

Dangers posed by cyberspace and prized gadgets are a concern for those working with looked-after children. *Eileen Fursland* explores the more positive contribution technology makes to young lives

# THE IT CROWD

## How technology is helping children in care

**T**echnology such as computers and mobile phones is often seen as a potential threat to children in care. Mobile phones and instant messaging are key tools used by perpetrators involved in the sexual exploitation of vulnerable young people. Looked-after children are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying.

Meanwhile, the ease of tracing people via the internet and social networking can make it harder for social workers, foster carers and others to keep young people safe from harmful contact with birth parents and other relatives.

Yet technology, increasingly a tool in the day-to-day work and training of social workers, is also being used in innovative ways to help looked-after children access services, get support and have a voice.

Adoption is one area where local authorities and agencies are making more and more use of online opportunities to match children with families, while Facebook campaigns are becoming more prominent in efforts to recruit more foster carers.

Social workers are using texting and instant messaging to maintain regular contact with the young people they work with and Skype can be a useful way for looked-after children to keep in touch with siblings in other placements. At the same time, young people in care are helping to develop and produce websites, apps and online videos to support others or to put their views across.

Support organisations such as the Who Cares? Trust now see social media including Twitter and Facebook as essential in promoting the views and experiences of children in care and care leavers. Every Tuesday, the charity tweets messages from young people in care at regular

intervals. "It's getting their views to a wider audience," says media officer Oliver Wilkinson. "The number of re-tweets we get on a Tuesday is far higher than any other day of the week."

### Digital revolution

The days when folders crammed with leaflets and forms were seen as the best way of getting information to those entering care are coming to an end.

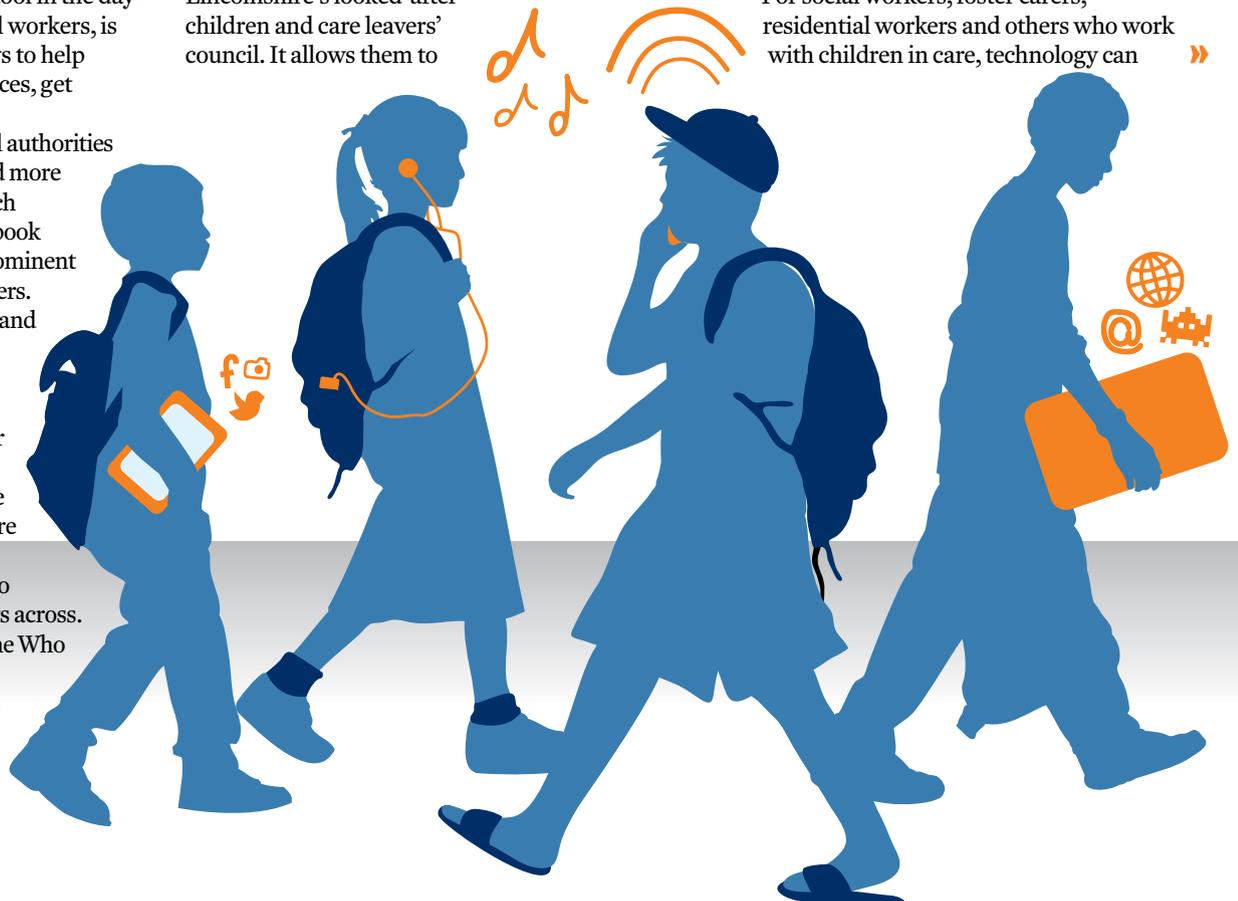
Lincolnshire County Council has replaced its Coming into Care Kit with a web-based app that can be used on a smartphone, tablet, laptop and PC. The app was developed with the help of young people from V4C (Voices for Choices), Lincolnshire's looked-after children and care leavers' council. It allows them to

