Social networking and Facebook
Information for foster carers

This document focuses on Facebook, but is largely applicable to similar forms of social networking, such as Bebo and Myspace.

What is social networking?

“A social network service focuses on the building and verifying of online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others, and which necessitates the use of software”

Common elements of social networks are that:

- They require membership of a website
- Users can create a profile – a page where they can tell others about themselves
- There is the ability to add other users as online friends or contacts
- They allow members to communicate among themselves

Should I let children and young people I care for use social networks?

The Fostering Network believes that all foster carers and social workers need to understand the role of social networking. Foster carers must be helped to view social networking as something that young people in care will – and must be allowed to – use. While we acknowledge the challenges, we principally see real opportunities for young people in general and those in care in particular.

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1 [The free dictionary http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/social+networking]
Why is social media so popular, and so central to the lives of many children and young people?

Social networking is the way in which many teenagers and young adults organise their lives and the way they keep in contact with their friends. Preventing young people from engaging with social networking sites would mark them out as different to their peers and leave them behind.

Facebook does not exist independently of young people’s ‘real’ lives. For example a birthday party may be arranged on Facebook, and then photos from it uploaded to the site afterwards.

Communicating online has advantages to more traditional forms of communication:

- Distance is not important, and many people can be contacted at once
- It is free and there is not the pressure of the cost of a phone call
- Where children and young people don’t feel confident communicating face to face with others, they may find it easier to talk to others online
- It is easily controllable; users can go ‘offline’ if they do not wish to respond
- There are a variety of methods of communication: articles or photos can be shared, messages can be sent to someone’s wall, a private message can be sent to a friend or a conversation can be started via instant messaging
- Children and young people are comfortable using computers; many will have grown up using them.

Who can use Facebook?

Anyone with an email address can join. Users should be over 13 years old so if they are under that age it is legitimate to stop them having a profile.

Who does use Facebook?

39 per cent of all internet users in the UK use social networks – this is highest for 16 to 24 year olds with 54 per cent having a profile on at least one network, and many on more than one. However, recently use of social media among older age groups has been growing dramatically, with Facebook continuing to see more growth with users over age 26.
## What do people use Facebook for?

### Creating an online identity

When people join Facebook they create a profile; likely to include a photo of themselves and some general information such as gender, date of birth, interests and hobbies. However, a user’s profile photo can be of anything, not necessarily their face.

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<tr>
<th>Communicating with online friends</th>
<th>Arranging their social life and keeping up to date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Users add online ‘friends’ who they will be connected to. This will be likely to include friends and family, old friends who they have been reconnected with and new people, for example those connected with through common interest groups.</td>
<td>Facebook allows users to organise events, such as birthday parties, online and join special interest groups or become ‘fans’, for example of a football player or charity.</td>
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<td>There are many ways users can communicate with online friends via Facebook:</td>
<td>Such applications can help build a sense of belonging to a community, and have specific advantages, such as giving an indication of how many people will attend a party. However, there is a need to be aware of who is finding out about events (see the privacy section below).</td>
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<td>• Status updates – allowing other users to see your latest news</td>
<td>Users can find out further information about friends such as birthdays, and follow friends’ news feeds, as well as those of interests such as TV programmes. Many social networks allow users to watch videos, listen to music and take part in a range of games, quizzes and other activities, which they can also invite their friends to join.</td>
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<td>• Posting on a friend’s wall – a space on a user’s profiles that friends can see</td>
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<td>• Private messages – to one or many friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>• ‘Facebook chat’ – an instant messaging service allowing text conversations with friends who are ‘online’</td>
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<td>• Through comments on event or group pages</td>
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What is specific to children and young people in care?

By facilitating contact with friends, siblings and even parents, social networking sites can be invaluable in allowing young people in care to maintain important relationships. Social networks can also be vital for children and young people in care to maintain as ‘normal’ a life as possible, through interacting with their peers on an equal basis. It is also invaluable in allowing them to keep in touch with their friends if they have to move home, sometimes moving to an entirely new area.

Social networking also allows people to form groups around a common interest or topic, for example the Fostering Network page on Facebook allows discussions around a number of topics that would not be possible through traditional media. In this way, social media can be positive as it allows interaction with people who may be in a similar situation and can facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas.

Social networks such as Facebook can appear to threaten carefully designed contact arrangements. However, it is impossible and unsuitable to prevent young people using social media, so understanding what they are doing and having regular and open dialogue with them is important to minimise any risks.

How can foster carers use Facebook?

People who care for children and young people – parents, foster carers and social workers – are often not as up to speed with social networks as younger people, and tend to focus on the challenges rather than the opportunities. It is important that foster carers understand social networks, including the opportunities and the dangers, and that they can discuss with children and young people in their care how they are using sites such as Facebook.

