

Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents

While social media has changed the way the world communicates, it also creates privacy and safety concerns. This tip sheet offers some considerations and ideas for foster parents as you use social media and as you guide social media use by youth in your care.

Helping Youth Use Social Media Safely

While it may be tempting to forbid youth to use social media, this is seldom realistic. The Internet and mobile devices are too widespread and accessible. In addition, forbidding social networking may make it harder for youth to fit in with friends. Instead, foster parents can provide guidance and boundaries to help youth use media safely. As with many parenting situations, you may need to start with close supervision and gradually provide more freedom as youth demonstrate responsibility. Before you talk to youth about social media use, make sure you know your child welfare agency's social media policies.

What are the benefits?

- **Maintaining social ties.** Youth can keep in touch with existing friends, siblings, and others and make new connections. This may be important for young people who have been moved from their communities.
- **Support.** Through online community groups, youth can share experiences with peers (see, for example, social media options through FosterClub at <http://fyi3.com>).
- **Family connections.** Youth may be able to share posts and other information with biological family members between family visits, where appropriate and approved by the caseworker.
- **Self-expression.** Videos, blogs, and other digital venues allow youth to express their feelings and ideas, which can help them shape their identity and contribute to healing from childhood trauma.

What are the risks? While all youth may be at some risk for unsafe online situations, youth in foster care may be particularly vulnerable to inappropriate contact, cyberbullying, or child predators. In addition, social media use may aid in communication with adults or family members who are "off limits."

Tips for safe use of social media by youth

- **Discuss social media with youth in your care.** Ask youth how they use social media and why it's important to them. Share and discuss this series' tip sheet for youth https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips_youth.cfm
- **Talk with your caseworker.** Ask about safety needs or concerns that may affect your youth's use of social media and whether there have been any past issues with social media use.
- **Set house rules early on for what's okay and what's not.** Rules will likely vary with youth's age (see sample family media agreements for different age groups at http://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/imce/educatefamilies_fma_all.pdf).
- **Set strict privacy settings.** Understand settings for each network used, so youth in your care can limit who can find them, what they can see, and how they can communicate (for information on Facebook settings, read <http://www.connectsafely.org/pdfs/fbparents.pdf>; for other networks, consult networks' user information).
- **Teach youth to keep personal information private.** Advise youth not to post a full name, address, school name, phone number, photo, or other identifying information.

- **Monitor use.** Keep computers in a common family space (not a bedroom) and keep track of mobile device use. Know what type of social media your youth uses. Consider asking youth for passwords and permission to let a trusted adult “friend” them. However, try to balance monitoring with privacy.
- **Conduct searches.** Every so often, search on a youth’s name and address and see what information or tagged photos are publicly available (see <http://www.common sense media.org/advice-for-parents/photos-gone-wild-how-combat-unwanted-photos-facebook>).
- **Explain the need to be careful.** Make sure youth understand that not everyone is who they say they are. Advise youth to avoid sharing intimate photos and talking online about sex.
- **Discuss cyberbullying.** Warn youth not to send, forward, or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or pictures. Help youth document, block, and report cyberbullying if needed (for information on cyberbullying, see <http://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying>).
- **Keep lines of communication open.** Encourage youth to let you know if an exchange makes them uncomfortable or if someone asks to meet them in person.
- **Be prepared to deal with mistakes.** When youth slip up and don’t follow guidelines, approach the situation as a “learning opportunity” and calmly work together with youth on what to do next.

Foster Parent Use of Social Media

You may turn to social media (Facebook, blogs, etc.) for learning opportunities and to share information and support with other foster parents (see media options for foster parents available through <http://www.nfpaonline.org> and <http://www.fostercarecentral.org>). If permitted by the agency, you also may use social media to keep in contact with child welfare workers or your youth’s family members.

Tips for social media use by foster parents

- **Talk with your caseworker about agency policies.** Ask about guidelines for social media contact between foster parents and birth parents and with community agencies, other foster parents, and agency staff. Find out whether there are specific considerations for the youth in your care.
- **Protect privacy and confidentiality.** Do not identify a child or youth as a foster child or post the child’s full name or address on a social network. Never discuss specific case information.
- **Get permission from the agency before posting family pictures that include a child or youth in care.** It’s important to ensure that photos do not create privacy or safety risks.
- **Be aware that photos may reveal the youth’s location.** Some smartphones embed tags that can provide geographic information (for more information on geolocation tags, see http://www.webwisekids.org/pdf/Handout_for_Geotagging.pdf). Other photos can provide clues, such as a school or city name.
- **Think before you post.** Be sensitive to how messages may be interpreted by others, including the child or youth’s family members and agency staff.

For more information and resources, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/workforce/tools/socialmedia.cfm>

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