Digital Media Safety : Tips for Caregivers

The digital world offers many opportunities for adults and children to learn, and has also dramatically changed how we communicate. Unfortunately, it is also a place where children and adults can be victimized. Cyber-bullying, predatory behavior, and loss of privacy are just some of the risks. In order to effectively protect children, foster parents need to be familiar with the ever-changing online and digital methods of communication, and take the necessary steps to promote safety for the children and youth in their care.

Following are some tips that may be helpful for you and the children and youth in your care.

Educate the Children

- Talk about the risks, such as what can happen when a child's identity, location, or other personal information gets into the wrong hands.
- Kids in care are at higher risk for online, digital, and other bullying. Discuss what bullying looks like, what to do if the child or someone they know is bullied, and how important it is to communicate with parents or caregivers, if it's happening.
- Educate the child in your care about grooming behaviors. Predators don't begin conversations with explicit sexual requests. They begin by acting like a friend and validating the child's feelings. Children in care may be at greater risk since they may be feeling afraid, isolated, or lonely.
- Warn the child in your care that gifts, pressure to do things, requests for pictures, and other seemingly innocent actions by an acquaintance from the digital space could also be grooming.
- It's a good idea to discuss respectful and healthy digital behavior with everyone in your family.
- Help the child in your care distinguish between quality sites and social media messaging, and those that distort and seek to exploit people.

Set Boundaries

Many families have established house rules for a multitude of behaviors and expectations; yet sometimes they neglect to address the importance of developing clear and consistent rules around the digital world.

You might consider having a posting a written Family Agreement in a place where everyone can see it. That agreement should:

- Establish clear boundaries about prohibiting the posting or sharing of personal identifying information in digital spaces, such as names, pictures, telephone numbers, addresses, or

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passwords/logins. For example, have the child avoid a username like "Jane.Doe2011."

- List specific sites or apps kids should not be visiting, as well as firm rules about the consequences of visiting those sites.

- Identify clear expectations about the use of video game systems or other household devices that have digital capabilities.

- Specify time frames when kids can be online. For example, sleep is known to be disrupted when kids bring their cellphones or tablets to bed. Have a designated spot for devices to be kept when not in use.

- Communicate a firm message that kids should never meet someone in person from the digital world without talking to an adult first.

- Be shared with other members of the child's care team (birth family, social worker, school staff, respite providers, etc.).

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

- Teach the child in your care that, if they get in a situation that feels uncomfortable, they should and can always come to you, and that they won't get in trouble if they do.

- Avoid grounding kids from screen time for violations of the Family Agreement. Doing so may make it more likely that the child will hesitate to come to you if they are experiencing a problem online.

- Discuss with the child and the child's care team how you, as the foster parent, will be monitoring the child's digital activity. Help the child understand that family safety means all family members need to act responsibly.

- Discuss with the children in your care any uncomfortable experiences you've had, and how you resolved them and learned

from them.

Educate Yourself and Supervise

- Become familiar with the latest digital platforms and apps, even if it's simply to know which ones are most frequently used. Whether the children in your home have devices or are using yours, understand that devices are easily accessible to them.

- Ask the children in your care to share their favorite apps, or to teach you what they already know. You're likely to learn something new, and it helps build a child's self-esteem to teach you something.

- Utilize monitoring software and be diligent about using it. Inform the child's care team so that privacy issues can be handled with care.

Explore Together

Learn from one another by utilizing online content and social media as teaching tools and educational resources. While it is true that the virtual world can be dangerous, it is also an invaluable resource for opportunities to learn and grow together.

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Resources

Additional Resources
- [A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety](#)
- [The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#)
- [NetSmartz](#)
- [Online Teen Safety Guide](#)
- [Mobicip—Parental Control Software & Internet Filter](#)
- [Net Nanny](#)
- [CYBERsitter](#)
- [GoGuardian—Engaging Digital Learning for Schools](#)
- [Securly—The Student Safety Company](#)
- [Life360](#)
- [Keeping Children You Foster and Adopt Safe Online](#)
- [A Guide to Internet Safety](#)