



Fosterline Wales Factsheet

Fostering in a digital world

Introduction

This factsheet provides a short introduction to internet and technology use for children and young people. It provides some practical advice on things to think about when applying this knowledge to children and young people who are fostered. It is aimed at helping foster carers to develop strategies for supporting safe and appropriate internet and technology use, by highlighting some key advice and issues to be aware of.

The internet and new technologies are now a ubiquitous part of children's lives, with young people more likely than not to own a smartphone by the time they reach their teenage years¹. Owing to the way the technology has developed a number of devices (including almost all phones and iPods) are now fully internet enabled and children are likely to access the internet via various different means throughout their day. Children will access the internet for many reasons and in a number of different ways. They may use it to message or chat to their friends or family, to share content about themselves or others, to meet new people, to find out new things, to research interests and hobbies, and for gaming and entertainment.

Engaging with technology can have benefits for young people and, for some, it can reduce feelings of isolation. Although in this factsheet we want to highlight some of the ways the technology can be risky, it is important that foster carers adopt a balanced approach and understand that a child's technology use can be extremely important to them. A child or young person's technology use should generally be explored sensitively with them and a collaborative approach, involving the foster carer and children's social worker, used to determine a way forward, whenever possible.

There are a range of issues it is important to be aware of in relation to the online environment. One, is to understand that childhood and adolescence, in particular, can be a period of vulnerability in relation to risk taking and this can exacerbate the risks children encounter. Added to this, the technology can have the effect of masking or reducing children's understanding and awareness of the risks they are taking, or even the impact of the behaviours they are engaging in – this can be the case in relation to chatting to an unknown stranger or even in contributing to a bullying incident by onward sharing. The online world can feel misleadingly safe and harmless and can reduce opportunities for empathy.

¹ Ofcom's 2017 report found that 39% of 8-11 year olds and 83% of 12-15 years olds have their own smartphone

There are a huge range of popular sites and apps for children and young people, and it is worth doing some specific research on what your foster child is using and how.

Many young people use Instagram, which gives users an opportunity to post photos and information to their friends and followers, and Snapchat, which is way of messaging friends using photos to build friendship connections. It is good to have an understanding of what games and apps the child in your care is using – the NSPCC's net aware www.net-aware.org.uk is a good place to get more details about the most popular current apps.

Grooming

Today's children and young people not only make new friends in the real world, but online too. 30% of European nine to 16 year olds have had online contact with someone they haven't met face-to-face (Livingstone et al, 2011). This means, of course, that foster carers may not always know who the children and young people in their care are talking to.

Grooming is a process used by sexual predators to gain the trust of a child or young person, in order to then sexually exploit them – it can happen in the real world, as well as online.

It is important that children and young people are aware of this risk and understand that they can report this and get help, telling an adult they trust or going directly to the police. It is important to let young people know they can tell you about anything that has happened that has made them feel uncomfortable online, in the same way that they would tell you about something that happened in school or at home. Also make them aware that offenders will very often try to make them feel like what has happened is their fault and they will get into trouble if they say anything. This message and control can be very powerful, so it is important to tell children and young people that they will not be blamed.

Children can also report their concerns to the [Child Exploitation and Online Protection \(CEOP\)](#) unit (a specialist police agency) or chat confidentially to [Childline](#).

Sense of self

It is also important to be aware that the technology can present some broader safety and welfare issues for children and young people. There is research suggesting that the use of apps by celebrities with perfect bodies or lifestyles, can actually have a negative impact on children who feel that they are missing out, or that the ideals presented are unattainable. Equally, children can be drawn into the compelling aspects of digital technology, with its rewards and messaging geared at hooking them in, rather than offering deeper more meaningful relationships and providing them with space to disconnect. Children as young as eight have reported feeling stressed about keeping up with their online profile.

Digital resilience

There is research to suggest that vulnerabilities offline may be exacerbated online, leading to more risk-taking, or children and young people being less able to distance

themselves from the technology. It is important to be aware that the ways in which fostered children have experienced adversity may have had an impact on their technology use.

When a child or young person enters a new placement, their social worker should undertake a digital risk assessment. Any information flagged up in this risk assessment, about a past history of unsafe or challenging online behaviours, should be given to the foster carers. This is also relevant when drawing up the care plan.

