Care leaver relationships, mental health and online spaces

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Introduction

- Research suggests that young people see digital media as crucial to their rights to information, social participation and education. By focusing on the online practices of care-experienced young people, our research set out to qualitatively explore how individuals navigate social media; how these spaces are used to form and develop social communities; and how online communities influence mental health and wellbeing. Findings from the study informed the co-design and piloting of training resources for professionals tasked with supporting young people in their relationships as they transition in/out of the care system.

- This study is based on research fieldwork carried out between Nov 2019 and December 2020. Methods comprised two exploratory focus groups of care experienced young people; in-depth interviews with care experienced young people (n=5); and an interactive, creative art workshop with care-experienced young adults (n=13) aged 16-27 years. In addition, focus groups conducted with practitioners (n=17) and an online survey (n= 21 foster carers), explored knowledge and experience of dealing with young people's online participation, along with a focus on training development needs.

Key Messages

- A primary benefit of social media for care-experienced young people is the opportunities for independence: being online is an escape from the constraints of supported accommodation and supervision. Social media enhances opportunities for exploring personal relationships and the expression of individuality, and provides an exciting alternative to mundane, 'normal' life. Restricting or preventing online opportunities thus has the potential for a negative mental health impact, reinforcing perceptions of isolation from personal support networks.

- Although aware of common online dangers, care-experienced young people's vulnerabilities are rooted in their fragile social relationships. Like most young people they crave a sense of belonging and acceptance but because of deficits in early care and experience of neglect and abuse, some can lack interpersonal skills and struggle to effectively navigate online relationships. Social media can create spaces for arguments, with unstable social connections leading to individuals both receiving targeted abuse, and engaging in aggressive disputes, which can quickly escalate between family members and peers.

- The use of social media platforms is linked to a complex interplay of often contradictory emotions. Individuals simultaneously enjoy positive social interactions and experience feelings of loneliness and inadequacy around many online communications. It is thus important not to perceive online risks and benefits as two separate fixed categories, but rather to see them as intricately tied to a range of ever-changing emotional, wellbeing and lifestyle factors. Working with young people to find the right 'balance' of rights and developing resilience in their online social interactions is crucial to establishing independence, confidence and fostering healthy digital lives.

Key Messages

- Practitioners report a lack of confidence in their knowledge of social media platforms and a need for relevant, multi-agency training opportunities. They often struggle to strike a balance between imparting knowledge and support, whilst allowing young people their rights to independence, participation and privacy. Training provisions must promote the importance of listening to young people and working together to enhance social and relationship skills rather than a focus purely on risk management and harm minimisation.

- Keeping up with young people's behaviours and concerns within an ever-changing social media landscape is challenging. The majority of foster carers would welcome external support to encourage young people to listen to advice and, where necessary, ensure that this is reinforced and monitored to limit adverse consequences to well-being. In light of the young people's increased use of social media during the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to sustain ongoing support and up to date training for practitioners and carers is of utmost importance.

- Practitioners' value training that is experiential and closely linked to practice through the use of case studies. The opportunity to share experiences with others from different agencies and contexts is also really important to them. Young people want training that makes a difference in practice and centres their experiences and views and improves care and empathy.

Background to the study

1.1 Young people and Social Media

Social media can be defined as any digital communication tool that enables people to interact with each other by quickly creating, sharing and consuming content. Research suggests that young people see social media as crucial to their rights to information, education and participation. Through engagement, individuals can learn new skills and creatively explore, experiment with and develop their identity (Firth, 2017); become informed citizens of the world who can contribute meaningfully to their communities (Third et al. 2014); increase social connections, foster peer support networks, and reduce isolation and loneliness (Ross and Edmonds, 2018); and help develop a sense of community and belonging (Papamichail and Sharma, 2019).

1.1.1 Abusive and harmful behaviours: However, technological advancements can also bring a number of potential risks. One well-documented risk is abusive and harmful behaviours, including aggressive, offensive language or threats and cyberbullying (Livingstone and Haddon 2009; Bilic, 2013). This refers to the use of media and visual technology to socially exclude, threaten, insult or shame another person (Livingstone and Smith, 2014: 638) and can include, name calling or 'being mean'; deleting individuals from group chat; manipulating images to create false impressions; or sharing embarrassing images without permission. The impact on young people's mental health can be devastating and include loneliness, anxiety and depression, or even self-harming (Korenis and Billick, 2014).