email their social worker and find out about facilities near where they are living.

Warwickshire's Children in Care Council has also produced a new resource to replace a cumbersome folder of information leaflets in the form of a set of playing cards called Ur Say Ur Play for looked-after children aged 13 to 18.

The back of each card features a different service such as alcohol misuse, advocacy or leaving care, and each has a QR code – a barcode that can be scanned with a smartphone – that links directly to the service's website when the young person scans it with their phone. The old information packs dated quickly, but this way the information is more likely to be up to date.

For social workers, foster carers, residential workers and others who work with children in care, technology can »



offer many more ways to engage with this vulnerable group. Simply using digital technologies can attract the attention of disengaged and socially excluded young people.

At the same time, it affords opportunities for workers to discuss issues about online safety and appropriate sharing of information and photos, and build children's digital resilience.

But how far will information and communications technology continue to change social work? Could video-calling via Skype replace face-to-face meetings?

"I can't believe that won't happen, especially given the capacity issues," says David Niven, the former national chair of the British Association of Social Workers, who now runs a training company. "People will look for ways of saving time and Skype would be one of them. Personally, I would feel we are losing something – because I am over 25.

"But given most young people are technologically literate and not only assume but expect that their world will include technology, it will be less of a shock to the system for them."

Many in the sector will be nervous about this idea. "The most powerful consultation is face to face," asserts Michelle Dean, children's social care participation manager at Cambridgeshire County Council. Nevertheless, she has worked with groups of looked-after young people to produce animations and seen how technology can make a difference.

One of these – about children's emotions and feelings on first coming into care – is now used as part of the national Skills to Foster course.

"I've seen the young people I work with become more confident in giving their opinions," says Dean.

While there is a wealth of information available to looked-after young people online, Emma Corbett, participation officer at The Who Cares? Trust, also stresses that face-to-face relationships remain vital.

"Whenever we ask young people about this, they say they can get overwhelmed with information and it's more helpful to find things out from a social worker or advocate they know, who can give them the right information at the right time," she says.

"Also, they can't look up information about a higher education bursary if they don't know such a thing exists."

