TRUST...
DON'T COMBUST!

What has not gone so well?

enable

Making a difference to the digital lives of young people

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE YOUTH CONSULTATION WORKSHOPS

About the young people

- Workshops with children and young people took place in July-August 2021 to explore their needs, ideas and lived experience of online life in foster care.
- A total of 40 young people took part in three workshops:
- 6 from Brighton CiCC. All have additional learning needs, 9 from Dudley, several in alternative educational provision with experience of multiple placements in foster care.
- 25 from across Wokingham, Bracknell Forest, Slough and West Berkshire
- 5 had experienced 4 or more placements 17 had 3 or more

Gender of the young people

2%   2%
43%   53%

- Male   - Female   - Other   - Prefer not to say

Number in each age group

Age: 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, Missing
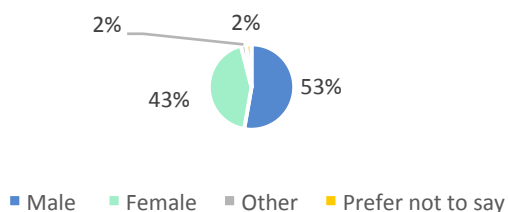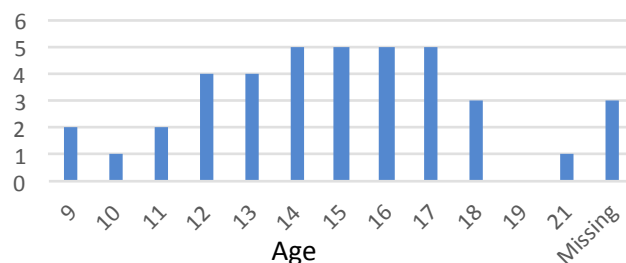
Do you need extra support with learning?

- Yes   - No   - Missing

Number of placements experienced to date

Young people
Placements: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, Missing

Types of devices used by young people

Most workshop participants had a smartphone and a laptop.
Some younger children are more likely to use a tablet.

Young people and their devices
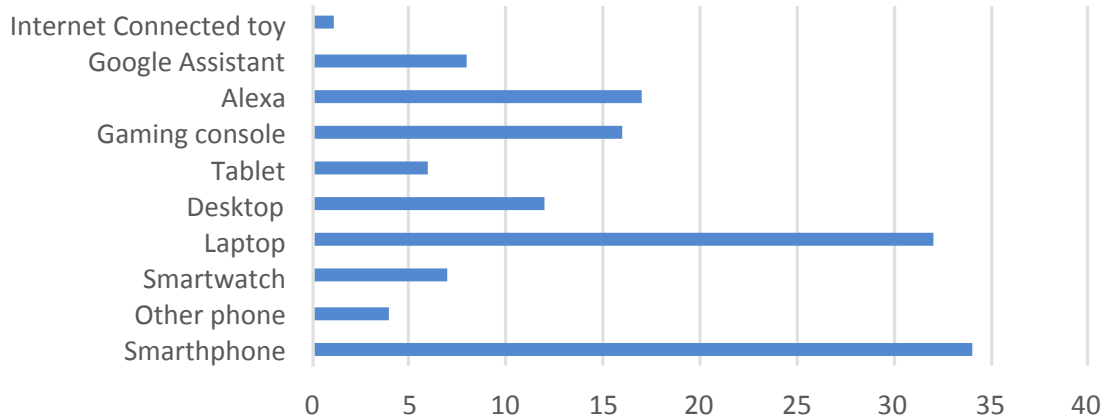
Young people's awareness of the foster carer's responsibility

Q.6 If you were an adult taking care of a child, would you be nervous about some of the risky or hurtful things that could happen to that child online, or on a smartphone?

Missing 9.5%

No 9.5%

Yes 81%

Q.7 What do you think of the idea of young people helping design a training course for foster carers?

What do you think of the idea of young people helping to design a training course for foster carers?

Q.8. Overall, how would you rate the workshop?

Good 20%

Excellent 80%
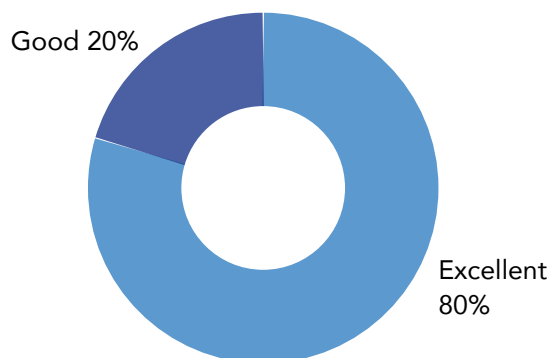
Q.9 Did you feel respected and listened to?

