Social networking and Facebook information for foster carers

It is important that foster carers understand about social networking, including the opportunities and the dangers, and that they can discuss with children and young people in their care how they are using sites such as Facebook. We are living in a world in which technology is moving at a heightened pace. People who care for children and young people – parents, foster carers and social workers – may not be as up to speed with this world as younger people, and may consequently tend to focus on the challenges rather than the opportunities it offers.

However, it is important that parents and foster carers are able to support their own children and the children and young people in their care to learn about safe use of the internet and social networking sites. You wouldn't expect children to cross a road without teaching them how, and the same applies to the internet. However, you also wouldn't ban children from crossing roads because of the dangers, nor make them feel that every time they do so they are likely to get run over. A positive and safe approach is what is called for.

This document gives you general information about social networking as well as highlighting aspects of social networking that apply particularly to children and young people in care.

It provides information about Facebook, but is largely applicable to similar forms of social networking, such as Bebo and Myspace. Other sites such as Club Penguin for younger children are also social networking sites.

What is social networking?[1]

Social networking is a term that is used to describe some of the ways in which people communicate online via their computers or mobile phones.

Common elements of social networks are that:

- They require membership of a website
- People using the social network (users) can create a profile – a page where they can tell others about themselves
- There is the ability to add other people as online friends or contacts
- They allow members of the website to communicate among themselves

Why is social media so popular, and so central, to the lives of many children and young people?

Social networking has become the way in which many teenagers and young adults - and increasingly older people too - organise their lives and the way they keep in contact with their friends. Preventing young people from engaging with social networking sites marks them out as different to their peers and leaves them behind, as well as excluding them from social activities and friendship groups.

Facebook does not exist independently of young people's 'real' lives. Young people will use it, for example, to share their holiday photos, arrange to meet up at the weekend or to invite friends to a party.

Communicating online has advantages to more traditional forms of communication:

- Distance is not important, and many people can be contacted at once.
- It is free and there is not the pressure of the cost of a phone call.
- Where children and young people don't feel confident communicating face to face with others, they may find it easier to talk to others online.
- It is easily controllable; users can go 'offline' if they do not wish to respond.
- There are a variety of ways to communicate: articles or photos can be shared, messages can be sent to someone's 'wall', a private message

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[1] *"A social network service focuses on the building and verifying of online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others, and which necessitates the use of software"*
http://encylopedia.thefreedictionary.com/social+networking

can be sent to a friend or a conversation can be started via instant messaging[2]

- Children and young people are comfortable using computers; many will have grown up using them.

Who can use Facebook?

Anyone with an email address can join. Facebook requires users to be a minimum of 13 years old. If they are under that age it is legitimate to stop them having a profile. However, it is increasingly the case that children under 13 are using Facebook and it is therefore increasingly important that all adults understand how it works and what can be done to ensure it is used safely.

Who uses Facebook?

39 per cent of all internet users in the UK use social networks – this is highest for 16 to 24 year olds with 54 per cent having a profile on at least one network, and many on more than one. However, use of social media among older age groups has been growing dramatically recently, with Facebook continuing to see more growth with users over age 26.

What do people use Facebook for?

Creating an online identity

When people join Facebook they create a profile likely to include a photo of themselves and some general information such as gender, date of birth, interests and hobbies. However, a user's profile photo can be of anything, not necessarily their face. It is also possible to use a false name and/or false photo.

Arranging their social life and keeping up to date

Facebook allows users to organise events online and to join special interest groups or to become 'fans', for example of a football player or charity. The Fostering Network's page on Facebook currently has almost 2000 fans, for example. It also provides the facility to chat online, to share information, and to interact with friends through games, quizzes and other activities. Many social networks allow users to watch videos and to listen to music, and users can find out further information about friends such as birthdays, and follow friends' news feeds, as well as those of interests such as TV programmes.

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[2] See glossary at end

This can help build a sense of belonging to a community, and have specific advantages, such as letting people know about a school play performance, or a local fundraiser. However, there is a need to be aware of who might be finding out about events and using the privacy button (see below) allows you to manage this.

Communicating with online friends

Users add online 'friends' who they are then connected to. This is likely to include friends and family, old friends who they have been reconnected with and new people, for example those connected through common interest groups.

There are many ways users can communicate with online friends via Facebook:

- allowing other people to see their latest news (status updates)
- posting on a friend's wall – this is a space on someone's profile that friends can see
- sending private messages to one or many friends
- using 'Facebook chat' which is an instant messaging service that allows text conversations with other friends who are 'online'
- through comments on event or group pages.

What about confidentiality?

Being aware of issues of confidentiality on social networking sites is important. Considering ahead of time the implications of posting photographs of yourself and/or fostered children on Facebook is essential.

You – and they - need to be aware that material such as photos may well remain on a site such as Facebook for longer than you anticipate, and could be seen by people who were not the intended audience. Ask yourself questions such as 'would I put these photos up in a public place?' and 'Would I be happy for an employer to see this photo?'