Corbett also warns against assuming all young people in care or leaving care have access to smartphones. Often they do not, or cannot afford an expensive phone contract.

Nevertheless, instant messaging services – especially free services like WhatsApp and BBM (Blackberry Messenger) – can prove a lifeline for care leavers who are more at risk of becoming lonely and isolated.

"For young people, making a phone call has a different connotation from chatting on messaging services – they message each other all the time," says Corbett.



### THE APP: GIVING LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN A VOICE

David was 17 and in foster care in south-east London when one Saturday night last year, he got a call from his brother with news that came as a bombshell.

"My brother had been moved from his placement and my mother was put in prison – and I wasn't told," he says, recalling the sense of panic and anger he felt at not being informed, despite the fact these changes had happened more than a month previously.

"It was the weekend, so I couldn't contact social services," he says, but he was able to use an app on his phone, specially developed for children and young people in care, to put in an instant complaint.

The app is called Mind of My Own – known as MoMo. "MoMo structures the complaint for you, asks how you're feeling about it and writes it up for you, and then it asks who you want to send it to," explains David.

"I sent it to my advocate, social worker and participation worker. I felt a lot more at ease that I had done something and I knew when they got into the office or checked their emails, they'd see it."

On the Monday, he heard from his social worker and arranged to meet her via MoMo. Their discussion, which included reassurance about seeing his brother, left him feeling a lot happier.

Others like 15-year-old Cara, who is in foster care, have used the "self-advocacy" app, developed by social enterprise Sixteen25, to request more contact with her family.

"It worked. I saw my mum and my auntie

at the family centre and it went really well," she says. "I prefer the app because I'm a bit shy. Face to face is hard and you have to think what to say, but with this you can just click on the bit that says: 'I'd like to see my family more'."

A number of local authorities in England and Northern Ireland have signed up to the service. However, it is available to all young people for free regardless of whether their council is an official user.

It allows young people to use the prompts provided or write their own statements and is designed to make it as easy as possible for them to communicate with professionals and get problems sorted.

David Hamilton, senior social worker for looked-after children at the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland, recently used MoMo to consult children before their looked-after children reviews. "Our current consultation tool is paper-based and only 54 per cent were completing these," he explains.

In a small pilot involving 11 children aged seven to 15, social workers visited with an iPad and went through the consultation using MoMo.

"They were excited about the iPad," says Hamilton, who says the approach proved so popular that three social work teams at the trust, covering 220 children in long-term care, are now being trained to use the app.

"We also decided to start reviews by considering the child's views, as reported through the app, which helped some get the decisions they wanted."

## THE DIGITAL DIARY: USING TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE LIFE STORIES

Digital technology is being used in the therapeutic life story work that can make a big difference to children and young people unable to live with their families. The technique, which helps looked-after children reflect on the important people and events in their lives, is traditionally undertaken with younger children, but can be just as vital for teenagers.

Simon Hammond was working in a residential home in Sheffield when he developed the idea of a digital approach to life-story work with adolescents. This inspired his PhD research project at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he is now a lecturer in psychology.

Hammond realised some of the adolescents he worked with dismissed traditional life story work resources as being “for kids”. But they would often use pictures and video clips on their phones and talk to him about places and people from their past and present.

In his book *Digital Life Story Work* – co-written with Neil Cooper – he outlines various projects including making a photo collage online, recording an interview and compiling a “life soundtrack”, a collection of music with talking in between. Projects can be combined or linked with each other and

built on over time. “The young people are so imaginative that they are the greatest resource in this,” he says.

Perhaps the most complex yet powerful of these projects is a “podwalk” where the young person revisits locations meaningful to him or her with a video camera and records the memories the places evoke.

In one case study in his book, a 16-year-old girl in residential care makes a film at her old school, sharing memories and anecdotes and reflecting on both the setbacks she experienced and the progress she made, helping her prepare to start college.

