



FACTSHEETS | OCTOBER 2022

Social Media: Tips for Child Welfare Workers

The child welfare field is expanding the role of digital technologies in casework practice. Social media apps have become ubiquitous communication tools for professionals, families, children, and youth, and they are critical for maintaining connections in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the use of social media presents privacy and safety concerns for the child welfare population, and agencies must determine how to utilize these technologies while minimizing risks to families and staff. This factsheet contains tips to help child welfare workers address the complex balance required for successfully using social media in a field that demands strict confidentiality and adherence to a range of rules and guidelines.

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USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN CASEWORK PRACTICE

Child welfare agencies use social media in a variety of ways, from recruiting foster and adoptive families to facilitating virtual connections between children and youth in foster care and their birth relatives. While social media is centered on information sharing, child welfare workers must prioritize privacy and comply with agency guidelines when using these technologies in casework practice.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Familiarize yourself with your agency's social media policies.** Learn guidelines for professional and personal social media use, and check with your supervisor before using these technologies in your casework practice. Find out if your agency offers social media training or related instruction.
- **Use the right social media tool for your needs.** Decide what you are trying to achieve and choose a platform that fits your goals and audience. (For guidance on choosing social media tools, see the [Community Engagement Sources: Media Toolkit](#) on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website.)
- **Craft messages that are appropriate for the selected medium.** (For more information, see the [Digital & Social Media](#) section of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention website.)
- **Understand potential communication barriers.** Be aware of issues that might impact social media use, including cultural, environmental, economic, disability, linguistic, and other considerations, as well as technical barriers, such as connectivity.
- **Be cautious about searching for clients on social media.** Recognize that you might find information that could complicate your client's case (e.g., evidence of substance use). Before searching, determine whether the potential benefits outweigh the risks.
- **Be mindful of misinterpretation.** Be professional and sensitive in all types of communication. Consider how messages might be perceived by all potential viewers.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

- **Virtual visits.** When in-person visits are unsafe, such as during times of crisis, social media apps can facilitate virtual visits between family members. Note that this approach might not be appropriate for all visits. Check with your supervisor about the agency's preferred social media platforms and consider the child's age and any relevant case plan guidelines that may be in place before implementing this strategy. (For more information, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Tips for Supporting Virtual Family Time](#).)
- **Connecting family members.** As long as no safety concerns exist, social media can help parents and children who are physically separated stay connected and engage in everyday exchanges (e.g., checking in after school, saying goodnight at bedtime). These tools can also be useful for children and youth in out-of-home care who want to keep in touch with birth siblings or former foster families. (For more information, see the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute's ["Supporting the Virtual Workforce Using Technology to Engage Children, Youth, and Families"](#) webinar.)

- **Family finding.** Social media can be a helpful tool for locating family members who may wish to reconnect with, support, or serve as kinship care providers for children or youth in foster care. Certain interventions used for engaging relatives, including the [Family Finding](#) model, incorporate social media into their frameworks. (See the [Use Social Media to Find Family Members](#) section of the Child Welfare Playbook website for more information.)
- **Searching for birth relatives.** Adopted children and youth—or their adoptive parents—may wish to contact birth parents, siblings, and other relatives for various reasons. Social media can be a useful tool for finding these relatives. However, it is important to remember that contact with birth relatives may be complicated or distressing and children and youth who have been adopted may need additional support with these interactions. It may be helpful to suggest the establishment of communication boundaries if contact is made. (To learn more, see Information Gateway's [Searching for Birth Relatives](#).)
- **Locating youth missing from foster care.** When a youth is reported missing from foster care, one strategy that can be used for locating them involves checking their social media accounts for information on their location and trying to establish contact using messaging features. Note that your agency may have a dedicated unit or other procedures for locating missing youth and this task may fall outside your responsibilities. (For additional information, see Information Gateway's [Responding to Youth Missing From Foster Care](#).)
- **Recruiting resource families.** Social media may enhance collaborations with adoption agencies and advocates and can help agencies with their general foster parent recruitment efforts. Agency channels can provide an accessible forum for posts about adoption resources, upcoming recruitment events, relevant news stories, and more. (For more information, see the [Recruiting and Retaining Families for Children and Youth in Foster Care](#) section of the Information Gateway website.)
- **Foster parent support efforts.** Online peer-to-peer forums provide a way for parents and caregivers to get support and exchange ideas. (For more information, see "[Facilitating Virtual Parent Support Groups](#)" by AdoptUSKids.)