1.1.2 The gendered aspects of social media: In the past decade or so, young people's sexuality has become increasingly visual and commercialised across social media sites. Within this sexualised cultural context, the issue of gender has become increasingly significant (Livingstone and Haddon,2009; Cooper et al., 2016; Ringrose et al., 2012; Orben et al., 2019). Studies suggest that negative experiences are predominately reported by females who can be more deeply affected by 'content and contact risks' (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009:16; Temple et al., 2014), including requests for sexual images and pressure to be 'visually perfect', resulting in negative self-image and lack of confidence (Papamichail and Sharma, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2012).

1.2 Care-experienced young people and social media

Research suggests that some groups may be more susceptible to negative consequences resulting from social media use. Certain groups or sub-groups of vulnerable young people with particular characteristics or life experiences, may face difficulties in engaging positively online. This includes those with a history of offline physical or sexual abuse, low body-esteem, emotional and social difficulties, depression or other mental health disorders, and a lack of guidance and poor family relationships (Munro, 2011; Sorbring, 2014; Papamichail and Sharma, 2019).

One group of young people who may experience early traumatic or difficult home experiences are care-experienced individuals. Indeed, children in care are just over three times more likely to have a mental disorder than disadvantaged children, and over five times more likely to have a diagnosed mental disorder than non-disadvantaged children (NSPCC, 2015). However, despite a growing recognition of the impact of digital culture during adolescence and beyond, studies do not generally consider the impact on the most vulnerable children (Papamichail and Sharma, 2019) and therefore our understanding of how care-experienced individuals use social media, and the impact this has on their wellbeing, remains unclear.

What limited research there is, suggests that the most prominent difficulty linked to social media usage is forms of online aggressive, targeted verbal abuse by those known to young people offline (Sen, 2016). Due to their relatively small support networks, care-experienced young people are more likely to experience isolation from friends and family when arguments escalate on line. They may also struggle to develop and maintain these online relationships offline because of possible transient or unsettled nature of their lives (Papamichail and Sharma, 2019).Moreover, looked after children are being neglected in the conversation about their interaction with the digital world. The Children's Commissioner's Office (2017) identified key challenges linked to: a lack of digital access due to Wi-Fi connections or less access to devices; a lack of digital skills and support from key workers and foster parents, due to poor knowledge, digital confidence and awareness of internet trends and Apps; and a lack of appropriate safeguarding, linked to practitioner understanding around the application of specific practices. These challenges are supported by a Barnardo's report that suggests carers lack the skills and knowledge to understand how social media works and how to help children to use this safely (Papamichail and Sharma, 2019).

Methodology

To better understand the experiences of care-experienced young people requires insight into their online behaviours (Sen, 2016). By focusing on the 'voices' of young people, our research set out to explore practices and interests, alongside personal circumstances and vulnerabilities. Our study was informed by thirteen [1] care-experienced young people aged 16-27 years (7 females, 6 males) from the Edinburgh region. Participants were recruited via the Dean and Cauvin Young People's Trust. Research methods comprised two exploratory focus groups; in-depth interviews with five individuals; and an interactive, creative art workshop to discuss ideas in a more fun and engaging way.

In addition, three in-depth focus groups were conducted with 17 practitioners (9 males, 8 females). Practitioners worked across Throughcare and Aftercare services, Residential childcare services and Residential school services in one large urban Local Authority in Scotland. This provided opportunities to hear about their understandings of young people's social media experiences, during transitions in/out of the care system.

Finally, to explore how young people in foster care are being supported in their social media use, an online survey was undertaken over a two month period (Sept – Dec 2020). The survey included 21 respondents; eighteen females and three males, with the majority (71.4%) aged 45-64 years. Foster carer experience ranged from 5 to 13 years, with an average of 8 years and 4 months [2].

To explore and identify themes, a thematic analysis was conducted across the different strands of data collection. This approach, widely used in policy and health research, aims to identify similarities and differences in qualitative data, to then focus on the relationships between parts, and finally draw conclusions clustered around themes. On the basis of the findings to emerge, the project team devised and piloted a training course for foster carers and kinship carers. The aims were: to develop understanding about how social media can impact on the mental health of care experienced young people; to develop carer self-awareness about how personal hopes and fears influence the support they provide to young people; to develop understanding about how to minimise risks/dangers to mental health and enhance benefits/opportunities; and to develop understanding of strategies to improve communication with young people about their social media use. The three-part course was held online. Eight carers started the course and four completed all three sessions.

