

Supporting young people online

Information and advice for foster carers




The internet – an inspiring and positive place


The internet is an amazing resource which enables children and young people to connect, communicate and be creative in a number of different ways, on a range of devices.


However, there are risks online. These will vary depending on a child's age and online activities, and children in care may be more vulnerable to these risks because of behavioural or emotional difficulties, or because of the people they are in contact with.




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Content: Age-inappropriate, unreliable or illegal content can be available online. Talk to your foster child about what content is appropriate and what is inappropriate, and reassure them that they can always turn to you if something worries them online.
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Conduct: Children may be at risk because of their own behaviour. They need to show respect for other people online and to always be wary of giving away personal information to people they don't know online.
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Contact: Children can be contacted online by people who seek to bully or abuse them. Cyberbullying can be reported online and offline, and it helps to be aware of how to report or block abusive users. It's important for children to realise that new friends made online may not be who they say they are. If a child has been approached sexually online you should report to CEOP (www.ceop.police.uk).
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Commercialism: Young people can be unaware of hidden costs and advertising. Encourage them to keep their personal information private, learn how to block both pop ups and spam emails, turn off in-app purchasing on devices where possible, and use a family email address when filling in online forms.

There are real advantages in maintaining an open dialogue with your foster children about their internet use.

Not sure where to begin? These conversation starter suggestions can help.

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1 Ask your foster children to tell you about the websites and apps they like and what they enjoy doing online.
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2 Discuss with them about how they stay safe online. What tips do they have for you, and where did they learn them? What is OK and not OK to share?
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3 Ask them if they know where to go for help, where to find the safety advice, privacy settings and how to report or block on the services they use.
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4 Encourage them to help someone! Perhaps they can show you how to do something better online or they might have a friend who would benefit from their help and support.
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5 Think about how you each use the internet. Are there online activities that you could enjoy together?

Foster care in a digital age

It can be difficult to find a balance between giving young people freedom and privacy online, while also developing boundaries and keeping an eye on them. However, with a bit of planning and ongoing dialogue you can help minimise risks without restricting their opportunities.



Things to think about when planning a placement

- Make sure you are familiar with your agency's policies and guidance on internet safety, and discuss technology use at your planning placement meeting. Remember you can speak to your child's social worker and your supervising social worker if you have any questions – for example, about appropriate contact for the child with their friends and family via technology.
- Consider what technology your foster child will have access to. Do you have a family computer, tablet or games console? Will they be bringing their own devices?
- Decide what family rules you will have when it comes to online technology – remember that these rules apply for you, your foster child and your own children.
- Make use of parental control tools. You can set up filtering on your home internet and use parental control tools on any devices your foster child will use.
- Ask your social worker if the young person has a history of any online harm or risk (eg bullying, grooming, self-harm) and, where relevant, incorporate into the young person's risk management plan.



Privacy and confidentiality

- Be careful what you share. For example, you should not share on Facebook that you are a fostering family, or share daily routines and photos. Make sure friends and family know these rules.
- Familiarise yourself with the privacy settings and reporting features on social networks.
- It's okay to be friends on social networks with your foster child if you both feel comfortable with this.
- With shared devices, make sure you log out of websites or apps after using them.



Establishing trust and giving advice

- Maintain an open dialogue with your foster child – encourage them to talk to you about their internet use and teach them to be kind online, to protect personal information and to 'think before you post'.
- Remind them that meeting someone they have only been in touch with online can be dangerous. Online friends are still strangers even if they have been talking to them for a long time.
- The internet can facilitate continued contact from birth family or people who the child needs protection from. If necessary, explain the reasons why unmanaged contact online is not appropriate. Make sure the child knows they can turn to you, and be aware of blocking tools.
- Encourage them to tell a trusted adult if someone or something makes them feel uncomfortable or worried.



What to do if something goes wrong

- Don't overreact if a child tells you about something that has worried them online, or if you discover something inappropriate on their device. You might feel shocked and angry but by dealing with it calmly the child will know they can turn to you again.
- Save all available evidence, for example by taking screen grabs.
- Speak to your social worker and know where to report the incident, for example to the school, service provider, or the police.

Further advice and resources:

www.saferinternet.org.uk/fostering-adoption
www.childnet.com



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If you need further support about any online safety issue, you can contact the UK Safer Internet Centre helpline for professionals working with children: www.saferinternet.org.uk/helpline



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www.islington.gov.uk/fostering