Principles for providers of children's residential care:

Supporting young people's online experiences

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Introduction

In the spirit of the principles set out in the Quality Standards, residential care settings will want to help support children in their care to enter the digital world equipped with knowledge and skills to thrive.

They will be aware that these children and young people will leave care and go on to independent lives in which being digitally competent will be essential for work, play, health and wellbeing, as well as information, managing money and learning. However, while they are in residential care, good practice and procedures will help to enhance their safety. Of course, children and young people will make mistakes, as adults do. But with caring support they can be enabled to handle the challenges they face online and get help when needed.

Acting in your professional capacity you and your team may follow a code of conduct and principles such as those of the BASW or the BPS. Alongside these there is a need to incorporate the digital world.

The residential care sector (whether small homes caring for four or five children, institutions, or secure settings), is presented with particular circumstances, such as team and shift working, and the possibility of intense relationships with the children in your care.

Discussions with carers and social workers illustrated how the sector is distinct and differs from foster care. These consultations also suggested there was a need for this document because the fast-changing digital environment presented new challenges to the workforce.

While working to the Children's Homes [England] Regulations, 2015 and the Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations and Quality Standards, you may find it helpful that this document adds more detail on digital life to support your practice.

Aligned documents from the UKCIS Vulnerable Users Working Group:

These principles are aligned with the [UKCIS Principles for Social Work in Children's Social Care: Supporting young people's online safety and experiences](#) and [The UKCIS Digital Passport](#), for carers and young people, to assist social workers whose caseloads may include children and young people across a range of different placement types.

Principles for Social Work in Children's Social Care: Supporting young people's online safety and experiences, was developed by Traci Good with contributions from colleagues at the NSPCC and members of the UKCIS Vulnerable Users Working Group.

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Online safety principles for service managers providing children's residential care

Within your professional practice

1. Achievable and consistent online safety policies and procedures are in place, regularly updated and understood by all. They are integrated within Safer Care plans.

2. Training/updates are regularly accessed and shared with the whole team. These include: the risks, benefits and support for young people being online, including trauma-informed practice and therapeutic responses.

3. Online benefits and safety are routinely incorporated into working practice and considered as part of contextual safeguarding.

Supporting young people in residential care

4. The voice of the child is listened to.

5. Young people are supported to use online connectivity to maintain healthy relationships, develop digital resilience and engage safely with the online environment.

6. Joined up working between all those supporting the child is encouraged so they receive consistent support and advice about their online world.

Supporting Staff

7. Residential care workers understand and are aware of online safety policies, procedures and escalation routes. They are signed up to a Professional Digital Behaviour Code of Conduct.

8. Residential care workers are supported to understand and access information, training and help on the risks, benefits and support for young people being online.

9. Residential care workers are supported in setting parental controls and discussing online risks, benefits and support with children in their care.

Within your professional practice

Principle 1

Achievable and consistent online safety policies and procedures are in place, regularly updated and understood by all. They are integrated within Safer Care plans.

Rationale

Connectivity is particularly important for the development and wellbeing of young people with care experience, but it can also expose them to risks of harm. It is vital that knowledge of online risks, benefits and support are embedded at a systematic level to ensure informed, consistent and considered practice takes place.

Best practice

- Online safety is seen as a crucial part of safeguarding and is included in Safeguarding policies and Safer Care plans.
- Supervision meetings cover online safety, the benefits to young people of being online and associated risk assessments, as standard.
- Your team has clear online safety escalation routes that are understood by all.
- Relevant policies and procedures are reviewed regularly and updated to reflect changes to how services are delivered, changes in platforms used, or new safeguarding risks.
- All team members are aware of the Code of Conduct on how to act professionally in a digital age and exhibit trauma-aware therapeutic parenting.

When you should be concerned

- New staff are not receiving induction training in online safety and the Digital Behaviour Code.
- Policies and procedures are not regularly updated in line with latest developments in technology, behaviours and recommended practice.
- Online risk and benefits are not considered as part of safeguarding and concerns about a child are not shared within referrals.
- When devices are arbitrarily confiscated, or children banned from using a form of technology without justification.
- Your team are not aware of current risks, benefits and support for young people being online.

Principle 2

Training on the digital risks, benefits and support for young people is regularly accessed and shared with the whole team including trauma-informed practice and therapeutic.

