**Guidance for Online Safety for Children in Care**

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**Online Safety for Children in Care**

All children deserve the opportunity to thrive online. Research has found that young people who are care experienced can benefit from the psychological, emotional and social support provided by social media networks ([University of East Anglia, 2018](http://www.uea.ac.uk/about/-/the-benefits-of-social-media-for-young-people-in-care)). Positive online networks can help to reduce physical and psychological isolation and can provide organisational support as children become more independent.

However, as well as the benefits, online spaces do also carry risks for children in care, particularly those who are vulnerable due to their previous lived experiences, their placement moves and their ongoing connections with their families can sometimes disadvantage them in ways that can make them more susceptible to risks.

We need to ensure that children and young people in care get the best out of their time online by ensuring that foster carers and parents are informed and equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to protect their children and young people from online harm. It is important to think about online harm in all its contexts as it can occur on any device that is connected to the internet including, but not limited to, smart phones, iPods, smart TV’s, gaming devices such as an Xbox, laptops, computers and iPads. There is also a need to ensure knowledge is relevant and up to date as this is a growing area.

**The aim of this guidance is to:**

* Provide practitioners with guidance around setting expectations and holding discussions with parents, children/young people and foster carers in regard to purchasing devices which can be connected to the internet.
* Provide links to resources which can be used by practitioners and/or shared appropriately with children/young people, foster carers and parents in order to create a safer digital space for children to explore and interact.

This guidance is aimed at any practitioner who works with Children in Care (including, but not limited to; Children in Care teams, CYPDS, SUASC, Fostering Teams, and Independent Reviewing Officers)

**Working with Parents**

Practitioners should take a proactive and preventative approach. **Discussions should take place** with parents and foster carers around online safety and expectations around purchasing devices which can be connected to the internet, if they are intended to be used by a child/young person. Where possible, these discussions need to take place **before** a child/young person moves to a new home and/or when a new device is purchased. Following a discussion, if deemed appropriate, **an agreement can be made** that allows a parent to give their child/young person a device. It is important that agreements are made following work with all parties involved in order to support the young person in their placement whilst supporting and sustaining safe connections with others, including their parents or family. In time, many children will return home to their family but even if this is not possible their birth family are still likely to be a central part of their lives.

The agreement needs to be **carefully considered** and a risk assessment carried out which covers at least the following:

* The specific level of risk for that child/young person (e.g. There may be issues of contextual safeguarding or exploitation which need to be considered, bullying, risk posed by family members, other connected persons and peers etc)
* The reason why a parent/carer wants to buy the device
* Other children who live at the address
* The child/young person’s current online use (see resources for Online Safety Mapping Tool)
* The child/young person’s level of online safety knowledge and their ability to keep themselves safe, or report incidences appropriately
* The child/young person’s relationship with their carer
* Age-appropriate use
* The ability of the foster carer to monitor the child/young person’s use and their knowledge around online safety
* The relationship between the parents and foster carers
* Who will be responsible for the purchase of a device, the account associated with the device and any loss or damage incurred. If it is agreed that a parent/carer will purchase a device, it is only in exceptional circumstances that they should be responsible for the contract connected to a device.

Agreements and decisions made are discretionary and should be alongside a team manager or supervisor and/or other practitioners involved with the child/young person where appropriate (e.g. the IRO, Fostering Social Worker)

If it is agreed that a device can be purchased by a parent/carer, the device must be given to the foster carer (or appropriate professional) prior to the young person, to ensure factory settings are reset.

**Parents need to be made aware** of online safety issues, the harm that can be caused and the **role of foster carers in managing risk** by setting rules and boundaries. For example, foster carers may need to set privacy settings, monitor contacts and content on a device and set screen time limits.

Where appropriate, **discussions should include the child/young person.** Young people will often use social media and/or their own device in a number of ways to connect with others, including parents, family members, their peers or foster carers. It is important to **discuss and explain safe contact to young people,** how this can be achieved and the need for practitioners and foster carers to support them in this.

Discussion and agreements can become part of the Safe Care Plan and agreements around Family Time. You can find a variety of **guidance, leaflets,** **tools and resources** to support you in your conversations with parents/carers, foster carers and young people [on the Kent Academy](https://www.delta-learning.com/course/view.php?id=2026)