

Internet safety and the use of videos, games etc

Computers, internet and social networking are an integral part of life today and can be fun and have many positive uses. For children and young people these can be educational sites which can support study and homework: many schools now expect young people to have the use of the internet to support their learning and to set and receive homework assignments, young people can keep in contact with their friends: particularly if placed a distance from their home community, and be part of the social networking most young people use. The regulations and standards for fostering services have an expectation that foster carers will provide access to a computer and to the internet.

As with all aspects of life the risks of using the internet and computers should be put into perspective. Statistically probably the greatest risk young people will encounter is people in chat rooms or newsgroups that are unkind and unpleasant, or at the worst predatory. Children may also spend a lot of wasted time in areas that aren't very productive.

By taking responsibility for young peoples internet use foster carers can greatly reduce the potential risks of being on line.

Guidelines for internet use

- Set reasonable guidelines and rules about internet use by your children. Decide what parental controls and or protective software you might use. Discuss the rules with children and stick them up by the computer so they can be easily seen and act as a reminder.
- Remember to monitor a child's use of the internet and their compliance with the rules, especially the time spent online – excessive use of chat rooms etc late at night can be a sign there may be a problem.
- Never give out identifying info – eg family name, address, tel. number, school name etc. in a public message forum such as chat room or bulletin board, twitter; facebook etc. and always be sure you are dealing with someone either you or the young person knows before giving it out via email.
- Consider carefully before giving out any personal info about you or your family eg. age marital status, financial info.
- Never put photos of children on social networking sites such as facebook, myspace, Twitter and Beebo, or on the many virtual worlds such as Habbo and Second Life etc. as this represents as a breach of privacy for the child, and because these sites can be 'hacked' and personal info obtained by people who should not have access to it which could represent a risk to the child.
- Never respond to anything on social networking sites that are suggestive, obscene, abusive or threatening. Encourage children to tell you if they encounter this or are made uncomfortable by anything said or done on the sites. If anyone receives a message that is harassing or of a sexual nature this should be reported to your service provider. Your Family Placement Social worker and the child's Social Worker should also be informed if it is related to the child in placement.
- Children should be instructed not to click on a link in an email from an unknown source as this can lead to explicit or otherwise inappropriate websites.

- Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you don't see or hear them means it can be easy for a person to misrepresent themselves as something they are not, eg. a 40 year old male as 12 years old. Always be alert to the dangers.
- Never allow a child or young person to arrange a meeting with someone they have only met online without this being first discussed with child's SW. If such a meeting is arranged, make sure it is in a public place, and that the young person is accompanied by a responsible adult.
- Get to know the sites your child/young person uses, and find out what information is offered and if there is a way for parents/carers to block objectionable material.
- Should you become aware of the transmission, use or viewing of pornographic material inform your service provider, the young person's SW and your FPSW
- Make sure internet and computer use is a 'family' activity, and undertaken in a family room and not in isolation, eg. in the child's bedroom.

What are the possible risks?

- **Password security** – young people should be cautioned never to give out their password to anyone, even if they claim to work for an Internet Service Provider. Most Providers have a policy regarding passwords (never asking a user for their password) The risk is that an account might be 'stolen' or misused by another.
- **Bullying** – children may encounter messages that are demeaning, harassing, bullying or threatening. This can seriously affect their self esteem and is more likely to happen where a young person uses chat rooms or exchanges message on bulletin boards, so it is important to be aware of this.
- **Harassment** – possibly through sharing information that puts their own safety and potentially the safety of others at risk. Occasionally paedophiles have been found to use chat rooms bulletin boards etc. to gain a child's confidence and try to arrange a face-to-face meeting.
- **Exposure to inappropriate material** – which might be frightening, sexual or violent in nature, or encourage dangerous or illegal activity. Any illegal activity by others should be discussed with the child or young person with a view to reporting to the Police.
- **Drugs, alcohol, tobacco or other dangers** – some websites or newsgroups contain information that advocates the use of drugs, alcohol, tobacco etc. It is also possible to find information on the internet relating to obtaining weapons, making bombs. The information which can be obtained through the internet is vast and constant monitoring is required.
- **Privacy** - young people have the right to privacy, everything about them eg. name., age, school they go to, where they live, who is in their family etc. is the personal business of them and their families. No one has the right to extract this information from a child without the permission of a parent, carer or person with parental responsibility.
- **Legal and financial** – the risk that a child might act in a way that has negative legal or financial consequences, eg. giving out another person's credit card details or doing something that violates another person's rights. Young people should be taught 'good manners' on the internet, as they should in public, and avoid being rude, mean or inconsiderate to others.
- **Gambling** – there are sites that enable users to gamble with real money or for fun. Although these sites maybe operating legally in the jurisdiction in which they are located, it is generally illegal (and inappropriate) for young people to gamble wherever they are.



Videos, DVDs and videogames

Foster carers should monitor the viewing of videos and DVDs and playing of video games, and follow the Government classifications on the age range stated that they are suitable for:

- U – suitable for all
- PG – parental guidance
- 12A/12 – suitable for 12 years and over
- 15 – only suitable for age 15 and over
- 18 – only suitable for over 18s.

Foster carers should discuss the reasons why a young person is unable to watch a particular video/DVD or play a videogame with the young person, and should discuss with their FPSW and the child's SW if they have concerns about what the child/young person may be viewing elsewhere.

Support

Remember that your involvement in your foster child's online life is by far the best insurance you can have of their safety. If you feel you need support in learning about computer and internet safety please talk to your Family Placement Social Worker, contact your local library where computer courses are regularly run.

Further information on internet safety can be found on the following sites:

- www.thinkyuknow.co.uk
- www.ceop.gov.uk
- www.bbc.co.uk/onlinesafety

These sites offer information for parents and carers, and advice for children of different ages on safe guidelines for internet and social networking. Please do use these and sit down with your child/young person and agree safe surfing rules for your child/young person. Keep a copy of these pinned up near the computer for easy reference and as a reminder. Talk to other carers about how they manage computer and internet use, see if their strategies would be useful for you to adopt.

Finally! Please remember that many children gain a great deal of benefit from using the internet and use it safely.