Yes 100%

Method: Artwork, pens, small, personalised booklets and a short film clip were used to engage the children and young people. A variety of methods were available for them to give their views.
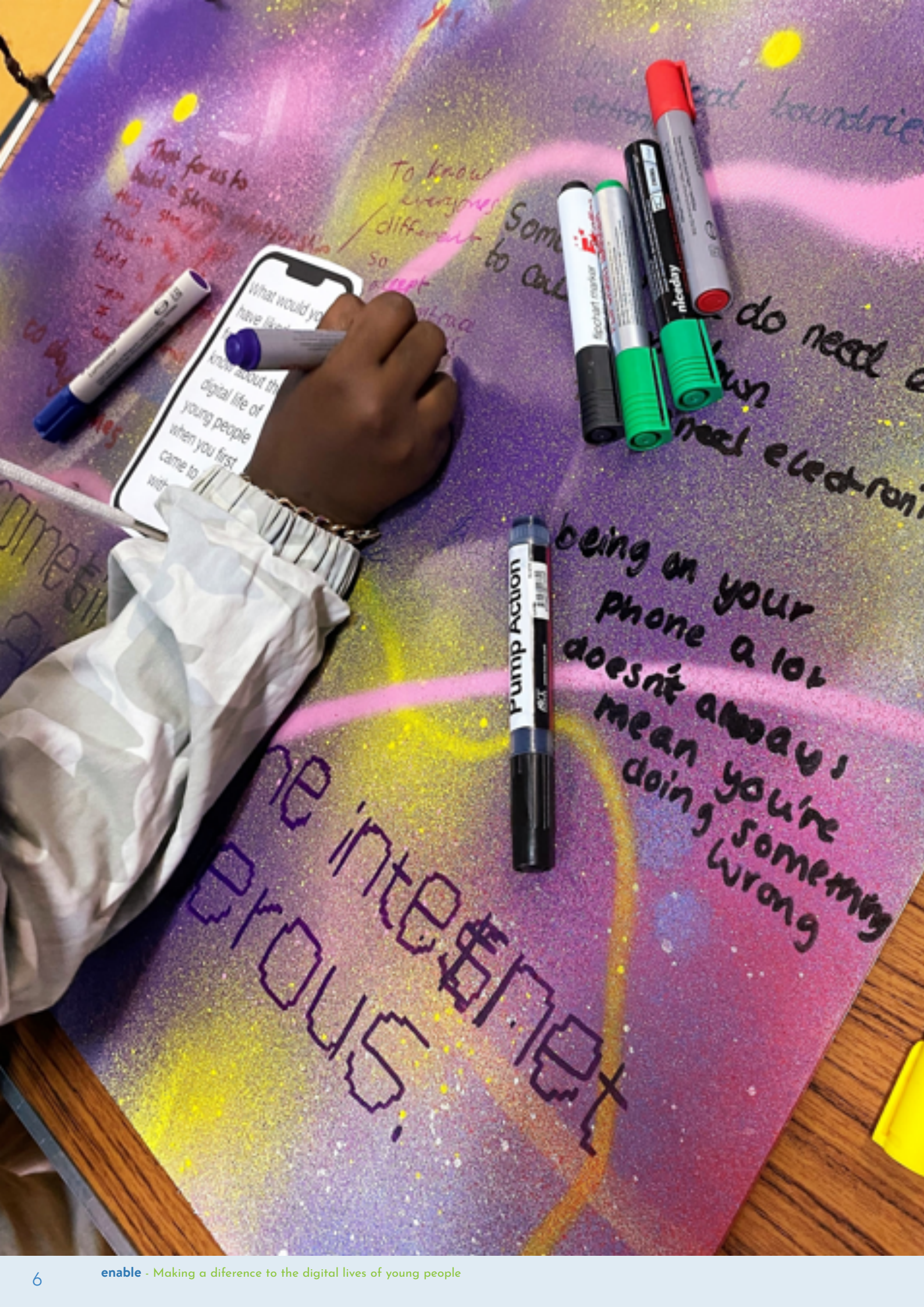
FACILITATOR'S WORKSHOP NOTES.

Getting the questions right

A number of young people commented on the initial research questions.

Those with care experience asked for questions about their placement experience to be removed as they felt these were intrusive and for the wording of certain questions to be changed to make them more accessible.

Nevertheless, certain questions still had to be rephrased during workshops, as some young people struggled to understand a question. We'd recommend that young people with care experience be involved earlier in the research design to enable them to youth-proof research questions, as they bring their own set of insights and perspectives.

Recruitment and Preparation

A short film was made by Priority 1-54 to help recruit young people. This was well received by professionals and shared across several social media platforms that were used by CiCC staff to support and engage young people with care experience.

A creatively designed pack containing research questions was sent to young people prior to the workshops. This meant that they had an opportunity to think about the questions beforehand and so felt more confident in answering certain questions. 23 young people completed the booklet in workshop 1. The use of urban arts to engage young people during the workshops proved to be a really positive and creative way to both incentivise and recruit young people, as well as facilitate discussions around sometimes difficult and sensitive issues within the workshop.

