Independent Living Workers Recognize the Need to Help Youth in Care Navigate Technology Use

November 2026

Key Insights

Independent Living (IL) workers who participated in the Older Youth and Technology Study recognize the need to support youth in care with their social media use and want additional training and resources to address relevant risks.

What is the Older Youth and Technology Study?

The Older Youth and Technology Study was conducted by the Child Welfare and Technology Collaborative to understand how child welfare professionals support youth in care with technology access and use. This collaborative included staff and faculty from the University of Pittsburgh, Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Buffalo, and the University of Texas at Austin. The study involved administering multiple surveys with one involving IL Workers, which is the focus of this data brief.

An online survey was administered to IL workers in Pennsylvania in May and June 2023. The questions covered various topics, such as what IL workers discuss with youth on their caseload who use social media, if they have had any training about social media and youth in care, and their desires for training and support to help youth in care navigate technology use. The study focused on Internet communication devices, which included websites and applications that enable communication with others and/or content to be shared (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, etc.), online discussion boards/forums, and direct messaging tools (e.g., text messaging, etc.).

There were 58 IL workers from 34 counties who volunteered to participate in the study.

Findings

IL workers in this study reported that they discuss various risks, healthy and unhealthy online behaviors, and online etiquette with the youth on their caseload who use social media. Table 1 provides the topics discussed. IL workers could select more than one response. Some IL workers provided other relevant points that they discuss, including 1) additional risks of using social media (e.g., how they may give away their physical location, the repercussions of contacting people who are not safe to contact, and the dangers of screen addiction), 2) other ways the youth can protect themselves (e.g. human trafficking prevention), 3) how to use social media professionally (e.g., via LinkedIn), and 4) time management.

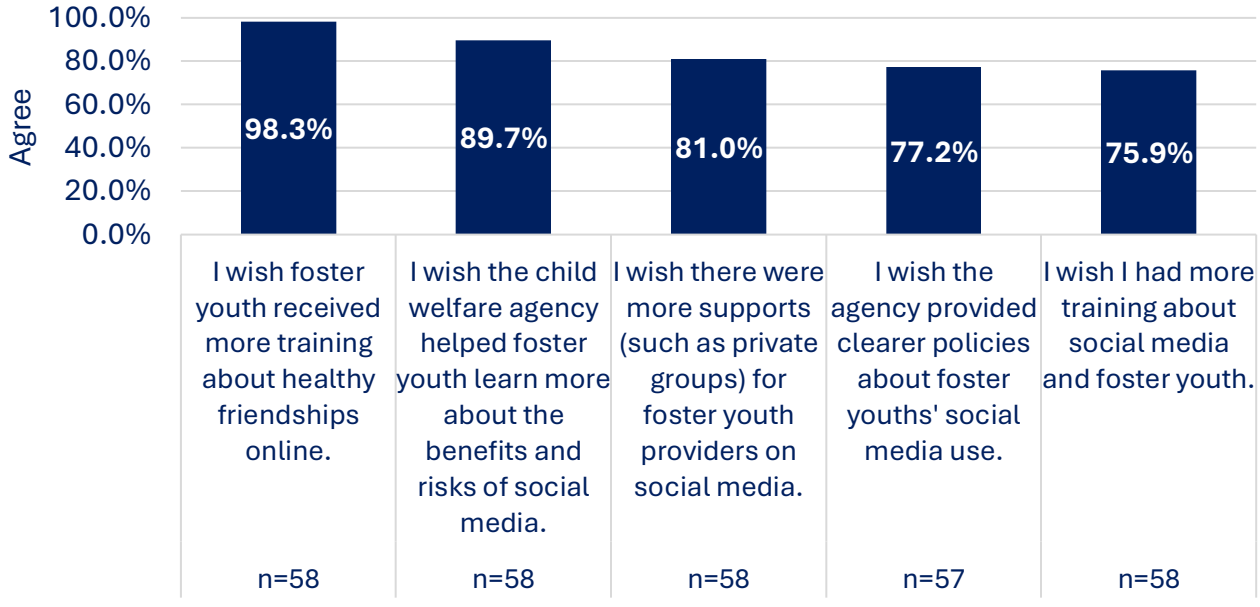
Table 1. What IL Workers Discuss with Youth on Their Caseload (n=58)