[1]Some of the young people took part in more than one of the activities. For example, an interview and the art workshop.
[2] Of the 5 out of 21 respondents (24%) who answered this question.

Research Findings

During exploratory focus groups, participants were invited to write key messages about social media on post-it notes and to complement these thoughts with visual images from a selection of magazines. The idea was to create a message board highlighting key positive and negative associations. The resulting piece of work is shown (below, Figures 1 & 2).
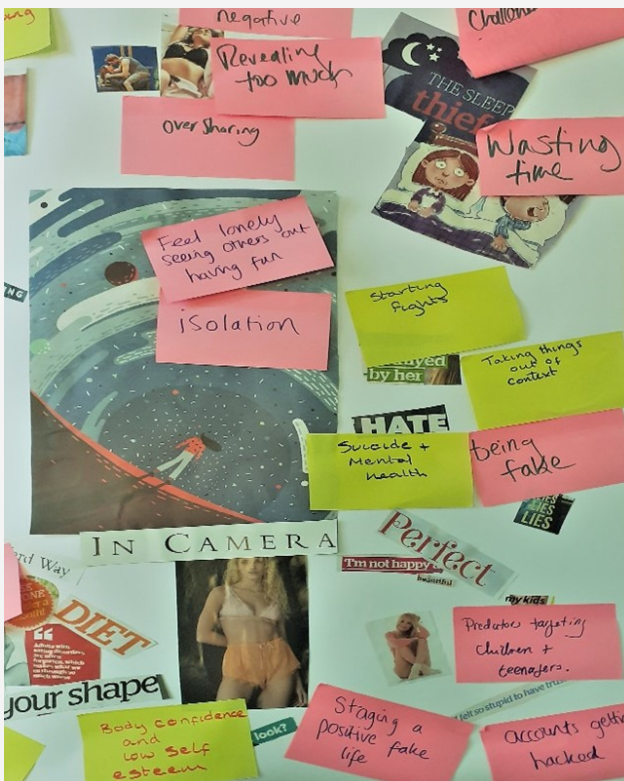

FIGURE 1: NEGATIVE

FIGURE 2: POSITIVE

The findings suggest a range of positive social communications linked to pleasure, social engagement and well-being, as well as negative feelings associated with social isolation, loneliness and self-doubt. These themes were further explored during one-to-one interviews.

3.1. Benefits of social media

3.1.1 Friendship: Social media is primarily viewed as a way of connecting with other people to: maintain existing contacts or friendship groups; maintain a support network during difficult times; and provide a means of contacting distant and/or estranged family and friends. These opportunities are particularly important when individuals are feeling isolated or lonely and can provide positive links to the past (e.g. looking at old messages or photos) as well as promoting future friendships. In this regard, social media is a way of escaping difficult, intense off-line, or real world relationships, by providing access to a wider, extended network of friends with similar interests and ideals. These communication networks would seem to have an important role in supporting young people's positive mental health: with participants associating independence, personal freedom and rewarding, open social lives with personal wellbeing.

Preferred sites

INSTAGRAM; FACEBOOK; SNAPCHAT; MESSENGER; YOUTUBE; WHATSAPP; AND TIKTOK

'...Your family might not understand what you're going through and they might not know how to help...so you go to your phone to be happy'

YPF2

3.1.2 Relaxation and escapism: Young people reported that their phone is often their 'happy place', providing a level of comfort, or refuge from daily life when they are otherwise feeling down or isolated within their off-line relationships.

Social media provides a means of exploring the world, particularly for funny or interesting videos, blogs or messages (e.g. from friends and family, or internet vloggers and celebrities). Each of our respondents said that they enjoyed browsing social media content to relax, keep calm and to take their minds off more mundane problems, or even to escape boredom. Scrolling through posts has a 'soothing' benefit just before going to sleep, helping to block out relationship problems or 'tune people out'. The internet thus provides a world of opportunities to suit the young person's mood and needs

3.1.3 Independence: A major benefit of having access to social media is the independence it provides; most notably an escape from the constraints of being in supported accommodation and constant daily supervision. Having a phone is a way to explore personal relationships, to express individual interests and views and to enjoy an exciting alternative to 'normal' life. When access to a mobile is threatened in some way, the young people report feeling upset and angry. In this regard, any attempts by staff to limit or remove social media as a sanction has the potential to negatively impact on mental health by reinforcing perceptions of isolation from support networks. To maximise the benefits of social media use, interviewees suggested that carers should attempt the following:

- Work through problems with young people, rather than using a predetermined and inflexible punishment e.g. removal of a mobile phone.

