



FACTSHEETS | OCTOBER 2022

# 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 factsheet briefly discusses the benefits of social media for children and youth in foster care and provides tips for parents and caregivers who want to help them use social media safely. It also provides advice for foster parents on how to responsibly use your own social media accounts.

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## HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH USE SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLY

Social media has become a standard tool for communication and self-expression. For children and youth in foster care, it can also create normalcy by helping them connect with others in their communities and maintain relationships with friends and caregivers from previous living situations. However, children and youth in care may be particularly vulnerable to inappropriate contact, cyberbullying, or child predators when using social media, and networks and private messages may aid in communication with adults or family members who are "off limits."

Prohibiting the use of social media can be harmful to children and youth and is often unrealistic, given the widespread accessibility of computers, mobile devices, and the internet. Instead, foster parents should provide guidance and boundaries to help them use social media safely and responsibly. Here are some tips to help foster parents and caregivers guide social media use for the children and youth in their care.

## UNDERSTAND HOW CHILDREN AND YOUTH USE SOCIAL MEDIA

- **Discuss social media with children and youth.** Ask the children or youth in your care how they use social media and private messaging apps and get an understanding of why it's important to them. Share and discuss Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care](#).
- **Learn about social media apps.** New social media tools are released frequently and children and youth are often quick to adopt them. Keep abreast of current technology and best practices for the most popular social media apps that young people of various age groups are using today. (See the [Popular Teen Apps Parents and Teachers Need to Know](#) section of the Smart Social website.)
- **Be aware of online gaming risks.** Online games can be unsafe, as players often interact with others on gaming platforms. Be aware of the kind of games your child or youth plays and discuss the risks. Let them know that they should avoid posting pictures of themselves or giving personal information while playing online games, and that they can come to you if they are being harassed or bullied. (Learn more at Internet Matters' [Online Gaming Advice Hub](#).)
- **Understand their language.** Children and youth may use slang, hashtags, and emoji in their online communications. Understand that young people communicate in a language different from yours. (See Smart Social's [Teen Slang, Emojis, & Hashtags Parents Need to Know \[The Ultimate List\]](#) to learn more.)

## SET AND REINFORCE SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

- **Talk with your child's caseworker.** Familiarize yourself with your child welfare agency's social media policies. Ask about safety needs and concerns that may affect your child's use of social media and whether they have had issues with social media use in the past.
- **Set house rules.** Set social media rules early and, when possible, in collaboration with children and youth. Ensure that these rules align with agency guidelines and foster youth rights and be prepared to answer questions about why the rules exist. (Find sample media agreements for different age groups on the [Family Contracts & Pledges](#) section of the Connect Safely website.)

- **Coordinate with your child or youth's birth relatives.** Setting up new social media accounts and establishing usage rules might require consent or input from a young person's birth family. Approach your caseworker first for guidance and collaborate with birth relatives when appropriate. (For more information, see Information Gateway's [Partnering With Birth Parents to Promote Reunification](#).)
- **Be prepared to deal with mistakes.** When a child or youth slips up and doesn't follow guidelines, approach the situation as a teachable moment and calmly work together on what to do next.

## HELP SAFEGUARD CHILD AND YOUTH PRIVACY

- **Teach children and youth about keeping their personal information private.** Advise children and youth in foster care not to reveal their full name, address, school name, phone number, or other identifying information on social media, and caution them against posting photos that reveal these types of details (e.g., school logos and mascots). (Find internet privacy lessons for a range of age groups at Common Sense Education's [23 Great Lesson Plans for Internet Safety](#).)
- **Set strict privacy settings.** Use privacy settings to help children and youth limit who can find them online, which posts or photos are visible, and who has contact permissions. (For information on privacy settings for various apps, see the [Social Media Privacy Guides](#) section of the Internet Matters website.)
- **Conduct searches.** Every so often, search a child or youth's name and address to see what information or tagged photos are publicly available.

## ADDRESS RISKY OR HARMFUL SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES

- **Explain the need to avoid explicit content.** 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, regardless of their relationship with a person. (Read more about protecting youth with ["Tips for Dealing with Teen Sexting"](#) by Connect Safely.)
- **Discuss cyberbullying.** Warn children and youth not to send, forward, or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or pictures. Help youth document, block, and report bullying if needed. (To learn more, see ["Parent's Guide to Cyberbullying"](#) by Connect Safely.)
- **Check in on your child or youth's mental health.** Social media can trigger negative feelings, such as anxiety or depression. From time to time, ask children and youth if they ever see things on social media that upset them, and encourage them to limit their use to social media spaces where they feel supported. (See Common Sense Media's ["How to Help Teens Manage the Effects of Social Media on Their Mental Health"](#) to learn more.)
- **Monitor use.** Place computers in a shared area and keep track of mobile device use. Know what type of social media your children and youth use and the amount of time they are spending on social media apps. Consider asking them for passwords and permission to let a trusted adult connect with them on their social media pages. However, try to balance monitoring with respecting their privacy. Installing an online monitoring program can help you watch for inappropriate use. (For more information, see the [Guide to Monitoring Apps](#) section of the Internet Matters website.)

- **Watch for activity on risky sites.** Be aware of risky apps that have inappropriate or unmoderated content and set boundaries with children and youth if you notice them using these apps. (For a list of risky apps, see the [Popular Teen Apps Parents and Teachers Need to Know](#) section of the Smart Social website.)
- **Keep lines of communication open.** Encourage children and 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 their participation in their online communities and show interest in their friends. (To learn more, see "[How to Connect with Your Teen about Smart & Safe Media Use](#)" by the American Academy of Pediatrics.)

## USING SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLY AS A FOSTER PARENT OR CAREGIVER

You may wish to use social media for support and to share information with other foster parents and caregivers. If permitted by the agency, you can also use social networks to keep in touch with your child's birth relatives. Here are some tips for using social media responsibly when you are caring for a foster child or youth.

- **Talk with your caseworker about agency policies.** Ask about guidelines for your social media communication with your child or youth's birth relatives, other foster parents and caregivers, and child welfare agency staff. Find out whether there are specific considerations for the children or youth in your care.
- **Get permission from the agency and your child or youth before posting family pictures that include children in care.** Agencies might have guidelines around posting photos, such as concealing identifying information with emojis or other editing features. It's important to ensure that photos do not create privacy or safety risks.
- **Avoid searching for a child or youth's birth relatives.** When you connect with birth relatives online, you might expose yourself to information that raises concerns or complicates your dynamic. Caseworkers likely can't respond to information found on social media, so it's best to avoid birth relatives' pages.
- **Protect privacy and confidentiality.** Do not identify a child or youth as a foster child or post their full name or address on a social media network. Never discuss case information in an online forum. (Learn more at "[How to Protect My Foster Child on Social Media](#)" on the Embrella website.)
- **Be aware that photos may reveal a child or youth's location.** Some smartphone photos and network services (such as the location features on Facebook and Instagram) provide GPS information. Learn how to manage location services on your smartphone or turn them off completely. (See more information about these settings at "[How to Limit Location Tracking on Your Phone](#)" by Consumer Reports.)
- **Think before you post.** Be sensitive to how messages may be interpreted by others, including your child or youth's birth relatives and agency staff.

For additional resources on social media safety in foster care arrangements, see the [Social Media Safety](#) section of the Information Gateway website.

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