Rationale

Changes in technology use and best practice can move at pace. Regular training and information sharing on the benefits and risks of connectivity will enable your team to feel confident in supporting young people to safely enjoy the benefits of being online.

Best practice

- A nominated individual and/or process supports your team, ensuring it keeps informed about latest developments in technology use and best practice. This includes relevant updates and reports from a range of sources i.e. serious case reviews or coroner's reports.

- Managers and staff recognize the danger of triggering or intensifying the impact of adverse events and trauma a child has experienced.

- Information about how children benefit from being connected, any harms experiences and their individual needs and support requirements is regularly updated.

- Newcomers receive online safety training at induction and all team members access annual refresher training, including professional conduct in a digital age.[1]

- Your team have a good understanding of established and emerging technologies and use these to support young people in a safe and beneficial way.

When you should be concerned

- Your team members are not aware of up-to-date online benefits and safety insights. Online risks are not routinely identified or addressed, and/or this knowledge is inconsistent across your team.

- Your team are not trained in trauma informed practice, or its use is not in evidence.

- Your team are not aware of how they are to act professionally in a digital age (i.e. a Professional Digital Behaviour Code).

- New team members do not receive online safety training until the next scheduled whole team training.

- Training in digital safety matters is not given dedicated training time, but treated as a brief add-on to safeguarding or child protection training.

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1. Digital Behaviour Code for adults working with children or young people. Enable-Pathway Training.

Principle 3

Online risks, benefits and support are routinely incorporated into working practice and considered as part of contextual safeguarding.

Rationale

Behaviours and experiences online and offline impact each other and are intertwined for most young people. It is crucial that online benefits and safety are considered as part of a wider safeguarding picture.

Best practice

- Online benefits and safety are routinely considered as part of contextual safeguarding of a young person.

- Online benefits and safety form specific sections of any Early Help Assessments, or Child in Need,/Child Protection assessments and reviews.

- Referral procedures allow for consideration of online access. Behaviours, needs or experiences and are mapped against existing assessments and plans.

- Planning considers all devices and usage. Enhancements as well as restrictions are considered.

When you should be concerned

- Online benefits and safety are not discussed as part of contextual safeguarding, assessment or review processes.

- Online is seen as 'another world' and not considered as part of a holistic view of a young person's everyday life.

- Practices across your team are inconsistent.

- Offline predictors of online harms are not considered.

Supporting young people in residential care

Principle 4

The voice of the child is listened to.

Rationale

Children and young people have rights in the digital world and online access is likely to be vitally important and beneficial to them. Conversations should regularly take place to offer them choices, where appropriate, and so that their views and opinions about their digital lives are taken into account.

Best practice

- Regular conversations about the safe use of technology take place with all parties and the young person pre-placement, during placement and after a placement has finished.

- Young people are supported to experience online benefits and develop safety strategies, using the UKCIS Digital Passport to have regular conversations about their online experiences and aspirations.

- Your team ensures the young person is involved in any changes to their digital access and has a good understanding of why a change has been made.

- Your team ensures all agencies involved in supporting a young person's online life explain to the young person what information will be shared between them.

- Young people know who to talk to and what they can do if they want support to do something online, or if something online worries them.

When you should be concerned

- The young person is not consulted on their digital access and therefore does not understand or rejects arrangements.

- The young person is not encouraged to share relevant details of their online lives and important information is not known by trusted adults.

- The young person does not understand their digital rights, nor have a trusted adult with whom they can discuss these.

- Agencies put new rules in place together, but without involving the young person or explaining the collaborative steps which are being taken.

- Restrictions intended to keep a child safe are having the reverse effect, as they incentivise hacking or work-arounds.

Principle 5

Young people are supported to use online connectivity to maintain healthy relationships, develop digital resilience and engage safely with the online environment.

Rationale

The use of connected technology can have a positive impact on young people - enabling them to maintain friendships and contact with their families as they move placement, to relax and support their wellbeing, and to develop important life skills, knowledge and behaviours. Case-by-case management of online access and activities tailored to each young person can ensure risks and benefits are effectively identified, balanced and managed.

Best practice

- Where appropriate, young people are encouraged and supported to maintain contact with friends and family using technology.