- Learn to recognise signs of young people in distress when using social media.

- Have a respectful curiosity about young people's online use. Be approachable and respond in a caring way and 'be there' when young people seek support.

- Know the Apps that young people use and be able to explain how to set privacy settings to maximise security.

- Involve peers in helping other young people learn about social media safety.

3.2 Risks of social media

3.2.1 Receiving unwanted friend/image/video requests: Of primary concern is the risk of strangers making unwanted contact. Four out of five young people reported frequently receiving uninvited comments and friend requests, including individuals asking for images, videos, or making disturbing or inappropriate suggestions. Common to young females of a similar age who use social media, there was an awareness of the danger of (mainly late night) requests for nude images and texts from boyfriends and/or strangers ('stalkers' and 'creeps') which could then be shared more widely online.

Practical recommendations to other young people

- Not speaking to or accepting friend requests from people you do not know.

- Not sharing images of yourself that you wouldn't want adults or parents to see.

- Learning how to use sites safely by setting privacy settings and hiding location trackers.

3.2.2 Self-image and lack of confidence: Another common response to receiving a constant stream of social media images is the ongoing need for comparison and self-evaluation. Whilst individuals are aware that others 'stage' perfect lives to make themselves appear wealthy, or to create a happy family environment, the majority of the young people interviewed nevertheless suggest feelings of inadequacy are exacerbated by such images. In particular, females made reference to other people's looks, bodies and personal possessions. This tends to make them feel negatively about themselves and can impact adversely on their self-esteem as they compare their looks and body shape to celebrities or other individuals. These feelings of inadequacy or even jealousy can be heightened by forms of cyberbullying such as body shaming. They are also more common at traditional celebratory times like Christmas or birthdays, when the young people inevitably seek to compare their own (lack of) gifts to others, on sites like Facebook, or the more extravagant world of vloggers and celebrities.

3.2.3 Aggressive behaviour: A further risk to mental health and wellbeing is 'name calling' or aggressive and nasty targeted behaviour from friends, family and/or strangers about matters such as money, debts and friendships. Four out of five individuals talked about falling out with people over the way on-line conversations were worded or misinterpreted and this could lead to aggressive behaviour on social media and private abusive messages. Bullying over videos was one danger, with some young people recalling examples of videos being posted without people's knowledge, specifically to embarrass them or to cause problems.

Given their fragile home relationships and small networks of friends, the young people struggled with the sometimes intense and instantly explosive nature of online arguments. Equally, negative feelings could be exacerbated by actions such as individual recipients not responding immediately to texts, thus leading to people feeling unwanted or worried that they had done something wrong. Following an argument people could also be blocked by a friend and this left them feeling upset and confused. Such negative interactions leave the young people feeling 'drained of energy' and 'down' – emotions they associate with negative mental health. Social media could not only accelerate disputes and foster distance and anxiety, it could also be a source of loneliness; isolating individuals from their family in a more obvious way and also creating a space for arguments and disputes - sometimes even leading to the break-up of relationships.

Analysis of Art Workshop

The use of art based and creative methods provides opportunities to access information which may be otherwise difficult for individuals to express or articulate in words (Tarr et al., 2018). A workshop also provides a novel and creative activity to engage with young adults, enabling the researchers to discuss ideas in a more relevant way as an essential pathway towards the expression of feelings and emotions linked to young people's online experiences. Individuals were presented with a wide selection of materials (e.g. craft and art supplies including wool, straws, socks, paints etc) and tasked with designing a piece of artwork which could capture the feelings or emotions linked to social media.

4.1 Social media and risk

There was much recognition of the destructive aspects of using social media. Descriptions were vivid and held clear implications of danger:

"Social media is the devil"
AWM1

"Social media kills your brain cells"
AWF1

These perceptions were reflected in the young people's creative outputs. One individual illustrated the negative and damaging impact of social media on both wellbeing and mental aptitude by designing a brain, damaged by constant use of online platforms (Figure 3).