Topics	n(%)
The risks of sharing personal information	57 (98.3)
Setting good boundaries with people who ask for help or information online	57 (98.3)
The risks of downloading certain things	53 (91.4)
How to present themselves online	52 (89.7)
Healthy online communication with friends, dating partners, and/or family	51 (87.9)
The risks of going to certain sites	50 (86.2)
What pictures they can share online	49 (84.5)
Online behaviors that are considered bullying, harassment, and/or stalking	47 (81.0)
How to handle disagreements online	39 (67.2)
How to choose user names and email addresses	38 (65.5)
Other	7 (12.1)

Despite having these conversations with youth, a little over half of participants have not received any training about social media and youth in care (51.7%, n = 30). Less than half received training and thought it was helpful (44.8%, n = 26). A couple received training but did not think it was helpful (3.4%, n = 2).

Many IL workers in this study agree with the need for more training, guidance, and support related to social media use among youth in care for themselves, youth, and providers. Figure 1 provides their perspectives on needed support.

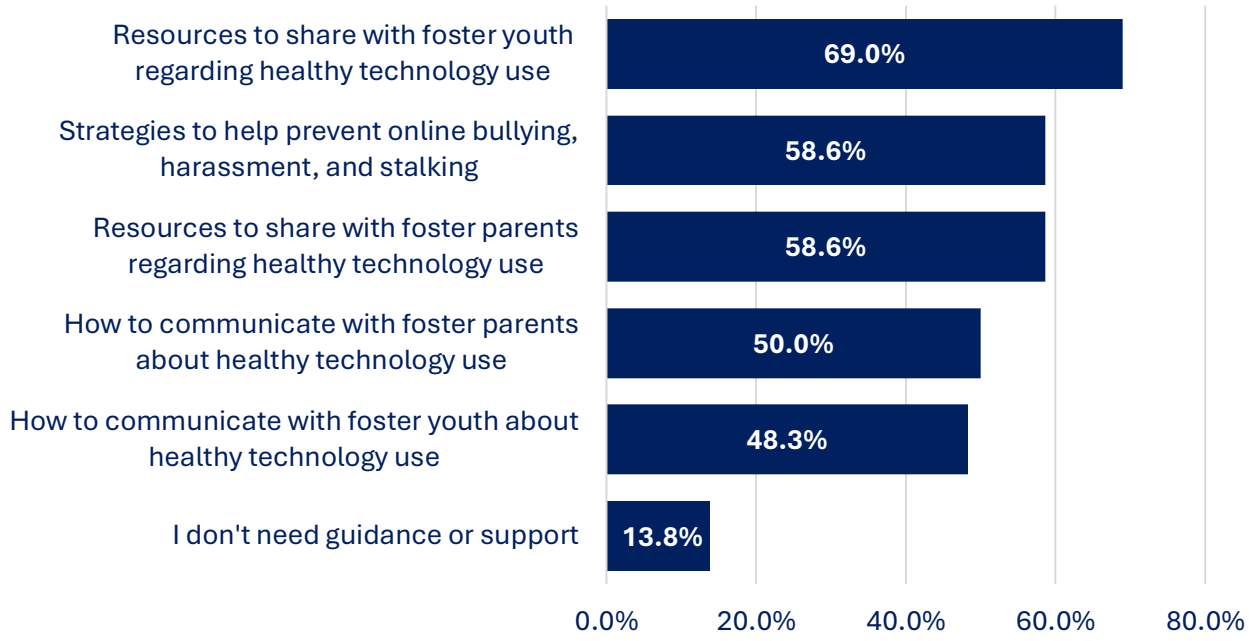
Figure 1. Perspectives About Needed Support



Note: "Agree" includes strongly agree, agree, and somewhat agree responses. These response categories were combined due to a small sample size.

IL workers in this study also desire resources and guidance from their agency about social media and technology use for youth and caregivers. Figure 2 displays the support they desire from their agency. Participants could select more than one response.

