

INTERNET SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR FOSTER CARERS

How to reduce the risks.

While children and young people need a certain amount of privacy, they also need adult involvement and supervision in their daily lives. The same general parenting skills that apply to the “real world” also apply while online. If you have cause for concern regarding a child’s online activities, talk to him or her. If you feel that you do not have enough knowledge about computers and the Internet, you can speak to your Fostering Social Worker or to a teacher or librarian.

If your foster child tells you about an upsetting message, person, or web site encountered while online, help him or her avoid problems in the future. You should also report the incident to the foster child’s Social Worker and note the incident in your daily log.

Guidelines for Foster Carers

Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by children in your care.

- Never give out identifying information – home address, school name, or telephone number – on a public message board such as chat or newsgroups, and be sure you’re dealing with someone both you and the child know and trust.
- Do not post photographs of the child in newsgroups or on web sites that are available to the public. Consider using a pseudonym, avoid listing the child’s name and e-mail address in any public directories and profiles, and find out about your ISP’s privacy policies, and exercise your options for how your personal information may be used.
- Get to know the Internet and any services your foster child uses. If you don’t know how to log on, ask your child to show you how. Have the child show you what he or she does online, and become familiar with all the activities that are available online. Find out if your child has a free web-based E-mail account, such as those offered by Hotmail and Yahoo® and learn their user names and passwords.

- Never allow a child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they “meet” on the Internet without first seeking permission from their Social Worker. Speak to them about the dangers of doing this.
- The child should never respond to messages that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, threatening, or makes them feel uncomfortable. Encourage the child to tell you if he or she encounters such messages. If you or the child receive a message that is harassing, of a sexual nature, or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your ISP, and ask for their assistance. Speak to your Fostering Social Worker and make a note incident as part of your daily log.
- The child should not click on any links that are contained in e-mail from persons they don’t know. Such links could lead to sexually explicit or otherwise inappropriate websites or could be a computer virus. If someone sends you or the child messages or images that are indecent, lewd, or obscene with the intent to abuse, annoy, harass, or threaten you, or if you become aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography while online **immediately report this to the child’s Social Worker.**
- Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can’t see or even hear that person it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him or herself. Thus someone indicating “she” is a “12-year-old girl” could in reality be a 40-year-old man.
- Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by the child. Discuss these rules and post them near the computer as a reminder. Remember to monitor the child’s compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time the child spends on the computer. A child’s excessive use of online services or the Internet, especially late at night, may be a clue that there is a potential problem.

Check out blocking, filtering and rating applications.

As you may know, there are now services that rate websites for content as well as filtering programs and browsers that empower carers to block the types of sites they consider to be inappropriate. These programs work in different ways. Some block sites known to contain objectionable material. Some prevent users from entering certain types of information such as their name and address. Other programs keep children away from chat rooms or restrict their ability to send or read e-mail. Generally these programs can be configured by the carer to only block the types of sites that the carer considers to be unsuitable.

Whether or not it is appropriate to use one of these programs is a personal decision. If you do use such a program, you’ll probably need to explain to the

young person why you feel it is necessary. You should also be careful to choose a program with criteria that reflects your family's needs. Be sure to configure it so that it doesn't block sites that you want the foster child and your family to be able to visit.

It is important to realise that filtering programs cannot protect your foster child from all dangers in cyberspace. To begin with, no program can possibly block out every inappropriate site. What's more, it's possible, in some cases, for the programs to block sites that are appropriate. If you use a filtering programme, you should re-evaluate it periodically to make sure it's working for your family.

Regardless of whether you use a filtering program, you should still make sure that the foster child follows all of the basic rules. Filtering programs are not a substitute for good judgement or critical thinking. With or without filters, children and their carers need to be "net savvy" and communicate with each other.