Figure 3

More widely, respondents recognised harmful and abusive behaviours as typical social media experiences, including targeted abuse and groups set up to aggressively bully others. They also discussed the vulnerability of younger children to being targeted, lied to and bullied publicly on open forums and social chat groups. Nevertheless, whilst criticising those who participate in bullying, several of the young people admitted that they had previously put up videos during arguments, which might be regarded as antagonistic. The ease and speed with which it is possible to post on social media means that such disputes can escalate quickly without proper thought given to personal actions.

Respondents also had an acute awareness of 'fake' people and those who lie to deliberately deceive others. This includes females who edit pictures to make themselves look more attractive, as well as strangers creating profiles to request images or other personal information from young people. Being 'fake' online was regarded as a common, well recognised feature of social media usage and one that the vast majority of respondents hugely resented for causing problems and making others feel inferior or bad about themselves.

However, some individuals believe that young people can also use more nuanced strategies for covering up feelings or emotions, recognising that this isn't always because they want to cause trouble. Rather, for those with difficult lives or suffering negative mental health, it is often easier to try and hide emotions rather than express feelings. Many of the art pieces were honest in their simplicity, capturing the multi-layered emotions involved in social media relationships. As one young person illustrates in Figure 4, an individual can seem straight forward and black and white, yet they can still be extremely fragile and vulnerable.

Figure 4

"[Social media] is good for hiding what you feel because you can just be fake…You get these people with pictures of this big happy house and life, but it's all fake"

AWFI

The young people were also asked to design a banner or placard to draw attention to an issue of importance linked to social media experiences and use. The primary message again involved 'fake' people posting lies and the importance of being more honest online (Figure 5). Regardless of the motivations for posting, using social media was regarded as frequent and ongoing – influencing all their interactions and relationships to varying extents – often in both good and bad ways. Another individual's artwork sought to highlight this mixture of emotions (Figure 6)

Figure 5

In terms of links to positive mental health, a common recurring theme was the benefits of online communications. These interactions were particularly notable during the young people's comic strip artwork designs. One young person recalled being separated from his brother when entering foster care, before getting in touch a number of years later via social media. Another emphasised how a personal support network of family and friends had been strengthened via social media.

Figure 6

Yet participants also stressed that being on social media could simply be tedious and repetitive. Some of the young adults felt that the content of posts becomes largely predictable, monotonous and unfulfilling. Yet despite a lack of interest or sometimes even enjoyment, they still feel the need to check their accounts and to browse other people's posts. In this regard, individuals may not always enjoy being on social media, but at the same time they are unable to resist the need to constantly check in with friends, keep up to date with social groups, and escape to the online world to avoid daily tasks and surroundings.

Research Findings:
Practitioner themes and issues

The above findings raise a number of key questions about how staff working with care experienced young people in residential settings may best support them to use social media networking sites and platforms in a positive way, to enhance well-being and resilience, whilst minimising risk.

5.1 Lack of knowledge and training opportunities

In general, participants did not feel confident in their knowledge of social media and were not familiar with many of the current popular sites, or how to navigate them.

The fast-paced nature of online change means staff' find it difficult to keep up to date with the provision of advice for young people and lack up to date training and guidance. This perception of being 'out of touch' is linked to a fear about starting conversations around social media.

> "They're doing their multimedia world, I'm not really a part of that world myself"
>
> TCM2

When it comes to educating care-experienced young people about online behaviours, practitioners feel that any educational strategies they choose to use are "...much more scrutinised and stigmatise [the young people] more" (HRM1) than typical parent-child conversations. Therefore, despite feeling a responsibility to address online issues, staff are simultaneously wary of mishandling difficult situations and alienating young people.

One recognised concern was how to strike a balance between providing information and support, whilst allowing the young people a degree of privacy. This idea of evoking aspects of parenting was perceived as a 'tricky minefield' (TCM2) which in the past has led to accusations of interfering.

Practitioners with generally positive relationships with the young people are also wary of getting too involved and have turned down friend requests or held back on messaging for fear of allegations around boundaries. This cautious approach inevitably impacts negatively on the abilities of practitioners to adopt natural and open discussions around online behaviours.