Figure 2. Desired Support from Their Agency (n=58)



Why This Matters

Technology plays a vital role in helping all youth transition into adulthood. It provides access to education, employment, housing resources, and social connections that support independence and well-being. Such access is especially important for youth in substitute care, as they often experience unique challenges, such as limited support networks (Sage & Jackson, 2022; Storer et al., 2014) and a disrupted sense of normalcy (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021). However, youth in care are less likely to have access to technology compared to youth in the general United States population (Goldbach, 2016; Vogels et al., 2022). Additionally, youth in care are more likely to experience or engage in adverse behaviors online (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2019; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2015; Stott et al., 2017; Wells & Mitchell, 2008). Yet technology remains a powerful tool for these youth if they learn to use it safely and responsibly.

IL workers can be conduits for teaching and encouraging youth in care to use technology wisely, given that they help youth to build the life skills they need to successfully transition from care to adulthood. Many IL workers in this study are already doing so and are looking for more guidance and support. Ensuring IL workers have the proper support mechanisms and training related to technology use among youth in care is key to making sure youth receive the right guidance and support needed to navigate social media and other technology in a way that benefits their well-being.

What Agencies Can Do

Agencies can learn more about Pennsylvania's Independent Living Program by visiting the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board website: https://www.payab.pitt.edu/AboutILP.htm

Agencies can learn more about technology use among youth and how it impacts their health by visiting the following websites:

- Children and Screens: The Institute of Digital Media and Child Development: https://www.childrenandscreens.org/
- The American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health: https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/
- Child Mind Institute: https://childmind.org/topics/screen-time-technology/

Additionally, IL workers can use the following resources to assist them as they engage with youth and caregivers:

- Digital Wellbeing: Conversations Toolkit: https://ayemind.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Digital-Wellbeing-Conversations-Toolkit-February-2025.pdf
- Conversation Starters: Talking to Kids About Social Media: https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org/-/media/onoursleeves/documents/social-media-conversation-starters.pdf?forcedownload=0
- Family Social Media Plan: https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org/-/media/onoursleeves/documents/social-media-family-plan.pdf?forcedownload=0
- Data Detox X Youth Activity Book: https://cdn.ttc.io/s/datadetoxkit.org/youth/Data-Detox-x-Youth_EN.pdf

About the PACWRC

The PACWRC is a collaborative effort of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, and the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators. Together, we are committed to supporting children, youth, and the child welfare workforce that serves them.

Additional Resources

The full published study can be found here:
Reiss, D. M., Perry, M. A., Gomez, R. J., Tomlinson, C., & Reddish, N. (2026). Exploring the role of independent living workers in how youth in care access and utilize technology. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 43*, 113-128. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-025-01018-w

Contact Us

If you have any questions about this data brief, please contact the PACWRC Research and Evaluation Department at RESupport@pitt.edu.

References

Armstrong-Heimsoth, A., Hahn-Floyd, M., Williamson, H. J., Kurka, J. M., Yoo, W., & Rodríguez De Jesús, S. A. (2021). Former foster system youth: Perspectives on transitional supports and programs. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, *48*(2), 287–305. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-020-09693-6

Badillo-Urquiola, K., Page, X., & Wisniewski, P. J. (2019). Risk vs. restriction: The tension between providing a sense of normalcy and keeping foster teens safe online. *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300497

Goldbach, J. T. (2016). *1 laptop program for foster youth evaluation report*. University of Southern California. https://placercf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/iFoster_2016_1_Laptop_FCC_Evaluation_Report.pdf

Gustavsson, N., & MacEachron, A. (2015). Positive youth development and foster care youth: A digital perspective. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *25*(5), 407–415. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.966223

Sage, M., & Jackson, S. (2022). A systematic review of Internet communication technology use by youth in foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *39*(4), 375–390. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00738-z

Storer, H. L., Barkan, S. E., Stenhouse, L. L., Eichenlaub, C., Mallillin, A., & Haggerty, K. P. (2014). In search of connection: The foster youth and caregiver relationship. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *42*, 110–117. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.04.008

Stott, T. C., MacEachron, A., & Gustavsson, N. (2017). Social media and child welfare: Policy, training, and the risks and benefits from the administrator's perspective. *Advances in Social Work*, *17*(2), 221–234. https://doi.org/10.18060/21263

Vogels, E. A., Gelles-Watnick, R., & Massarat, N. (2022). *Teens, social media and technology 2022*. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/

Wells, M., & Mitchell, K. J. (2008). How do high-risk youth use the Internet? Characteristics and implications for prevention. *Child Maltreatment*, *13*(3), 227–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559507312962