INSIGHTS

53

Children in care and their use of mobile devices and the internet for contact

JENNY SIMPSON (UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON)
JUNE 2020

Iriss

Acknowledgements

Iriss

improving lives through
knowledge, evidence and innovation

Key points

- The use of mobile devices and the internet are a normal part of everyday life for children and young people, including those in care.
- A balanced view of use of devices and the internet by children and young people in care is to appreciate both opportunities and risks associated with use.
- There are a number of factors known to increase the vulnerability of children and young people online. However, in considering vulnerability online, this should be done holistically, taking account of a child or young person's life in general at a given time, and with awareness of both protective and risk factors.
- There is a need for practitioners to move towards a more expansive and child-centred approach with a focus on relationships. This should encompass an appreciation of stepfamily and biological family, and the maintenance of relationships with a wider variety of individuals that reflect the world of the child or young person in care.

Introduction

The emergence of the internet and the use of mobile devices such as the smartphone, tablets and laptops, has changed how life is lived, not only for adults but for children and young people. As never before, children and young people are adopting, transforming, creating and sharing cultural norms online (Livingstone and Palmer, 2011 p13). This revolution has brought with it a number of significant challenges to social workers involved in fostering and adoption, particularly increased usage of mobile devices and social media to maintain contact with birth family members and others (Fursland, 2011; Howard, 2012; MacDonald and colleagues, 2014; Greenhow, 2017). The social work profession has raised concerns about the potential risk of continued abuse and disruption to out-of-home placements and adoption arrangements (Cooper, 2009; Stephenson, 2009; Sen and Broadhurst,

There is a growing body of evidence that points to known categories of risk around internet usage by children and young people, relating to: content, contact and conduct

2011; Oakwater, 2012). However, the concerns of social workers, as well as foster carers and adoptive parents, are not confined to contact, but to use of mobile devices and the internet more generally.

There is a growing body of evidence that points to known categories of risk around internet usage by children and young people, relating to: content, contact and conduct (Livingstone and Palmer, 2012; Staksrud, 2013). Content is about the way in which children and young people might receive and access potentially inappropriate websites that may include pornographic, self-harm or extremist material. Contact concerns children and young people who are potentially approached by a person (known or unknown to them) whose aim is to sexually exploit them. Contact can also include harassment and bullying, a significant problem experienced by children and young people (Lenhart and colleagues, 2011; Willoughby, 2018). Finally, there is conduct — which can take the form

of children and young people posting pictures and other personal information online — that can lead to cyberbullying or sexual exploitation (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009). While these highlight the dangers of the internet, the existing empirical evidence points to a range of complexities and conundrums.

Use of mobile devices and the internet by children and young people

The literature regarding use of mobile devices and the internet is made up of a series of large-scale studies that have taken place in the United States (Lenhart and Madden, 2007; Boyd, 2007; Boyd and Marwick, 2007), the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2017) and Europe (EU Kids Online, 2012 and 2014). The earlier studies, such as those by Lenhart and Madden (2007), showed how young people used social media to manage their current friendships, plan and coordinate activities or events, as well as retain contact with people in their lives they rarely meet. Another study by Lenhart and colleagues (2011) revealed that the majority of young people using Facebook were posting status updates, commenting on friends' posts, posting a photo or video, and tagging people. In terms of

impact, Lenhart and colleagues study (2011, p3) found that 88% of adolescent respondents had witnessed other users being cruel or mean in a social media environment; the same study reported that 78% had positive interactions that supported self-esteem and enabled them to feel closer to another individual. An EU Kids Online (2014) study of internet use by children and young people across Europe, also found positive benefits, which included educational opportunities and the promotion of creativity through the sharing of content eg pictures and music.

The Children's Commissioner for England has pointed out that parental concerns do not always match those of their children, with risk viewed very differently (Children's Commissioner, 2017). Livingstone (2005) reported that there is confusion regarding child online safety and failure to appreciate that, while there are recognised risks, a child or young person will not necessarily come to harm. She also recognised that fears around internet use is fuelled by press reports that have a tendency to overstate problems. That said, this does not discount genuine concerns, particularly for children who could be identified as vulnerable. Livingstone and Palmer (2012) highlight that there are a number of unresolved questions that research has yet to address

in this area. For example, the impact of cultural context on children's lives, age, behaviour, risk and resilience.

