

Foster care on the Internet

Is there a role for the Internet in assisting with the changing face of foster care into the 21st century?

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a view and understanding of the nature of the Internet, and the possible benefits in assisting foster caregivers, foster care agencies and persons in out-of-home care.

The Internet has been with us for most of this decade. Its original role was to ensure that computer-to-computer communication proceeded in a de-centralised fashion, in the event of catastrophes. Such computer-to-computer communication has become so widespread and we now refer to it as the Internet. Alongside the technological development, has been the development of means of placing information on the web for all to view and its access by anyone connected to the Internet, anywhere. Further, communication between people through the use of e-mail has also developed.

As for the impact of the Internet and the web, there are those who fear the new technology, and others who embrace it totally. The paper will take a path somewhere in between these extremes by looking at the Internet as a mechanism for empowerment of the individual through the access to the huge amount of information that is freely available on the Internet. Seeking out information is not always easy, and then assimilating such information for increased knowledge and hopefully increased wisdom is the new challenge, particularly when put into the context of foster care.

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The paper will demonstrate how we can gather relevant information for the benefit of all involved: government, agencies, foster caregivers and the persons in out-of-home care. We will consider these three situations:

Governments and Agencies can use the Internet as a management and publicity tool. General policies and reports can be placed on the web, as seen in the web site for the N.S.W. Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies (www.acwa.asn.au) and the Barnardos Children's Charity (www.barnardos.org.au), and Inner South Foster Care (<http://www.vicnet.net.au/~isfc>). Our own state government has a site at (<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/yafs/index.htm>).

With the upcoming generation who are far more computer literate, and who will use the Internet as a normal part of their daily lives, the web can present a good marketing tool by agencies for prospective caregivers.

Equally important is the information on the issues relating to foster care that can benefit foster care workers in researching aspects of their professional work, and opportunities to assist in enhancing their knowledge through this research. The information can be anything from government reports, through to published research from academia. One example is the research is being carried out by a group at Catholic University of Nijmegen, Faculty of Social Sciences, Dept. of Special Education and Child Guidance, under Dr Lucas M.H. Robbroeckx, "Researchprogramme: Childrearing and care-giving processes in foster care" (<http://www.socsci.kun.nl/ped/ortho/robbroeckx/robbroeckx.html>) !! Another is a site directed at "Lifting the Veil: Examining the Child Welfare, Foster Care and Juvenile Justice Systems"

(<http://home.rica.net/rthoma/index.html>). This site indeed provides a critical look at the Foster Care System!

Foster caregivers can use the Internet a tool for information on practical matters, not necessarily directly related to fostering, as with caseworkers, but also positive parenting (eg, <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/6205/parenthp.html>) and health information (eg, <http://194.70.69.4/headlice/interne.htm> provides nits advice for parents, teachers and health workers). Also foster parent associations are represented. Some examples in this category include our own Foster Care Association of Victoria (<http://www.vicnet.net.au/~fcav/>). Further, the National Foster Parents Association (<http://www.nfpainc.org/>) and the Canadian Foster Parent Home Page (<http://home.ica.net/~sharyn/>), whilst directed at the US and Canadian experiences, provide a feeling that foster caregivers are not alone. Some of these sites also provide chat areas for direct communication among caregivers.

Foster children are represented through sites that promote the issues relevant to them, particularly as they go through and come out of the foster care system. One site is <http://www.asztarnet.com/~marier/sos/>, where the 'survivors of the system' speak out on their needs for support and networking, and promote the need to improve services. The site invites responses from viewers on things such as songs and movies that have impacted on individual children and youth.

The Internet is here to stay. What we do with it is up to us. The positive view is that judicious access to the Internet is an empowering one for all concerned in the foster care area, and therefore can only be useful in assisting the changing face of foster care into the 21st Century!