Principles for Social Work in Children's Social Care:

Supporting young people's online safety and experiences

Introduction

Online life holds particular importance for care experienced children, but they are also at greater risk of encountering online harms and often have to renegotiate their digital access when they move placement ([Refuge and Risk, 2021](#)).

This document contains nine principles to help social workers and other social work professionals support foster carers and care experienced children understand how to safely benefit from being online. Each principle is accompanied by a rationale, as well as examples of what best practice and the risks may look like.

The principles are intended to provide a concise reference point for best practice, we encourage readers to use them as foundation to guide further learning and action. A glossary and suggestions for further reading are included at the end of the document though readers should ensure they are always accessing the latest information, support and research.

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These principles were developed by the [UKCIS Vulnerable Users Working Group](#), a voluntary collaboration of experts chaired by Internet Matters, which works to help vulnerable people have a safe and beneficial experience online.

Summary of principles

Within your professional practice

1. Achievable and consistent online safety policies and procedures are in place, regularly updated and understood by all

2. Training/updates on the risks, benefits and support for young people being online are regularly accessed and shared with the whole team

3. Online benefits and safety are routinely incorporated into working practice and considered as part of contextual safeguarding

Supporting foster carers

4. Foster carers understand and are aware of online safety policies, procedures and escalation routes

5. Foster carers are supported to understand and access information, training and help on the risks, benefits and support for young people being online

6. Foster carers are supported in setting parental controls and discussing online risks, benefits and support with children in their care

Supporting care experienced young people

7. The voice of the child is listened to

8. Young people use online connectivity to maintain healthy relationships, develop digital resilience and engage with the online environment in a supported way

9. Joined up working between all those supporting the child is encouraged so they receive consistent support and advice about their online world

Within your professional practice

Principle 1

Achievable and consistent online safety policies and procedures are in place, regularly updated and understood by all

Rationale

Connectivity is particularly important for the development and wellbeing of young people with care experience, but it can also expose them to risks of harm. It is vital that online risks, benefits and support are embedded at a systematic level to ensure informed, consistent and considered practice takes place.

Best practice

- Online safety is seen as a crucial part of safeguarding and is included in Safeguarding and Safer Caring policies.

- Social worker supervision meetings cover online safety, the benefits to young people of being online and associated risk assessments as standard.

- Your team has clear online safety escalation routes that are understood by all.

- Relevant policies and procedures are reviewed regularly and updated when there are changes to delivering services, platforms or your team become aware of a new safeguarding risk.

When you should be concerned

- Policies and procedures are not regularly updated in line with latest developments in technology, behaviours and recommended practice.

- Online risk and benefits are not considered as part of safeguarding.

- Your team are not aware of current risks, benefits and support for young people being online.

Principle 2

Training/updates on the risks, benefits and support for young people being online are regularly accessed and shared with the whole team

Rationale

Changes in technology use and best practice can move at pace. Regular training and information sharing on the benefits and risks of connectivity will enable your team to feel confident in supporting foster carers and young people to safely enjoy the benefits of being online.

Best practice

- You have a nominated representative and/or process to support your team and hold it to account on being informed about the latest developments in technology use and best practice.
- Your team routinely accesses relevant updates, research, and reports from a range of sources.
- Online risk, benefits and support information is disseminated regularly through team meetings.
- New starters receive online safety training at induction and all team members access refresher training annually.
- Your team have a good understanding of established and emerging technologies and use these to support young people in a safe and beneficial way.

When you should be concerned

- Your team are not aware of up-to-date online benefits and safety insights.
- Online risks and benefits are not understood, routinely identified or addressed.
- Knowledge of online risks and benefits is inconsistent across your team.
- Your team do not feel confident exploring and supporting online lives.
- New starters do not receive online safety training until the next scheduled whole team training.

Principle 3

Online risks, benefits and support are routinely incorporated into practice and considered as part of contextual safeguarding

Rationale

Behaviours and experiences online and offline impact each other and are intertwined for most young people. It is crucial that online benefits and safety are considered as part of a wider safeguarding picture.

Best practice

- Online benefits and safety are routinely considered as part of contextual safeguarding of a young person.
- Online benefits and safety form specific sections of any TAF, TAC, CIN and CP assessments and reviews.
- Referral procedures allow for consideration of online access, behaviours and experiences and are mapped against the CAF.
- Planning considers all devices and usage, and enhancements as well as restrictions are considered.

When you should be concerned

- Online benefits and safety are not discussed as part of contextual safeguarding, assessment or review processes.
- Online is seen as 'another world' and not considered as part of a holistic view of a young person's everyday life.
- Practices across your team are inconsistent.
- Offline predictors of online harms are not considered.

Supporting foster carers

Principle 4

Foster carers understand and are aware of online safety policies, procedures and escalation routes

Rationale

Foster carers and social workers work in partnership, a shared understanding of expectations and procedures is therefore paramount. A confident and collaborative approach by both parties will ensure the best support for the young person.

