

Youth in Care and Social Media Use

Best Practices for Caregivers



It is important for caregivers to help keep youth safe online by learning how youth are using social media, what normative social media use looks like for them, and how to talk about social media with them. Youth in foster care report higher rates of inappropriate contact online than other youth; including contact from child predators, and cyberbullying (The Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Youth in care can also experience many benefits from being online. Here are some best practices for caregivers:

Be open minded, positive, and understanding

Focusing only on the dangers of social media will make youth less likely to come forward if things go wrong online.

- Approach the topic in a positive way with interest in what they are doing and with respect for their knowledge of technology, as opposed to always “checking up” on them.
- Youth aren’t perfect and mistakes are likely to happen. If you are able to respond with care and trust, they will be more likely to come to you with questions in the future. Youth report that the main reason they did not come forward when something happened online was because they were afraid their phones or computers would be taken away.
- Look at social media sites together and invite them to teach you about social media, ask questions, and allow them to be the experts.
- Never tease or make fun of anything you read that they have written or posted.

Ask youth why they want to use social media

Some of their reasons might include:

- Connecting with foster siblings, biological siblings, previous social worker or previous caregivers
- Expressing themselves
- Connecting with other youth in care going through similar situations
- Gaining a sense of normalcy/fit in with peers

Monitoring youth use

Unfortunately, there is no “one size fits all” approach. How you monitor social media will depend on 1) youth age, 2) youth’s previous online behavior, 3) youth’s maturity, and 4) devices and apps they are using. Some general rules for monitoring are listed below.



• Secure Settings

- » Remind youth to use settings on their social media profiles as private as possible (for example changing profiles to private or sharing posts with friends only).
- » Some applications such as the “Snapchat map” or “Facebook post locations” tracks users locations. It is important to ensure these features are turned off.
- » For younger youth, caregivers should keep track of their passwords and remind them that they are able to monitor their activities.

• Establish Ground Rules

- » Establish rules about the frequency of social media use and which platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, etc.) youth are allowed to use.
- » Talk about what kinds of information should not be given out, including personal details (full name, address, phone number, or information that would allow strangers to find their physical location; social security number; pictures that could lead to identification of self, family, or friends such as name of school; and financial information).

• Don’t be Fooled

- » Youth may have more than one social media account on the same platform, for example two Snapchat accounts.
- » Finstagrams (or fake Instagrams) are accounts where youth post inappropriate photos and videos they do not want caregivers, schools, or jobs to see—keeping the privacy settings strict.

- For Home Computers

- » Place the computer in a common area where everyone has access to it, and where you can easily see what the youth is doing.
- » Check the history of what social media sites have been accessed OR check the history of what social media sites youth have been accessing.
- » Install protective software for blocking, monitoring, or filtering websites. Set protections so they can't download apps without your approval.

- Learn the lingo

- » Knowing everything about all social networking sites may seem like an impossible task. **We have put together lists of popular texting phrases and applications to help you learn the sites and the language youth use on social networking sites.**
- » It may help to join the social networking sites youth are using to become familiar with these sites and help with monitoring.

The internet is forever

Talk with youth about the lasting effects of what they put on social media. Once something is posted online, even if you think you have deleted it, it can still be found. You never know who saw it or saved a copy while it was up.

- Apps, such as Snapchat, have “self-destructing” features where the picture or text will disappear after a few seconds. Some youth falsely believe that once the image is gone that it is gone forever.
- There are inconspicuous apps, such as apps disguised with a calculator icon that can take and store photos without the sender knowing. See our dangerous app guide z.umn.edu/dangerous-apps.

Biological families.

If a youth is not allowed to be in contact with certain family members it is important to be clear with them about that, and help them understand the potential consequences of online contact.

- Talk about what it would be like to be found by or to search for biological family members online. FosterClub found that 64% of youth in foster care would have liked mentoring either before or during reconnection with family members.
- It is important that caregivers and others in the home do not share information about or images of the youth online. It could be easy for someone to follow the trail to the youth's profile.

Conversation starters

Getting a conversation started can seem like a terrifying task. Here are some conversation starters:

- What would you do if someone you didn't know sent you a friend request?
- Do kids at your school use ___ app?
- Do any of your friends go into chatrooms?
- What would you tell a friend who wanted to meet someone they met online in person?
- Can you show me some of the filters on Snapchat?
- How would it make you feel if (biological family member) contacted you online?

Summary

When used responsibly, the benefits that youth in care gain from being on social media greatly outweigh the risks. Things will not go perfectly after just one talk; caregivers and youth need to learn together. See the Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat links in the related resources section for help on how to adjust location settings.

References and Resources

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