Risks children and young people face online: Advice for Foster Carers

Looked after children often experience adversity, trauma and disruption in childhood. This can cause physical, emotional and behavioural problems that can make them particularly vulnerable. This is as true online as it is offline.

As a carer, it is important you show a positive interest in your child's life online and discuss the risks and issues they may face.

- ***Show a positive interest in their online life –*** *Talk to them about the sites they use and the friends they have online.*
- ***Set online boundaries –*** *consider limiting the amount of time they spend online and the sites they can visit.*
- ***Think about how their information is protected online -*** *If they are using social networking sites ensure they have adequate privacy settings - this will make it harder for them to be traced. Be open and frank about the additional security levels needed for them to stay protected.*

Contact

In the online world it is easier for contact between a child and their birth family to take place unsupervised – whether this is motivated by the child or their birth family. Whilst in some cases this may be appropriate, family members may have been a danger to them in the past, or may be a danger to them now. The use of online technologies means this contact can happen in secret, without your knowledge and the additional support they need.

- ***Keep communication channels open –*** *Your child will be more likely to come to you if you've talked to them about online issues and what they would do if their family were to get in contact.*
- ***With your child's social worker establish the permitted level of online contact -*** *make sure the reasons for this are known to the child*

Pre placement

If a looked after child is bringing technology into your home, you need to be aware of any possible risks. If the device is supplied by the local authority it may already have a parental controls package installed, check this with your child's social worker and ensure that the same is done for all of their devices, such as laptop and mobile.

- ***Ask your child to enable privacy settings for the sites they use.*** *They should set these to private and if possible, use a nickname for additional security.*

Do not ban them from going online, unless you have been instructed to do so by the child's social worker, as they may then go online in secret, without your support and advice.

Prior to your looked after child's arrival, find out what experiences they are bringing with them –consider what effect this had on their online activities and behaviour. Find out if your looked after child is or has been a victim or perpetrator of any form of online abuse, such as bullying or if they have met up with anyone they first met online.

- ***Before a child comes into your care*** *- Find out what devices and online experiences they are bringing with them.*
- ***Keep communication channels open*** *– They will be more likely to come to you if they have any issues online.*

Things can quickly get out of control online, but the first step in protecting and supporting the child in your care is being aware of how they use technology. Build on the trust that you have gained, as they will be more likely to come to you in times of difficulty.

Remember, your looked after child's online activity will change and develop as they grow. If they stay in your care, the boundaries you initially set should be adjusted accordingly. With younger children sit with them and play an active role in their online lives. With older children, who may be more difficult to monitor, let them know that you understand the challenges of growing up online and that you are there to talk to if things get out of control. It is never too late to seek help.

Don't forget to ask your fostering agency for internet safety training and learn how to report any incidences that arise with them.

For further help and guidance on all the information mentioned please visit
www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents