

Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care

From that trendy sound you love, to the filter you can't get enough of, you probably know that social media apps are a fun tool for expressing yourself and staying in the know—and you also might know that they can be risky. This tip sheet provides a roadmap for a safer social media experience.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA: THE GOOD

- **Connecting with your people.** Keep in touch with those who mean the most to you.
- **Joining online communities.** Have you ever felt like no one understands you? We get it! Use online groups to connect with peers who have similar life experiences. (See the [Foster Care Alumni of America Facebook group](#).)
- **Expressing yourself.** Post photos, videos, vlogs, and other digital content to creatively express your feelings and ideas.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA: THE BAD

- **Privacy concerns.** Limit the sharing of personal information—you never know how others might use it.
- **Cyberbullying.** Bullying can be a hurtful experience, whether it happens in person or virtually. Don't respond to mean comments. You can use privacy settings to block bullies instead. If the harassment continues, use an app's reporting function to notify the platform of your experience, and tell a trusted adult. (To learn more, see the Cyberbullying Research Center's [Preventing Cyberbullying: Top Ten Tips for Teens](#).)
- **Impacts on mental health.** It's not uncommon to feel sad because of something you saw on social media, or anxious when you can't check your social media feeds. Try to be aware of how social media makes you feel and tailor your feed and the amount of time you spend online to more positive experiences. (Learn more at Mental Health America's webpage. [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#).)
- **Breaking rules.** Don't engage with anyone who is not supposed to contact you, including family members who are off limits.
- **Inappropriate communication.** Watch out for inappropriate communications, which can be sexual or nonsexual in nature. While meeting new people can be exciting, connecting with people you don't know or chatting on dating apps can be risky. You may want to discuss these situations with a trusted adult.



STAYING SAFE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Trust your gut—if an exchange on social media doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. Rules are put in place to keep you safe, so follow them the best you can. If any communications are hurtful or make you feel uncomfortable, tell an adult as soon as you can.



Set strong privacy settings.

Limit who can see your posts. In most cases, your profile defaults to a “public” setting. However, you can use your privacy settings to manage who has access to your content. Remember, anyone with access can share your content with whomever they want; nothing online is truly private. (See how to manage your settings on the [Social Media Privacy Guides](#) section of the Internet Matters website.)



Don't post information that reveals your location.

Some apps provide your GPS information automatically. You can use location settings on your devices to manage what apps have access to your location. Manage location services on your smartphone or turn them off completely. (Learn how to manage location services with [“How to Limit Location Tracking on Your Phone”](#) by Consumer Reports.)



Don't give out personal information.

This includes your full name, address, phone number, school name, or password. Don't share your passwords with friends, and never send revealing photos (sexting). If someone requests personal information from you, tell your foster parent(s) or another trusted adult.



Be safe playing online games.

Gaming online can be a great experience, but it can also be risky. One way to make your experience safer is to refrain from sharing any revealing information. From privacy breaches to cyberbullying, if you experience anything that makes you uncomfortable while you're gaming, tell an adult and report or block the user. (Learn more about gaming safety with the National Cyber Security Alliance's [10 Online Safety Tips for Gaming](#).)



Be kind and show respect for others.

It may feel easier to say things online that are outside of your norm. However, as a rule of thumb, don't say or do anything you wouldn't say or do to someone face-to-face.



Set boundaries when connecting with birth relatives online.

Reconnecting with a birth relative online can be a delicate situation. Before you send or accept a friend request, ask your caseworker if your case plan allows for this type of communication. Also, consider how your feelings may be affected by the different types of content and communication you might see on their pages. Remember: restrictions against talking to certain people are in place to help keep you safe.



Be cautious of friend and message requests.

Friend and message requests from strangers may be from fake profiles, spam bots, or scammers. Play it safe and only connect with people you know.



Think carefully before meeting anyone in person that you've "met" online.

If you feel you must connect with and meet a new online contact, discuss the idea with your foster parent(s) or another adult. If you decide to meet, choose a public place, and never go alone.

THINK BEFORE YOU POST!

Once something is posted on the internet, you can't control how it may be used. So, before you decide to make that comment or send that photo, ask yourself the following questions:

- How would I feel if someone other than the person who is supposed to see this content sees it?
- How would I feel if my parent, teacher, or caseworker saw this?
- Could this be offensive or hurtful to others?
- Will this hurt my chances of getting into college or getting a job? (Yes, college recruiters and employers look at social media pages!)

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

For additional guidance on using social media safely, see the National Cybersecurity Alliance webpage, [Share With Care: Staying Safe on Social Media](#).

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