- Young people are supported to develop critical thinking skills around what they see and who they meet online. Where appropriate, young people are encouraged to learn new digital skills in order to be effective digital citizens.

- Young people are supported via the setting up of tech-based online safety strategies, such as parental controls, privacy settings and filtering inappropriate content at source. They are informed of the reasons for this.

- Young people are supported through opportunities to discuss their experiences, so that low risk incidents can be used to build digital resilience.

When you should be concerned

- Young people are disconnected from support networks and not helped to understand the positive online benefits and specific risks relevant to them.

- Young people feel the trusted adults around them do not understand the online environment and therefore do not turn to them for support.

- Young people fear a victim-blaming or judgmental response, so do not seek support with low-risk incidents that may then develop into significant harms.

- Relevant online safety settings are not in place and staff are not consistent in applying specific provisions for each child.

- Young people are motivated to bypass security/safety systems that are in place for their wellbeing.

Principle 6

Joined up working between all those supporting the child is encouraged so that they receive consistent support and advice about their online world.

Rationale

Children's online and offline worlds are often intertwined. That is why consistent online safety advice and practice is important in all elements of the child's life, such as school, healthcare and social settings. To reassure the young person and ensure effective support, practice should be aligned and not in conflict or contradictory.

Best practice

- All adults keeping the child safe (e.g. Child Social Workers, carers, teachers, youth-workers and counsellors or therapists) share information on tech-based and non-tech-based strategies to support the young person's online safety.

- All adults supporting the child are encouraged to regularly communicate to enable good awareness of online benefits and risks specific to the young person and avoid excessive/duplicated monitoring or intervention. (The UKCIS Digital Passport may be used for this purpose).

- All adults supporting the child, including birth parents if in contact, know the specific provisions in place for each individual child, so they get consistent support.

- Children's residential care services encourage agencies to inform all relevant adults of any incidents that may have implications for the child's online safety, such as an event at school or distressing contact from someone. Discussions about digital life should routinely be included in meetings about Looked After Children Reviews and Safer Care Plans.

When you should be concerned

- The various placements and settings the child engages with have different approaches to online risks, benefits and support (e.g. social workers and carers discouraging the use of certain apps, while a therapist encourages them).

- Agencies share excessive amounts of non-risk related information about the young person's online world or deploy duplicated interventions, making the young person feel overly monitored or disengaged.

- Not all adults are aware of the provisions in place to keep a child safe online.

- Communication between adults supporting a child is inconsistent or absent.

Supporting residential care staff

Principle 7

Residential care staff understand their team's online safety policies, procedures and escalation routes. They follow a Code of Conduct in a digital environment.

Rationale

Children's residential care staff work in partnership with other agencies, and in some cases birth parents. A shared understanding of expectations and procedures is therefore paramount. A confident and collaborative approach by all parties will ensure the best support for the young person.

Best practice

Children's Residential Care teams:

- Understand what online safeguarding policies are in place and why.

- Know that safeguarding risks discovered online should be managed in line with standard safeguarding practices and concerns should be reported to the social worker or DSL and birth parents who retain parental responsibility.

- Know what devices the child in their care has access to and understand their role in managing these devices. They feel confident managing online risks and benefits.

- Are clear on what online communication is permitted for the young person and why (e.g. with birth families) and there is a clear escalation route for inappropriate online contact that all parties are aware of.

- Are supported to use a secure email account, so all correspondence with social workers remains confidential. They follow a Professional Digital Behaviour Code.

- Can set clear, fair, supportive and consistent boundaries or an explanation of why these differ (e.g. because of age or specific circumstances, but without oversharing private information).

When you should be concerned

- The online history and aspirations of a young person and relevant others is not shared as part of the placement process.

- Any member of the children's residential care team is unaware of the policies and procedures around online safeguarding, including use of secure email.

- Information about young people is not shared securely or appropriately.

- The care team are not aware of all devices a young person might have access to, or who owns them. (A tool is provided by enable-pathway.com to log these).

Principle 8

Residential care workers are supported to understand and access information, training and help on the risks, benefits and support for young people being online.

Rationale

Online risks, benefits and support are a significant and ever-present consideration for carers, and something they are likely to have to manage and make notable decisions about on a frequent basis. Guidance on benefits of a connected world and how to improve safety should be integral to their training, which should be regular and fit for purpose.

