Social Media: Tips for Foster Care Workers

Child welfare agencies use social media to support networking and training, assist with public awareness campaigns, and recruit foster and adoptive families. At the case level, foster care workers may use social media to find kin, support resource families, and communicate with birth relatives. (Examples of social media use in child welfare can be found at https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=142&sectionid=2&articleid=3728.)

While social media is centered on sharing information, child welfare workers must prioritize privacy. This tip sheet contains tips to help foster care caseworkers address the complex balance required for successfully using social media in a field that demands strict confidentiality.

Above all, be clear with families and youth about your agency's social media policies and procedures.

General Considerations

- **Be familiar with your agency's social media policies.** Learn guidelines for professional and personal social media use. Find out if your agency offers social media training or related instruction.

- **Obtain agency and client consent to communicate with youth and family members through social media venues.** Discuss expectations for which social networks will be used (e.g., Facebook messages, texting, video chatting).

- **Recognize that all forms of communication may be considered legal documentation of interaction between the agency, the foster youth, and families.** Social media does not replace person-to-person contact and should not be the primary communication between a caseworker and family members.

- **Use the right social media tool for your needs.** Decide what you are trying to achieve and choose a platform that fits your goals and audiences. (See the *Social Media for Child Welfare Resource Guide* at https://www.uwgb.edu/newpart/PDF/SocialMediaforChildWelfareResourceGuide%208-27-2012.pdf.)

- **Craft messages that are appropriate to the selected medium.** (See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's CDC Social Media Tools, Guidelines & Best Practices at https://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/.)

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- **Take precautions to protect privacy and preserve confidentiality.** Do not reveal family members' personal information (full name, address) or specific case details in public forums. Maintain your confidentiality as well as that of your colleagues and clients.

Supporting Youth

- **Promote positive social media opportunities for youth.** Enabling children and youth in out-of-home care to use social media helps them fit in with their peers and fosters normalcy. Share Child Welfare Information Gateway's tip sheet for foster youth at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips-youth/.

- **Help youth in care use social media safely.** Teach youth about social media risks—such as inappropriate contact, oversharing, cyberbullying, and sexual predators—and encourage them to use safeguards. Provide guidance on the following safety issues:

  - Keep personal information (full name, address, school name, etc.) private. (See *Helping Youth Avoid Identity Theft* at http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dhs/Identity_Theft_Tip_Sheet_394972_7.pdf.)

  - Understand when and how youth in foster care should and should not use social media to communicate with family members. (See Facebook *101 for Child Welfare Professionals: An Introduction to Using Facebook to Reach Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families* at http://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/facebook-101-for-child-welfare-professionals.pdf.)

  - Think ahead to who might see messages and images posted and their potential impact.

  - Do not share intimate photos and/or talk online about sex (sexting). (See *Sex Trafficking and Child Welfare* at http://childwelfaresparc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Sex-Trafficking-and-the-Child-Welfare-System.pdf.)

- **Discuss cyberbullying.** Advise children and youth not to send or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or photos. Help youth document, block, and report cyberbullying if needed. (For more information, visit http://www.stopbullying.gov/.)

- **Be aware of online gaming risks.** Go over online gaming safety with youth and their parents. Let them know that chatting with others in a game can be unsafe, and advise youth to never post photos or other identifying information. Teach youth to avoid bullies and to tell an adult if they feel threatened or unsafe. (Learn about online gaming safety at http://www.internetmatters.org/advice/online-gaming/.)

- **Model appropriate social media use.** Communicate with youth using the digital channels that they are most comfortable with and set appropriate boundaries for social media use. (Learn about using Facebook at http://www.nrcdr.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/facebook-101-for-child-welfare-professionals.pdf and Twitter at http://www.nrcdr.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/twitter-101-for-child-welfare-professionals.pdf.)

- **Support foster parents in providing oversight of youth's social media use.** Share Child Welfare Information Gateway's tip sheet for foster parents and caregivers (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips-parent/) and your agency's social media guidelines. Discuss concerns specific to the children in their care and their needs. Help parents keep abreast of new technology and learn about social media sites and apps popular with youth today. (See the list of apps parents should know about at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/social-media-apps-parents-should-know-about.)

- **Understand their language.** Youth in foster care may use abbreviations, hashtags, and emoji online. Help parents understand that the way teens communicate is a language all their own. (Learn more about online abbreviations at http://time.com/4373616/text-abbreviations-acronyms/; emoji use at https://emojidictionary.emojifoundation.com/; and hashtags at http://mashable.com/2013/10/08/what-is-hashtag/#JKPFk3EQIPqF.)

- **Encourage youth to come to you with concerns.** The more openly you discuss social media, the more likely youth will let you know if they experience inappropriate or hurtful exchanges.
- **Be prepared to deal with mistakes.** Seek guidance as needed from your supervisor. Work with youth and their foster parents or caregivers on determining next steps.

Supporting Families

- **Leverage opportunities to use social media to enhance training and support efforts.** Digital stories of foster care experiences can be powerful tools for foster parent training, while online peer-to-peer forums provide a way for parents and caregivers to exchange ideas. (See examples of digital stories at https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/reallifestories and an example of a forum at https://www.fosterclub.com/forums/supportive-adult-message-board.)
- **Separate professional and personal social media use.** Use agency accounts with professional profiles for communication with families; don't "friend" clients on personal accounts.
- **Set restrictive privacy settings for each network.** Be aware, however, that even on private networks, users might share your messages or images with others. (See how to manage your settings at https://identity.utexas.edu/everyone/how-to-manage-your-social-media-privacy-settings.)
- **Be mindful of misinterpretation.** Be professional and sensitive in all types of communication. Consider how messages might be perceived by all potential viewers.

As child welfare work continues to integrate social media and other technologies, more information and training is needed on how child welfare professionals can best ethically and effectively manage emerging challenges.

For more information and resources, see https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/workforce/tools/socialmedia/.

Suggested Citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017). *Social media: Tips for foster care workers.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

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