Vulnerability online

Despite these unanswered questions, there are a number of factors known to increase the vulnerability of children and young people online. Findings from the EU Kids Online Study (2014) highlight that children experiencing psychological problems are likely to encounter more risk. Disabled children, while identified as having more digital skills, also experience greater levels of risk because of increased likelihood of bullying and harassment (Livingstone and Palmer, 2012). Munro's (2011) scoping review also identifies certain groups of children that are potentially more vulnerable than those in the general population, including children living away from home, children in need (including those with disabilities), children who have run away from home, and children missing from school. Many of these groups include children who would also fall within the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) Vulnerable Champions Group (HM Government, 2010) categorisations of vulnerability offline. These are identified as children experiencing family difficulties and brought up in chaotic family/

home environments, children with disabilities, children with emotional/behavioural difficulties and children experiencing 'exclusion of access.' Many belong to marginalised groups such as travellers, asylum seekers, trafficked and migrant communities.

In the case of children and young people in out-of-home placements, online risks may be greater because of their inability to keep themselves safe online (Fursland, 2011; May-Chahal, 2011, Sen and Broadhurst, 2011; Sen, 2015). Fursland (2011) identified the vulnerabilities of this group as sharing too much personal information online, cyberbullying and sexting (Fursland, 2011, pp26-27). In terms of children who have previously been abused, Sen (2015, p16) highlights that they are more predisposed to online grooming, drawing on information from the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Child Exploitation. Nonetheless, mobile devices and the internet can provide opportunities too. Fursland's (2011) *Fostering and social networking* helpfully identified how children in out-of-home placements used mobile devices and the internet to develop friendships, gain support, be part of a community and stay in touch with birth parents and other relatives. Findings by Cross and colleagues (2009, p9) provide another

perspective of vulnerability, stressing that: 'Vulnerable children and young people are not a self-contacted or static group. Any child or young person may be vulnerable at some time depending on any one, or a combination of risks or challenging life events they face and their resilience'. Both Munro (2011) and Cross and colleagues (2009) also agree that while certain young people may be vulnerable, this does not necessarily translate to behaviours online. Therefore, when considering vulnerability online this should be done holistically, with consideration of the child's or young person's life in general, and an awareness of both protective and risk factors.

Policy and guidance for children in out-of-home placements

In terms of children in out-of-home placements in Scotland, contact is governed by a variety of statutes and guidance that include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); Children (Scotland) Act 1995 s.17); the Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations, 2009; and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014) which is more specifically concerned with the role of the local authority as corporate parent.

The key expectation from legislation and guidance is that, 'a local authority is to take such steps to promote on a regular basis personal relations and direct contact between the looked after child and his/her parents, family, anyone else with parental responsibilities or rights or any other specified person'. The guidance expands on the duty by making explicit that contact can be inclusive of face-to-face meetings, letters, telephone calls, gifts and photographs. Also that contact includes siblings and members of the extended family (The Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations, 2009). Another key element in the guidance is that practitioners should 'discover and monitor a child's wishes about continuing contact with his/her parents and other family members, and where a child is unsure seek clarification in order to understand what is likely to be of greatest benefit'.

It can be argued, however, that legislation and guidance has failed to capture the breadth and vitality of the range of relationships that children and young people in out-of-home placements may wish to have. Evidence of this is apparent in the Independent Care Review published in February 2020, which spoke to children and young people in out-of-home

placements, adults formerly in care, and people in paid and unpaid positions. Importantly, it recognised that, 'children in care must be actively supported to develop connections and relationships. Relationships must not be prevented by an assumption that children may come to harm and/or face unnecessary risk' (The Independent Care Review, p23).

An emergent area: young people's perspectives

The position of the Independent Care Review reflects a number of recent studies from the fostering and adoption sectors on the use of mobile devices and the internet for contact (Greenhow, 2017; McDonald and colleagues, 2016; Simpson, 2020, in press). In what is an emergent area, Greenhow's study (2017) was the first of its kind to examine contact via mobile devices and the internet where children have been adopted from public care. A total of ten adoptive families, including 11 adoptive parents and six adopted children between 14-22 years were involved. It identified patterns of virtual contact[1]. These began with regular

exchanges, which reduced over time to be replaced by infrequent communication and information from online updates on social media. Informality of contact allowed adoptive children and members of their birth family to engage in natural family-like communication (2017, p49). Virtual contact also provided opportunities for adopted children to ask and receive answers to questions about their identity and lives. A similar study focusing on children in care was undertaken by MacDonald and colleagues (2014), concerned with how children and young people in both residential and fostering placements made use of mobile phones for contact. It involved reviewing policies and interviewed eight senior managers and twenty home care managers. A survey was created for foster carers that yielded a 15% (no.=128) return. A survey was also designed for young people in either foster or residential care, however, the authors found that due to the 'gatekeeping' stance of allocated social work practitioners, few young people responded. The study noted that children and young people benefited from having immediate family contact via mobile devices (2016, p834) and that for those who did not want direct contact with certain members of their familial network, the lines of communication were able to stay open.

---

1   Greenhow (2017) defines virtual contact as post-adoption contact activities between adopted children and birth relatives via social networking sites, e-mail, video calling or text messaging (p45)

There are a number of weaknesses in both studies. The most obvious is Greenhow's study (2017), whose sample of children were adopted from public care only and involved their adopters. With regards to MacDonald and colleagues (2014) study, even though the size was admirable, the problems associated with the recruitment of children in care meant that only the perspectives of adults were provided.

The recent small-scale study by Simpson (2020, in press), which involved young people in care between 13-18 years of age, their foster carers and social workers, expands on the two previous studies. In this, none of the young people used the word 'contact' to describe communication with family members. Instead, they spoke about 'staying in touch' with activities involving texting, calling or using WhatsApp, video-calling and sending or posting pictures. Additionally, young people who took part in the study were able to monitor and even see what was going on in their wider family through the use of social media. This was important because even when a young person's feelings were not reciprocated, there was still a mechanism to maintain connection. Therefore, even in difficult circumstances, the technology gave room to negotiate the complexities of their relationships,

avoiding the withering of family links altogether. This reflects the observation made by Boddy and colleagues (2013) that even where young people are placed away from home, they remain 'psychologically present' (p13). Simpson's study (2020, in press) also revealed that the young people in care could share joyful moments and achievements in 'real time', as opposed to waiting for other forms of contact.

Carers' perspectives

In contrast, both foster carers and social work practitioners in Simpson's study considered the use of mobile devices and the internet a nuisance, a risk and not equal to face-to-face contact. Similarly, Greenhow (2017) and McDonald and colleagues (2016) studies revealed foster carer and adoptive parent concerns around managing this. They agreed there was a dearth of policy and procedures to support foster carers, adoptive parents and social work practitioners. Nonetheless, the study by MacDonald (2014) does describe some of the rules foster parents have adopted in the daily management of mobile devices, such as switching off mobile phones at a certain time, leaving them downstairs at night and not taking them to school.

However, 45% of the foster carers surveyed as part of McDonald and colleagues (2014) study said that they did not think that the use of a mobile phone had a detrimental effect on the placement. This was confirmed in the conclusion drawn:

> 'However, overall, the general perception was positive, strengthened by the pragmatic view that mobile phones are a way of life for all children, not just children in care. Negotiation and explanation were both thought to be central to making it less problematic.' (MacDonald and colleagues, 2014, p37).

A potential explanation for foster carers' reactions may be found in two recent studies (Guardian Saints, 2017; Children's Commissioner, 2017). The report by Guardian Saints highlighted challenges in relation to mobile devices, such as mobile phones purchased by birth parents and the use of free Wi-Fi hotspots. It also noted that mobile phones were particularly difficult for foster carers to manage as they were unable to apply controls to the devices in the same way that they could with computers and their own personal Wi-Fi (2017, p12). Some foster carers stated that blocking content was far too complicated for them and that the children in their care had a better understanding.

It could be argued that this finding may be related to the age demographic of foster carers, with 50% of respondents being over the age of fifty and a further 17% over the age of sixty (2017, 7). Further to this, a report completed by The Children's Commissioner's (2017), as part of the Fostering National Stocktake in England, found that the foster carers' lack of digital skills led to an alarmist and overly cautious approach. However, this is not the entire picture. The study by MacDonald (2014) identified that young people were involved in negotiating the rules and regulations for the fostering household, although in the first instance, these negotiations were often met with resistance by the young people in care.

Lastly, in bringing together findings from the Guardian Saints, the Children's Commissioner and aforementioned studies, it can also be seen that foster carers have a considerable number of concerns similar to those of parents in general.

Social work practitioner response

The majority of the literature in relation to social work practitioners and the use of mobile communication devices and the internet is primarily concerned with

how social media is being used in child protection work and the ethical implications (Stott, MacEachron and Gustavsson, 2017; Sage and Sage, 2016; Boddy and Dominelli, 2016; Breyette and Hill, 2015; Mishna and colleagues, 2012; Reamer, 2013). The literature on the *response* of social work practitioners to the use of mobile communication devices and the internet by children in care is limited. It tends to be a commentary on what is happening in terms of the risks posed by the internet to children in care, rather than based on empirical research. That said, Ballantyne and colleagues (2010) have highlighted the opportunities provided by the internet (p97), and recognised the moral panic that accompanies the technology (p98), and try to provide a balanced account of the evidence available. Crucially, they call for child-centred solutions as opposed to technical approaches, evidence-informed awareness raising, media literacy skills for children and young people in care, and peer-education programmes (involving child advocacy organisations) for young people in care that are potentially harder to reach. Similar messages are given by Willoughby (2019) who calls for social work practitioners to develop a greater knowledge and understanding of social media platforms as a way of identifying both risks and opportunities (p136). Furthermore, tailoring

assessments so that they are reflective of social media use and child development. He too closes by identifying a role for practitioners in educating parents about the risk of social media use (p137).

Proposed new ways of working

The findings from existing research and the Independent Care Review all point towards a need for a more expansive and re-imagined view of children and young people in care's relationships with family members and friends. It is suggested that an expansive view should seek to avoid the word 'contact' and focus on relationships. As has been identified by the Independent Care Review, 'contact' is a word that compounds a sense of difference and is associated with stigma (The Independent Care Review, 2020, p11). An expansive view will also require practitioners to practice in a way that genuinely seeks the views of the child or young person in care about the people they want to stay in touch with. Tools such as Ecomaps are a useful means of capturing this important information, and can be modified by adding a number of app symbols to stimulate a discussion about the use of social networking sites used to stay in touch with family and friends. This moves away from the notion

that children and young people in care only wish to stay in touch with people who make use of those methods associated with 'contact'. Another feature of maintaining relationships includes recognising that for children and young people in care, 'family' can potentially include a wide range of people that are not immediate members of the biological family, but are associated with the community (Bullock, 1991).

This approach needs to be accompanied with support for foster carers so that their knowledge and understanding of this new way of maintaining relationships is legitimate and of value to children and young people who are in out-of-home placements. This can be done through sharing (with permission) the results of an Ecomap. There is also a necessity for the Care Plan to formally record the use of mobile devices and the internet, so that this information can be discussed as part of the Introductory Placement meeting that takes place at the start of a new placement. Such a forum would allow the expectations of use by children and young people in out-of-home placements to be shared, as well as management and access to reflect the specific needs of the child or young person. In addition, this expansive view must consider the value of

friendship for children and young people in out-of-home placements. There should be a deliberate intent to encourage them and trust the judgement of foster carers, rather than being 'constricted' by an over-reliance on a procedural approach that is rooted in risk aversion (The Independent Care Review, 2020, p24). Finally, in terms of a theoretical perspective, practitioners are encouraged to move beyond the 'confines' of attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and towards embracing socio-genealogical connectedness, which stresses the importance of charting and taking account of children and young people's broader social network that incorporates both their extended family and home community.

In brief, the use of mobile devices and the Internet for contact is revolutionising what is understood as the maintenance of relationships and what constitutes family. It is calling into question the validity and relevance of contact for children and young people who are living in out-of-home placements in the twenty-first century.

References

Ballantyne N, **Duncalf** Z and **Dale** E (2010) Corporate parenting in the network society. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*. 28, 1-2, 95-107

Boddy J and **Dominelli** L (2016) Social media and social work: the challenges of a new ethical space. *Australian Social Work* 70, 2, 1–13

Boyd D (2007) Why youth (heart) social network sites: the role of networking publics in teenage social life. In Buckingham D *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning — Youth, Identity and Digital Media Volume*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press

Boyd D and **Marwick** A (2011) The drama! Teen conflict, gossip, and bullying in networked publics. In *A decade in internet time: symposium on the dynamics of the internet and society*. Oxford Internet Institute

Children (Scotland) Act 1995. https://s.iriss.org.uk/3d3Oo9n (Accessed 28 January 2020)

Children's Commissioner (2017a) Growing up in digital care — submission to the DfE Fostering Stocktake 2017. London: Children's Commissioner. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/31335 (Accessed 7 November 2018)

Cooper J (2009) Technology and supervised contact between children and young people and birth parents. *Community Care* https://s.iriss.org.uk/36C7Mlj (Accessed 13 December 2011)

Cross EJ, **Richardson** B, **Douglas** T et al (2009) Virtual violence: protecting children from cyberbullying. London. Beat Bullying

Fursland E (2010) *Facing up to Facebook: foster care and social networking: a guide for social workers and foster carers*. London: British Association of Adoption and Fostering

Greenhow S, **Hackett** S, **Jones** C et al (2017) Adoptive family experiences of post-adoption contact in an internet era. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22, 44–52

Guardian Saints (2017) Online safety foster carer survey 2016. Guardian Saints https://s.iriss.org.uk/3d39ipt (Accessed 13 November 2018)

Howard J (2012) Untangling the web: the internet's transformative impact on adoption. US: The Donald Adoption Institute

HM Government (2010) Working together to safeguard children. Nottingham: Department for Children, Schools and Families Publications

Lenhart A and **Madden** M (2007) *Social networking websites and teens: an overview*. Pew Washington: Internet and American Life Project

Lenhart A, **Madden** M, **Smith** A et al (2011) *Teens, kindness and cruelty on social network sites: how American teens navigate the new world of digital citizenship*. Washington: Pew Internet and American Life Project. https://s.iriss.org.uk/2LWpzQY (accessed 12 February 2012)

Livingstone S and **Haddon** L (2009) EU Kids Online: final report. LSE, London: EU Kids Online

Livingstone S and **Palmer** T (2012) Identifying vulnerable children online and what strategies can help them. London: UK Safer Internet Centre.

Livingstone S, **Mascheroni** G, **Olaffson** K et al (2014) Children's online risks and opportunities: comparative findings from the EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile

MacDonald G, **Kelly** G, **Robinson** C et al (2014) Mobile phones and contact arrangements for children living in care. Queens University Belfast. https://s.iriss.org.uk/2TIm3Oy (accessed 18 January 2015)

May-Chahal C, **Mason** C, **Rashid** A et al (2014) Safeguarding cyborg childhoods: incorporating the on/offline behaviour of children into everyday social work practices. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, 3, 596-614

Mishna F, **Bogo** M, **Root** J et al (2012) 'It just crept in': the digital age and implications for social work practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 40, 3, 277–286

Munro ER (2011) The protection of children online: a brief scoping review to identify vulnerable groups. Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre. Loughborough University

Oakwater H (2012) *Bubble wrapped children: how social networking is transforming the face of 21st century adoption*. London: MX Publishing

Ofcom Office of Communication (2017) Children and parents media use and attitudes report. London. https://s.iriss.org.uk/3ewty39 (Accessed 7 December 2018)

Sage TE and **Sage** M (2016a) Social media use in child welfare practice. *Advances in Social Work* 17,1, 93–112

Sen R and **Broadhurst** K (2011) Contact between children in out-of-home placements and their family and friends networks: a research review. *Child and Family Social Work*, 16, 298-309

Sen R (2016) Not all that is solid melts into air? Care-experienced young people, friendship and relationships in the 'Digital Age'. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46, 4, 1059-1075

Simpson JE (2019) 21st century contact: children in care and their use of mobile communication devices for contact. PhD. University of Edinburgh.

Staksrud E (2013) *Children in the online world: risk, regulation, rights*. Surrey: Ashgate e-Book.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. https://s.iriss.org.uk/2LYC2DF (Accessed 28 January 2020)

The Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations, 2009. https://s.iriss.org.uk/2znCCIJ (Accessed 28 January 2020)

The Independent Care Review (2020) The Promise. http://www.carereview.scot (Accessed 8 February 2020)

UNICEF (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child https://s.iriss.org.uk/2THt4iB (Accessed 1 February 2020)

Willoughby M (2018) A review of the risks associated with children and young people's social media use and the implications for social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 33, 2, 127-140

More in this series...

Our range of *Insights* are evidence summaries that support the social services in Scotland, outlining the available evidence on a given topic and examining the potential implications. Find out more at www.iriss.org.uk/insights

Spoken language interpreters in social work
SIÂN LUCAS

This Insight explores policy, research and practice issues about spoken language interpreting in social work, focusing on people who speak limited English.
www.iriss.org.uk/insights/52

Social work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Scotland
ANNE RAMSAY

Details the immigration status of children and young people, the legislative and policy framework, the number of unaccompanied children and young people, and lessons for social work policy and practice.
www.iriss.org.uk/insights/51

Working with people who commit hate crime
RANIA HAMAD

This *Insight* aims to consolidate the existing research on effective practice with people who commit hate offences, and consider what may constitute effective practice for practitioners in Scotland working in this field.
www.iriss.org.uk/insights/50

Social pedagogy and its relevance for Scottish social welfare
MARK SMITH & SEBASTIAN MONTEUX

Social pedagogy chimes with Kilbrandon's conception of social education, but also offers a suggestive framework within which to locate current policies.
www.iriss.org.uk/insights/49

www.iriss.org.uk/insights
enquiries@iriss.org.uk
0141 559 5059

improving lives through knowledge, evidence and innovation

Iriss