What can I do to protect my privacy?

Facebook has a number of privacy settings. These allow you to decide who can see what on your Facebook pages, and they are very easy to set using the Privacy button. These are worth reviewing and exploring the privacy settings, as many people are not aware of the privacy options available to them, and the options do change from time to time.

It is worth remembering that even if you have the strongest privacy settings, once material is published it could be shared by an online friend, and can be very hard to erase.

Photos of a person can be posted by other users who 'tag' the people in them. It is therefore worth users regularly checking content they may be featured in.

Top tip: Only upload those photos that you are happy to share. Think carefully about posting up photos of foster children, or your own children, or of other family members who may wish their privacy to be respected. It is not a good idea to post photos which can identify the school which your child attends as this can help others to trace their whereabouts.

Should I let children and young people I care for use social networks?

Social networking is now a fact of modern life. It will be very difficult to prevent young people from using Facebook – many will be able to access it at friends' houses or even on their mobile phone. Preventing them from taking part in social networking could lead to social exclusion amongst their peers. Our task as adults is to help them explore the positives of social networking whilst keeping themselves safe.

Foster carers and social workers need to understand the role of social networking, in the same way that parents and others who work with children need to. Some foster carers may embrace this while others may need support, encouragement and help to understand social networking.

While we acknowledge the challenges, we principally see real opportunities for young people in general and those in care in particular in social networking. However, this should all be set within the context of the overall plan for the child and in particular any specific contact arrangements all of which should be reviewed regularly to meet the changing needs of the young person.

What are the issues specific to children and young people in care?

Social networking can be both a positive experience and at the same time can raise concerns for those with responsibilities for children – whether their own or children in foster care. Understanding what children and young people are doing when they are online, having regular and open dialogue with them, being alert to the possibilities offered by social networking and monitoring its usage are important in order to minimise the risks associated with it.

The following issues are particularly pertinent to children and young people in foster care, and suggestions are given for how these could be addressed in a positive way.

Maintaining and building relationships

By facilitating contact with friends, siblings and even parents, social networking sites can be invaluable in allowing young people in care to maintain important relationships. Social networks can be vital for children and young people in care to maintain as 'normal' a life as possible, through interacting with their peers on a equal basis. It can allow them to keep in touch with their friends if they have to move home, sometimes moving to an entirely new area.

Children and young people need to be helped to ensure that they have contact with those that they want to. Obviously there will be relationships that children and young people may not wish to maintain, and relationships where considerations such as safeguarding make it inappropriate for them to stay in contact. Foster carers will need to monitor online relationships as they would those in the 'real' world, and support young people to ensure that they understand why it is important to consider how, and with whom, they interact on social networking sites.

> **Top Tip:** Parents and foster carers must ensure that they understand how to use the privacy settings in order to ensure that a young person can 'hide' their profile in searches and block unwanted contacts.

Finding common ground, sharing experiences

Social networking allows people to form groups around a common interest or topic. In this way, social media can be positive as it allows interaction with people who may be in a similar situation and can facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas. Young people in care may find it helpful to link up with others in a similar situation through the Fostering Network's Leading Our Lives group on Facebook.

> **Top Tip**: Discuss with the child/young person in your care whether they would find it helpful to join up with others in a similar situation.

Contact

Social networks such as Facebook can appear to threaten carefully designed contact arrangements. For instance, a child's care plan may state that they are to have no contact at all with particular members of their family or there could be a no contact order. Foster carers and social workers must be clear with children

and young people in care about the possibility of being contacted by unsafe people and what they must do if they are contacted via any social networking sites, or in any other way. This needs to be part of the dialogue that you and the social worker has with the child in your care about contact generally.

Contact issues should be addressed at every child's review and a comprehensive and detailed safe contact plan, which includes how to manage social networking, put in place for those children for whom this is necessary[3]. The Independent Reviewing Officer has a key role in this.

> **Top Tip:** Work to create openness about social networking with those in your care, encouraging them to tell you if their family are in contact with them. If appropriate, they may agree to let you be their 'friend' online so that you can see what is going on. As above, remember that it is possible to 'block' certain people on Facebook so that they are unable to contact you.

'Excessive' use of social networking

Children and young people in care can be particularly vulnerable and sometimes withdrawn, lonely and lacking in confidence. Social networking can be their link to the world, and a place in which they feel they have lots of friends and they are important. If you are concerned that a young person in your care is spending too much time online, and is retreating from the 'real world' of social interaction, talk to them about it. Discuss with your social worker other ways to engage them in productive face to face social relationships.

> **Top Tip**: It may be necessary to limit a young person's time on the computer, preferably through encouragement and discussion, but parental controls can also be helpful as this allows you to put a block on when a child/young person can access the computer and when not.

How can foster carers use Facebook?

