Adolescents in foster care require guidelines for safe social media use

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About 73 percent of online American teens use social networking sites, such as Facebook, to share photos, interests and experiences with others, according to Pew Research Center. For youths in the foster care system, sharing information online presents additional safety and privacy issues. A University of Missouri researcher recommends that child welfare agencies develop policies to guide how adolescents in foster care use social media.

Dale Fitch, an assistant professor in the MU School of Social Work, says agencies usually advocate restricting how youths in the foster system use social media in order to avoid potential liabilities that could result in lawsuits. However, like other teens who ignore adults' instructions concerning information disclosure online, teens in foster care turn to the Internet to express their identities and share their stories. Social media is a positive tool that helps adolescents in foster care connect with society, but the lack of guidelines leaves them at risk for cyber-bullying, unintentional disclosure of identifying information and personal harm, Fitch said.

"Foster parents and caseworkers might tell teens not to use Facebook, but they're using it anyway, which opens them up to negative consequences," Fitch said. "They need to be able to share instances of unwanted social media contact with their guardians, and they might not reveal information if they've been told not to use Facebook."

Extensive policies regulate how records of youths in the foster system

are shared with others such as foster parents, school personnel, health care professionals and caseworkers, so encouraging teens in foster care to use the Internet allows them a sense of privacy and control over their own information, Fitch said.

"Although adolescents in foster care are very much aware of their own safety issues and are very protective of their foster families and biological siblings, they may not know the implications of sharing information online," Fitch said. "Working with them to safely use social media is a huge step."

Additionally, allowing youths in foster care to use social media could give their caretakers insight into the youths' lives they might not have otherwise, which could help adults identify development issues, Fitch said.

"If adolescents have few friends on Facebook, foster parents need to find out whether they have other, hidden online profiles or if they're having problems making friends," Fitch said. "Adults could learn a lot more about what's going on in the teens' lives and what they're thinking about. Those conversations happen on a limited basis now."

Fitch used a tool called Critical Systems Heuristics to create a framework child welfare agencies can use to develop privacy guidelines to ensure the safe use of social media. He says youths in the foster system should be included in the policy-making process in addition to child welfare workers, foster parents or guardians, juvenile officers and judges.

The paper, "Youth in Foster Care and Social Media: A Framework for Developing Privacy Guidelines," was published in the *Journal of Technology in Human Services*. The School of Social Work is part of the MU College of Human Environmental Sciences.

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