



## Personal boundaries, internet use and social networking online for foster carers

### Maintaining professional boundaries

Communication between children and adults, by whatever method, should take place within clear and explicit boundaries. This includes the wider use of technology such as mobile phones text messaging, e-mails, digital cameras, videos, web-cams, websites and blogs.

Carers should also be circumspect in their communications with children so as to avoid any possible misinterpretation of their motives or any behaviour which could be construed as grooming. However, this should not stop any carer acting as a 'good parent' would for any child placed in their care

It is expected that carers would want to give their personal contact details to children and young people including email, home or mobile telephone numbers to ensure that the children can keep in contact with them. This should be agreed as part of the placement agreement. However, carers and children and young people need to be aware that these personal contact details should not be widely shared or exchanged.

### How to protect your reputation and stay safe online

#### **Act in accordance with your fostering organisational policy.**

E-mail or text communications between an adult and a child or young person outside acceptable protocols may lead to disciplinary and/or criminal investigations. This also includes communications through internet based web sites. Clearly, once a child or young person leaves a foster placement the type and nature of acceptable communication (on paper or electronic) will change. This is likely to vary from case to case and guidance should always be sought from the supervising social worker.

**Manage your personal information.** Carers are strongly advised, in their own interests, to take steps to ensure their personal data (paper or electronic) is not accessible to anybody who does not have permission to access it. This includes your date of birth and address. Identity theft is a growing crime and this information could be used to access your bank account or apply for a credit card in your name.

**Understand privacy.** How you behave online is not the same as doing what you like in the privacy of your living room. As a carer you should be careful that whatever you get up to on the internet doesn't compromise your role or status as a carer. Privacy on the internet seldom means communications are entirely private, even messaging.

**Respect dignity.** Whether it is about a fellow carer, a social worker, a parent or a child, never post a comment that could cause serious offence to that individual or anyone else. Respect people's right to confidentiality. It is not advisable to post pictures of children or young people you are working with. If you post School pictures, with other pupils in shot who can be identified, for example, – that would be breaching their privacy and parents might be able to identify which school their child is attending.

**Uphold your reputation.** Remember that anything posted online could end up in the public domain to be read by birth parents, children, young people or your social worker. Some organisations may even access social networking sites before considering you for a job interview.

## The guiding rule is if in doubt, don't

Remember humour is relative. For example, posting images and/or text about a recent stag or hen night may be deemed inappropriate. Likewise, a few 'light-hearted' comments and/or images about adults, children or young people may not be perceived as such by either the subject(s) of the humour or your agency.

### Further tips for Facebook and other social network sites

- Treat your online conversations as if you were talking with people in a public space where you can be seen and overheard and don't assume that all people are who they say they are online
- Don't post or tweet in the heat of the moment or when under the strong influence of alcohol
- Learn how to adjust your security or privacy settings in Facebook. Most social networking sites allow you to control who can see your information. For example, at the bottom of every page on Facebook, there is a link that reads 'Privacy'. The linked page is 'a guide to privacy on Facebook', containing the latest privacy functions and policies.

Set your privacy settings to "only friends". Settings such as "friends of friends" and "networks and friends" open your content to a wider audience. Your privacy and that of your family, friends, and the children in your care could be compromised

- Remove inappropriate photos. Somebody else could post a photo on their profile in which you are named, so think about any photos you appear in. On Facebook, you can 'untag' yourself from a photo. If you do find inappropriate references to you and/or images of you posted by a 'friend' online you should contact them and the site to have the material removed.
- Increasingly Facebook has a feature which allows users to identify their exact location and also have real time video conversations. Think about the implications for this for your own safety and that of the children that you are caring for.
- Make sure you regularly check and refresh your site page to ensure it is free of any inappropriate comments and/or images.
- Stop the network provider from passing on your details to other companies for research and advertising purposes.
- Ensure that you have downloaded the 'panic button' from CEOP onto facebook. (This feature from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) allows anyone to easily report suspected abuse to CEOP and Facebook. Go to <http://apps.facebook.com/clickceop> to find out more.

For example, to stop Facebook from forwarding your details, click 'Account', then 'Privacy Settings', then 'Apps and Websites ...edit your settings'. This allows you to choose how your personal information is shared with other websites, apps, games and search engines.

The guiding rule is if in doubt, don't post it!

## Sources

Association of Teachers and Lecturers 2010. Social networking sites: how to protect yourself on the internet

Department of Education

[www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/behaviour/bullying/cyber/a0010050/protecting-personalinformation-](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/behaviour/bullying/cyber/a0010050/protecting-personalinformation-) online

Nursing and Midwifery Council

[www.nmc-uk.org/](http://www.nmc-uk.org/)

Guidance for Safer Working Practice for Adults who Work with Children and Young People, 2009. Government Offices for the English Regions.

The Fostering Network

[Social Networking and Facebook information for foster carers](#)

[www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net)

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