It is recommended that this risk assessment should be undertaken by the child or young person's social worker, in partnership with the foster carer and both should have a copy of the assessment.

The goal of many educational interventions with children is to help children develop digital resilience, where they are able to make capable and empowered choices and, as they get older, understand the impact of the technology on themselves and others. This fits with the broader ideas about developing resilience in fostered children and the difference you can potentially make through your relationship with them. It is worth thinking about how you can help them develop digital resilience in their online lives too, by engaging with the way they use technology, being understanding, but also helping to think through consequences and, where possible, make positive choices.

Nuances of the fostering relationship

Foster carers will probably be aware that their foster children will have grown up with an approach to technology in their birth family, or other settings, that has already had an influence on their technology use. A good place to start would be to talk to your foster child about what they enjoy and then move on to discuss aspects they might find challenging or difficult. Foster carers should then develop an agreement about how the technology is used, while being sensitive to some of this, allowing some elements of risk, but reinforcing awareness about the availability of support and when it might be needed. As with any parent, this is likely to include a combination of engagement, supervision, technical solutions (such as household filters) and household rules.

One of the primary concerns that many foster families have, with regard to social media and mobile phones, is the possibility of informal contact with birth families. Foster carers have said that there is often a contradiction between the formal contact arrangements that are in place and then the fact that young people can have consistent unregulated contact with their birth families via their phones, both via social media and phone calls. This contact can, of course, be a very positive thing, but it can also lead to problems, such as placements being undermined or young people becoming upset. It can be difficult for carers to monitor and manage.

Quick wins

- Find out what your foster child or children are doing online, how long they are spending online, what apps they are using and what they enjoy the most.

- Find out in more detail some more about these apps and the risks and opportunities from independent sources, such as www.net-aware.org.uk or www.thinkuknow.co.uk
- Talk to your foster child about some of the risks of being contacted or manipulated by someone online, and make sure they understand it is not their fault and it is never too late to get help.
- Discuss with them about developing an agreement on what you think are some reasonable boundaries around internet use, in line with their age and development. Try to be sensitive to their previous internet use, but also explain any changes they want to make, such as cutting down the time spent on particular games and apps. Many children will be resistant to this at first, but in some cases reducing the time spent online, and increasing their investment in offline activities, may make them happier and safer.

How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up to date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday. If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us at:

fosterlinewales@fostering.net

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Resources

There is some excellent information on our website about this subject.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/fostering-in-digital-world

Safer Caring: a new approach (by Jacky Slade)

This book by The Fostering Network includes a chapter on Safer Caring in a Digital World. It is essential reading for all foster carers.

fosteringresources.co.uk/?pid=497

There is also an updated supplementary resource on this topic.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/safercaringsupplementaryresource-chapter10.pdf

Fostering in a digital world: a common sense guide

Fostered children deserve to live normal lives, but how can we balance this with keeping them as safe as possible in an increasingly digital world?

fosteringresources.co.uk/?cid=1&sid=8&pid=499

Keeping Safe online

Welsh Government [Hwb](#) has a wide variety of information, guidance and resources, including:

- About digital resilience in education
- Children and young people
- Parents and carers
- Resources
- Support services

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information, contact our Learning and Development Manager, Sarah Mobedji at sarah.mobedji@fostering.net.

There are specific training courses on the subject of *Fostering in a Digital World*. These courses will provide foundations for sensible, ethical and balanced guidance to foster carers, social workers and other childcare professionals on how to navigate the pressures of online use. See link to The Fostering Network's training and events web page for further details.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/training-and-events

There are a series of training courses around Safeguarding, which also include information on Safer Caring. These courses will enable both foster carers and social workers to develop their understanding, review current practice and consider strategies to manage any risk.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/training-consultancy/training

The Fostering Network in Wales have also developed a masterclass around new digital technology. The rapid take up of new technologies among the young has meant that organisations have had to increase their awareness and understanding quickly against a backdrop of new threats and risks faced by children and young people. This particular masterclass will provide foundations for sensible, ethical and balanced approaches to navigate these pressures.

For more information email wales@fostering.net

Any current courses running will be on The Fostering Network's website.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/training-and-events

If you are a fostering service and would like to commission this training, please contact Sarah on sarah.mobedji@fostering.net.

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

Contact us

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