Best practice

- Foster carers understand what online safeguarding policies are in place and why.
- Foster carers understand safeguarding risks discovered online should be managed in line with standard safeguarding practices and concerns should be reported to the social worker or DSL.
- Foster carers know what devices their child has access to and understands their role in managing these devices.
- Foster carers feel confident managing online risks and benefits, and can set clear, fair, supportive and consistent boundaries.
- Foster carers are clear on what online communication is permitted for the young person and why (e.g. with birth families) and there is a clear escalation route for inappropriate online contact that all parties are aware of.
- Foster carers are supported to use a secure email account, so all correspondence with social workers remains confidential.
- Foster carers are encouraged to provide, where possible, consistent digital access between children in the same setting or an explanation of why expectations are different (e.g. because of age or specific circumstances).

When you should be concerned

- The online history and aspirations of a young person and relevant others is not shared as part of the placement process.
- Foster carers are unaware of the policies and procedures around online safeguarding.
- Information about young people is not shared securely.
- Foster carers are not aware of all devices a young person might have access to, or who owns them.

Principle 5

Foster carers are supported to understand and access information, training and help on the risks, benefits and support for young people being online

Rationale

Online risk, benefits and support are a significant and ever-present consideration for foster carers, and something they are likely to have to manage and make notable decisions about on a frequent basis. Guidance on online benefits and safety should be integral to their training, which should be regular and fit for purpose.

Best practice

- Your team share up-to-date insights on online benefits and safety with foster carers and the wider professional network.

- Foster carers are encouraged to appreciate that young people go online for different reasons which may vary depending on the child's age or stage of development.

- Your team help foster carers to be aware of sources of immediate and general support related to being online.

- Foster carers are able to access support services including support out of hours.

- Your team work with foster carers to understand the young person's behaviours and experiences online, including device ownership, usage and online safety knowledge.

When you should be concerned

- Foster carers and other trusted adults are unaware of online benefits and risks for young people.

- Actions, decisions and advice are based on outdated information.

- The impact of moving from one household's online approach to another is not considered or managed.

- Digital access is restricted by a foster carer due to lack of confidence in or knowledge of other options.

- Foster carers do not realise that what is appropriate online can depend on age e.g. certain platforms for certain age groups.

Principle 6

Foster carers are supported in setting parental controls and discussing online risks, benefits and support with children in their care

Rationale

Foster carers may lack the skills or knowledge to set up filtering or parental controls on young people's devices. Clear guidance and support should be given so that foster carers feel confident in discussing the young person's online life effectively, and in setting up and checking on the controls they have put in place.

Best practice

- All parties supporting the child understand that that denying online access to children can be a risk to them it itself (e.g. loss of opportunity to develop resilience, risk of alienation, risk of turning to secret devices).

- The UKCIS Digital Passport is used as an integral tool by all parties.

- Foster carers and other trusted adults are supported to have regular, ongoing conversations with young people about their online lives in an engaging and supportive way.

- Arrangements that affect online lives, such as changing device access, are agreed with the foster carer and child before any changes are made.

- Specific funding for anti-virus and security software is made available, and promoted as essential, as part of foster carers' allowances.

- Your team encourage and support foster carers to use appropriate parental controls and device settings to enable appropriate online contact between the child and others.

When you should be concerned

- A risk averse approach to online safety is adopted which does not allow young people to access the benefits of the online world or develop digital resilience.

- A positive relationship with birth families or friends is disrupted by lack of digital access, or inappropriate contact is not known of or managed.

- Foster carers are given rules but are unclear or unsupported is implementing and enforcing them.

- Foster carers are unable or unwilling to ensure security provisions are in place.

- Foster carers employ excessive or inappropriate use of parental controls or monitoring software.

Supporting young people

Principle 7

The voice of the child is listened to

Rationale

Children and young people have rights in the digital world and online access is likely to be vitally important and beneficial to them. Conversations should regularly take place to offer them choices, where appropriate, and so that their views and opinions about their digital lives are taken into account.

Best practice

- Regular conversations take place with all parties and the young person pre-placement, during placement and after a placement has finished.

- Young people are supported with online benefits and safety strategies, such as using the UKCIS Digital Passport to have regular conversations about their online experiences and aspirations.

- Your team ensure the young person is involved in any changes to their digital access and has a good understanding of why a change has been made.

- Your team ensures all agencies involved in supporting a young person's online life explain to the young person what information will be shared between them.

- Young people know who to talk to and what they can do if they want support doing something online or if something online worries them.

When you should be concerned

- The young person is not consulted on their digital access and therefore does not understand or rejects arrangements.

- The young person is not encouraged to share details around their online lives and important information is not known by trusted adults.

- The young person does not understand their digital rights or have a trusted adult who they can discuss them with.

- Agencies put new rules in place together, but without involving the young person or explaining the collaborative steps which are being taken.