PRIORITIZING PRIVACY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- **Take precautions to protect privacy and preserve confidentiality.** Do not reveal child and family members' personal information (e.g., full name, address) or specific case details in public forums, and avoid posting photos with identifying information, such as school logos. Remember to also maintain your own confidentiality as well as that of your colleagues.
- **Obtain agency and client consent to communicate with youth and family members via social media platforms.** Discuss expectations during your initial meetings with clients for how social media networks can and will be used to communicate, deliver services, and search for client information.
- **Read privacy policies for the apps you use with clients.** Understand what information may be shared or protected by a social media platform and be prepared to explain these terms to families when obtaining informed consent.

- **Consider HIPAA guidelines.** Conversations involving protected health information cannot take place over most social media platforms. Note that some apps, such as [Doxy.me](#), are HIPAA compliant.
- **Recognize that all forms of communication may be considered legal documentation of interaction between the agency, families, and children and youth.** However, social media does not replace person-to-person contact and should not be the primary communication method between a caseworker and family members.
- **Notify your supervisor in the event of a confidentiality breach.** If client information is shared with unauthorized individuals, approach your supervisor for guidance. Agencies will typically have policies and procedures in place for notifying family members of a confidentiality breach.
- **Separate professional and personal social media use.** Use agency accounts with professional profiles for communication with families; don't connect with clients on personal accounts.
- **Set restrictive privacy and location settings for your networks.** Be aware that even on private networks, users might share your messages or images with others.

The National Association of Social Workers updated its [Code of Ethics](#) in 2017 to include guidelines for the use of technology in casework practice. For information on those updates—many of which are related to protecting client privacy—see Social Work Today's "[Eye on Ethics: New NASW Code of Ethics Standards for the Digital Age](#)."

SUPPORTING RESPONSIBLE SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG FAMILIES

Although social media apps can present privacy and safety concerns, these tools also foster normalcy for children and youth in out-of-home care. Because children and youth in foster care may be particularly vulnerable to unsafe and inappropriate contact when using social media, caseworkers should provide them with guidance on how to use these tools safely and responsibly.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILD AND YOUTH SOCIAL MEDIA USE

- **Promote positive social media opportunities for children and youth.** For children and youth in out-of-home care, using social media can create normalcy by helping them connect and fit in with their peers and providing an avenue for self-expression. Share Information Gateway's [Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care](#) with youth on your caseloads.
- **Discuss contact boundaries.** A child or youth's case plan may include restrictions around who they can contact. If certain family members are off limits, let children and youth know that these restrictions extend to social media.
- **Encourage partnership between birth and foster parents.** When appropriate, supporting partnerships between birth and foster parents can promote stability for children in care. Ensuring caregivers are on the same page about social media rules can help children and youth use apps and other tools safely.

- **Model appropriate social media use.** If you are connected to children and youth on social media platforms, demonstrate appropriate behavior by setting communication boundaries.
- **Help children and youth safeguard their privacy.** Encourage children and youth in foster care to keep their personal information private and to set strict privacy and location settings on the platforms they use. (For more information, see the [Social Media Privacy Guides](#) section of the Internet Matters website and "[How to Limit Location Tracking on Your Phone](#)" by Consumer Reports.)
- **Talk about cyberbullying.** Advise children and youth not to send or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or photos. Help them document, block, and report cyberbullying if needed. (To learn more, visit [stopbullying.gov](#).)
- **Check in on a child or youth's mental health.** Social media can trigger negative feelings, such as anxiety or depression. Encourage children and youth to limit their social media use to spaces where they feel supported. (See Common Sense Media's "[How to Help Teens Manage the Effects of Social Media on Their Mental Health](#)" to learn more.)
- **Encourage children and youth to come to you with concerns.** The more openly you discuss social media, the more likely children and youth will let you know if they experience inappropriate or hurtful exchanges.
- **Be prepared to deal with mistakes.** Seek guidance as needed from your supervisor. Work with children and youth and their foster parents or caregivers on determining next steps.

Foster parents and caregivers may need assistance in supporting their child or youth's social media use. Caseworkers can share Information Gateway's [Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#), which includes guidance on helping children and youth in their care use social media safely and responsibly.

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