Lockdown and summer holidays

Many of the Children in Care Councils (CiCCs) had only recently started meeting face-to-face since lockdown and were initially unable to find time to schedule in the workshops, at such relatively short notice. Our prior experience of working with CiCC suggests their meetings are often scheduled months in advance and tend to already have a very full agenda. As a result, the project team experienced some slippage in undertaking the workshops whilst negotiating access. Workshops took place during the summer holidays, when CiCCs already have several planned activities

for their CiCC. As mentioned above, making the workshops art-based and fun, meant that certain CiCC felt more inclined to engage with the workshops.

Obstacles – a risk of compromising privacy and restricted technology

We approached a school that was very keen to take part in the project. However, the disclosure of young people's looked after status became an issue.

The school felt that bringing together a group of young people with care experience would compromise their privacy about the fact they were in foster care. We agreed to interview a small number individually, but were unable to do so, due to the time constraints and the start of the summer of holidays.

In Dudley, a small number of young people joined the online meeting using staff laptops which meant they had limited access to some of the functionalities on Teams, i.e. some didn't have access to the chat function so had limited engagement during the workshop.

One young man was quite articulate throughout the workshop, yet we later learned that his foster carer had been present off camera throughout (in the background) but did not make herself known until the end. We need to consider this for future workshops and confidentiality issues.

FACILITATOR'S WORKSHOP NOTES.

Mixed gender groups

Young women seemed reluctant (and in some cases embarrassed) to talk openly about certain issues within the workshop in front of their male peers. For example, the constant request for nudes, being coerced into sending 'nudes' and receiving of 'dick pics' and other sexually explicit content appeared to be a very real issue for many young women.

Yet despite attempts to address this, these issues were never fully addressed in any great depth within the workshops and would have benefitted from further exploration with a female-only workshop. This would have offered a clearer insight into the challenges of talking about sensitive and difficult issues with foster carers and how foster carers subsequently responded to these incidents.

Unexpected numbers in one setting

Support workers asked for several groups to be brought together in workshop 1, so that young people had the opportunity to meet peers from other geographical areas with similar lived experiences. 22 young people were expected, but 30 were present on the day.

Despite help from support workers, the workshop proved difficult to manage due to the age range of those present (9-18) and the additional support needs of a those present. Young people were spilt into two groups to make it more manageable.

Additional support needs

Just under half of the young people had additional needs which had to be taken into account at very short notice during the workshops. As a result, a very small number did struggle to engage with some of the questions.

Making use of the knowledge of CICC participation support workers

CiCC participation support workers often provided a really important insight into the digital lives of young people and could have been a really useful resource in the initial research design. In the workshop, CiCC participation support workers gave really interesting examples of online issues and incidents that had taken place between young people and foster carers.

In one workshop the CiCC support workers were able to prompt young people about these incidents which led to some interesting discussions.

A short debriefing session with CiCC support workers proved really useful and offered further contextual information and insights, not only into the digital lives of young people but their relationship with foster carers and lives more generally.