Best practice

The Residential Care team:

- Receives up-to-date insights on online benefits and safety from social workers, schools and the wider professional network.

- Is encouraged to appreciate that young people go online for different reasons which may vary depending on the child's age or stage of development.

- Is aware of sources of immediate and general support related to being online, including out of hours.

- Receives help from social workers to understand the young person's behaviours and experiences online, including device ownership, usage and online safety knowledge.

- Holds regular positive conversations with young people about what they enjoy online.

When you should be concerned

- The Residential Care team or other trusted adults are unaware of online benefits and risks for young people. They do not explore what they enjoy.

- Actions, decisions and advice are based on outdated information.

- The impact of moving from one online approach to another in a different setting, is not considered or managed.

- Digital access is restricted by a carer due to lack of confidence in or knowledge of other options.

- Carers do not fully realise that what is appropriate online can depend on age, developmental stage, or difficulties in learning, emotional health or prior trauma.

Principle 9

Residential care staff are supported in setting parental controls and discussing online risks, benefits and support with children in their care.

Rationale

Residential care teams may lack the skills or knowledge to set up filtering or parental controls on young people's devices. Clear guidance and support should be given so that every carer is confident when discussing a young person's online life effectively, and setting up and checking the controls they have put in place.

Best practice

- All parties supporting the child understand that denying online access to children can be a risk to them in itself (e.g. loss of opportunity to develop resilience, risk of alienation, or turning to secret devices and hacks. In some cases, this could result in a mental health crisis. [(Coroner's Report Talullah Wilson)](#)

- The UKCIS Digital Passport is used as an integral tool by all parties. The child is given clear information about steps taken to protect them and how to give their views.

- Arrangements that affect online lives, such as changing device access, are agreed with the care team and child before any changes are made.

- Specific funding for anti-virus and security software is made available, and promoted as essential, for all Residential Care settings and team members.

- Social workers where present, encourage and support the Residential Care team to use suitable device settings to enable appropriate online contact between the child and others (including birth parents or family members where appropriate).

When you should be concerned

- A risk averse approach to online safety is adopted which does not allow young people to access the benefits of the online world or develop digital resilience.

- A positive relationship with birth families or friends is disrupted by lack of digital access, or inappropriate contact is not known of or managed.

- The care team is given rules but not supported to implement and enforce them.

- Individual carers or birth family members are unable or unwilling to ensure security provisions are in place.

- There is excessive or inappropriate use of parental controls or monitoring software.

What should children and young people reasonably expect if this guidance is in place?

Principle 1: Comprehensive and Consistent Policies

Children and young people can expect that their home has established achievable and consistent online safety policies and procedures. These policies are not only regularly updated to stay current with potential risks and challenges but are also well understood by all staff members. Importantly, these online safety measures are seamlessly integrated into Safer Care plans, emphasising a holistic approach to keeping children safe in the digital environment.

Principle 2: Ongoing Training and Awareness

Children and young people can expect staff members to regularly engage in training and updates on online safety. This training covers a spectrum of topics, including the risks, benefits, and support structures related to young people being online. It goes beyond the basics, encompassing trauma-informed practices and therapeutic responses. This commitment ensures that the entire team is well-informed and equipped to navigate the complexities of online interreractions in order to prioritise the well-being of the children in their care.

Principle 3: Integration of Online Safety into Daily Practice

Children and young people can expect that online safety is not just a theoretical concept but an integral part of daily working practices. Online benefits and safety considerations are routinely woven into the fabric of daily routines, and the staff actively consider them as part of contextual safeguarding. This approach ensures that online safety is not a standalone concern but a seamlessly integrated aspect of overall care, acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the digital landscape.

Principle 4: Empowering the Child's Voice

Children and young people should expect an environment where their voices are valued and heard. This means that the organisation actively listens to the perspectives and concerns of the child, ensuring their input is considered in decision-making processes and policies that impact their online experiences.

Principle 5: Fostering Healthy Online Relationships

Children and young people can anticipate that their home will promote the use of online connectivity in a positive and supportive manner. This includes guidance for young people on maintaining healthy relationships, developing digital resilience, and engaging with the online environment in a way that is conducive to their well-being and personal growth.