In the same way that everyone else uses Facebook, you could find it a fun and helpful tool. You can use social networks to communicate with other foster carers through Facebook groups, instant messengers and fan pages for foster care associations or other foster care groups. Facebook groups, for example, can help you to share experiences and tips about your specific experiences and challenges. It can also help you, or your sons and daughters, to stay in touch with

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[3] such as confidential placements because of serious child protection concerns.

children/young people that you have cared for if it has been agreed that you can do so.

If you are on Facebook then you can be 'friends' with the young people in your care and can keep an eye on their Facebook page.

If you are using Facebook and other social networking sites then you will be in a better position to understand what it is the children and young people in your care are doing.

> **Top Tip:** Think carefully about information you share - there have been cases of burglary after people updated their status to say they were on holiday on the same page that contains their address; the online equivalent of leaving your door open.

There has been a lot in the media about the downsides of Facebook. What are the dangers, and what can be done about them?

There are often stories in the media about the dangers of Facebook. While these should not be ignored, simple steps can be taken to mitigate them.

Fundamentally the messages are similar to traditional child safety messages, albeit in a different context:

- Be careful about friend requests from people you don't know
- Don't assume people are who they say they are
- Ensure that you have downloaded the 'panic button' (see below) onto Facebook
- People can find ways to access profiles; something posted on a wall intended for just friends could well be read by an unintended audience
- Don't give out or publicise personal information (for example, your address) and remember that anything you put up may be read by people you may not know
- Don't put up information about where you will be at a particular time – this could be found by someone that you don't know
- Safety steps that can be taken include having a computer in a family space such as the living room (but bear in mind that many modern phones have internet access) and ensuring that all computers have updated virus protection.
- Make sure that everyone in your house who is using social networks is aware of their security settings and how to change them if they need to.

Cyber bullying

Social network sites can be used as a tool for bullying amongst children and young people. This can involve a number of people sending abusive or intimidating messages to an individual, or posting threats on their wall.

As with any form of bullying, cyber bullying can be traumatic and isolating for the individual. Encourage those in your care to be open with you about their relationships with their peers and be aware of changes in their behaviour that may suggest they are being bullied. Keeping the computer in a communal area will also help you keep an eye on things.

If a child or young person in your care is being bullied, remind them that can block and 'defriend' those that are bullying them. If necessary, they can close their account and set up a new one which they keep more private. Encourage them not to respond to abusive messages. Some schools treat cyber-bullying as a school matter, so do contact them to see if they can offer support.

Social networks and 'grooming'

Often, adults who want to engage children in sexual acts, or talk to them for sexual gratification will seek out young people who desire friendship. Social networking sites offer a route for them to target young people. They will often use a number of grooming techniques including building trust with the child through lying, creating different personas and then attempting to engage the child in more intimate forms of communication including compromising a child with the use of images and webcams. Child sex abusers will often use blackmail and guilt as methods of securing a meeting with the child.[4]

Children and young people in foster care may be particularly vulnerable to approaches from strangers or people they hardly know online because of their past experiences. This will be especially true if they feel isolated from their peers. They may lack normal boundaries.

Being open with them about the potential dangers and supportive of attempts to improve their social skills will help and in some cases this will need to be very carefully monitored to prevent a vulnerable child from being 'groomed'.

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[4] CEOP http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/Parents/FAQ/Grooming/

What is the 'Panic button'?

Recently a 'panic button' has been developed by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), which can be installed on any Facebook profile.
The panic button is an application aimed at children and teenagers that allows them to easily report suspected abuse to the CEOP and Facebook. The application has to be added by the user themselves, even if they are under 18. Go to http://apps.facebook.com/clickceop/ to find out more and install the app. You need to be aware of this and to ensure that the application has been installed and set up.

Terminology

There are a number of terms specific to Facebook, including:	
Poke	A feature that allows users to attract the attention of another user.
Like	Users can indicate to that they like something, ranging from a friend's status update to a new song.
Status update	A short piece of text users have on their profile, usually to update their friends as to what they are doing or how they are feeling.
Tag	To 'tag' someone in a photo means to link their name to it, so it will appear on their profile that they are featured in a picture. Users can 'un-tag' themselves from photos.
Friend Request	When someone wants to be your online friend you will be sent an email asking you to confirm you wish to be friends with them. If you do not know them or do not wish to be friends you can reject the request, and they are not informed.
Block	Users can block other users, removing them from their online friend list.
News Feed	A service on a user's page that shows updates about their friend's activity.
Instant Messaging	This is where you can have conversations over the internet with friends and family. These conversations can be typed, voice chats or even video messaging. Instant messaging also allows you to talk to more than one person at a time

Where can I find out more?

The Fostering Network offers training for foster carers on social networking and IT safety. Contact us on 020 7620 6430 or email training@fostering.net for more information.

You can also access information about social networking and IT safety through the Children and Young People section of the Fostering Network's online resource centre at www.fostering.net/resources/subjects/children-and-young-people.

The Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre (CEOP) has a very useful web site and you can download helpful support at www.thinkuknow.co.uk/