



Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers

While social media has changed the way the world communicates, it has also created privacy and safety concerns. This page discusses the benefits of social media for children and youth in foster care and provides tips for parents and caregivers who want to help youth use social media safely. Advice for social media use by foster parents is also provided.

Helping Youth Use Social Media Safely

While it may be tempting to forbid children and 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 in foster care to fit in with friends and relate to other teenagers in the community. Instead, foster parents should provide guidance and boundaries to help youth in their care use social media safely. Before talking to youth about social media, make sure you know your child welfare agency's social media policies.

Social media provides benefits for youth

- **Social ties.** Social media helps youth in foster care fit in with their peers and fosters normalcy. Using social media, youth can keep in touch with friends, siblings, and others and make new connections.
- **Support.** Through online community groups, youth in foster care can share experiences with peers who have had similar experiences. (See FosterClub at <https://www.fosterclub.com/forums/youth-message-board> and Foster Care Alumni of America's groups on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/FCAANational/>.)
- **Family connections.** Between visits, youth in foster care may share posts or have online conversations with biological family members, when appropriate and approved by the caseworker.
- **Self-expression.** Videos, blogs, and other digital venues allow youth in foster care to express their feelings and ideas, which can help shape their identity and contribute to healing from childhood trauma.

What are the risks?

Youth in foster care may be particularly vulnerable to inappropriate contact, cyberbullying, or child predators. In addition, social networks and private messaging may aid in communication with adults or family members who are "off limits."



Tips to help youth use social media safely

- **Talk with your youth's caseworker.** Ask about safety needs and concerns that may affect your youth's use of social media and whether he or she had any past issues with social media use.
- **Discuss social media with youth in your care.** Ask youth how they use social media and private messaging and why it's important to them. Share and discuss Child Welfare Information Gateway's social media tip sheet for youth (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips-youth/>).
- **Set house rules for what's okay and what's not.** Rules will likely vary with the youth's age, but setting them early is important. (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.** Use privacy settings to help youth limit who can find them online, which posts or photos can be seen, and who has contact permissions. (For information on Facebook settings, read <https://www.facebook.com/safety/groups/parents/>; for Instagram, Snapchat, and other networks, visit <http://foster-adoptive-kinship-family-services-nj.org/protecting-social-media-teens-2016/>.)
- **Teach youth to keep personal information private.** Advise youth in foster care not to post their full name, address, school name, phone number, or other identifying information. (See how to keep youth safe from identity theft at <http://www.parents.com/kids/safety/tips/how-to-prevent-child-identity-theft/>.)
- **Learn about social media sites and apps.** Keep abreast of current technology and best practices for the most popular social media sites and apps youth are using today. (See this list at <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/social-media-apps-parents-should-know-about/>.)
- **Be aware of online gaming risks.** Online games can be unsafe as players often interact with others on gaming platforms. Youth should avoid posting pictures of themselves or giving personal information while playing online games, and they should know they can come to you if they are being bullied or harassed. Be aware of the kind of games your youth plays and discuss the risks. (See online gaming tips for parents at <http://www.internetmatters.org/advice/online-gaming/>.)
- **Monitor use.** Station computers in a shared area (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. Installing an online monitoring program can also help watch out for inappropriate use.
- **Conduct searches.** Every so often, search a youth's name and address to see what information or tagged photos are publicly available. (See ways to combat unwanted photos on Facebook at <http://www.inglewoodportal.org/news/2513>.)
- **Watch out for profiles on dating apps or risky matchmaking sites.** Look for use of dating sites like OKCupid, Match.com, or Tinder, which may not be appropriate for teens. (See a list of apps to be aware of at <https://safesmartsocial.com/app-guide-parents-teachers/>.)
- **Explain the need to be careful.** Make sure youth understand that online, not everyone is who they say they are. Advise youth to avoid sharing intimate photos and messaging about sex online. (Read about protecting foster youth from human trafficking at <https://www.fosterclub.com/groups/sex-trafficking>.)
- **Discuss cyberbullying.** Warn youth not to send, forward, or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or pictures. Help youth document, block, and report bullying if needed. (For more information, see <http://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/bullying101tab.pdf>.)

- **Keep lines of communication open.** Encourage youth to let you know if an exchange makes them uncomfortable, if someone is sending them inappropriate photos, or if anyone asks to meet them in person. Appreciate your youth's participation in their online communities and show interest in their friends.
- **Understand their language.** Youth in foster care may use abbreviations, hashtags, and emoji in their online communications. Understand that teens communicate in a language different from yours. (Learn more about online abbreviations at <http://time.com/4373616/text-abbreviations-acronyms/>; emoji use at <https://emojidictionary.emojifoundation.com/>; and hashtags at <http://mashable.com/2013/10/08/what-is-hashtag/#JKPFk3EQIPqF>.)
- **Be prepared to deal with mistakes.** When youth slip up and don't follow guidelines, approach the situation as a teachable moment and calmly work together on what to do next.

Foster Parent or Caregiver Use of Social Media

You may use social media for support and to share information with other foster parents and caregivers. (See social media options at <http://www.nfpaonline.org>.) If permitted by the agency, you may also use social networks to keep in touch 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 your social media communication between your youth's family and with community agencies, other foster parents and caregivers, and the child welfare agency staff. Find out whether there are specific considerations for the youth in your care.
- **Get permission from the agency and youth before posting family pictures that include a youth in care.** It's important to ensure that photos do not create privacy or safety risks.
- **Protect privacy and confidentiality.** Do not identify a youth as a foster child or post the youth's full name or address on a social network. Never discuss specific case information. (Learn more from <http://wiadopt.org/Resources/Tip-Sheets/Caring-for-Children-Youth/The-411-on-Social-Media-Networking-and-Texting>.)
- **Be aware that photos may reveal the youth's location.** Some smartphone photos and network services (such as Facebook's and Instagram's location features) provide GPS information. Learn how to manage location services on your smartphone or turn them off completely. (See more about these settings at <http://www.connectsafely.org/how-to-disable-location-on-your-mobile-device/>.)
- **Think before you post.** Be sensitive to how messages may be interpreted by others, including your youth's family members and agency staff. (For more information and resources, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/workforce/tools/socialmedia/>.)

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