

Social Media Use in Child Welfare Settings

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We recommend the following action items for social work programs and child welfare agencies:

- Develop a social media policy that matches your department's organizational values and goals, and addresses benefits and risks of social media use
- Assess the policy for indicators such as feasibility, acceptability, legal compliance, as well as flexibility to address emerging social media platforms, and its ability to address real-life ethical dilemmas encountered in the child welfare setting
- Include discussions of the social media policy in other trainings, such as trainings on ethics, boundaries, or confidentiality
- Describe, discuss, and offer examples of professional and unprofessional social media use
- Educate supervisors, managers, and colleagues in issues related to social media use so they can provide appropriate guidance to students and employees

The following case scenarios can be used in class or agency training

Scenario 1: Tammy

Tammy is a seasoned child welfare foster care worker who often works with the same teenage youth in care for months to years. She keeps a separate private "work" Facebook account in which she "friends" many of her teenage clients, and they approve (and sometimes initiate) her friend request. This is not prohibited by any current agency policy. She feels this helps her develop stronger working relationships with youth, and also allows her to monitor their online behavior. She sets her privacy settings so that her friends list is not visible. One day she sees that her client has disclosed through a Facebook post that she is leaving school to "get high" with her new boyfriend.

Discussion. Tammy made some choices about how to manage her relationship with her client. She is keeping her private Facebook profile separate from her work Facebook profile. Her clients may prefer communication through social media. However, though her intention was to develop a stronger working relationship, she is now faced with a dilemma that may jeopardize the relationship and cause harm to the client-worker relationship. Failure to act on the information may result in harm to the client. Does the agency have liability should the worker either act, or not act, on the information about the client's plans? Is she implicitly approving of the behavior if she does not address it? How should she document this information in the case file, and how should she share it with the courts and the biological parents if parental rights are still intact? Should Tammy comment on the Facebook post, or ask the youth to remove the information? Since Tammy has established that she will monitor youth behavior via social media, is she responsible if she accidentally misses a critical post while not checking her account for several days? Do all the Facebook posts become a part of the case file?

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