitions and social networking websites.
- Only downloading files online from reliable and legal sources and if unsure I will first check with our parent or foster carer. I understand that downloading music, games and films for free can be illegal.

We will think first and:

- Take care with my online activities. This especially applies to gaming in front of younger children.
- Not believe everything I read online is true and people might not be who they say they are.

We will have a healthy balance between the real and digital world by:

- Making sure we finish all our homework before we go online.
- Only going online for the agreed time.

We all agree to help our parents/foster carers understand that the internet can be a fun place and we will help them have fun, learn things online and teach them things about the internet, computers and other technology.

I accept that my internet access can be monitored, filtered or blocked to ensure that I am safe.

I accept my foster carer's Digital Family Agreement.

Foster carers and parents agree that they will never say 'no' without explaining their reasons why.

Signed

Date

Signed

Date

This Digital Family Agreement has been produced as an additional tool to complement the Fostering Network's book *Fostering in a Digital World: a common sense guide* (2013)