A Failure to Strike a Balance: The Use of Parental Mediation Strategies by Foster Carers and Social Workers

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Abstract : Background and purpose: The ubiquitous use of the Internet and social media by children and young people has had a dual effect. The first is to open a world of possibilities and promise that is characterized by the ability to consume and create content, connect with friends, explore and experiment. The second relates to risks such as unsolicited requests, sexual exploitation, cyberbullying and commercial exploitation. This duality poses significant difficulties for a generation of foster carers and social workers who have no childhood experience to draw on in terms of growing up using the Internet, social media and digital devices. This presentation is concerned with the findings of a small qualitative study about the use of digital devices and the Internet by care-experienced young people to stay in touch with their families and the way this was managed by foster carers and social workers using specific parental mediation strategies. The findings highlight that restrictive strategies were used by foster carers and endorsed by social workers. An argument is made for an approach that develops a series of balanced solutions that move foster carers from such restrictive approaches to those that are grounded in co-use and are interpretive in nature. Methods: Using a purposive sampling strategy, 12 triads consisting of care-experienced young people (aged 13-18 years), their foster carers and allocated social workers were recruited. All respondents undertook a semi-structured interview, with the young people detailing what social media apps and other devices they used to contact their families via an Ecomap. The foster carers and social workers shared details of the methods and approaches they used to manage digital devices and the Internet in general. Data analysis was performed using a Framework analytic method to explore the various attitudes, as well as complementary and contradictory perspectives of the young people, their foster carers and allocated social workers. Findings: The majority of foster carers made use of parental mediation strategies that erred on the side of typologies that included setting rules and regulations (restrictive), ad-hoc checking of a young person's behavior and device (monitoring), and software used to limit or block access to inappropriate websites (technical). It was noted that minimal use was made by foster carers of parental mediation strategies that included talking about content (active/interpretive) or sharing Internet activities (co-use). Amongst the majority of the social workers, they also had a strong preference for restrictive approaches. Conclusions and implications: Trepidations on the part of both foster carers and social workers about the use of digital devices and the Internet meant that the parental strategies used were weighted more towards restriction, with little use made of approaches such as co-use and interpretative. This lack of balance calls for solutions that are grounded in co-use and an interpretive approach, both of which can be achieved through training and support, as well as wider policy change.

Keywords : parental mediation strategies, risk, children in state care, online safety

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