Wirral Fostering Service

Social Media Information for Foster Carers

IT TAKES A BIG HEART TO FOSTER

CONTENTS

1. Introduction

2. Role of the Placement Planning Meeting and Safer Caring Plan

3. Privacy and Confidentiality

4. Establishing Trust and Giving Advice

5. If Something goes Wrong

1. Introduction

Social media and the internet have changed the way we communicate and offer children and young people positive opportunities and benefits such as developing friendships and maintaining social ties, education and developing a sense of identity and belonging.

However, it can also create potential privacy and safety/risk concerns for example the potential for sexual exploitation/grooming or contact with family members/strangers that might lead to them coming to harm. Such concerns will vary depending on a child's age and online activities and children who are looked after may be more vulnerable to these risks because of behavioural or emotional needs or the people they are in contact with.

Whilst it may be tempting to prevent children and young people from using social media, it is rarely realistic given that internet and mobile devise are widespread and accessible and forbidding any use will prevent them from benefitting from its advantages and may make it harder for children looked after to fit in with friends. Instead there are a number of steps through the use of open communication, monitoring, guidance and boundaries that foster carers can take to ensure children and young people are safer online and minimise the level of risk.

Foster Carers and professionals may also wish to participate in social networking in their own personal lives, however, individuals are encouraged to consider very carefully the information they post and how it might be viewed when published in terms of the potential impact on their own reputation.

2. Role of the Placement Planning Meeting and Safer Caring Plan

It is good practice to hold a placement planning meeting prior to a child/young person being placed and provides a good opportunity for Foster Carers to find out more about the child/young person who is going to be placed with them. Expectations in relation to the use of digital technology should be addressed within this meeting; the agreed arrangements should be recorded in the Placement Plan.

Key issues to consider include:

- What role the digital/internet technologies had in the child/young person's life to date. Is there any history of online harm or risk e.g. bullying, grooming, self-harm?
- What the child or young person can use the internet for e.g. schoolwork, socialising or gaming and what services will they have access to e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram.
- What equipment the child or young person will have that can access the internet e.g. family computer, tablet, games console, mobile phone.
- Contact, consideration of the role that digital and internet technologies should or could play in arrangements.
- Privacy and confidentiality; all members of the family household need to be mindful of what they can and cannot share online.

The arrangements for delegated authority should also be discussed in the placement planning meeting for example what authority you have been delegated to make decisions about photographs and where they can be displayed and when you need to refer to the Social Worker or parent of the child/young person.

These areas should be incorporated into you family Safer Caring Plan, any family rules around how to behave online apply not only to a foster child but Foster Carers and professionals' own children so they need to be understood by everyone in the family including the reasons behind the family rules.

Although it is likely that Foster Carers and professionals may need to start with close supervision, any agreement/rules will need to change over time as the child or young person grows and technologies develop. Digital issues should be revisited regularly in the child or young persons reviews and in the family safer caring plan.

3. Privacy and Confidentiality

- Be careful what you are; for example, you should not share on Facebook or other social media your role as a foster carer or share daily routines.
- Carers must never identify a child or former child in their care on social media.
- Information and photographs of children looked after including family photos must never be posted on social media sites without written consent from the Local Authority, parents and the children, if they are of an appropriate age. Once an image is on the internet it can be viewed and stored by other people within their friends' network.
- Be aware that photos may reveal the child/young person's location. Think about the implications of this for your own safety and that of the children you are caring for.
- Carer's immediate family and friends, who are aware of their fostering role, should also be reminded of expectations around social media and the dangers of identifying a foster child.
- Need to uphold your reputation; Foster Carers should consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites and the impression it may give of you to those who access the information. Remember that anything posted online could end up in the public domain to be read by birth parents, children/young people or your Supervising Social Worker.
- Set maximum privacy settings; understand settings and reporting features for each network used, so children in your care can limit who can find them, what they can see and how they can communicate.
- Privacy settings should be set to 'only friends', settings such as 'friends of friends' and 'networks and friends' open you content to a wider audience. Your privacy and that of your family, friends and children in your care could be compromised.
- Privacy settings should be reviewed on a regular basis.
- Conduct an internet search every so often, search on a child/young person's name/address and see what information/tagged photos are publicly available.
- Make use of parental control tools for example on your home computer and any device your foster child will use.
- With shared devices, make sure you log out of websites or aps after using them.
- Foster Carers and children/young people can be friends on social networks if both parties feel comfortable with this, however, this will need to be reviewed if a child/young person moves on as the type/nature of acceptable communication is likely to change. Guidance should be sought from the child's Social worker and the Supervising Social Worker.
- Adding a young person as a 'friend' means you can assess/monitor their contents, but it also means they can access yours, which can lead to difficulties if anyone posts anything inappropriate on your wall/page.
- In order to maintain appropriate professional boundaries, Foster Carers should not have family members of children looked after as 'friends' nor should employees of the Fostering Service and Foster Carers be 'friends' on social media websites.

4. Establishing Trust and Giving Advice

- Involve children/young people with the development of the safer caring plan.
- Children and young people should be advised to 'think before you post' and be encouraged to keep personal information private by never giving out personal details which could identify them or their location.
- Explain the need to be careful; that not everyone is who they say they are. Remind children/young people that meeting someone they have been in touch with online can be dangerous. Online friends are still strangers even if they have been talking to them for a long time.
- Monitor use; know what type of social media children/young people are using. Consider asking children/young people for passwords and permission for a trusted adult to 'friend' them. However, try to balance monitoring with privacy considerations.
- The internet can facilitate contact from birth family where this is not appropriate. If needed explain why unmanaged online contact is not appropriate, consult other professionals and be aware of blocking tools.
- Maintain an open dialogue; children/young people should be encouraged to talk about how they use social media and to tell a trusted adult if someone or something makes them feel uncomfortable or worried.
- Discuss cyberbullying, encourage them to be kind online and not to send, forward or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or pictures.

5. If something goes wrong

- If you discover something inappropriate on a device, you may feel shocked or angry but by dealing with it calmly the child/young person will know they can turn to you again.
- Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube have facilities for reporting abuse and inappropriate material.
- Save any available evidence if necessary, for example by taking screen grabs.
- Speak to your Supervising Social Worker and child's Social Worker; know where to report the incident e.g. Children's Services, school or the police and complete an incident report if applicable.

For a guide to all social networks, apps and games visit: https://www.net-aware.org.uk/