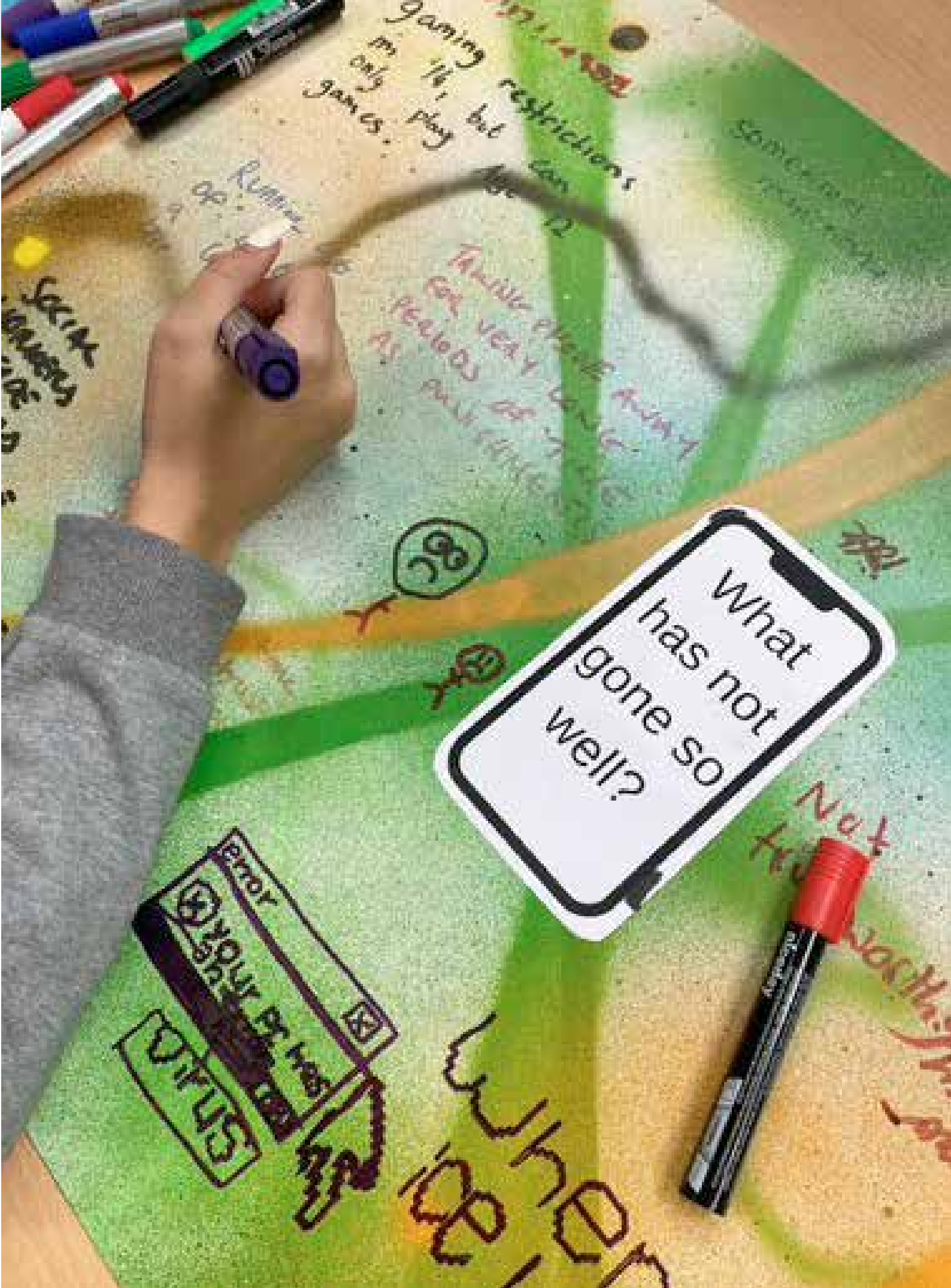## Rewards for young people and reporting back to them

The project team took the decision to reward and recognise young people for taking part in the workshops. This was really appreciated by young people.

The team will need to consider how to report back to the young people the key findings and recommendations, and how these have informed the development of the training programme for foster carers.

EMERGING THEMES

Certain themes emerged consistently across all three workshops:

Treating everyone fairly within a household

'I was told by the foster carers I wasn't allowed 15 or 18 rated games because of my age but then the foster carers' child was the same age as me and they're 18 rated games…it so unfair but it makes you feel differently and not in a good way. We should all be treated the same'

'We get treated differently to our foster carers' children, it's like they care and respect us less'

'I know that they treat us differently [more overprotective about online use] because we are in care'

Overreacting when problems arise online

'Trust don't combust' was the slogan young people developed in workshop Issues of trust and carers overreacting came up in every workshop subsequently.

Young people suggested foster carers should try:

'Not overreacting, talking us through it slowly'

''Stay calm and learn more about things that happen online'

'Foster carers need to understand more about the stuff that happens online, so it would stop them from overreacting'

'Foster carers can overreact in certain situations but could be calmer.

'They shouldn't be so judgemental if something happens'

'Someone who listens to you and doesn't argue with you and stays calm. And calm with their body language. I don't want them getting angry with me'

'Just sit down and have a talk with you. Just sit down and talk and not take your phone away. Please don't over-react and shout because it will just make me shout back and that's when we argue even more'

But definitely not -

'Putting Apps/software on our phone without our permission or knowledge.'

Inconsistency of rules in placements

One 16year old spoke with great insight about the fact they had experienced a series of placements and how each foster carer had a different set of rules.

'You just learn to adapt every time to the situation…if you don't it's going to cause problems with your placement. I suppose in a way it's never been really bad to the point where I've had a major bust-up'

And a girl said:

'I've had a few foster carers and they all do things differently when it comes to online stuff. I mean one carer had a thing about WhatsApps. I don't even know why, and they said that I couldn't use it…but that's what I always use to stay in touch with friends. They made me uninstall it from my phone and I got upset…but that didn't matter. It's like they didn't care how important my friends are to me'

'In placement they don't let you use social media. They don't respect all the ways that we use it'

But for those with multiple placements it is a challenge not to feel like a commodity which might make engaging with new rules rather difficult:

> ❝ *Been moved around like an Amazon package* ❞

Building trust and being trusted

'I don't like risk assessment about my online world and how this is shared with people I don't even know…it's not right or fair'

'They need to care about you, and you need to be able to trust them, but it works both ways, doesn't it?'