Principle 8

Young people use online connectivity to maintain healthy relationships, develop digital resilience and engage with the online environment in a supported way

Rationale

The use of connected technology can have a positive impact on young people - enabling them to maintain friendships and contact with their families as they move placement, to relax and support their wellbeing, and to develop important life skills, knowledge and behaviours. Case-by-case management of online access and activities tailored to each young person can ensure risks and benefits are effectively identified and managed.

Best practice

- Where appropriate, young people are encouraged and supported to maintain contact with friends and family using technology.
- Young people are supported to develop critical thinking skills around what they see and who they meet online.
- Young people are supported with tech-based online safety strategies, such as parental controls, privacy settings and filtering adult content at source.
- Young people are supported to be effective digital citizens.
- Where appropriate, young people are encouraged to learn new digital skills.
- Young people are supported in discussing their experiences so low risk incidents can be used to build digital resilience.

When you should be concerned

- Young people are disconnected from support networks and unsupported in the specific online benefits and risks relevant to them.
- Young people feel the trusted adults around them do not understand online and therefore do not turn to them for support.
- The young person fears a victim blaming/judgemental response so do not seek support with low-risk incidents that may then develop into significant harms.
- Relevant online safety settings are not in place.
- Young people are motivated to bypass security/safety systems that are in place for their wellbeing.

Principle 9

Joined up working between all those supporting the child is encouraged so they receive consistent support and advice about their online world

Rationale

Children's online and offline worlds are often intertwined and therefore consistent online safety advice and practice is important in all elements of the child's life, such as school, healthcare and social settings. To reassure the young person and ensure effective support, practice should be aligned and not in conflict or contradictory.

Best practice

- Tech-based and non-tech-based strategies to support the young person's online safety are communicated with all adults keeping the child safe (e.g. teachers, youth workers, counsellors).

- All adults supporting the child are encouraged to regularly communicate to enable good awareness of online benefits and risks specific to the young person and avoid excessive/ duplicated monitoring or intervention.

- Your team support and encourage agencies to inform all relevant adults keeping the child safe of any incidents that may have implications for the child's online safety, such as an event at school.

When you should be concerned

- The various placements and settings the child engages with have different approaches to online risks, benefits and support (e.g. foster carers encouraging the use of certain apps, while school discourages them).

- Agencies share excessive amounts of non-risk related information about the young person's online world or deploy duplicated interventions, making the young person feel overly monitored or disengaged.

Resources, research and reading

Resources

Childnet Information and advice for foster carers

A two-page leaflet produced by Childnet, offering information and advice for foster carers to support young people online.

Connecting Safely Online hub

Internet Matters' resource hub to support the online lives of young people with additional needs, including content aimed at parents and carers, and advice for young people.

Harmful Online Challenges and Hoaxes

Department for Education guidance on harmful online challenges and hoaxes.

Inclusive Digital Safety hub

Internet Matters' resource hub to support safe online engagement for young people most likely to experience online risks. It features content specifically for adults supporting care experienced young people.

Keeping children safe online

The NSPCC's child safety online hub, offering guidance and support on a range of topics. There is support for parents, carers and professionals, and directs to the Childline pages for support for children and young people.

NSPCC Online safety training

E-Safety training for professionals to keep children and young people safe online. Developed by the NSPCC in association with NCA-CEOP.

Professionals Online Safety Helpline

The UK Safer Internet Centre helpline supporting professionals with child safety online issues.

Safer caring

Guidance from The Fostering Network supporting foster carers to keep young people and themselves and their families safe when fostering.

Sharing Nudes and Semi Nudes

Guidance for education settings working with children and young people on sharing nudes and semi-nudes. Developed by the UK Council for Internet Safety.

UKCIS Digital Passport

A resource to help care experienced children and young people, and their carers, talk about their online lives.

UCKIS Guidance for School Governors

A resource detailing the questions that school governors should ask to ensure their school leaders are keeping children safe online.

Research

Children's Media Use and Attitudes

Ofcom's annual report on their Children's Media Literacy research, examining evidence on children's media use and access, and parents' views on this.

Refuge and Risk

A 2021 report produced in partnership by Internet Matters, Youthworks and the University of Kingston, providing insight into how children with some form of vulnerability interact with the online world.

Status of Mind

This 2017 report from the Royal Society for Public Health offers insight into how social media can impact young people's mental health, both positively and negatively.

Vulnerable Children in a Digital World

A 2018 report produced in partnership by Internet Matters, Youthworks and the University of Kingston, examining the risks that vulnerable children may face online.

Reading

Children, technology and healthy development
Catherine Knibbs

Fostering in a digital world: a common sense guide
Maria Boffey

Safer Care for Internet and Social Media Policy (example)

Safer caring: a new approach
Jacky Slade

The absurd and unfounded myth of the digital native
Enrique Dans

UNCRC general comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment

Glossary

CAF	Common Assessment Framework		**TAC**	Team Around the Child
CIN	Child in Need		**TAF**	Team Around the Family
CP	Child Protection		**UKCIS**	UK Council for Internet Safety
DSL	Designated Safeguarding Lead		**UNCRC**	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child