

Supporting children and young people with care-experience online

Advice for parents and carers to help children and young people with care-experience stay safe online.



Connecting & Sharing

Children and young people with care-experience using the internet and social media share the same risks and benefits as any young person growing up today. However, their previous lived experiences, their placement moves, and changes in caregivers disadvantage them in ways that can make them more susceptible to those risks.

What you need to know

Interacting with others online through social media or other platforms has become an important part of young people's lives and even more so for children and young people with care-experience.

The benefits

Maintaining relationships with family and friends

- It can help overcome the fragmented relationships of birth families or frequent care location movements, helping children and young with care-experience to maintain healthy, positive relationships and friendships, learn new skills, enhance their academic grades.¹ For further reading - [Not All that Is Solid Melts into Air? Care-Experienced Young People, Friendship and Relationships in the 'Digital Age'](#)

Supporting their wellbeing

- Positive online networks can help to reduce physical and psychological isolation, and can provide organisational and informal pro-social support as children and young people become more independent.²

Supplementing education and learning

- Learning and education is increasingly accessed online and children and young people with care-experience regularly use technology for schoolwork. Their wellbeing can improve as will their opportunity to increase achievement and attainment of improved grades

Connecting with support groups and organisations

- Access to special interest groups, such as those for food/diet, self-harm, suicide, or other mental health issues, can be helpful and informative but can also have negative effects on wellbeing. Age-appropriate discussions around the subject will help them to establish a balanced view

Social platforms give children outlet to share their creativity

- Online video sharing and live streaming services such as Facebook Live, [TikTok](#), and YouTube allow children and young people to develop creatively through participation, generating their own images or video content, as well as passively consuming existing content. They can also be a source of information and learning

1. [Online Safeguarding for Young People in Care report](#).

2. [Social Media, Social Capital and Adolescents Living in State Care: A Multi-Perspective and Multi-Method Qualitative Study](#)

The risks

Any child or young person from any background, can be at risk of online harm, but some may be more susceptible than others. Children and young people with care-experience may be more at risk of the following:

Online abuse

Pre-care experiences such as maltreatment and neglect are thought to persist and children and young people taken into care due to abuse are more at risk of sexual victimisation and exploitation.³

Privacy concerns

Children and young people with care-experience may have a disjointed or fragmented social background and the risk of over reliance on social media contacts is high.⁴ Where contact with birth family members is inappropriate, children and young people should be made aware of their discoverability through social media and other technology platforms.

Inappropriate content

As children and young people spend longer online and become more active and independent, they will inevitably see something that may upset or confuse them. This can include sexual, violent, or harmful content. According to [Online Safeguarding for Young People in Care](#), reports of actual online incidents for children and young people with care-experience often involved experiences of visiting inappropriate sites.

Cyberbullying/Trolling

48% of children and young people in care said they had been cyberbullied compared to **25%** of those with no vulnerabilities.³ Cyberbullying, unplanned contact and internet addiction were the top three risks outlined in the research report carried out in 2019. Further discussion and research can be found [here](#).

Cyber scams

Findings from our research³ showed that children and young people with care-experience are particularly susceptible to cyber scams.

There is an association between children and young people with care-experience, experiencing cyber scams and being a victim of cyber aggression. This suggests that if they report a cyber scam risk, a parent / carer may wish to talk about other possible experiences which co-exist. For example, evidence indicates that if they report online aggression, support should include addressing cyber scams with them.

Cyber aggression:

Online aggression that isn't always viewed as bullying. It can include insults or threats due to appearance, race, religion, sexuality, gender or disability. Or threats to harm a person or their family.

It is important to be aware that:

Children and young people tend to see no boundaries between their online and offline life and often become victims online, through someone who knows them offline and is aware of their 'vulnerability'. In this way the perpetrator has the knowledge to manipulate their target especially if they are experiencing vulnerabilities.

The challenges

Children and young people with care-experience may look for places online and people to provide stable contact and interaction (good or bad) in place of physical interaction. They may have learned not to trust caregiving adults but can be won over by online contacts that do what they say they will do, give rewards, say positive things.

