Safer Care for Internet and social media Policy

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1. Introduction

Use of the Internet and Social Media networking has become an essential part of growing up in the 21st century and there are many benefits to such technology. It allows children from an early age to access education, on-line activities and games, worldwide communication, and information. Social networking is a huge phenomenon, particularly for teenagers and is a term that is used to describe some of the ways in which people communicate online. Some common elements of social networking online are:

- Membership of a website is required.
- A personal profile can be created that tell others about themselves.
- There is the ability to add other people as online friends or contacts.
- Members of the website can communicate among themselves.

The way that such media can be accessed has also changed and it is no longer confined to a computer, children and young people access sites via a range of devices, for example their phones, games machines and internet television.

For some children and young people the Internet and Social Media 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 have had multiple placement moves or are moved to different geographical areas as it may be their main means of contact with those they have known in previous locations.

Although there are many benefits to the use of the Internet and Social Media, unfortunately there are also challenges which cannot be ignored. This is the same for everyone but those who are vulnerable are more at risk, for example of contact with people who may pose a risk to them, as well as their own general safety. In knowing the possible risks of using the Internet and Social Media it is tempting to forbid use of these platforms. Access to the Internet, computers and mobile devices has become so easily accessible that preventing use of the Internet and Social Media is not only unrealistic but can be perceived as detrimental to children and young people. Preventing children and young people from engaging with Social Media networking sites can mark them out as different to their peers and can exclude them from social activities and friendship groups. Social Media can be an important outlet for expressing and shaping identity for children and young people, but it is important that children and young people are provided with guidance and boundaries about safe use of the Internet and Social Media.

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

2. Role of the Fostering Supervising Social Worker

Supervising Social Workers should talk to foster carers about e-safety and how foster carers can protect the children and young people in their household (and should be discussed with fostering applicants during assessment). E-safety should be incorporated within the foster carer Family Safe Care Policy which should be reviewed with each new placement into the household. Foster Carers need to know information about what digital devices the child or 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 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. schoolwork, social networking, gaming etc.
- What equipment the child or young person can or should use to enable them to access the digital world.
- What Social Media platforms might be used to help the child or young person stay in touch with people they wish to be in contact with e.g. Skype, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram, or other social networking sites and whether there are any restrictions to this.

Fostering Supervising Social Workers should continue to discuss areas of e-safety as part of foster carer supervision sessions, making it relevant to children and young people in placement. For children and young people that it is deemed Internet and Social Media is an area of concern that is placing them at harm, additional safety planning will need to be included in the child or young person's individual safer care/risk plan.

3. Managing Internet and Social Media in the Fostering Household (*guidance, support, and training for foster carers)*

Foster carers have an important role to play in helping and encouraging children and 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, parental supervision and developing the child or young person's ability to keep safer can be very useful. 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, the Fostering Service training team will be able to sign post foster carers to these courses and other training options for Worcestershire Fostering Foster Carers to support children with Internet and Social Media.

Basic Internet safety starts with ensuring that you have adequate and updated protective software installed on every computer that is used in your household. Anti-virus software will protect from damage from a variety of viruses. Anti-virus software checks all incoming traffic including web pages, emails, attachments, instant messaging and downloaded files for signs of viruses. Both firewall and anti-spyware software prevents others seeing 'who' you are. A firewall is a program that filters information coming through your internet connection onto your computer. It acts like a barrier and keeps a list of rules detailing what can and cannot pass between your software and the internet. The BBC has a website BBC - WebWise that adults and children can access which covers a wide range of IT learning and keeping safer online.

Although there is an enormous amount of useful information and fun available through the Internet, there is also a great deal of unsuitable material that you would not want a child or young person to access. Installing parental control software provides a layer of security but is not fail safe. It does not eliminate a child or young person's curiosity or developing knowledge of how computers/gadgets work, nor does it limit access to the Internet from other people's computers and mobile phones/gadgets, therefore emphasis must also be on supporting children and young people to develop skills to keep them safer. Putting in place parental controls and rules can, however, provide a discussion starting point and helps to set a 'Foster Family Internet Code', whereby a set of established rules can help children and young people understand the dangers and gives them a sense of responsibility. Discuss these rules with everyone in the household and put a note near the computer as a reminder. Monitor compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time a child or young person spends online. Excessive use of online services, especially late at night, may be a clue that there might be a problem.

Foster carers should actively use the Internet with children and young people, encouraging an open dialogue. Foster Carers should not be afraid to ask the child or young person questions about what they are doing when they go on the computer or using games machines etc. For example, asking the child or young person 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?

Foster carers should 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.

Limit the amount of time that can be spent on the Internet – it should be an activity but not the sole activity available.

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 online games with or chat individually with another person who is online. 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 or is accessing inappropriate material, being bullied, bullying others, having contact with people that they shouldn't or any other issue relating to the child or young person's access to social media, talk to the Fostering Supervising Social Worker and child's Social Worker, and the child or young person if it is appropriate to do so, if unsure speak to the Social Workers first.

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 is 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. Foster carers need to bear in mind the length of time that this is restricted, and to be realistic about children and young people accessing what they wish to access via other devices.

4. Safer Caring for Foster Carers

If the right protection is not in place, the Internet could potentially pose risks to children and young people or others in the fostering household. Children need to be taught from an early age how to use technology in a safer way and it is important that foster carers talk to children and young people about staying safer and about the risks involved. Teach them the SMART tips listed below.

