

The 411 on Social Media, Networking and Texting!

“I get frustrated when my niece and nephew are tappity tap tapping away in their own worlds,” says Johnnie, a relative caregiver and foster parent. “I feel left out, until I remember that I really wasn’t so different when I was that age. We didn’t have cell phones and computers, but we still had our own worlds and, above all, we wanted our privacy.”

What Exactly Is Social Media, Anyhow?

Social media is any form of communication between people and the internet. It’s a large list of online activities that include:

- Talking (using Voice Over Internet Protocol or VOIP)
- Sharing media files like pictures and videos
- Social networking
- Video gaming
- Web logs or “blogs”

While many of us are familiar with *Facebook* or *YouTube*, in reality, there are too many social media outlets to mention. Focus on the popular websites for now, but know that what’s

popular can change quickly, and you always want to stay a little ahead of your kids if possible. (Or okay, not too many steps behind.)

Popular Social Technology Definitions and Destinations

Social Networking websites like *Facebook* and *MySpace* are used as ways to communicate, share pictures, music and videos. Facebook has become

increasingly popular over the past five years and has millions of users worldwide. It requires users to have an individual e-mail account and be above the age of 13.

Once a person has a *Facebook* account, he or she can “friend” people by accepting requests. The site has several security settings that may hide or not hide each user’s information.

For example, in the Spring of 2010, *Facebook* changed its default settings to make it much easier for people to see other people’s information, but a lot of people weren’t aware of the change that took place. It’s crucial to know how to set and check account settings.



Blogs are basically online journaling websites. A blog is similar to *Facebook* and *MySpace*, but is more focused. Think of a blog as an online diary or an extended holiday newsletter. There are privacy settings for blogs so you can control who can view them. Blogs can display pictures, text, videos and links to other sites.

MMOGs (Video Gaming) stands for Massively Multi-player Online Game. Some of the popular games are *Crossfire*, *World of Warcraft*, *Doom* and *SimCity*. Today’s MMOGs can have thousands of users worldwide playing one specific game online at a time. Often MMOGs are played on computers, cell phones and with video game units like the Xbox, Wii and PlayStation.

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Johnnie says she didn't realize at first that when her kids started to play online video games, they were also "chatting" with other players. That "chat" led to her niece talking (on her cell phone) to a person claiming to be a 24-year-old man in Texas (or possibly a 45-year old woman in Arizona since no one really knows anything about anyone online). This person ultimately told Johnnie to butt out—he was going to marry her niece as soon as she turned 18. "And this," says Johnnie, "is how today's world is not at *all* like the world I grew up in as a teen!"

Instant Messaging (IMing) is a way to communicate with others online. The cool thing about IMing is that you can have online real time text chats (private conversations) with one or more people. IMing can be done within browsers such as Yahoo or with services like Twitter or AOL.

Certain websites like Skype let users have conversations using video calling technology, as well, if you have a video camera. There is a specific IM text language known as SMS language, which stands for Short Message Service. If you understand what LOL means, then you've already encountered this language. BTW (by the way) LOL means "laughing out loud."

Text messaging or texting is a form communication between cell phones over cell phone networks. Texting also uses the SMS language and is extremely popular. Many people find texting quicker and more effective than talking.

Video and picture sharing websites like YouTube, Flickr and Photobucket let account users upload videos and pictures from various electronic devices like cell phones, cameras and video recorders. *YouTube* is a public website, and users are allowed to watch videos without having an

account. To post something on *YouTube*, however, you need to an account, and that allows you to control privacy settings. *YouTube* videos can also be shared and cross-posted on other websites.

Twitter is a social networking service that allows users to provide small updates, messages or entries using less than 140 characters using the SMS text language. The messages, once posted, are called "tweets." Twitter also allows users to cross-post and share on other websites.

Forums and message boards provide places on the internet for people to discuss, meet or ask questions, usually about one main subject. There are thousands of message boards and forums. Some require that you become a member and have a user name and password before joining. Forums and message boards are not done in real time, meaning users have to wait for others to read their message and respond.

One message board you might want to encourage your child to go to is <http://fyi3.com/>, which is run by FosterClub. There's also a message board on the same site for foster parents.

Safety

When talking about social technology or media, safety is a valid concern. Check out our tipsheet, *Internet Safety Tips for Caregivers*, that addresses safety-related issues and discusses *Family Internet Agreements*. <http://wifostercareandadoption.org/site/indexer/561/library/392/internetsafety.pdf>

Social Media Agreements

Social media agreements are a great way for foster families, social workers, birth families and youth to talk about how youth will use social media. Here are links to media agreements for certain ages.

