

Youth in Care and Social Media Use

Social Media and Child Welfare: A Review of the Literature



Introduction

Twenty-five percent (or 171,162 people) of the United States foster care population is aged fourteen and above (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018), one year beyond the legal age to have a personal social media account. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram all require users to be at least 13 years old. As a result, one in four youth in foster care are old enough to legally create profiles on these social media sites. When youth are online, 44% of teens report being online 'almost constantly' with another 44% being online 'several times a day' (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

As a result there is a need to understand how to effectively support youth in care in safe and responsible internet and social media use. There is a tremendous need for more research, program development, and resources to support youth in foster care, social workers, and caregivers in navigating social media and other online spaces. To begin to address this gap, the purpose of this literature review was to summarize the existing literature on youth in care and social media use as well as to identify gaps in the literature and opportunities for resource development.

Benefits of Social Media Use

As with all youth, for youth in care, when social media is used safely, the benefits of being online can easily outweigh the risks. For example, in online spaces, youth in care can express themselves and connect with other youth in care to build community based on similar experiences. They can also maintain sanctioned relationships with past family members, social workers, and friends from different schools. Sustaining these relationships can help prevent them from feeling isolated and alone; being able to use social media can help to decrease the digital divide that many youth in care face (this is discussed starting on page 4).

Control their Own Story

In her 2008 paper, "Why Youth <3 (Heart) Social Network Sites" danah boyd discusses how teens lives are heavily structured by parents and laws, making social networking sites an inviting area for teens to cultivate and present themselves, unrestricted by adult rules. Youth in care are no exception and have more aspects of their lives controlled by adults than other teens. Today, 95% of youth have or have access to a smartphone and 88% report having access to a desktop or laptop computer at home.

Youth in care have no control over the families they are placed with or how long they will remain with the family. In addition,



each foster family may have different rules, cultures, and expectations that youth are required to follow. Social workers and agencies maintain files and records on every aspect of youth in care's lives that youth might not see until they age out of care, or they must go through a lengthy process to access those files. It is possible that youth in care would have several different social workers building these records during their time in care (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2008). Information about youth can get lost in this process, or youth might not be able to ask a former social worker for information about events from previous placements (such as trips a foster family took together). It is no surprise then that these youth are turning to social media and other platforms, such as videos and blogs, for self-expression and a chance to present themselves in a way they can control. Social media can help youth in care feel a sense of normalcy and fit in with their peers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Maintain Connections

Social media can help youth in care maintain connections and social ties with family and friends they are no longer seeing regularly (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

The longer youth are in care, the more likely they are to be moved to multiple placements (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2008). With each move, youth may face a new school, new caregivers, and possibly new foster siblings. It can be difficult for youth to keep track of the different places they have been and the connections they have made. These moves and lost connections have resulted in one-third of youth in care reporting that they felt lonely while in care (Shin & Poertner, 2002).

To help combat this loneliness and maintain connections, youth in care are turning to social media. Social media can allow youth to build and maintain relationships with biological family, friends, previous caregivers, social workers, and other foster siblings. Having these online relationships could help youth in foster care feel less alone and connect with other youth in care who share similar experiences (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Schimmel-Bristow & Ahrens, 2018). This online social support may act as a protective or moderating factor to protect youth, making them less likely than those without this type of social support to become victims online. Whittle, Hamilton-Giachrisis, Beech, and Collings (2013) identified a list of possible risk and protective factors for online grooming (grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or trafficking), among those protective factors were high self-esteem, social support, and high life satisfaction.

Decrease the Digital Divide

A challenge facing many youth in foster care is that of the digital divide, or the gap between those with and without access to information and communication technologies (Finn & Kerman, 2004, 2005; Finn, Kerman, & LeCornec, 2005; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2015; Roche, Vaterlaus, & Young, 2015). Information and communication technologies include cell phones, tablets, and computers; items youth in care often have very limited access to. Results from three longitudinal studies found that only 5% of rural and 21% of urban youth in foster care in California have consistent reliable access to a computer at home (Goldbach, 2016). If a foster family is able to provide these technologies for their youth, or if youth are able to access them at local libraries or schools, their access might temporarily be high. However, youth in foster care are frequently moved and relocated, with no promise of access in their new homes, schools, or communities.