5.2 Connecting with friends and family – the benefits of social media

The positives of social media identified by practitioners focused primarily on the role of communications and relationship-building. For young people who may struggle with relationships or long, in-depth conversations, short interactions on social media platforms are easier to sustain and provide access to a wider number of friendship opportunities without the pressure of being face to face. Friendship groups can also provide a sense of belonging – something care-experienced young people may struggle with. Where they may feel isolated or lonely, social media can provide a form of comfort and have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. In addition, staff credit social media with fostering connections with family members. Some participants recalled instances where siblings had been separated in difficult circumstances and then reunited through Apps such as Facebook.

5.3 Online Risk and Care Experienced Young People

Focus group participants perceive the young people as 'savvy', with an awareness of the more widely-recognised risks of social media, such as dealing with strangers online. Yet this ability to recognise online dangers does not protect the young people from negative personal communications, including aggression from peers and family members. This is largely linked to issues around trust and boundaries, which staff feel are more difficult to manage in virtual relationships. Personal insecurities also mean that young people want to belong, and get recognition within friendship groups, even when it causes them difficulties.

Online relationships can be difficult for the young people to navigate due to insufficient interpersonal skills. Their tendencies to escalate arguments or aggressive situations are fostered by young people frequently feeling that "…they have to respond or else they lose face" (TCM2). Moreover, the lack of social skills and emotional stability of some individuals mean that they are highly likely to react instantaneously and get pulled into arguments, rather than to take a step back and consider how to respond to a difficult or challenging remarks. One participant commented that the young people "lack insight" (TCM3) and react instinctively and instantaneously, particularly online when individuals can to some extent be invisible.

5.4 Young people, mental health and social media

Practitioners reported concerns that those coming from a care-experienced background may have existing vulnerabilities, which can predispose them to a greater risk of being "coaxed into unsuitable or unacceptable" (CEM2) behaviour. Many of the young people already have some mental health issues such as suffering from complex trauma. This can lead to involvement in aggressive arguments or being persuaded by others to engage in specific activities to gain acceptance and respect. A further concern is the young people's inability to recognise what might be 'inappropriate' behaviour online. For example, putting up images or videos of friends that might lead to their embarrassment or anger, or uploading content to YouTube which may later reflect badly upon them or cause offence. As such, staff feel they may often not be in the 'right space' to be accessing social media for considerable periods of time.

Another notable issue is the addictive nature of social media – this includes gaming and sites such as TikTok. With easy accessibility and 24 hour access the young people can quickly become addicted to sites and enjoy the attention and control they have over putting up information online. There is a belief this may only serve to exacerbate the young people's tendencies towards aggressive behaviours.

Across the focus groups there was also recognition of the harm that can be caused by friends, acquaintances and strangers promoting 'fake lives'. Being bombarded with daily images and references to 'perfect' families and material possessions might only serve to reinforce feelings of insecurity and inferiority. Where the young people may still be naïve to the level of deception created within online profiles, or are drawn to celebrity lives, there are concerns that these already vulnerable young people are being placed at risk by making comparisons in their own lives. By acting in a similar manner and revealing aspects of their routines and personal issues, or having arguments in a public domain, the staff feel that they are inviting people to comment and to see what they are doing. Comments which inevitably will not always be positive or supportive. Without having the emotional and social tools to deal with these responses, the young people face many difficult decisions.

"There is no one right way to do this - it's about combining elements of working and learning together, with recognition of emotional and relational aspects interwoven within the behaviours of young people"

TCM3

Going forward there is a need for:

- The importance of a more flexible approach. Striking a balance between listening and imparting knowledge, whilst recognising the importance of young people's rights to independence, participation and privacy - including the autonomy to make decisions about their own behaviours, needs and concerns.
- The need for inter-agency cooperation and the sharing of resources (e.g. across health, mental health, child protection and education) to address the constantly changing parameters within which staff work.
- A rethinking and reframing of ways of dealing with risky online behaviours to create an environment where staff can consult, collaborate with, and learn from, young people as 'mentors' or 'social media champions.'
- Increasing knowledge about social media sites in order to avoid feeling unprepared and anxious when faced with a need to deal with issues.

Foster Carer Survey Responses

According to the survey findings, foster carers we surveyed had a balanced and insightful view of the social media landscape and young people's behaviours within this environment. All respondents acknowledged the positive dimensions of social media, citing the benefits of young people engaging online - particularly in terms of the following: enhanced social interaction with peers and family (66.7%), access to information about problems and interests, and pursing hobbies and reducing boredom (57.1% each).