'My foster carers talked to me about the rules, so I think they are fair'

'My carers now are really supportive about me and she's helping me get myself back to being myself and my self-confidence has gone right up now since I have been with them'

'Trust Us More' - 'It takes time to build trust, but they should trust us more'

'Not trustworthy. They always take my charger'

To check or not to check phones?

'Checking phones…but that's way over the top'

'It's like they are spies, it's like they don't trust us'

'I think sometimes they have to if they've done something wrong'

'They are keeping us safe though'

'Don't be over-protective…like checking phones every night'

'There should be checks on our phones'

'You can check our phones but not everyone is going to be happy with it'

Adults available when needed

'Adults always say they are too busy. Whenever I need them, they are never there'
[young woman currently in local authority care]

How vital technology is to our lives

'Foster carers who are old, [they] don't always get it though, but what they need to know is that tech is a major part of lives'

'I'm the only child here so I get really lonely and bored, so I need my phone'

'When I changed school during lockdown, they [school] took my laptop back so I didn't have a laptop to do my schoolwork' [Young man who had been permanently excluded from his mainstream school.]

'During the first lockdown, I didn't have a phone for ages, likes months. So, I didn't stay in touch with anyone. That was hard. My foster knew and I kept asking them for ages'

'I like to use the internet as it allows me to communicate with my family and friends via social media. I have found this helpful during lockdown when I wasn't able to see them face to face'

Taking technology away as a punishment or means of control

'When something happened, my foster carer just took my phone and then I got so stressed out. It made things even worse. So please don't take our technology away from us'

'When I got into trouble [foster carer] hid my controllers, but I knew where they were. So I nicked them back and hid them. That caused lots of problems and arguments…too much'

'They shouldn't turn off the Wi-Fi when things go wrong or I get in trouble at school, that's not even connected to me using my phone. I used to be really naughty and when I did anything bad [foster carers] would turn off the wifi and the other people who lived with us [who were in foster care] - they'd get really annoyed with me'

When tech is not helpful

'Sometimes I know I play for too long and that's when I get into arguments with my foster carers'

'Sometimes you get sent things that you don't want'

'Like people who bully you and they make hate comments, that's what I find mean'

> " Sometimes I find using the internet negative as it can create a false image that everyone has a perfect body, this often leads to low self-esteem and people feeling unhappy with how they look "
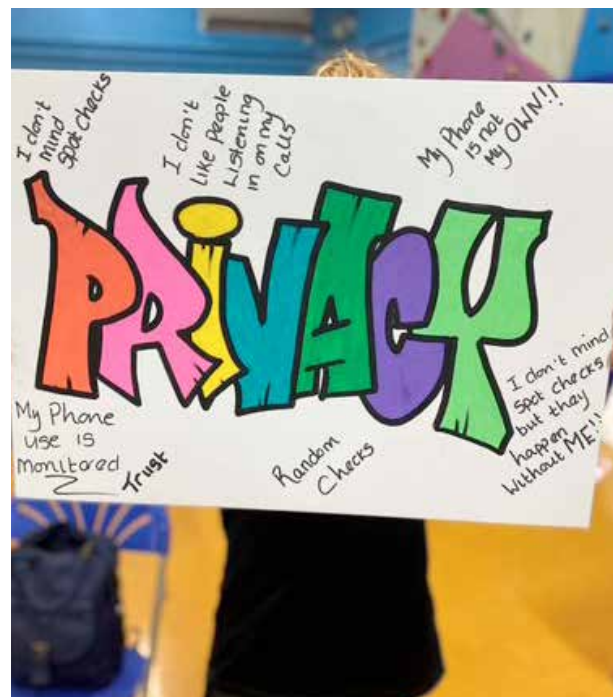
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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TRAINING FOR FOSTER CARERS

Rules that should be put in place by foster carers to keep you safe

'Have a cut-off point at night. But have circumstances when it's mental health-related when you can use that time.' (Related to Apps that help mental health or help with sleep).

'Like in my other placement I had to hand my phone over at 10 which is when I went to bed anyway. But [name of foster carers] takes my phone and puts my phone in her room. Normally it's around 11 o'clock' [young woman]

'For me it was downstairs in the kitchen on charge' [young man]

If you think there should be rules, how should these be agreed?

'Have an age limit but make it fair. Maybe discuss it'

'If they are going to put rules in place, they need to talk to us as well. Sometimes I'm told I have to play outside but there's nothing to do outside, no parks, no nothing and it's even more boring now it's the holidays…there nothing to do where I live…nothing'

'I know that my social worker told my foster about something that happened to me online, and there were loads of things I wasn't allowed to do… but they [foster carer] never once asked me my opinions, it's like they'd already made their mind-up about me and what I can and cannot do online. It just doesn't seem fair' [young woman]

thought might be used, rather than how agreement should be reached.

