

Youth Tips for Resource Families on Navigating Technology and Social Media in Partnership with Adolescents

What youth want families to understand about use of technology and social media:

- School, social, and other healthy outlets outside of the home are limited, so social media, phones, and the online world are the only outlets. Without outlets, youth may want to break rules to hang out with friends or run away.
- Youth want direct online access to some news and information about COVID-19 to address their worries.
- Tech is the only way right now to provide the support youth need and want—legal, therapeutic, educational, access to social workers, visits with family, and time with friends.
- Tech allows youth to keep connections to friends and family. Youth have already experienced separation from family and are struggling to make and keep lifelong connections.
- Online connections and phone time with friends and family can support youth through struggles with mental health challenges and loneliness. Connection can help youth maintain stability right now.
- The world that requires tech to create connections and have access to everything has already been created. It is the world youth need to learn how to live in and be safe in. It's not bad, just different, even though families may not understand it.
- Youth feel more connected to their support system if they have online platforms. Youth feel left out from their friend groups if they don't have it.
- Youth use social media creatively—to help others through social justice and advocacy, to support friends, to find out what other youth think, to market their skills, and to showcase creative talents.

What youth want to tell families about what needed to stay balanced and safe with tech and social media:

- Right now is the time for foster parents to bond with youth and take the time to explain their fears and the reasons behind rules or restrictions, so youth understand their perspectives and can hear that restrictions come from a place of caring, not control.
- With so much unstructured time, youth may need help learning to manage their screen time so they can keep on course educationally and emotionally. Youth are worried about the future and staying on track. Timers and apps can help with this, but give youth as much control and freedom as possible with the process of managing.
- Families should take a solution-based approach to any concerns about safe use of the internet and online dangers. This is an important opportunity to teach youth how to say NO and be empowered to make healthy choices. Teach youth about how to avoid online dangers such as scamming, online predators, and pedophiles. Teach youth how to use apps safely, including disabling locating-sharing settings and not giving out personal or financial information to

strangers. Families should help youth be aware of dangers like trafficking and be alert for signs of danger.

- Families should help teach youth about the potential severity and consequences of reckless actions they take on the internet, so they can make good decisions.
- As conversation-starters, families should ask youth about what they have seen on social media or elsewhere online and what they find interesting. If there are concerns about what youth are searching for or running into online, families can explore how they can fulfill youths' interests in healthy ways, without punishment or stifling curiosity. This is an opportunity to have open conversations with youth at home.

Advice youth have for families in creating agreements or dealing with conflict over social media and online use:

- Compromise does work and is important with teens. Meet teens in the middle when developing an agreement or working out conflict.
- Have discussions that allow both youth and foster parents to share their expectations. This will be more effective than policing—that doesn't work with youth.
- Be open-minded. Families' response to the agreement and conflict matters—their approach can make the difference. Both the resource family and the youth need to feel heard.
- Again, families need to communicate the “why” to youth. It's important to explain that you are not trying to be in youths' personal business, but trying to help keep them safe and teach them responsibility.
- Families should make sure to not shame or judge youths' activities online.
- If families feel they have to check a youth's social media or online activity, this needs to be agreed upon in advance, and checking should be done very carefully, in partnership with the youth, with explanations why.
- Youth want to have at least the same screen time privileges as biological children in the home, but they may need additional time given their special circumstances. Remember that youth may be walking into a new environment where they haven't been raised with screen time rules, that they have additional needs for connection with family/friends, and that they have additional trauma they may be using online means to heal and process.
- Incentives might be the best approach to online access, rather than punishment.

Ideas to Use Technology to Keep Youth Connected

- **Youth-to-youth connections**—Youth can share with each other that they are not alone. Youth may feel sad, angry, isolated, but can reassure each other that everything will be ok.
- **Youth-to-youth mentoring**—Connect youth to other youth or peer coaches so they have trusted sources of mentorship (both official and unofficial).
- **Friend and family time**—Connect with family and friends on Zoom, Facetime, Google Hangouts, Facebook Live, Facebook watch parties, and similar platforms that support real-time, face-to-face (virtual) interactions.
- **Do activities together online**—Youth can do activities with friends and family online including game nights, karaoke, book club discussions, makeup tutorials, cooking a new recipe together, working out, dance parties, studying together, or making crafts together. Many of the apps mentioned above can support these activities, and specialized game and other apps are available for specific activities.
- **Watch movies with friends and family**—The “Netflix Party” extension for the Chrome browser allows friends and family to sync their Netflix and watch a movie or show together online while text or voice chatting.
- **Use video games to connect**—Multiplayer online video games, such as Fortnite, Apex Legends, and Overwatch, are a social activity.
- **Participate in challenges**—TikTok challenges, fitness challenges, reading challenges, and challenges give participants shared goals to focus on and talk about.
- **Get inspired**—Many posts on platforms like Instagram focus on topics such as meditation and healing.

Youths' Takeaway Advice for QPI Families during this National Emergency

- Foster parents don't understand how big of an impact they can have in a youth's life. I remember one specific family was gentle and radiated good energy. They didn't force their way into having a relationship with me, but I felt their positivity and energy from a distance. Just because you aren't as close as you want to be with the youth in your home doesn't mean you aren't making an.
- I remember the foster parents who took time with me and were gentle and nurturing. That one relationship impacted my life—the foster parents were patient enough with me to see something I didn't see in myself. Despite chaos in the lives of youth, foster parents' response and gentleness can go a long way even if they can't see immediately.
- Not everyone gets kind words in care, so the few foster parents that do give kindness really stand out. For newer foster parents, see youth for who they are and create an open pathway for communication. Especially during this lockdown, communication is important. Understanding different styles of communication is critical.
- Look beyond what you read in case files of youth and beyond diagnoses and past behaviors. See the youth in your home for who they are, not just what you heard or read. They are so much more than that.
- Don't judge the youth based on the expectations or explanations from the case file. A lot of times, social workers only write what they have physical evidence of, and children have been through a lot more. They have greater needs. Not every child who goes through the same thing will have the same acceptance or denial of their situation. Normal development principles might not apply and foster parents should be accommodating and understanding.
- I feel like a lot of foster parents avoid talking to youth because they are worried we will blow up. We feel excluded if you don't talk to us. Communication is always the best thing to start off with. It's the first step to a lot of other things that can be great for youth. Youth just want someone to show us we are actually cared about. Take the time to get to know the youth. It all starts with a simple conversation.
- Be patient with youth. This crisis is hitting foster youth ten times as hard because of all the transitions we have been through and are going through. I'm not going to adapt to everything you want me to, so it's important to control your expectations.
- While foster parents will want children to get comfortable with them, remember youth may feel suspicious and anxious if foster parents want to hold their hand or give them a hug. It's important for foster parents to understand barriers that exist and be supportive of youth even when they are frustrated. We want foster parents to educate themselves about teens and where they are coming from and to teach us life skills.
- It's so important for families to be calm. For many youth, going to a true home setting is foreign. Youth are in defensive mode or survival mode. Although we may appear difficult, we have goals and aspirations. Families can really communicate with us and we appreciate when foster parents meet us where we are at in conflicts. At some point, you will teach us how to grow and trust again. This will happen through the relationship, and not through a power trip or forcing their weight.