

Safer Caring: A New Approach supplementary resources (2017)

Chapter 10: Safer caring in a digital world

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Technology today

Within the last ten years, the key developments in digital and internet technologies have been the increase in the number of devices that connect to the internet as well as the sheer number of services available.

The internet can be accessed from all sorts of different devices, often using wireless networks (wi-fi). Instead of a desktop computer or a laptop you could use a smartphone, games console (such as the Microsoft Xbox), iPad or internet television.

Mobile devices such as smartphones are now the focal point of teens' technology use, closely followed by tablets. The popularity of these devices is coupled with a high degree of engagement, with mobile-focused social media networks Instagram and Snapchat adding to the extensive influence social media personalities have on children and young people.

And the digital world never sleeps – it's on 24/7, connecting people worldwide to commercial and news websites, apps that allow you to share photos, shop online and much, much more.

This world is very familiar to many children and young people. They may engage in live chat on Skype or Facebook, post on friends' walls on Facebook, share their interests on Pinterest, blog about their interests on Tumblr, share photos on Instagram and Snapchat, watch YouTube videos and post messages on Twitter.

Some of these services are free; others require an account to be set up with a credit card and other details that are stored online.

The challenges for fostered children and young people

The internet is a fantastic place for children and young people to learn, connect and have fun. Without a doubt, many of these technologies provide tremendous benefits. However, they can present challenges too.

There are some useful tips on managing 'what children see online' [here](#).

Online safety for children with special educational needs (SEN)

Some groups of children and young people are potentially even more vulnerable and at risk than others in the digital world. These can include children with emotional or behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties and other complex needs, as well as those for whom English is an additional language.

Of course, these groups must and can use the internet for learning, creativity as well as for empowerment, social interaction and fun, just like their peers. Indeed, young people with autism and other communication disorders often find digital communication easier than face-to-face communication. Some digital apps provide visual cues to aid in communication, support transitions to reduce anxiety, and create a consistent structure in children with special educational needs. They can help children to identify and regulate their emotions, express themselves, manage time and routines and interact with others.

However, as foster carers, it is important that you are aware of the risks and challenges they might face:

- Children with autistic spectrum disorders may make literal interpretations of online content, which will affect how they respond and interact with online users.
- Some children may not understand some of the terminology due to language delays or disorders.
- Some children with complex needs do not understand the concept of friendship, and might therefore trust everyone unreservedly. They are unable to make judgements about what is safe to share, and who to trust online.
- Children with learning disabilities can be more vulnerable to online bullying. They also may need more support to recognise when someone is bullying them online. Teaching children the signs of cyberbullying, how to stay safe online and what to do if someone bullies or upsets them online, can help make sure children have a positive, safe online experience.
- In addition, some children may not appreciate how their own online behaviour may be seen by others as bullying.

These can be challenging and complex issues for you as foster carers. It's important that your school's co-ordinator for children with special educational needs outlines strategies for safe internet use as part of the child's learning plan.

(Note: many of the tips above are adapted from information from [Childnet International](#), a not for profit organisation that aims to make the internet a great and safe place for children.)

Be a digital role model

Children take behavioural cues from the adults around them. So if you'd like the children in your household to have a balanced approach to using technology, think about how you use technology. If you look at your phone during dinner, then you can't expect a young person to resist the temptation to do the same. If you learn how to navigate the digital world well, then you can play a key role in helping fostered children to do the same.

Find out more from Vodafone's Digital Parenting website [here](#).

Ensure your family is cyber secure

Make sure that your family is aware of and know how to deal with cyber security issues. Being digitally secure is a necessary priority in today's digital world for any family. Cyber crimes include hacking and malware (malicious software) where cyber criminals can gain access to your devices.

Warn your family to be careful what they click on, to be wary of identity theft and keep their passwords strong and private.

Make sure your fostered child is aware of the risks of viruses. Opening an infected attachment or visiting a corrupt website could download harmful files, possibly to fraud, essential data being deleted or even your computer rendered unusable.

Install antivirus software on any device your family uses to go online, and update it regularly. Make sure your child knows to not download suspicious files or attachments.