- **Talk with your foster child about what they can and cannot do online.**
Be reasonable and set reasonable expectations.
Try to understand their needs, interests, and curiosity.
- **Be open with your foster child and encourage him/her to come to you if they encounter a problem online.**
If they tell you about someone or something they have encountered, your first response should not be to blame them or take away their Internet privileges. Work with him/her to help avoid problems in the future, and remember – your response will determine whether they confide to you the next time they encounter a problem and they learn to deal with problems on their own.
- **Learn everything you can about the Internet.**
Ask the foster child to show you what's "cool". Have them show you great places for young people and fill you in on areas that you might benefit from as well. Make "surfing the net" a family experience. Use it to plan a vacation, pick out a movie, or check out other family activities. Make this one area where you get to be the student and the foster child gets to be the teacher.

Additional information

There are chat areas, newsgroups, and web sites that have material that is hateful, is violent, or contains other types of material that Parents/Carers might consider to be inappropriate for their children? It is possible for children to stumble across this type of material when doing a search using one of the web sites that is specifically designed to help people find information on the Internet. Most of these sites, called "search engines", do not, by default, filter

out material that might be inappropriate for children, but some offer a childsafe option and some are designed specifically for use by children.

Also the Internet contains newsgroups, web sites, and other areas designed specifically for adults who wish to post, read, or view sexually explicit material including pictures, stories, and videos. Some of this material is posted on web sites where there is an attempt to verify the user's age and/or a requirement for users to enter a credit card number on the presumption that children do not have access to credit card numbers. Other areas on the Internet make no such effort to control access. Nevertheless, to consider monitoring your credit card bills for such charges. In addition to "adult" pornography, there is also areas on the Internet that contain indecent images of children. If you or your foster child come across this type of material, **immediately report it to their Social Worker.**

Some online services and Internet Service Providers (ISP) allow Parents/Carers to limit their children's access to certain services and features such as adult-orientated "chatrooms", bulletin boards, and web sites. There may be an area just for children where it is less likely for them to stumble onto inappropriate material or get into an unsupervised "chat-room". At the very least, keep track of any files your foster child downloads to your/their computer.

In addition there are ways to filter or control what children can see or do online. One type of filter, called a "spam" filter limits unsolicited e-mail including mail promoting sexually explicit material. Some ISP's and e-mail services include filters as part of their service but, if not, there is software you can purchase that will attempt to limit the type of mail that gets through. For further advice see www.thinkuknow.co.uk or www.getnetwise.org and speak to your fostering Social Worker.

There are also ways to filter what a child can see on the World Wide Web. Check with your (ISP) to see if they offer age-appropriate parental controls. If not, consider using a software program that blocks chat areas, newsgroups, and websites that are known to be inappropriate for children. Most of these programs can be configured by the parent/carer to filter out sites that contain nudity, sexual content, hateful or violent material or that advocate the use of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. Some can also be configured to prevent children from revealing information about themselves such as their name, address, or telephone number. You can find a directory of these filtering programs at www.getnetwise.org and click on the tools section.

Another option is to use a rating system that relies on web-site operators to indicate the nature of their material. Internet browsers can be configured to only allow children to visit sites that are rated at the level that the Parents/Carers specify. The advantage to this method is that only appropriately rated sites can be viewed. The disadvantage is that many

appropriate web sites have not submitted themselves for a rating and will therefore be blocked.

While technological-child-protection tools are worth exploring, they're not a panacea. To begin with, no program is perfect. There is always the possibility that something inappropriate could "slip through" or something that is appropriate will be blocked. Finally, filtering programs do not necessarily protect children from all dangerous activities. For example some do not control instant messaging or chat services which are particularly dangerous because they put a child in instant communications with people who they may not know. Also some filters do not work with peer-to-peer networks that allow people to exchange files such as music, pictures, text, and videos. These peer-to-peer networks are sometimes used to distribute indecent images, including those of children. Filters are not a substitute for parental/carer involvement. Regardless of whether you choose to use a filtering program or an Internet rating system, the best way to assure yourself that the child you are caring for is having positive online experience is to stay in touch with what he or she is doing.

Useful Websites:-

www.gridclub.com

www.kidsmart.org.uk

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

www.netsmartz.org

www.bizzikid.co.uk

www.clubpenguin.co.uk

www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com

www.iwf.org.uk

www.sip-bench.eu

www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/help/safesurfing

www.yahooligans.com - <http://safely.yahoo.com/>