Once again, the negative aspects of social media were primarily linked to the difficulties care-experienced young people have navigating complex online relationships.

There was a very mixed picture regarding whether social media has a primarily positive or negative influence on care experienced young people's mental health and wellbeing. The majority of respondents opted for a mid-range answer, with 28.6% of individuals selecting 'neither positive nor negative'. This reflected a recognition of the broad range of social media influences.

Foster carer concerns:

- Cyberbullying and initiating arguments with peers and family.
- Exposure to potentially harmful and risky content e.g. unwanted sexual contact.
- Struggles to form healthy relationships and to effectively differentiate between real friendships and individuals who exploit or ridicule.
- Feelings of inadequacy caused by long periods of exposure to 'other people's 'fake' realities'.
- Young people being contacted by estranged family members, leading to arguments and anxieties.

6.1.1 Engaging with young people on social media

Sixty-seven percent reported using social media to keep in touch with the young people they look after (namely via Snapchat and WhatsApp) for welfare purposes (68.4%), although it can also be used to check up on their activities and location (both 42.1%). A further seventy one per cent of respondents admitted that they had prevented social media use as a sanction or punishment, primarily due to unsafe or unsuitable use, or, because the young person was spending too much time online. Of these respondents, 80% felt their actions subsequently had a positive impact on the young person's behaviour and awareness of online safety.

6.1.2 Training and Support

In terms of training, seventy six per cent of foster carers had received support to help them talk with young people about online safety and wellbeing. A broad range of training is readily available and easily accessible. Respondents had accessed resources including, online courses run by charities eg. Barnardos, Local Authority and Child Exploitation and Online Protection command (CEOP) training, as well as researching booklets, leaflets and even TV documentaries.

Nevertheless, the ever-changing social media landscape means that the most significant challenge to sustaining support is keeping up with the different platforms young people use. Similar to the practitioners in this study, respondents noted a need to follow current trends and a feeling of always 'playing catch up'. However, 66.7% of individuals still feel they have sufficient skills to deal with these challenges, and 71.4% believe they have sufficient understanding to support young people who are struggling with their mental health. Yet there remains a perceived need for more external support from professionally qualified sources, so as to not leave carers feeling helpless and unsupported, and to monitor the impact that advice is having on the young people's behaviour – particularly where they are more vulnerable due to prior trauma. Such support would encourage young people to listen to advice and, where necessary, ensure that this is reinforced and monitored to limit adverse consequences to well-being.

Training Resources and Recommendations

The pilot training course was developed on the basis of the above findings. The course was delivered online over three sessions of 1.5 hours each. This short format was to make the course as accessible as possible to foster carers. Six foster carers and two kinship carers took part in the first session, six foster carers took part in the second session and the final session was completed by four foster carers. Those who did not complete all the sessions reported caring responsibilities during the ongoing lockdown to be the reason they were not able to commit to the final sessions.

The course had four learning outcomes:
1. To develop understanding about how social media can impact on the mental health of care experienced young people (Part 1 & 2).
2. To develop self-awareness about personal hopes and fears around the use of online environments (Part 1).
3. To develop understanding about how to minimise risks/dangers presented to mental health and enhance the benefits/opportunities (Part 2).
4. To develop understanding of strategies to improve communications with young people about their social media use (Part 3).

The course was very interactive and included: online quizzes; discussions; case study material; and reflective exercises. It was facilitated online by Dr Autumn Roesch-Marsh and Shona Johnston, Participation Worker from the Dean and Cauvin Young People's Trust. At the outset of the project, it was anticipated that young people would be involved in course delivery, but unfortunately due to the Covid-19 pandemic and young people's precarious and digitally excluded lives, this was not possible. We nevertheless worked with the Articulate Trust, Made in Care project, to produce a film with care experienced young people, which allowed them to input to the content of training. The film is available to view on the eNurture website and the Articulate Trust website.

Carers reported enjoying the course and finding it useful. They found the balance between discussing risks and possible harms alongside opportunities and strengths particularly novel and helpful. They also welcomed the space to connect with other carers and to reflect on some of their fears and difficult practice experiences.Furthermore, they appreciated the use of case studies to draw out practical suggestions and to think about how they might talk to young people about both social media use and mental health. Hearing about our research findings also helped them to better empathise with young people's experiences.