It is important that foster carers are also able to help younger children learn about safe use of the internet and social networking sites. You wouldn’t expect children to cross a road without teaching them how, and the same applies to the internet. However, you also wouldn’t ban children from crossing roads because of the dangers, nor make them feel that every time they do so they are likely to get run over. A positive and safe approach is what is called for.

Think carefully about information you share - there have been cases of burglary after people updated their status to say they were on holiday on the same page that contains their address; the online equivalent of leaving your door open.
Foster carers can also use social networks to communicate with other foster carers through Facebook groups, instant messengers and fan pages for Foster Care Associations. Facebook groups, for example, can help foster carers to share experiences and tips about their specific experiences and challenges.

Confidentially is important; be careful about posting photographs of yourself and/or fostered children on Facebook. Material such as photos may well remain on a site such as Facebook for longer than you anticipate, and could be seen by people who were not the intended audience.

**There has been a lot in the media about the negative side of Facebook. What are the dangers, and what can be done about them?**

There are often scare stories in the media and, while the dangers should not be ignored, simple steps can be taken to mitigate them. Fundamentally the messages are similar to traditional child safety messages, albeit in a different context:

- Be careful about friend requests from people you don’t know
- Don’t assume people are who they say they are
- People can find ways to access profiles; something posted on a wall intended for just friends could well be read by an unintended audience
- Don’t give out or publicise personal information (for example, your address) and remember that anything you put up may be read by people you may not know
- Don’t put up information about where you will be at a particular time – this could be found by someone that you don’t know
- Safety steps that can be taken include having a computer in a family space such as the living room (but bear in mind that many modern phones have internet access) and ensuring that all computers have updated virus protection.
- Make sure that everyone in your house who is using social networks is aware of their security settings and how to change them if they need to.
What about ‘Facebook parties’?

There have been a number of sensational headlines in recent years: “Teenagers learn harsh lesson after Facebook party brawl” (Guardian); “Riot police raid £30m Mayfair squat after 2,000 people show up to Facebook party ‘gone wrong’” (Daily Mail).

These sound dramatic, but risks are similar to news of a party spreading by word of mouth, although this can be facilitated to a greater extent by social networking.

As well as the methods that would be employed for any party, such as adequate supervision, the risk of people you don’t want finding out about a party can be minimised by understanding online privacy settings. Facebook allows differing levels of access to the online event page; ranging from ‘open’; where anyone can see details and add themselves to the guest list, to ‘secret’ where the event can only be viewed by those people who have been invited.

An alternative is to use a private message to write to people who are invited, although there is then a limit on the number of people who can be included.

What about privacy?

Facebook has a number of privacy settings. These are worth reviewing and exploring, as many users are not aware of the privacy options available to them.

It is worth remembering that even if you have the strongest privacy settings, once material is published it could be shared by an online friend, and can be very hard to erase.

Photos of a person can be posted by other users who ‘tag’ the people in them. It is therefore worth users regularly checking content they may be featured in.

What is the ‘Panic button’?

Recently there has been a lot of media pressure on Facebook to instate a ‘panic button’. The button has now been implemented, having been developed by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (Ceop).

The panic button is an application aimed at children and teenagers that allows users to easily report suspected abuse to the Ceop and Facebook. The application does have to be added by the user themselves, even if they are under 18.
Terminology

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Poke</td>
<td>A feature that allows users to attract the attention of another user.</td>
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<td>Like</td>
<td>Users can indicate to that they like something, ranging from a friend’s status update to a new song.</td>
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<td>Status update</td>
<td>A short piece of text users have on their profile, usually to update their friends as to what they are doing or how they are feeling.</td>
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<td>Tag</td>
<td>To ‘tag’ someone in a photo means to link their name to it, so it will appear on their profile that they are featured in a picture. Users can ‘un-tag’ themselves from photos.</td>
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<td>Friend Request</td>
<td>When someone wants to be your online friend you will be sent an email asking you to confirm you wish to be friends with them. If you do not know them or do not wish to be friends you can reject the request, and they are not informed.</td>
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<td>Block</td>
<td>Users can block other users, removing them from their online friend list.</td>
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<td>News Feed</td>
<td>A service on a user’s page that shows updates about their friend’s activity.</td>
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Where can I find out more?

The Fostering Network offers training for foster carers on social networking and IT safety. Contact us on 020 7620 6430 or email training@fostering.net for more information.

You can also access information about social networking and IT safety through the Children and Young People section of the Fostering Network’s online resource centre at www.fostering.net/resources/subjects/children-and-young-people.