

New Technology: Recommendations & Guidelines

OVERVIEW

In today's world, it is important that children & young adults entering the workforce be technologically literate. Unfortunately, children in the child welfare system often have less computer access and use due to residential instability, educational discontinuity, and other environmental obstacles.¹ It is critical that young people in foster care are not left even farther behind their peers due to a digital divide.

Foster parents of adolescents must often weigh risks versus rewards when making decisions about the activities of youth in their care. In the same way, caregivers must ultimately use their best judgment when deciding whether to provide access to new technologies and in supervising the online activities of young people in their care. Recognizing these challenges, we have opted to issue a series of **guidelines** rather than make policy recommendations. For the purposes of these guidelines, we've addressed the use of technology by adolescent-aged young people (the Center for Disease Control defines adolescence from age 10 to 24).

Restricting access to the internet and other technology on the basis of age is extremely hard to get right and, where the internet is concerned, has tended towards a 'blanket 18 and under' and '18 and above' approach. However, there are clear differences in maturity and development between a 12-year-old and a 17-year-old. Two sixteen year olds, in fact, may have very different levels of maturity. Issuing recommendations on age alone would be unreasonable. Therefore, age recommendations have not been addressed in these guidelines and judgment of the maturity level and dependability is left to those who know the young person, their caregiver and caseworker.

ROLES

A balance between benefits and safety are best kept in check by a team of people concerned with the youth's best interest.

Foster Parent and Caregiver role

Foster parents and caregivers should develop, at minimum, an understanding of the benefits and challenges of the technology most used by young people, including social networks, email, and texting. As the primary caregiver of the child/youth, foster parents are responsible for educating the youth on internet safety. Caseworkers, certifiers, and other involved adults also hold these responsibilities and ought to ensure that foster parents have the skill necessary to accomplish this task. Rules for a particular youth should not be based on the actions of another youth or group or media story —

¹ Kerman, Ben. (2000) Foster Care Program Needs Assessment: Results Of The Foster Parent And Foster Youth Interview, Casey Family Services, New Haven, CT

it's important to view youth as individuals and not bar them from technology based on the inappropriate actions of others.

Child Welfare Worker role

It is necessary that case workers learn to use technology and social networking sites to connect with young people they work with, so they can better understand issues of appropriateness and safety. Caseworkers need to discuss internet safety with youth on a regular basis and assess the youth's ability to use technology in a responsible manner. Caseworkers should also check in with foster parents and refer them to training on internet safety if needed.

Certifier's Role

The certifier's role includes discussing each child's use of the internet **and** Social Networking Sites (SNS) with the Foster Parent. Certifiers will assess training needs regarding internet safety and refer to appropriate training resources.

Young peoples' role

Young people must be responsible for their own actions, online and otherwise if youth are provided access to technology.

GUIDELINES

Internet Access

Control over allowed websites and filters can be utilized to protect youth. Young people in foster care should be allowed (with appropriate supervision) access to the internet and taught to use it responsibly.

Supervision

The level of supervision for using the internet is determined based on a youth's age, maturity, and trustworthiness. Supervision of a youth's internet use may fall to many, including teachers, but primary responsibility rests with foster parents.

Rules

Foster parents and caregivers should discuss the internet rules for their home with each young person. Below are links to well known and authoritative guides with advice for safety on the internet:

<http://www.microsoft.com/protect/parents/childsafety/age.aspx>

<http://safetynet.aap.org>

<http://www.wiredsafety.org>

DHS has developed an Internet Usage Agreement for Foster Parents and Youth which is available through the ILP Desk.

Self protection

Responsible youth development includes equipping youth to interact with technology in a safe way. Young people should be taught to protect their personal information, passwords, and privacy.

Joining online social networks

The minimum age to sign up for a Facebook account (and many other Social Networking Sites “SNS”) is 13. Youth are strongly advised to set privacy settings to private or semi-private, to protect against interaction with strangers. Caregivers and youth workers may wish to make a condition of use of a “SNS” to have the youth “friend” them, allowing access to view photos, messages, videos, and other activities. Be aware that some social networking sites have more stringent default privacy settings, such as Facebook and FosterClub.

E-mail

Young people age 13 and older should be allowed to have an e-mail address. If there is ever a concern about safety, appropriate supervision needs to be implemented. E-mail should be treated under the same rules as postal mail. Only in instances where there is reasonable cause to suspect misuse or inappropriate activity should a youth’s email be checked by a responsible adult. E-mail sent to and received from a caseworker, ILP provider, attorney, CASA, or therapist is private and should only be read by the foster child/youth.

Sibling communication

The loss experienced by children who must be separated from family members is compounded by the loss of contact with siblings. Separated siblings need to maintain connections with each other.

Communication using the various tools the internet has to offer can help siblings stay connected. Sibling communication via the internet is immediate and beneficial, but should not be considered a substitute for actual time spent together. Sibling connections are important, and should not be limited unless there is a court order or other extenuating circumstance.

Birth family contact

In addition to regularly planned visitation, communication with the biological and extended family could be facilitated through “Virtual visitation,” or visits by video chat, IM, or other technology–assisted contact. This would be a supplement to in-person visitation, not a replacement and virtual visitations must follow the same guidelines in the youth’s visitation plan.

Family finding

When the case plan allows and a youth is interested in using the internet for “family-finding” they should be partnered with a supportive adult to guide them in their efforts, receive training, and be held accountable to follow rules around safety and confidentiality.

Posting of photos and video

Young people ought to be allowed to post photos and video including images of themselves, except in situations where doing so would expose the young person to harm from a previous abuser (i.e. the child is in hiding) or the young person has demonstrated poor judgment. Caregivers should be allowed to post photos of their family, including foster youth, so long as there is no indication that the youth pictured are in foster care (no last names-initials used) and the youth's consent is given.

Cell phones

Cell phones are a primary “instrument of communication” and it is in the best interest of young people to learn and practice managing the finances of phone ownership prior to aging out of foster care. If a foster youth comes in to a home with a cell phone, contact the caseworker for any instructions. *Caregivers should not be required or made to feel compelled to co-sign or financially support the cost of a cell phone.*

If there is some court restriction on whom a child/youth can have contact with, then this needs to be monitored. If the cell phone use is interfering with the child's ability to function in school or in the home, some plan related to the specific behavior, designed to improve functioning, needs to be developed and implemented. A collaborative problem solving approach is suggested.

If the child is struggling with current behavioral or mental health issues that are exacerbated by the quantity or quality of cell phone use, we would recommend incorporating possible solutions into any plan developed regarding cell phone use.

In developing any cell phone use plan, consider including the child, child's parent, foster parent, and the caseworker as part of the development team. In addition, consider utilizing input from a mental health worker or other significant person (to the child).

Beyond safety or issues related to functioning, we do not feel the child/youth's use of the cell phone should be restricted.

TIP: A “Suggested Use Agreement” template was developed along with the above guidelines. The template is designed to assist foster parents and youth to mutually determine a safe plan for allowing the teen access to technology. The Suggested Use Agreement is available through the DHS ILP Desk (503-945-5684).