

How is Social Media Impacting on your Foster

Children?

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Social Media is a relatively new phenomenon with young people dominating the apps and online services offering instant connection worldwide on the internet. As with anything in life used in moderation, it has its benefits. However young people are often poor regulators of self and do not always use their time constructively. Left to their own devices a young person could potentially spend all day watching TV, gaming or on Social Media apps. There is a tangible pressure to be available 24/7 and respond to every message received for fear of missing out or being judged. Teenagers often 'like' pictures or blogs just because it's a highly liked one by others- not necessarily because they personally like it. There is a huge following of celebrities online and that creates pressure to look good all the time and maintain the latest fashion, make up, diet, and lifestyle trends.

It is a very real challenge for today's teenagers in general but for fostered young people it poses an additional issue of trying to 'fit in' and to be seen as the same, not different due to their care status.

For the vast majority of teens, social media is a daily part of modern life but becomes troublesome when 'living online' becomes more time consuming than 'living in the real world'. Smartphone addiction, otherwise known as "nomophobia" (fear of being without a mobile phone), can be triggered by an internet overuse problem, or internet addiction disorder. It's the games, apps and worldwide connection that creates a compulsion within us to use it constantly-and this leads to several impulse control problems:

Information Overload & Virtual Relationships- Compulsive use of the internet and social media / smartphone apps can cause you to live in a virtual world neglecting other aspects of your life, from the real-world including social and family relationships, as well as hobbies and social gatherings. Too much information can be just as harmful as too little where teens often self- diagnose health issues or look up ideals in body image and compare themselves to unrealistic photos of airbrushed celebrities.

Ease of Access to Inappropriate Content- The worldwide web can expose young people to a world of things that are not age appropriate including pornography, gambling and dating sites. This makes them vulnerable to grooming and sexual exploitation by unscrupulous individuals online posing as youngsters.



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Sexting is a recent issue that's become widespread amongst teenagers. It involves people exchanging sexually explicit photographs with each other or posting them online. This creates all sorts of complex safeguarding, emotional, social and psychological issues for foster children and their families. A multi-disciplinary approach is required to manage sexual exploitation.

Increasing loneliness and depression- The assumption is that being online might decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation but it can have the opposite effect. High social media use can cause depression and anxiety. Especially in teens who often compare themselves unfavourably with peers on social media which makes them feel depressed and anxious as they feel everybody else's life is more interesting, fun and exciting than theirs.

Impacts on concentration and attention- The constant stream of communication, messages and information from a smartphone can overwhelm the brain and make it difficult to pay full attention on any one thing for more than a few minutes without feeling compelled to browse around. No rest or relaxation with phones constantly buzzing, pinging, needing your time and attention takes you away from the real world and it takes time for your brain to refocus.

Insomnia- Staying up late using smart phones and tablets to access the internet and check social media gives rise to disturbed sleeping patterns. The lack of sleep and overstimulation of the brain late at night means disrupted or little sleep which impacts negatively on school performance and causes lethargy, low mood and sleep problems. It can impact memory, reduce cognitive and learning skills.

Ego inflating- Taking lots of selfies in different places and positions showing off your best moments, posting your thoughts and details about your life can create an unhealthy self-absorbed characteristic in young people. It promotes narcissism and showing off which impacts on young minds and hearts, making building healthy relationships a difficult task. Some feel they are better than others due to status or wealth, making others feel inadequate. This can be stress inducing and creates an Us and Them division.

Cyber-Bullying-Trolling- Trolling is defined as creating discord on the Internet by starting quarrels or upsetting people by posting inflammatory or off-topic messages in an online community.



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Basically, a **social media troll** is someone who purposely says something controversial in order to get a rise out of other users. This can then lead on to instances of being bullied online

How you can help to support your foster child to manage their social media usage

Unfortunately this is not as simple as just confiscating the device as this often creates a whole host of other issues. As a first port of call for support use your Supervising Social Worker and the child's Local Authority Social Worker to advice and guide you on how to manage your particular foster child's usage. Every child and situation is different.

Here are some useful tips:

1. Sit with the fostered child and **create a working agreement on internet / smartphone usage**. The agreement can cover times to hand phones in to charge in a central place downstairs, so that young people are not online late into the night and what apps are age appropriate.
2. **Education around online safety** and cyber bullying is equally important.
3. **Be a good role model**, if you expect your foster child not to be using their smartphones at the dinner table then you can lead by example. Try not to let your own smartphone use distract from parent-child interactions.
4. **Create Phone Free places at home-** Try and have spaces and times when the use of smartphones or tablets is limited to a minimum or no use. Where you can keep an eye on your child's activity and limit time online. Ban phones from the dinner table and insist they are turned off after a certain time at night. Introduce family time hobbies together- go for walks, spend quality time off line doing activities or hobbies such as team sports, after-school clubs, bowling, hiking, park visits bike rides etc.
5. **Communicate with your child about any issues-** Often young people spend a lot of time online to escape from reality and there may be underlying causes such as bullying at school, or trouble in friendship groups/ drug/alcohol use, gang activity that is unknown to you. Is your child suffering with other issues at school or home?



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6. **Get professional help-** Sometimes it takes another professional or family friend to have a chat with young people for them to hear and listen. Maybe another family member, advocate, older sibling or teacher can help? If the child needs counselling or therapeutic support a visit to the doctor, for a referral to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) can be made. Don't be afraid to seek professional support if you are concerned about your child's smartphone use. The impact on the child's emotional and mental health can be significant if left without appropriate intervention and support.

If you are concerned that a child in your care has been affected by any of the things mentioned in this article

For further information and resources you can refer to:

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/news/mental-health/many-teenagers-reporting-symptoms-depression/>

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/social-media-smarts.html>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-verge/201807/is-my-teen-really-addicted-social-media>



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