# Social Media Guidelines for Foster Parents

## What is social media?

Social media includes various online technology tools that enable people to communicate easily via the internet to share information and resources. Commonly used social media tools (such as Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and many others) as well as various mobile applications are important outreach and communication tools. These tools can encompass audio, video, images, podcasts and other multimedia communications.

## Confidentiality

The Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) is committed to the safety, well-being, and privacy protection of the children and families we serve. DCFS recognizes that social media is deeply embedded in societal culture and has provided many individuals the ability to be more connected to others than ever before. DCFS also recognizes that relationships are vital to human growth and development and we strive to create safe environments to support healthy relationships. This guide is intended to support foster parents and relative caregivers in understanding their obligations around their use of social media in relation to a child in care. It also provides tips to help foster parents ensure safe use of social media by a child in care. When it comes to sharing information about youth in state custody on social media sites, foster parents must use their best judgment. And, though we want the children and youth to participate fully in family life and activities, confidentially is a must -- even in the digital realm.

If you have questions about sharing information/ photos of a child in care on any social media site, please talk to your caseworker.

### Before You Post

**Foster Parents** and **relative caregivers** who use social media sites can post photos and videos that include children and youth in foster care those sites, if the following conditions are met:

- The children are not identified by name.
- The children are not identified as foster children.
- There is no discussion on social media sites and websites about the child, the child's case or the child's family (including the reason a child entered foster care, visitation, progress of parents, status of the case, etc).
- Secure your privacy settings and location settings.
- Do not post photos or text with identifying information (house numbers, where you are currently, tagged photos, weekend plans, vacation destinations etc).
- Do not "tag" a foster child in any of your photos.
- Talk to the youth and make sure he or she is comfortable with you sharing information and images.
- There are no safety issues related to the child, specifically described by the caseworker (e.g. for safety reasons, the child's family cannot know where the child is placed).

# Helping Youth Use Social Media Safely

While it may be tempting to forbid children and youth to use social media, this is seldom realistic. The Internet and mobile devices are too widespread and accessible. In addition, forbidding social networking may make it harder for youth in foster care to fit in with friends and relate to other teenagers in the community. Instead, foster parents and relative caregivers should provide guidance and boundaries to help youth in their care use social media safely.

## Social media provides benefits for youth:

• **Social ties**: Social media helps youth in foster care fit in with their peers and fosters normalcy. Using social media, youth can keep in touch with friends, siblings, and others and make new connections.

• **Support**: Through online community groups, youth in foster care can share experiences with peers who have had similar experiences.

• **Family connections**: Between visits, youth in foster care may share posts or have online conversations with biological family members, when appropriate and approved by the caseworker.

• **Self-expression**: Videos, blogs, and other digital venues allow youth in foster care to express their feelings and ideas, which can help shape their identity and contribute to healing from childhood trauma

## Tips to help youth use social media safely:

• **Talk with your youth's caseworker:** Ask about safety needs and concerns that may affect your youth's use of social media and whether he or she had any past issues with social media use.

• **Discuss social media with youth in your care:** Ask youth how they use social media and private messaging and why it's important to them.

• **Set house rules for what's okay and what's not:** Rules will likely vary with the youth's age, but setting them early is important.

• **Set strict privacy settings:** Use privacy settings to help youth limit who can find them online, which posts or photos can be seen, and who has contact permissions.

• **Teach youth to keep personal information private**: Advise youth in foster care not to post their full name, address, school name, phone number, or other identifying information.

• **Learn about social media sites and apps:** Keep abreast of current technology and best practices for the most popular social media sites and apps youth are using today.

• **Be aware of online gaming risks**: Online games can be unsafe as players often interact with others on gaming platforms. Youth should avoid posting pictures of themselves or giving personal information while playing online games, and they should know they can come to you if they are being bullied or harassed. Be aware of the kind of games your youth plays and discuss the risks.

• **Monitor use**: Station computers in a shared area (not a bedroom), and keep track of mobile device use. Know what type of social media your youth uses. Consider asking youth for passwords and permission to let a trusted adult "friend" them. However, try to balance monitoring with privacy. Installing an online monitoring program can also help watch out for inappropriate use

• **Conduct searches**: Every so often, search a youth's name and address to see what information or tagged photos are publicly available.

• **Watch out for profiles on dating apps or risky matchmaking sites:** Look for use of dating sites like OKCupid, Match.com, or Tinder, which may not be appropriate for teens.

• **Explain the need to be careful**: Make sure youth understand that online, not everyone is who they say they are. Advise youth to avoid sharing intimate photos and messaging about sex online.

• **Discuss cyberbullying**: Warn youth not to send, forward, or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or pictures. Help youth document, block, and report bullying if needed.

• **Keep lines of communication open:** Encourage youth to let you know if an exchange makes them uncomfortable, if someone is sending them inappropriate photos, or if anyone asks to meet them in person. Appreciate your youth's participation in their online communities and show interest in their friends.

• **Understand their language**: Youth in foster care may use abbreviations, hashtags, and emoji in their online communications. Understand that teens communicate in a language different from yours.

• **Be prepared to deal with mistakes**: When youth slip up and don't follow guidelines, approach the situation as a teachable moment and calmly work together on what to do next.

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