

Social Media: Tips for Foster Care Workers

Child welfare agencies use social media to share information within and outside their agency. Within the agency, social media tools can support networking, training, and professional development. In the larger community, social media tools aid public awareness campaigns, outreach to community partners, and recruitment of foster and adoptive families. At the case level, workers may use social media for finding kin, supporting resource families, and communicating with family members (find examples of child welfare social media use at <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=142§ionid=2&articleid=3728>.)

While social media is centered around sharing, child welfare workers must protect private and confidential information. These sometimes contradictory approaches to handling information can pose difficulties. Following are some tips to help you consider the best ways to use social media in supporting families and youth. Above all, be clear with families and youth about your agency's social media policies and procedures.

General Considerations

- **Be familiar with your agency's social media policies.** Learn about formal and informal guidelines for professional and personal social media use as well as crisis response.
- **Use the right social media tool to meet your objectives.** Decide what you are trying to achieve through social media and then choose a platform that fits your goals and audience (for more information, see *The Social Media for Child Welfare Resource Guide*, at <http://www.nrccwdt.org/2012/09/the-social-media-for-child-welfare-resource-guide>).
- **Craft messages that are appropriate to the selected medium** (for more information, see *CDC's Guide to Writing for Social Media*, available from <http://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/pdf/guidetowritingforsocialmedia.pdf>).
- **Take precautions to protect privacy and preserve confidentiality.** Do not reveal family members' personal identifying information (full name, address) or discuss specific case details in public forums. Maintain your confidentiality as well as that of your colleagues and clients.

Supporting Families

- **Leverage opportunities to use social media to enhance training and support efforts.** For instance, digital stories of foster care experiences can be powerful tools for foster parent training, while online peer-to-peer forums provide a way for parents to exchange ideas (see examples of digital stories at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/reallifestories> and an example of a forum at <http://fosterparentforum.org>).
- **Obtain agency and client consent to communicate directly with family members through social media venues.** Discuss expectations for and boundaries of agreed-upon means of communication (e.g., Facebook private messages, texting, Skype).
- **Use social media to supplement and not replace person-to-person contact.** Texts, tweets, posts, and the like are appropriate for brief exchanges, announcements, and updates. They should not be the primary form of communication between a worker and family members, and typically they cannot substitute for required case visits. Also, recognize that all forms of communication may be considered legal documentation of interaction between the agency and youth and families.

- **Keep professional and personal social media use separate.** Use agency accounts with professional profiles for communication with families; don't "friend" clients on personal accounts.
- **Set restrictive privacy settings.** Set privacy options for each network used. Always be aware, however, that even on private networks, users might forward messages and images to others.
- **Be mindful of misinterpretation.** Be professional and sensitive in all types of communication. Consider how messages might be perceived by all potential viewers.

Supporting Youth

- **Promote positive social media opportunities for youth.** In today's plugged-in world, enabling youth in out-of-home care to use social media is important to helping them fit in with their peers and fostering normalcy. Moreover, social media can be a powerful tool for youth in care to express their feelings and ideas, explore their identities, learn, and find others with common experience.
- **Model appropriate social media use.** Consider communicating with youth using the digital channels that they are most comfortable with—texting, Facebook (via a professional account), video chat, other. Set appropriate boundaries for when and how you will use social media.
- **Help youth in care to use social media safely.** Youth need to be made aware of social media risks—such as inappropriate contact, oversharing, cyberbullying, and sexual predators—and encouraged to use safeguards. Share the tip sheet for youth from this series https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips_youth.cfm. Provide guidance on key safety issues, such as:
 - » Keeping personal information (full name, address, school name, etc.) private
 - » Understanding when and how social media can be used for communicating with family members (and when it should not be used)
 - » Thinking ahead to who might see messages and images posted and their potential impact
 - » Not sharing intimate photos and talking online about sex (sexting)
- **Discuss cyberbullying.** Advise youth not to send, forward, or respond to mean or embarrassing messages or photos. Help youth document, block, and report cyberbullying if needed (for more information, see <http://www.stopbullying.gov/>).
- **Encourage youth to come to you with concerns.** The more you discuss social media openly, the more likely that youth will let you know if they experience inappropriate or hurtful exchanges.
- **Support foster parents in providing oversight of youth social media use.** Share this series' tip sheet for foster parents https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips_parent.cfm and your agency's social media guidelines. Discuss any concerns specific to the children in their care and their particular circumstances and needs.
- **Be prepared to deal with mistakes.** Think about how best to react to missteps (e.g., a youth uses Facebook to contact a family member who is restricted from unsupervised contact). Seek guidance as needed from your supervisor. Work together with youth and their foster parents on determining appropriate next steps.

For more information and resources, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/workforce/tools/socialmedia.cfm>

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