The Casey Family Services Building Skills-Building Futures Information Technology Program (BSBF) was designed to help combat the digital divide among youth in foster care. This program provided 34 foster families with computers, internet connection, and supportive services. After a year in the program, results showed that those families who received the technology and computer training, used the technology more and felt more comfortable using it, as compared to foster families who were not in the program (Finn et al., 2005). Parents in the program felt that the BSBF program was, "improving children's computer skills, grades, homework, ability to find information on the internet, and interest in IT careers" (Finn et al., 2005, p. 477). Currently, only 3% of youth in care graduate with a degree from a four-year college (Courtney et al., 2011), making it extremely important that we provide youth in care with the tools needed to successfully transition to higher education or the workforce. Providing youth in care more consistent online access can help them catch up to and not fall behind other youth who are regularly using online tools.

Risks of Social Media Use

Although social media can provide several benefits to youth in foster care; youth in foster care also face additional challenges not experienced by other youth, and are at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a, 2007b; Wells & Mitchell, 2008). There are strict controls over the information that can be shared about youth in care and sharing too much information online can be dangerous. Predators may take advantage of these youth's vulnerability and pretend to be someone youth think they can confide in and trust (Whittle et al., 2013). In addition, youth in care are also at risk of being found online by biological family members they have restricted contact with (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). As a result, caregivers face many challenges when it comes to monitoring the online behaviors of youth in care (Badillo-Urquiola, Ghosh, & Wisniewski, 2017).

Safety Online

Previous research on youth who have experienced offline victimization or have experienced high levels of parental conflict, suggests that these populations deserve special attention when it comes to internet safety and use (Wells & Mitchell, 2008). Youth in foster care in particular, disproportionately experience many of the risk factors associated with participation in dangerous online behaviors. These risk factors include maltreatment, physical or sexual abuse, and high levels of parental conflict (Mitchell et al., 2007a, 2007b; Noll et al., 2013; Wells & Mitchell, 2008). As a result, youth in foster care are at higher risk than other internet users for inappropriate contact with others (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a, 2007b; Wells & Mitchell, 2008), being targeted by child predators (Noll et al., 2013), and being victims of cyberbullying (The Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). However, high-quality parenting and parental monitoring has been found to moderate adolescent risk factors for participating in dangerous online behaviors (e.g., looking at sexual images, having or creating sexually provocative social media profiles, and engaging in online sexual solicitations; Noll et al., 2013). Therefore, it is extremely important that we not only educate youth in care, caregivers, and social workers on the specific risks youth face online, but also teach ways to help youth remain safe online.

Unregulated Parental Contact

Some youth have protective orders preventing their biological parents or other family members from communicating with them. As a result, some caregivers and social workers are worried that allowing youth in care on social media and access to private message features for example, may enable them to be found by their biological families and may facilitate communication with family members youth are not supposed to be in contact with (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Unregulated contact leaves youth vulnerable to the potential for re-victimization; social media may give youth in foster care a false sense of reunification with their birth families—limiting their ability to make a connection with their foster family

(Albertson et al., 2016). However, simply banning youth in care from using social media because of these fears is not the answer. Instead, caregivers and social workers need to create nonjudgmental and accepting environments for youth, seeking to understand why youth may want this contact with family members. Creating this space allows youth to feel comfortable approaching caregivers and social workers to discuss appropriate contact and inappropriate contact if it does occur (Simpson, 2013).

Monitoring youth in care online presents unique challenges for caregivers (Badillo-Urquiola, Harpin, & Wisniewski, 2017). Many caregivers are not sure how to even begin monitoring online behavior and what they should be looking for if they were to monitor online behavior; this has been attributed to the generation gap between caregivers and youth and caregivers lack of understanding of the media youth are using (Alberson et al., 2017). Some caregivers reported that even if they were familiar with a certain type of media it would be impossible to control due to the variety of ways it is accessed by youth; at school, the library, mobile phones, or on a peer's computer or device (Alberson et al., 2017). Some caregivers have described not attempting to regulate online behavior because the youth owned the device (such as cell phone or computer) and caregivers felt they could not control or take away devices that the youth or someone else had paid for (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2017b).

Conclusion

Protecting youth in foster care online is a unique challenge for both social workers and caregivers. Traditional approaches to protecting youth online rely heavily on a parent-child relationship in which youth and parents feel comfortable and safe truthfully discussing online behaviors. For youth in care, this approach may not be as successful because of their past history of trauma and abuse with adults (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2017a). Youth in care may not have had the opportunity to build trusting relationships with adults, both in and outside of foster care, either due to abuse/neglect from biological family members or frequent placement changes. Consequently, youth in care may never feel comfortable opening up to caregivers and social workers about their lives online; relying on youth to come forward when they run into trouble online might not be the best practice with this population. Therefore, it is essential that guidelines, trainings, and resources be developed to support the many individuals working in support of youth in care, to help keep them safe online. Several interventions already mentioned, have begun to look at youth in care internet safety from a new angle. However, more outreach and engagement work is needed to support not only youth in care but also social workers and families.

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