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Kindergarten to 5th Grade:

<http://commonsensemedia.org/common-sense-family-media-agreement-grades-k-5>

6th to 8th Grade:

<http://commonsensemedia.org/common-sense-family-media-agreement-grades-6-8>

High School:

<http://commonsensemedia.org/common-sense-family-media-agreement-high-school>

Foster Care and Social Media Questions

Many foster parents have asked if there are any specific things that they should know about social media, networking and texting. While these topics are not specifically written in the *Wisconsin Foster Care Handbook* or *Chapter 56 Foster Home Care for Children*, there are a few basic principles that foster families should apply. Here are a few frequently asked questions:

How should I maintain confidentiality about the youth placed in my home on social networking websites like Facebook?

As a licensed foster parent, you must always maintain confidentiality about any youth placed in your home and their family. This means that pictures and any information about the youth placed in your home and their family should never be posted or written anywhere others have access to that information. This is especially important online for social media and social networking sites like *Facebook*.



(For more about confidentiality, refer to the *Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook* in Chapter 2, page 8 at: <http://wifostercareandadoption.org/library/511/chapter2.pdf>.)

If a youth in care owns a cell phone and/or portable gaming device before they came to my home, can they use those items all the time in my home?

If a youth owns something like a cell phone or handheld gaming device, those items belong to the youth and may not be damaged or destroyed.

The *Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook* (<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/library/512/chapter3.pdf>)

says, “If foster parents have concerns about a child’s choice in music, clothing or other recreational or personal items, they should discuss the situation with the child’s caseworker.”

Are youth in care allowed to have e-mail, Facebook accounts, blogs or YouTube accounts?

Yes, youth in care are able to have online

accounts as long as they meet the minimum guidelines for the website. However, foster parents don’t have to provide accessibility to the internet in their home. Many parents have opted to set up specific rules and guidelines about internet access for youth in their home.

A youth placed in my home is posting pictures and information about himself on a social networking website. Is this allowed?

Yes, youth in care are allowed to post pictures and information about themselves anywhere and

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anytime they want. Youth in care do not have to follow the confidentiality guidelines that licensed foster parents need to, **except when it pertains to other youth in care in the home.**

Am I allowed to develop or use a “Family Internet Safety Agreement” as a foster parent? Yes! Parents need to stay educated about social media and have some household rules or guidelines for family members. Ideally, members of the youth’s team will be part of the agreement, so that everyone is clear about what’s allowed and what isn’t.

The Advantages of Social Technology

Social technology has provided many of us the ability to be more connected to each other than ever before. For most of our youth, this technology has become a part of their daily culture, and social media plays a big role in their life as they learn how to develop relationships and their identity.

Johnnie says, “When my niece got into some mischief while on *CrossFire*, my gut reaction was to restrict *all* internet and cell phone use. But her social skills aren’t very good, and I actually found myself *encouraging* her to go on *Facebook* so that she could be ‘friends’ with the people at school and not be so isolated. They tend to ignore her at school, but *Facebook* is a kinder environment in some respects.”

Johnnie goes on to say that she was able to use the *CrossFire* incident as a “teachable moment.”

Some foster parents say a surprising bonus is being able to connect with their kids’ birth parents. “It’s been great!” says one parent. “They didn’t respond to voice mail and emails,

Popular Social Media Websites

Adoption Resources of Wisconsin

<http://wiadopt.org> is on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *LinkedIn* and *Adoption Voices*.

Foster Care Central

<http://fostercarecentral.org/> is a social networking site like *Facebook* that supports foster parents, social workers and volunteers.

FosterClub

<http://www.fosterclub.com/>

is devoted to youth in care and alumni. It has message boards, blogs and networking opportunities with other youth in care.

Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA)

<http://www.fostercarealumni.org/>

provides users a message board and blogs.

Adoption.com

<http://www.adoption.com/> offers support to its users with many available message boards.

Grandsplace

<http://grandsplace.org/>

offers support for relative caregivers with available live chats, message boards and an e-mail list.

but they always text me right back. I use AOL’s instant messenger for my computer to text their phones, and I get the texts back on my computer.”

Even though we adults may not “get it,” the technology available today will be the building blocks for future applications and social media interfaces.