Future training around social media, mental health and care experience needs to:

- Put young people's experiences and research evidence at the heart of the programme.

- Be relational and experiential, allowing carers to share complex experiences in a safe space.

- Be grounded in practice realities and make use of real world examples and case studies.

- Ideally involve young people more directly in development and delivery.

- Allow for collective problem solving.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Organisations should improve the quality and availability of training for foster carers, kinship carers and residential workers. Our experience of developing our training, 'Caring in a digital world', suggests there is an urgent need to make more available research-informed training that promotes the voices and experiences of young people and carers. People with care experience should be involved in the development and delivery of this training.

Recommendation 2: Care experienced young people must have opportunities to become digital leaders and maximise their opportunities to develop social networks, digital skills and confidence to engage safely with the online world. Our research, in line with other work in the field, suggests care experienced young people are more likely to miss out on such opportunities at school and need a programme that is tailored to their individual needs (Children's Commissioner 2017).

Recommendation 3: Multi-agency organisations must work together to address the digital exclusion of those with care experience. While our study did not set out to explore digital exclusion, our experience of trying to complete this study during lockdown highlighted the significant impact digital exclusion can have on the mental health of care leavers and their capacity to participate in a range of activities, including research. We support the recommendations of two reports published by CELCIS during this study, which call on all organisations to prioritise digital inclusion for care experienced people. This means addressing issues of 'kit, connection, and confidence'; digital inclusion is complex and requires more than having a device and access to WiFi or data, proper ongoing support and training is needed to ensure people can make the most of online opportunities (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh 2020; Roesch-Marsh et al. 2021).

Recommendation 4: Social care providers should ensure that carers, social workers and others are enabling young people to exercise their digital rights. In February 2021 the UN Committee on the Rights of Child adopted General Comment 25 on children's rights in a digital environment. This document highlights the important role that parents and carers play in supporting children and young people to exercise their digital rights. It also recognises that those in alternative care may face additional barriers to exercising their digital rights; which was highlighted by some of our participants. Those with care experience need access to support and advocacy from those who have a good understanding of how to help them exercise their digital rights, minimise digital risks and enhance digital resilience.

Recommendation 5: NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government should work to develop digital tools to support the mental health of those with care experience. Scotland's Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027 highlights the opportunities around digital mental health care, however, the development of digital tools to support mental health has not been widely publicised and there appear to be a lack of initiatives specifically targeted to the needs of those with care experience. We were inspired by some of the work going on in NHS England and would welcome similar developments in Scotland (Betton and Woollard, 2019).

Recommendation 6: Further research is needed which explores the relationship and friendship needs of care experienced young people and identifies the best ways for social workers, carers and others to support young people to develop healthy, supportive social networks on and offline (see also Roesch-Marsh and Emond 2020).

Conclusion

Care experienced young people are, in many ways, just like other young people their age. They have grown up in a world where the digital environment impacts upon and influences every aspect of their lives. Being online is essential in their social worlds and it allows them to connect to people who are important to them, to have fun, to find information and to relax. However, similar to other young people they can also find social media a burden and a source of stress and pressure, they can compare themselves to others and feel lacking and low as a result. Sometimes they face abusive or predatory behaviour and may find approaches from strangers or material they see online stressful and/or upsetting.

Our study was small in scale but it highlighted how those with care experience are also different to their peers in some ways and their needs and strengths must be better understood. We found that those with care experience may be more likely to face challenges online because of previous negative experiences and deficits in the care and support they have been given offline. They may have more limited social networks and be more likely to face social isolation, making online connection even more important but putting more pressure on these connections when they go wrong.

Care experienced young people want to be treated with respect and to have their experiences understood. Those that care for them often feel out of their depth in dealing with issues that arise online and would like more training so that they can better support young people's mental health. Caring for young people's mental health in a digital world requires a complex balancing act in which carers, social workers and others seek to maximise the opportunities presented by digital environments, while working to minimise the risks these environments pose. Young people want to do this work in partnership with adults and often know much about the quickly changing online world which adults are out of touch with.We hope our findings will help inform future policy, practice and research developments in order to ensure that care experienced young people are not disadvantaged by risk averse digital policies and are better supported to exercise their digital rights and develop digital wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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