**Introduction**

The things that children and young people see and hear on the internet has a big influence on them affecting most areas of their life. This influence in the most part is positive and can help children and young people to build relationships and enhance their understanding of topics and learning.

Unfortunately, whilst most young people have positive experiences online, we know that this is not always the case and that some young people have negative experiences. This guide is designed to support DMBC foster carers to understand how children and young people can be safeguarded whilst online.

In this day in age there are a vast number of social media platforms, website, and apps easily accessible by children and young people and this can be difficult for carers to oversee and manage. Gone are the days where the danger was solely linked to the family computer, mobile phones, laptops, and tablets all pose a challenge for carers in terms of being able to supervise and keep children using the internet safe.

What we know is that keeping children and young people safe online is just as importance as keeping them safe physically for example at home and in the community and that if not safeguarded, children can be seriously harmed via online platforms.

With the risk posed by the internet in mind we have developed this guidance to support you to understand the tools and to have the advice you need to safeguard foster children online. This guide will cover everything from what the risks are to children online to thinking about how children can get the best experiences out of their online activities and the measures you can take as a foster carer to support this.

**Online Bullying**

Online bullying also known as cyber bullying is one of the biggest risks posed to young people online. Previously before the explosion of the internet bullying would usually take place in schools and the community with the home being a safe haven for young people away from this. Today, young people being bullied can be targeted wherever they are via social media and the internet. Online bullying can often develop from what some may describe as banter or a joke but may escalate into a negative, abusive, and threatening pattern of communication. This may include the sharing of pictures and images which may be inappropriate. Online bullying may take place across several social media platforms and websites. Online bullying can stem from physical bullying, or worryingly it is known that strangers to the young person have targeted children and young people online for no apparent reason.

If left unresolved online bullying can be harmful for children and young people who are victim of this – the fact that this takes place online makes this no less serious an issue as physical bullying with some young people in the UK taking their own lives as a result in previous years. This tells us the hugely damaging and harmful impact that this type of bullying can have on young people.

**Online Grooming**

The internet has made it easy to be able to access children and young people, equally it has made it easy for people online to remain anonymous. Online grooming is when an adult enters conversation either verbally or written online to befriend them. Groomers often present as very friendly towards young people to start with. The groomer will often encourage young people to open up about their lives, share personal and sensitive information and inappropriate pictures.

In the most worrying and high-risk cases groomers may seek to establish a face-to-face meeting with the young person.

Unfortunately, it is known that online grooming is highly effective due to the anonymous nature of online interactions and the ease with which a person can hide their identity online. Children and Young people, particularly those who have experienced attachment difficulties or have social and emotional problems may find it easier to make friends online – this puts our children in care who have experienced trauma at higher risk than their none looked after peers.

**Sexting and oversharing**

Many children and young people struggle to understand the risks associated with sharing personal information or sexually inappropriate material online (this is known as sexting).

A young person may send a message or picture to someone that they thought was a trusted friend, only to find that this can be shared across multiple platforms and by numerous people very quickly and that the person sending the original message is unable to control this. Where the information being shared, or the picture being circulated is inappropriate and private this can be hugely damaging for young people. We know that often this can lead to online bullying, exploitation or abuse.

Without fully understanding the consequences of their actions many young people will share sexually inappropriate content online including pornography or violence.

It is important to teach children and young people and remained them regularly about the dangers of oversharing personal information on online platforms or even between friends.

### Smartphone Apps and Gaming

Apps seem to be taking over from traditional internet browsing and online gaming sites. Many thousands of apps are readily available at the touch of a button. While most of these apps are safe for children and young people – some even come with an age content rating, there are some apps that may be unsuitable / harmful for young people and these apps should be avoided.

### Apps pose a particular risk as criminals can use the app to be able to contact a young person, access data including documents, messages and pictures on their phone or computer and in some cases can even track their location.

### It is vital that foster carers are aware of which apps young people are using and ensure that these are screened to ensure that young people are accessing suitable content and that criminals operating online are unable to access their personal information.

### Risks to children in care

### Children who are in care may be at increased vulnerability online. This is why it is so important that foster carers understand the risks and know what to do to try to safeguard their child or young person when online. Largely foster carers should try to supervise as far as realistically possible the interactions that young people in their care are having online and to ensure that the content, they are accessing is suitable.