Children and young people with care-experience may also 'overshare' information (inadvertently or not) online that can identify them, their status, or their carers. This may be through the content of their posts or images (school uniforms, homes, favourite scenes), the regular posting of their location or through choice of identifiers such as usernames and gamer tags.

Things to consider

Parents and carers should look out for behaviour changes to determine if your child or young person in your care is experiencing an online harm (cyber scams, cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, online sexual abuse, online grooming etc.)

- Has their behaviour changed?
- Be involved from as early as possible. Be positive about their online activity
- Show and share good skills and behaviour in own online activity
- Talk early and often to encourage dialogue and make it natural.
- Ensure they have a good support network.
- Educate them on both risks and benefits of connections
- Empower and support them to make their own choices and be there if it goes wrong
- Understand their previous online activity history
- If they use their email address when signing up to things, together with them, ensure they understand privacy and safety rules

Practical steps to help your child

Children and young people in your care will increase in age and expectation at a time when apps, trends, risks, and tools available are also changing rapidly. Equipping yourself to safeguard them requires a mix of communication and relationship skills and the capability to work at a technical level.

- Google Safe Search and YouTube Kids app for mobiles, are designed to restrict access to inappropriate sites but are based on community participation and algorithms for filtering content so are less than 100% successful. Check out [Set Up Safe hub](#) for more information
- Microsoft Family can manage spending on Microsoft sites and games and allows management of parental controls on Microsoft devices including Xbox games machines. However, if a child does not have online access then the carer must set devices up first and remember to remove online access once this is completed
- Built in [Parental Controls](#) are available on iOS and Android devices, and many third party apps. These apps and tools can also be perceived as spying tools by the child or young person and can undermine trust so should be used in conjunction with other tools and ongoing dialogue
- [Family agreements](#) can be very helpful if everyone's role, expectations and sanctions for non-compliance are clear and consistently adhered to. They can be particularly beneficial where all the care groups around the CYP that agree with them and support them
- Consider using dedicated parental control devices that plug into the back of your router. There are a range of premium products that can offer enhanced levels of management for children's devices and provide a separate Wi-Fi service for them to use. Take a look at our [Monitoring apps guide](#) for more advice
- Connecting with the school and understanding their policies and procedures will enable discussion and use of similar approaches

Conversations to have

Build up children and young people's resilience to make safer and smarter choices online. Doing so by engaging in regular, open, [bitesize conversations](#) with them about their lives online is one of the best ways to build and develop coping strategies. It also gives you an easier way to know when to support them.

Check in with them

- Asking open questions and listening in full to what they are saying without assuming anything or overreacting. Be non-judgemental. Children and young people with care-experience are more likely to expect that you will react badly to what they are saying so showing them that you can listen and respond calmly and supportively will be beneficial

- You can opt to have conversations at mealtimes or during other activities. You could ask them to help you check your profile settings and this will then open ways to have conversations

Discuss

Having ongoing conversations around what they should and shouldn't share online and , what their understanding of privacy is and how they make decisions about what to keep private. Also discuss data privacy (what 'free' apps take from us in return). This can help them set the right privacy settings on the apps they use and review them periodically to stay in control of who sees their posts.

Ask them about their digital life

- Discuss their online activity may help to clarify how they are using a particular app or platform and therefore helping you to manage any feedback or comments they receive

Discuss screen time management

- While it's important to manage the time that children and young people spend on devices, it's equally and in most cases more important to address what children and young people are doing on screens. Understanding what they do while online and how this impacts their offline activities, i.e. sleep, schoolwork and relationships is key
- Encouraging them to have a balanced media diet of activities that help them to learn, stay connected to friends and get that much needed downtime is beneficial to their wellbeing
- Putting a family agreement in place that helps them to understand when, where and how they should use their devices can be a good place to start to address screen time management. There are also plenty of free tools on devices that can be used to review screen time use. These could be used to start a conversation on the best way to manage their online activities. For more advice on screen time, [visit our Advice Hub](#)

Know the facts

- Under data protection laws, from September 2020, service providers and app developers that monitor a child's use and activity will have to comply with [new design standards](#) that inform users that they are being monitored and provide age appropriate information and guidance. This can be a topic to provoke discussion and interaction that will benefit the young person's understanding

Visit: www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety