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## Vulnerability and safeguarding: the social work 'trump cards' for the digital age

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# “Vulnerability and Safeguarding”: the social work trump cards

**The Open University**

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# Contemporary social work



Waterhouse and McGhee (2002)

- Sound childcare decisions
- Effective inter-agency working
- Inter-disciplinary collaboration
- Child's best interests is to have paramountcy at all times



# Challenges of the Internet and social media in social work

- **Fostering**

- Fursland (2011)
- Community Care article (2012)

The screenshot shows a Windows Internet Explorer browser window displaying a blog post. The address bar shows the URL: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/blogs/childrens-services-blog/2013/05/foster-care-in-a-digital-world-secret-mobile-phones-and-re-child-proofing-the-kinde/7c>. The page title is "Foster care in a digital world: 'Secret mobile phones and re-child-proofing the Kindle'". The author is Camilla Pemberton, a Journalist, and the post is dated 16 May, 2013, categorized under "fostering".

The main content area features a photograph of a person's hands holding a black smartphone. Below the photo, the text reads: "The ever-expanding digital landscape can be a terrifying area for foster carers to navigate, but there are many less-reported positive sides to this too, writes the *secret foster carer*". A quote follows: "When a new foster child arrives in our home we let them unpack then go over our house rules. One of these is: 'Your mobile phone stays downstairs, on the table in the hall, please.'"

The right sidebar contains a search bar, a "Categories" dropdown menu, and a "CommunityCare Jobs" advertisement with the text "Be found by leading employers" and "YOUR CV". Below the ad, there is a "Latest from Community Care" section with a link to "'Attendance allowance must be reformed... but not means-tested'" and another link to "Ofsted to replace 'good' rating with new 'requires improvement' rating". At the bottom of the sidebar, there is a link for "More rights for young carers after government law change".

The browser's taskbar at the bottom shows several open applications: "start", "Community Care - Mic...", "SST", "Microsoft PowerPoint...", and "Foster care in a digita...". The system tray on the right shows the time as 13:38 and the date as 13/05/2013.



# Challenges of the Internet and social media in social work

- **Adoption**

- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2012)
- Oakwater (2012)
- Post Adoption Resource Centre, Australia (Adams, 2012)



# The reaction by the social work profession

- polemic
- tsunami effect



# Michael's story



- 13 years of age
- posts a nude picture of himself on Facebook
- Michael's foster carers are alerted to the picture by his grandmother
- Michael offers no explanation as to why he posted the picture
- Michael on the verge of being excluded from school

# Michael's story



- Social Worker's solution is to encourage the foster carers to set up a false Facebook account and monitor Michael.



# Michael's story



*“It’s about the foster carer protecting the privacy, because that privacy can be compromised by other people, because Facebook is quite dangerous, other people can get in touch and I’m not saying we have done this with every case, but in those cases where the children are vulnerable..”* (Social Work Practitioner)

# Michael's story



- Michael performing for his peers (boyd and Marwick, 2011)
- Michael engaging in developmental tasks (Hill, 1983)
- Michael exercising impression management (Goffman, 1963)





# Monitoring and management

Pew Internet Project (Madden et al. 2012)

- 50% of parents of adolescent children use parental controls to monitor activity online
- parents forge connections on social media with their adolescent children as part of passively observing their behaviour
- Parents worried by;
  - reputational damage
  - stranger danger
  - personal disclosure of a sensitive nature



# Monitoring and management

- Adolescents are reluctant to be ‘friended’ by their parents (boyd and Marwick, 2011)





# Risks posed by surveillance

- Adolescents ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of both the online and offline worlds
- Breeds a culture of mistrust

*“Uncertainty over parenting roles and children’s independence....is resulting in a tactical dance between parents and children. Parents’ attempts to control their children’s use of the Internet and children’s attempts to evade control (Livingstone, 2005)*



# Ethical dilemma

- Surveillance (active or passive)
  - Misinterpretation of communication
- Active mediation



# Issues of power

- Adults are not able to access the content of communication being shared (Buckingham, 2007)
- Young people do want to exercise control (boyd and Marwick, 2011)
- Children's right agenda and social work practice (Articles 12, 13 and 16)



# Fostering Network



*“You wouldn’t expect children to cross a road without teaching them how, and the same applies to the web. However, you wouldn’t ban children from crossing the roads because of the dangers, nor make them feel that every time they do they are likely to get run over, a positive and safe approach is what is called for”*  
(Fostering Network, 2011)



**Questions**