'In some ways, I am left to manage my own time'

'Everyone needs more rules about everything'

'It's not helpful to have NO screen time'

'One hour a day'

'Can't go on screens at night (after 9:30)'

'Don't have phones upstairs'

'30mins a day'

'Don't use WhatsApp'

'Shouldn't have phones in our room. The reason why I had mine was because I wanted to listen to music to help me sleep'

'Can't talk to friends on Roblox'

'Can't be on my phone late at night'

'A time limit'

'Contact friends – this was stopped'

'Can't use online hacks'

Do you think foster carers can be over-protective?

All the young people agreed.

'I think they can, but I like that because it makes me feel safe' (x2)

'Don't unplug our gaming console when it's time for bed. Give us time to finish the game'.

What went well with your foster carer around your digital life?

'Calmly discussed what is usually awkward to talk about (i.e. social media)'

'Lots of freedom'

'They let me use my electronics'

'Found a studio for my music'

'Because I get to play games'

'Carers are open to learn from young people'

'Age-appropriate games / apps'

'My screen time was healthy'

'Spoke about online safety / cyberbullying'

'They checked my screen time'

'They let me have my phone throughout the day but not late at night'

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TRAINING FOR FOSTER CARERS

What has not gone so well?

'Taking my phone away for very long periods of time as punishment'

'A lot of the time they don't trust you and don't let you make decisions for yourself'

'Foster mum made me stop playing Roblox'

'In placement they don't let you use social media. They don't respect all the ways that we use it'

'My foster carer used to have a timer (on the cooker) which she put on and I get 20 mins to play a game, but it really annoyed me. But now that I left [foster carer into supported living] I can play games 24/7' [young man]

'It's mainly been about having Wi-Fi tuned off. But I've had my phone taken off me. They change the Wi-Fi password and it's so annoying. But sometimes I've stayed up all night [gaming] so I can see why'

The hardest issues to talk to a foster carer about

The **four main issues** that young people said they would find difficult talking to foster carers about, included

- bullying,
- body image (size),
- racism and
- nudes.

(The group dynamics did make it hard to explore these issues in-depth within the large groups in workshop 1. Several young women (aged 14-17) were embarrassed talking openly about the issues in front of others in the group who were younger and particularly the young men.)

Interviewer - Could you explain more why that is?

'I know it's happened to some of my friends, so we talked about it a few times. It's like they don't even know me so I'm going to tell them stuff like that, am I, and like they don't get it. I know they'd over-react'.

'I've been bullied online and people saying really unkind things to me but it's embarrassing so I didn't want to say anything…it was ages before I admitted it was happening [being bullied]'

'Like it's just plain awkward talking to adult about this stuff…they think they know [about nudes] but they don't really'

> " *I would definitely find it difficult talking to a foster carer if I didn't feel I could trust them and that takes time*
>
> *It's just so awkward talking to them about stuff like that (nudes). I got a nude sent to me and I was fine talking to my friends about it, but definitely not my foster carers or social worker*
>
> (young woman). "

This conversation took place in workshop 2, between young people and the interviewer:

'I'd find it difficult to talk about my online friends. Because I don't want them [foster carers] to know everything about who my friends are' [young man]

YP 3 - 'I got bullied a long time ago and then something happened to me [sending nudes to ex-boyfriend], my friend used to like say stuff and I'd be just like, I can't deal with you, and I'd get stressed out, I used to really get stressed out with my friends and then, sometimes I would get really upset, I would cry'

Interviewer - So could you say why you wouldn't talk to foster care about that?

YP 3 - Okay, so they wouldn't understand. It's not just bullying, it's something else. So it was happening to me. Let's just say I was made to do stuff [online], and it was really difficult for me to say anything because it was my x.'

YP4 - Well I still haven't ever told anyone, but it was when people were messaging me off of this account and they were saying really horrible stuff and I couldn't talk to anyone about it and that was really hard.

Interviewer – So why didn't you talk to anyone

YP4 - I've been so used to not talking to people about things anyway' [young woman]

YP4 – 'It really pisses me off when people ask me for nudes, because when I say no it means no'

YP3 – 'That's kind basically what happened to me,

but they basically kept going on and on at me and finally I did'

Interviewer – Can you talk to your foster carers about these kind of things?

YP3 – 'I would be scared to death to say anything'

YP4 – 'I told [name of foster carer] that I had a couple of people ask me to send nudes so I told her, but I blocked them straightaway because obviously I'll tell them no, and then I'll give them a chance to actually process the word NO, you say no, but if you can't respect that. Then bye bye'

> ❝ *We also have to be brave to be able to talk about these awkward things, not just the foster carers* ❞

'it's about trust…I need to be able to trust them but that takes time and if they're putting loads rules in before I even know them, it's like you don't trust from the start'

'I think when you've been in the same foster home for a long time you kinda build up trust with your foster carer that would make it easier because you know them, there like family to you' [young woman]

If it wasn't a foster carer that I knew well then it would be like why are they asking me questions? This is really awkward' [young man]

What would you have liked your carer to know about the digital life of children/teenagers when you first came to live with them?