Principle 6: Collaborative Support for Online Well-being

Children and young people should experience a collaborative approach to their online well-being. The setting encourages joined-up working among all those supporting the young person, ensuring that consistent support and advice about their online world is provided. This collaborative effort aims to create a unified front in addressing and navigating the complexities of the digital landscape for the benefit of the young person.

Principle 7: Care Worker Awareness and Accountability

Children and young people residing in residential homes should expect that care workers are well-informed and conscientious about online safety. This involves a thorough understanding of online safety policies, procedures, and escalation routes. Staff are not only familiar with these guidelines but are also committed to upholding a Code of Conduct tailored to the digital environment, ensuring responsible and ethical conduct in online interactions.

Principle 8: Support for Continuous Learning

Children and young people can anticipate that staff are provided with ongoing support to enhance their understanding of online safety. This includes access to information, training, and resources related to new and emerging trends, risks, benefits, and support structures for young people online. By supporting staff in staying informed, the setting aims to foster a knowledgeable and proactive approach to addressing the ever-evolving landscape of online challenges.

Principle 9: Empowering Care Workers in Online Guidance

Children and young people in the care of these professionals should expect that staff are not only informed, but also empowered to actively engage in online safety measures. This involves providing support for staff to set parental controls and engage in open discussions with the children and young people under their care about online risks, benefits, and available support. This proactive approach aims to create a safe and supportive digital environment for the children and young people while encouraging open communication between staff and those in their care.

Further information:

The 2015 "Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations" published by the Department for Education touched upon the role of technology in the lives of children in residential care. Our new guidance aims to build on this by providing social workers with advice on how to respect children's digital preferences. Addressing the increasing role of technology in young lives, our guidance fills the gaps in the current regulations. It offers practical recommendations for integrating technology into residential care while prioritising children's wellbeing.

Regulation and Guidance

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018/links-to-legislation-regulations-and-statutory-guidance

Help & Advice from Internet Matters:

https://www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety/advice-for-parents-and-carers/

Action for Children
Advice and one to one talk
with a parenting coach
www.parents.actionforchildren.org.uk

CEOP
Report online sexual abuse
www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre

Childnet
Advice for foster carers on supporting
young people online
www.childnet.com/resources/foster-carers-andadoptive-parents

Resources for use with young people on
sharing nudes: The De-Shame project.
Advice on online safety: www.childnet.com

Family Lives
A confidential helpline service for families in
England and Wales

0808 800 2222

askus@familylives.org.uk

www.familylives.org.uk/how-we-can-help/
confidential-helpline

Harmless
Resources to understand self-harm
www.harmless.org.uk/resource-hub/

Internet Matters
Digital safety guides for parents/carers of
children in care
www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digitalsafety/advice-for-parents-and-carers/
supporting-children-in-care/

Kooth

Help for depression
www.kooth.com

London Grid for Learning

Resources, support & training
on online and offline safeguarding:
https://safeguarded.lgfl.net

Resources for parents to access
about online safety:
https://parentsafe.lgfl.net
safeguarding@lgfl.net

Mind: Infoline

Information on mental health and
wellbeing for parents and carers
03001233393
www.mind.org.uk

NSPCC Helpline

The NSPCC Helpline can help with
safeguarding situations you might face at
work. Their trained professionals will talk
through your concerns with you and give
you expert advice. Call 0808 800 5000
or by email help@nspcc.org.uk.

Parent Zone

A hub of advice for families.
www.parents.parentzone.org.uk

Professionals' Online Safety Helpline (POSH)

Advice for online safety problems for
professionals working with children.
0344381 4772
helpline@saferinternet.org.uk

Report harmful Content

www.reportharmfulcontent.com

Report Remove

Young people under 18 who are worried that a
sexual image or video of them may have been
shared online can use Childline and IWF's Report
Remove tool to see if it can be taken down.
https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-
resources/report-remove

Samaritans

jo@samaritans.org for a reply in 24 hours
116 123 to talk day or night

Shout mental health crisis line

Text "SHOUT" to 85258 to contact the Shout
Crisis Text Line, or text "YM" if you're under 19

Young Minds; Parent Helpline

0808 802 5544
www.youngminds.org.uk