- **S**afe - Staying safe involves being careful and not giving out your name, address, phone number, photograph, school name or password to people online.
- **M**eeting - 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.
- **A**ccepting - 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.
- **R**emember - 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.
- **T**ell - your parent or carer if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried.

Foster Carers must become familiar with CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection) and support children and young people to know about this https://www.ceop.police.uk. CEOP tackles the sexual abuse and exploitation of children both online and offline. CEOP contains advice for children and young people (and carers) on how to report abusive online content or inappropriate sexual content. The site also contains advice on how to remove / take down information which a young person no longer wants to appear online. Worcestershire County Council has CEOP ambassadors who can provide additional support and guidance, the Fostering Supervising Social Worker will be able to discuss this with you.

Never allow a child to arrange a face to face meeting with someone they met online without permission. If a meeting is arranged, make the first one in a public place and go with the young person.

It is important that foster carers apply appropriate caution, are aware of who in the home is using the computers, it may not be appropriate to share devices, but when devices are being shared ensure the use of password protection to prevent foster carer's or other family members own personal information being accessed by a foster child which could potentially make foster carers or other household members vulnerable to fraud e.g. access to bank accounts or online accounts, or the foster child accessing sites that may not be age appropriate for the child or young person. Make sure that all children and young people in the household know not to download programs to the computer without checking with you first.

Have the computer, and gaming devices if possible, situated in a shared family space such as the lounge and ensure that all computers have updated virus protection. Bear in mind that many modern mobile phones can connect directly to the Internet, either using the mobile phone operator's network or over local wi-fi (wireless Internet) like the wireless Internet connection you may have for your home computer. Some mobile phone operators sell phones with filtering software included.

Make sure that everyone in your household who is using Social Media networks is aware of their security settings and how to change them if they need to.

Children and young people may bring their own computer/games console/devices into 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 and whether others for example birth parents can accessing these remotely. 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 safer when using it.

A foster child is not obligated to provide foster carers with their usernames or passwords for Social Media accounts however if they choose to share this information then it is important foster carers keep this information confidential and secure

It may be that a child or young person's use of digital technology is causing them or likely to cause them harm, and foster carers in discussion with Fostering Supervising Social Worker, Child's Social Worker, and the child or young person, depending on their age and maturity, draw up a digital safety agreement. This may include amount of time spent on the computer as well as safety online and is particularly useful for children and young people where the use of Internet and Social Media presents concern. (See Appendix 1 for a suggested template).

Most importantly, it is more productive to go on the 'journey' with children and young people for them to develop their own capacity for safer use of digital technology. The Home Office have produced a website for children about safety and the Internet, see the thinkuknow website.

5. Foster Carer's Use of Social Media and networking sites

It is important that foster carers are aware that their personal Social Media activity could have an adverse impact on their fostering role or the Fostering Service's image and reputation. Even if you do not expressly name the Fostering Service on Social Media. Whenever you go online you must think carefully about what you are posting and how it reflects on the Fostering Service. You should not share on Social Media your role as a foster carer unless this is with the Fostering Service's agreement.

Any breaches of confidentiality or the publication of material that is a cause for concern, may affect a fostering applicant's assessment, or a foster carer's approval status and placements. The Fostering Service will not tolerate any of the following activity on Social Media, abusive or threatening behaviour, comments or material that may be regarded as discriminatory, false or misleading statements that could have a negative effect on the Fostering Service's reputation, inciting or supporting somebody to commit a crime or other unlawful acts.

Information and photographs of foster children must never be posted on Social Media sites without consent from the local authority, parents, and the children (if they are of an appropriate age and maturity). Foster carers must never use Social Media accounts to communicate personal information about a foster child or former foster child. Disclosing confidential, sensitive, or personal information could put the child at risk of harm. Foster carers should be aware that a child or young person's family may be using Social Media to find out information and could negatively use this information.

The Fostering Service advises that to protect foster carer's privacy and that of the immediate fostering family that a foster carer's (including other immediate family members) use of Social Media is on closed forums. Foster carers should discuss the use of Social Media networking sites with their own children/immediate family members so that they do not compromise privacy and confidentiality by putting a comment or photograph on Social Media sites about the foster children or former foster child.

Consideration should also be given to whether it is appropriate for foster carer's own children to 'friend' a foster child in placement on Social Media networking sites and also whether a foster carer should become an online 'friend' to the child or young person. 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 to. Foster Carers should discuss this with the Fostering Supervising Social Worker and child's Social Worker before setting this up, and this would need to be reviewed if a child or young person moves on as the type/nature of acceptable communication is likely to change. Adding a young person as a 'friend' means you can assess/monitor their contents, but it also means they can access yours.

To maintain appropriate professional boundaries, foster carers should not have family members of foster children or former foster children as 'friends' nor should employees of the fostering service and foster carers be 'friends' on Social Media websites.

6. Keeping up to date – Information for children, young people, and foster carers

It is important that children, young people, and foster carers keep up to date and the following websites provide useful 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 safer and provide advice as to parental controls that you may be able to set up.

https://www.getsafeonline.org
www.thinkuknow.co.uk
https://www.ceop.police.uk
https://www.childnet.com

Appendix 1

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 knowledge and permission.
- Telling my 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 my foster carers. 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 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 my 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 foster carers know.
- Only posting photos or videos online of friends, birth family and foster family after we have permission to do so.

- Never sending unfriendly messages online.
- Asking a 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 my 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 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 agree that they will never say 'no' without explaining their reasons why.

Signed

Date

Signed

Date