'Understand the boundaries with electronics'

'That sometimes people do need their electronics to help them calm down'

'There will be issues I don't want to talk about'

'Being on your phone a lot doesn't always mean you're doing something wrong'

'That the internet is safe but also sometimes dangerous'

'That I was abused a lot, but I hide it all the time'

'Set boundaries based on age'

'They do need electronics sometimes'

If a carer wanted to be supportive, but knew little about the internet or smartphones (or internet devices), where should they start?

'Ask a tech expert!'

'Ask the young people – us we know more than most adults'

'YouTube – there's load of stuff there'

'Facebook' x 3

Google/safari'

'Go on a training course'

'They should watch videos on YouTube'

'You could Google it'

'They should get help from a specialist or the foster care services'

'Talk to me'

'Use of the internet and talking to young people as they know more about technology. We were born into the world of social media'

> ❝ *My carers know about most apps and my foster carer knows about tech. But I'm 18 and sometimes it's like you don't wanna ask an adult because you wanna sort it for yourself. When my phone got hacked though, my foster was good. They had all these Apps that they put on my phone, and we eventually got things sorted…so that was good* ❞

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TRAINING FOR FOSTER CARERS

Advice to foster carers

'Advise them and don't get angry at the young people, even if they are over 18, as this will lead to them not opening up about anything in their past or current life.''

'Explain how bullying can be managed

'Change the passwords for you'

'They should know more about technology'

'I think that a foster carer should talk to a child quite frequently about self-esteem, as this is a major issue in today's society and the use of social media. Rules and guidelines should be discussed and agreed between the foster carer and the young person they care for' [young woman]

'Dependant on the child's age I would limit the use of social media. Sit down with the young person and go through what they're sharing online and check that the people they talk to are people that the young person knows and trusts'

'They need to talk openly and honestly about these things'

If something serious happens to people using technology

'Ask about the situation and find about exactly what happed'

'If the situation is serious then they should talk to their Social Worker'

'They need to think about the way they speak, they shouldn't be shouty and they need to stay calm'

'If it's really serious then they need to tell the police'

'If it's at school then they should talk to the teachers but if it's outside of school talk to the SW'

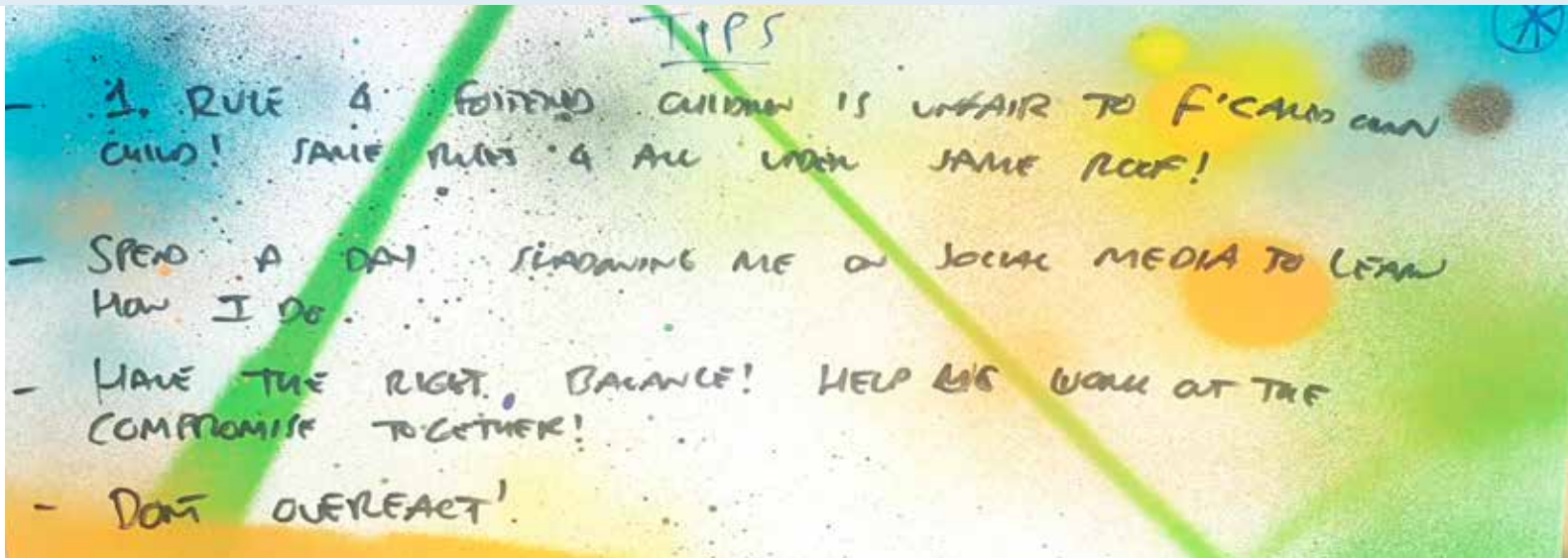'They can sit the child down and talk to them calmly and tell them that they won't get into trouble'

