Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care

Does it feel like everyone you know is posting, tweeting, and video-chatting? These days, most teens use some form of social media—Facebook, Twitter, Pheed, Instagram, and many other online networks. Like all teens, youth in foster care use social media to connect with friends, make plans, play games, and express themselves. Youth in care, however, may have additional things to think about when using social media. This tip sheet can help you use social media safely.

> **Did you know?** Social media can connect you to other young people who understand what you're going through. Check out various media options from the FosterClub at http://fosterclub.com.

How Can Social Media Be Unsafe?

While social media can be very useful in helping you share information quickly and keep in touch with those who matter to you, it also can create situations that may be unsafe. The following are examples of online situations that could be unsafe:

• Sharing too much personal information and not knowing how others might use that information

• Being in contact with family members or others from your past who are not supposed to contact you

• Mean or hurtful online actions by peers or strangers (sometimes referred to as cyberbullying)

• Communication with adults who are looking for inappropriate, and sometimes sexual, relationships

> **Did you know?** One of every six teens report that they have had online contacts that made them feel scared or uncomfortable. (See http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Teens-Social-Media-And-Privacy.aspx)

How Can You Stay Safe on Social Media?

Here are some general tips and things to think about for staying safe online. Talk with your caseworker and foster parent to find out if there are other rules for you to follow.

• **Set strong privacy settings.** Understand the privacy settings of each social network you use and check them regularly. These settings will help you limit who can see what you post and how.

• **Do not give out personal information on online networks.** This includes your full name, address, phone number, school name, or password. This also includes revealing photos (sexting).

• **Do not publicly post information that tells others where to find you.** This means don't post that photo of you in a shirt with your school name or announce the mall where you plan to spend the afternoon. Also, be aware that some smartphone photos and some network services (such as Facebook's and Instagram's location features) can provide information about where you are without you knowing about it.

- **Be kind and show respect for other people and their ideas.** While you may feel bold at the keyboard, don't say or do anything you wouldn't say or do face-to-face.

- **Don't let cyberbullies take control.** Seeing mean messages or embarrassing jokes from an online bully can be painful. If you are being bullied, do your best to ignore it—often a bully is trying to get a reaction. Use privacy tools to block the person from additional messages, texts, or posts. If the bullying continues or if it makes you upset, reach out to a trusted adult and get help with reporting and making it stop. Recognize that in some States cyberbullying is against the law. For more information on cyberbullying, see http://www.stopbullying.gov/kids/index.html

- **Be cautious.** Know that not everyone is who they say they are and not everyone has good intentions. Don't let anyone pressure you into doing something that doesn't seem right.

- **Avoid meeting anyone in person that you've "met" online.** If you feel that you must meet an online contact, discuss this idea first with your foster parent or another trusted adult, plan to meet in a public place, and don't go alone.

- **Don't keep concerns to yourself**. If you receive (or send) communications that are inappropriate, hurtful, or make you feel uncomfortable, tell your foster parent, caseworker, or another trusted adult. Resist the temptation to shoot off a quick reply because it could make matters worse.

Things to Ask Yourself Before You Post

Keep in mind that messages and photos—which may seem funny to you and your friends—may be forwarded on to others. You can't control what happens to the information once you've sent it or posted it. Before you post, ask yourself:

- How would I feel if the person who was supposed to see this {message, video, photo} shares it with 100 other people?

- How would I feel if my parent, teacher, or caseworker saw these words or pictures?

- Could these words or pictures hurt other peoples' feelings or be used against them?

- Could these words or pictures hurt my chances of getting into college or getting a job? (Yes, college recruiters and employers really do look at social media pages!)

Remember, once it's out there, it's nearly impossible to take it back!

For more information, visit:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/nam/youth/stay-safe.cfm

> **Did You Know?** Social media (blogs, videos, digital stories, etc.) can be powerful tools to share your life experiences and make your voice heard.