

## **Online Safety for Foster Care Children**

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While you are monitoring your foster child's online activities closer, you may wish to consider at the same time giving him a little more freedom. This may depend upon a number of factors. To begin with, you may find that your foster child is particularly vulnerable to falling victim to hoaxes, scams, and false claims by others. If so, your foster child is certainly not ready to have such freedom online. Along with this, you may have a child placed in your home who is unable or unwilling to follow house rules that you have in place. Furthermore, perhaps your foster child is one who is unwilling to share problems or concerns with you. In either event, such freedom online is not appropriate, as the child is simply not responsible enough to be allowed access to social networking or online technology. If you feel that a foster child who is older than 12 years of age is mature, responsible, and trustworthy enough to have his own computer, cell phone, or online device, discuss this with the child welfare agent beforehand, as the agency may have some policies and regulations already in place. Your foster child's case worker should certainly be made aware that the child has regular and consistent access online. When giving this kind of freedom, it is also most important to stress with your foster child the house rules and the consequences involved in breaking any rules.

The ages from 12-15 can be tough for both child and adult. It is an age where children often begin to find their own identity, one separate from their parents. It is an age where children are becoming more curious about the world around them, leading sometimes to poor decision making when the child experiments with things outside of parental guidance. For many parents, it is a difficult time, as their children undergo the awkward hormonal stage. It is at this age where foster children begin to have experiences with cyberbullying sexting, gaming, as they generally begin to spend more time on a computer or digital device.

It is at also this stage where foster parents must truly begin to watch what their foster children are accessing on the computer. Foster parents need to ensure that the child is not accessing inappropriate content, games, and apps, or visiting sites that encourage communication with strangers. To be sure, you should not depend on filters alone to keep your foster child safe. Even the best filters can fail, as technology savvy users find ways to get around the safety nets you have set in place. By checking your foster child's online devices and cell phones on a daily basis, you are better able to ensure that the online device is not being abused or used for the wrong purpose. One way to do this is to check your foster child's browser on the computer on a regular basis. By clicking on the arrow next to the address bar at the top of the screen, or by accessing the computer's menus and then clicking on "history", you will be able to see what sites the foster child has recently visited. Though your child might consider this "spying", you are instead ensuring their safety, and that they have not visited sites that both break your family rules as well as sites that may endanger both the foster child and yourself. Indeed, there are those children who wish to avoid being "spied on," and will attempt to use a secure browser in one of the various forms of "incognito mode". These can be disabled, though, with a few simple steps. For much more on how to protect your child, and yourself from online dangers, see Dr. DeGarmo's new book *Keeping Foster Children Safe Online*.

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Dr. John DeGarmo has been a foster parent for 12 years, now, and he and his wife have had over 45 children come through their home. He is a speaker and trainer on many topics about the foster care system, and travels around the nation delivering passionate, dynamic, energetic, and informative presentations. Dr. DeGarmo is the author of several books, including the new book *Keeping Foster Children Safe Online*, *The Foster Parenting Manual: A Practical Guide to Creating a Loving, Safe and Stable Home*, and the foster care children's book *A Different Home: A New Foster Child's Story*. Dr. DeGarmo is the host of the weekly radio program **Foster Talk with Dr. John**. He can be contacted at drjohndegarmo@gmail, through his Facebook page, Dr. John DeGarmo, or at his website, <http://drjohndegarmofostercare.weebly.com>.