### Specific risks to children in care may include:

### Contact with birth family that is not agreed by the local authority and that may cause harm to the child / young person. It is important to note that any of the restrictions or arrangements in place for family time in the real world also apply online.

### Foster children can experience bullying they are often stigmatised and seen to be different from their peers this can result in increased risk of bullying, and this can result in online bullying.

### Safeguarding, the first job of any foster carer is to try to safeguard the child or young person placed in your care. This includes supporting young people to ensure that they are safe online. By taking a proactive approach to online safeguarding by supervising and educating your child / young person about online safety you will be going some way to helping to keep them safe online. By modelling good online behaviour young people are likely to follow in this – a good way to model positive good online behaviour is to check your own privacy settings and ensure that you understand the risks posed online and how to spot and manage these.

### Children and young people should also be aware of a risk of prosecution for downloading or distributing indecent images including of themselves online.

### CEOP have a range of resources available to help parents and carers keep children and young people safe online – Dudley Fostering Service strongly encourages our foster carers to access and read this material specifically the appropriate material for your child’s age range: <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/>

### Recognising the signs of harmful internet use

### Foster carers must be able to understand and spot the signs of distress, anxiety and ultimately fear in children and young people. Foster carers are supported throughout their career to be able to do this staring with conversations within the fostering assessment, skills to foster preparation training and then specific training around children’s emotional needs safeguarding and child protection. Safeguarding children and understanding how to do this is a requirement for foster carers under the Fostering National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations 2011.

### Just as a foster carer should look to safeguard children physical, the same applies online. As we have already recognised the internet can significantly influence a child or young person and therefore its vital that carers are able to spot when the internet is having a negative impact on children and young people and know how to step in and what to do to safeguard the young person in their care.

### Within this section we consider the impact that inappropriate or improper internet use can have on young people.

### Young people may present as upset or worried / anxious about something they have seen, heard, or read online. Therefore, where appropriate adult controls can be very important to ensure children and young people are only accessing materials that are suitable for them.

### Some young people may experience fear of missing out and be anxious checking their social media platforms such as Facebook or twitter frequently. This can lead to an addiction to internet with young people feeling that they are missing out if they are not communicating with peers via social media. This can have a negative impact on mood, sleep, and schooling / education.

### Many young people develop unhealthy and unrealistic ideas about their body image, this can lead to young people lacking body confidence or lacking self-esteem. Social media and internet websites are packed with images of social media influencers, celebrities’ others who may dress or appear a particular way placing pressure on young people to seek to do the same. Often this is unrealistic and placed young people under enormous pressure.

### Peer pressure can take place both directly with peers encouraging a young person to do a particular thing often this may involve sharing inappropriate content or information about themselves or indirectly with a child or young person doing something to fit in online.

### Once something has been shared online, it can be difficult if not impossible in many cases to undo or remove this information or content from the public domain. A young person sharing content about themselves or inappropriately about others now could affect them both short-term and long term – young people have reported that they have been unable to secure a job that without their previous inappropriate online activities they otherwise would have been able to secure.

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### Practical help and advice

The best and most common way to safeguard children and young people during internet use is via supervision. This said supervising children and young people online without having an awareness of what the risks posed online are will be very limited in terms of preventing children having a negative experience. It is important that foster carers have the knowledge and the confidence to be able to monitor and understand what the risks are and how these can be mitigated.

As Dudley Council foster carers, we want you to feel that you have the knowledge and to develop the confidence to deal with the online world and safeguard the children and young people in your care whilst online just as you do in the real world! That said here are some useful practical measures that you can take to safeguard your foster child from negative online experiences and inappropriate use of the internet:

* As a foster carer monitor your foster child’s internet use
* Where appropriate set adult controls to prevent access to certain content or to prevent apps being downloaded that are unsuitable
* Show interest in the foster child’s online activities, including what apps they are using and what these apps are for e.g., games or social media
* Talk to your child or young person about who they are in contact with online, who they are talking to and what’s going on online
* Model responsible online behaviour yourself, check your own privacy controls
* Spend time to show your young person how to block people online and how to report inappropriate comments and materials they come across
* Ensure that none of the apps that the young person is using or any of the devices have ‘geo location’ switched on as this may be sharing the young person’s whereabouts with criminals operating online or with strangers and this may lead to young people being vulnerable – location services can commonly be located within the device’s settings
* Ask to check the privacy controls on their social media accounts, without prying into messages and comments. Help set up privacy controls so that only approved friends can talk and interact with them. Again, involve them in this to reinforce the message of online safety and doing this with the young person as opposed to doing too them may go some way to help the young person to cooperate
* Ensure if you have a younger child that you have access to their devices and know their passwords to social media and accounts and electronic devices should as tablets, mobile phones and computers
* Listen to your child or young person, and let them talk about their experiences online particularly if this has distressed them in any way
* Keep apps and devices up to date – this will help ensure that the latest security settings are installed and can prevent people hacking into the device and seeing content or data stored on the device
* Report any concerns regarding your foster child / young person’s online activities without hesitation to your supervising social worker & the child’s social worker, remember that children are able to access the internet and social media can be facilitated via gaming devices such as the Xbox, this can include location tracking

**Useful resources and additional information**

Technology develops quickly and it would be easy to be left behind as things continue to change. This could result in foster carers being unable to understand new and emerging risks posed through technology and internet use. It can be very difficult to manage a child or young person’s safety when it feels that they know more about online safety than you do! Thankfully there are a vast array of online resources to help us in safeguarding children online and to help us maintain up to date knowledge of known and emerging risks. Maintaining an up-to-date knowledge of applications, social media platforms, risks posed and how to manage these will go a long way in equipping foster carers in being able to safeguard children online. Below we list the resources and websites that we recommend that all our foster carers read to further enhance your understanding of safeguarding online. There are also some helpful guides aimed at children themselves, which can help foster an understanding of the dangers of the internet.

**For carers:**

* [Netmums Digital Safety Guide](https://www.netmums.com/child/internet-safety-for-children)

<https://www.netmums.com/child/internet-safety-for-children>

* [Child Safety Online – GOV.UK Guidelines for Parents and Carers](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-safety-online-a-practical-guide-for-parents-and-carers/child-safety-online-a-practical-guide-for-parents-and-carers-whose-children-are-using-social-media)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-safety-online-a-practical-guide-for-parents-and-carers/child-safety-online-a-practical-guide-for-parents-and-carers-whose-children-are-using-social-media>

* [Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP)](https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/)

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>

* [NSPCC Share Aware Online Safety Guide](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=GEN_-_Safety_-_%5BBMM%5D&utm_term=internet_safety&gclid=CjwKCAiAtdDTBRArEiwAPT4y-3peN11ku7b_6AuPTbFNCSuulyAqY3v5ZXCZKLJneeu7E4)

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>

* [Internet Matters](https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/6-10/)

<https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/6-10/>

* NSPCC advice for carers of children and young people with SEND

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-safety-families-children-with-send/>

**Apps and Tools to help foster carers safeguard children and young people online:**

* [Qustodio](https://www.qustodio.com/en/)

<https://www.qustodio.com/en/>

Great for content filtering and adding time limits, so children can only access the web at designated times.

* [OpenDNS Family Shield](https://www.opendns.com/home-internet-security/)

<https://www.opendns.com/home-internet-security/>

Perfect for busy households, this free tool works to filter content across multiple platforms, rather than on separate devices.

**For Kids:**

* [Kidsmart](http://kidsmart.org.uk/)

<https://www.childnet.com/resources/looking-for-kidsmart/>

* [CEOP’s Thinkuknow](https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/)

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

* [NSTeens.org](http://www.nsteens.org/)

<https://www.missingkids.org/NetSmartz>

* [Internet Safety Hangman](https://www.quia.com/hm/40647.html)

<https://www.quia.com/hm/40647.html>

**Videos:**

(Please Note - Press Ctrl and left click on the resource below with your mouse to follow these links)

* [Safe Web Surfing: Top Tips for Kids and Teens Online](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=yrln8nyVBLU)
* [Child Focus E-Safety](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5kW4pI_VQw)
* [Cybersmart Detectives](http://ejurhw3mswg/)
* [Professor Garfield Internet Safety](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPFZObMOPuA)

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