'Try and get across how serious it is but don't raise your voice or get angry or cross with the young person'

'Explain what could happen in the longer term'

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RECOMMENDATIONS BY YOUNG PEOPLE

#Recommendation 1:

'Same rules for all under the same roof' – same rules should apply for all children i.e. to foster children and the foster carers' own children. If not, this can be seen as unfair and cause friction between children. Give the same respect and care to everyone.

#Recommendation 2:

Understand - 'Shadow me for a day on social media' if you want to understand social media and more importantly what young people do online shadow them online and take an interest in what we do online

#Recommendation 3:

'Trust Us' - about how to stay safe online and don't always take the word of our social worker… 'they don't always know us or things that have happened to us' 'My foster carer spoke to my social worker behind my back and she came and limited my time online without even talking to me.'

#Recommendation 4:

'Trust - Don't Combust' and 'Don't Overreact'. If you don't, we are less likely to come to you when things go really wrong.

#Recommendation 5:

Privacy - 'Sometimes our mobile phones don't feel like our own with random spot checks. Sometimes spot checks happen without me, and this feels like an invasion of my privacy. I also don't like foster carers listening in on my phone calls when it's supposed to be private.'

#Recommendation 6:

Connection: 'Help us to stay connected with our family and friends, they are important to us.'

#Recommendation 7:

Find a healthy balance. 'Help us find a healthy balance between how much time we spend online and offline. If you put rules in place, then make sure you do this with us.'

#Recommendation 8:

'Staying in Touch' – 'It's very important for children to stay in touch with their friends especially if they are the only person…phones and gaming allow this'

#Recommendation 9:

'Digital Sanctions' – don't take away our phone, gaming console or switch off Wi-Fi as punishment, we need these to socialise and stay in touch with friends and family.

#Recommendation 10:

Have fun with social media - 'I have lots of fun online with foster carers'

> *So, like yesterday I was out shopping for clothes and I needed help choosing some clothes. So, I took a picture of the clothes and sent it to my foster carer and she said that's a nice top and you should get that*

CONSIDERATIONS TO INFORM THE TRAINING PROGRAMME

Gender

A strong gender split is evident in these workshops – boys tend to describe being in conflict with carers over the time they spend gaming, while girls tend to talk about how to handle or discuss issues with nudes, and the 'impossibility' of talking to a foster carer about these issues. Foster carers could be forewarned so that they might prepare an approach to address these common concerns.

Safeguarding

Serious situations had been identified. Two of the young women referred to their phone being confiscated by police. Others mentioned their phones being checked regularly and in some cases every night. Several young people were comfortable with having their phones checked and said it was a sign the carer 'cares about me'. Others felt their privacy was invaded. Fair boundaries around what they were allowed to do were considered good, unless other children in the household had different rules applied to them.

Challenges to building trust

While some teens spoke very warmly of their foster carers, others mentioned how much they resent being asked questions, or even that they would withhold information from a foster carer until they knew them better. This suggests that foster carers should take things gradually. However, for safeguarding reasons, the foster carer may need to have key information about the young person's online life and digital devices. The Digital Passport provides suggested questions and approaches.

Rules about phones at night

While it was understandable that carers would want to have clear rules about phones at night, some young people argued forcefully for a more nuanced approach. One explained how they could not get to sleep without listening to music on Spotify, while others mentioned being given apps by a therapist to help calm anxiety – which they used in bed at night on their phone. Some are lonely or anxious at night and seek comfort from calling a relative such as a grandmother or sibling. There is a risk that excessive policing of phones might encourage young people to accept devices given to them in secret by others.

Foster carers should:

1. **Be transparent** and involve the young person in discussions and decisions.
2. **Be consistent** – foster a sense of belonging, equality and fairness.
3. **Be present** – ensure the young person feels able to come to you, don't turn them away.
4. **Be aware of the benefits of technology** – not just for communication and entertainment, but also as a coping tool.
5. **Be sensitive when dealing with risk experiences**
6. **Be respectful of privacy** – if phone checks are in place, discuss them with the young person and set expectations.

Link to question booklet: https://bit.ly/3oTQ1hm

Link to invitation:
https://1drv.ms/v/s!AvUpw5WUlW4khMEJVCRgwuXo5CaNw?e=N4hyZq

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