Hammond has used software such as Google Earth to “virtually” visit places where filming or trips are not practical because of the distances involved, or because young people are not allowed to go there. A virtual journey can also be useful for young asylum seekers.

Some professionals may be tempted to steer clear of digital technology altogether, feeling well and truly outside their comfort zone. But using it can empower young people and Hammond urges professionals to embrace their lack of tech savvy. “I say ‘that’s great, it’s not a problem – ask the child to teach you,’” he concludes.

## THE SOCIAL NETWORK: A SAFE SPACE FOR FOSTER CARERS

Closed social networking sites for young people and carers can provide extra security and peace of mind.

In Monmouthshire in Wales, foster carers support each other via a closed social networking group set up through a private network called Yammer.

The service, which was established by Monmouthshire County Council’s foster care team, operates much like Facebook, allowing carers to chat at any time of the day or night and easily set up social events like group picnics.

However, the fact it is an invite-only group means it is more secure.

The scheme evolved through foster carers’ request for some kind of online bulletin board to help keep them up to date with useful information.

Setting up a Yammer community rather than a more static, formal website seemed like a good solution and had the advantage of being free to use. It has proved to be very popular.

Foster carers – who generally only met face to face at quarterly meetings arranged by the authority – can now chat openly to one another whenever they like.

They not only gain invaluable peer support by sharing experiences, tips and advice, but also ask questions about policy and other issues, and get swift feedback from council staff.

The group also gives carers direct access to the council’s director of social services, who is a member of the group.

“Some carers use it all the time and absolutely love it. We post stuff on there too. We think it works well,” says service manager Gill Cox.

## THE WEBSITE: PROVIDING KEY INFORMATION AND CONNECTING CHILDREN IN CARE

Most local authorities have a web page for looked-after children often accessed via the council’s own website. This was the case in Cambridgeshire, but the county council found young people were not using it, explains Michelle Dean, children’s social care participation manager.

The authority went on to create a new site accessed via the colourful website Youthoria, which features content about education, training and leisure opportunities for all young people in the county.

It now features a secure area especially for looked-after young people, which provides information on their rights, support, terminology and care plans, and is used for surveys and updates on the activities of the authority’s Children in Care Council.

“There’s also a place on our website where looked-after young people can post their questions – for instance, about money, reviews, health and advocacy,” says Dean. “The participation team

then asks the appropriate person and posts the answers. It’s an open forum, so all the other members can see the questions and the answers.”

The forum is an opportunity to address common fears and concerns. Young people can comment, but it is not live, so the content can be monitored to ensure it is appropriate and accurate, explains Dean.

Each looked-after young person aged over 11 has their own login, which they are given by their social worker who also explains the site to them. Before they can get involved, young people must sign up to the site’s terms and conditions and code of conduct.

The fact looked-after children were consulted about what they wanted from the site gave them a sense of ownership, says Dean.

“When we run events, children take photos and write blogs for the site,” she says. “We hope that if another child says ‘Join this group, it’s really good’ that becomes more real for them.”

## LINKS AND RESOURCES

- **Children and the Net** - CD and DVD training pack for children’s practitioners published by the NSPCC [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)
- **Digital life story work: Using technology to help young people make sense of their experiences** by Simon Hammond and Neil Cooper. [www.baaf.org.uk/bookshop](http://www.baaf.org.uk/bookshop)
- **Fostering in a Digital World** - guide for carers and professionals [www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net)
- **Mind Of My Own** - advocacy app for young people [www.mindofmyown.org.uk](http://www.mindofmyown.org.uk)
- **Redhood** - IT company specialising in working with local authorities, children’s homes and foster carers to provide safe access to technology [www.redhood.co.uk](http://www.redhood.co.uk)
- **WiseKids** - non-profit firm that works with professionals, carers and young people to promote digital literacy and safe use of technology [www.wisekids.org.uk](http://www.wisekids.org.uk)
- **Yammer** - private social network [www.yammer.com](http://www.yammer.com)