



RESOURCE LIST

STRONG FAMILIES

How can youth and families involved with **child welfare access** needed technology?

Although the need to address the digital divide has persisted for years, the COVID-19 pandemic has further [magnified technology-related inequities](#) in terms of access to both basic equipment and broadband. The nationwide closure of schools and workplaces abruptly forced people to learn and work from home for an indefinite and lengthy period of time. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 53% of Americans say [the internet has been “essential”](#) during the pandemic (an additional 34% say it has been “important, but not essential”). For families involved with the child welfare system, access to technology during the pandemic has been essential for maintaining [family time](#) and connection.

Ensuring all youth and families have equal opportunity to connect with virtual supports and access essential services is key to effective primary and secondary prevention, and to child and family well-being. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a sense of urgency to providing youth and families with access to technology, the progress made needs to continue once the crisis subsides as current resources are not sufficient. **Computers and internet access should be considered basic needs for youth and families involved with child welfare, with federal, state, and local policies and budgets revised accordingly.**



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Technology for families

Since technology reaches into so many aspects of everyday life, access to the internet for parents and families is crucial. Parents rely on the internet to find and apply for jobs and to find places to live. Schools use technology to [engage and communicate with families](#), and research shows that when schools send [weekly text messages](#) to parents, students increase class attendance and pass more classes. In addition, many family resources and services are accessed online, such as child care subsidies and other government assistance programs. For families with older caregivers, including grandparents and other kin, their learning how to use technology may also be critical.

Technology for youth in foster care

Longitudinal studies in three California counties of youth in foster care who received computers demonstrated improvements in academic performance, social connectedness, and life satisfaction. Yet research indicates that most youth in foster care do not have consistent access to technology. The [report](#), conducted for [iFoster](#), found that only about 5% of youth in foster care in rural settings and 21% of youth in foster care in urban settings have regular access to a computer. iFoster notes that access to computers and software is consistently the most commonly requested resource in surveys of its nationwide community of foster care agencies, caregivers, and youth in foster care.

Youth in foster care and alumni of foster care already face [challenges in completing their education](#), and lack of technology access intensifies these challenges. Further, given the important role [technology and social media](#) play in the lives of young people, youth in foster care who lack access to technology are often excluded from opportunities to connect with their family and peers via online platforms.

As for all children and youth, technology use by youth in foster care comes with risks, including the

QUANTIFYING THE IMPACT

The digital divide reflects lower rates of technology access for [people living in rural areas](#), people with low incomes, and [Black and Latinx people](#). According to a [2019 Pew Research study](#), over 40% of adults with low incomes report not having access to broadband at home, compared to less than 10% of higher income adults. Although most major internet providers offer cost breaks to subscribers with low incomes, [the residents often are unaware of the discounts](#).

These inequities affect students' ability to complete homework: a 2018 survey of youth found that 17% (particularly Black students and students from lower-income households) reported challenges completing their homework because they lacked internet access — an aspect of the digital divide often referred to as the [digital “homework gap”](#). Prior to the pandemic, [students without internet access](#) reported doing homework in coffee shops and fast food restaurants (36%), on public transportation (34%), or in public libraries (31%). Many of these options have not been available during the pandemic. While efforts do exist nationally to expand broadband availability, they [often discriminate against Blacks](#) and other communities of color.

potential for psychological harm and interactions with unsafe people. Children and youth in foster care may have [unique needs](#) in this area and foster parents have requested [more support](#) in keeping youth safe while online. Access to technology for youth in foster care should come with training and, as needed, restrictions to potentially harmful content. In addition, special attention should be paid to relative caregivers, particularly older adults who may need assistance learning how to access technology.

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Federal support during the pandemic

Recently developed federal resources for connecting youth and families to technology:

RESOURCE	DETAILS
Federal Communications Commission, <i>Keep Americans Connected Initiative</i> (2020)	Launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this initiative asks telephone and internet service providers to sign a pledge not to terminate service to residential and small business due to inability to pay, to waive late fees to residential and small businesses, and to make existing Wi-Fi hotspots available to all through June 30, 2020. Over <i>800 provider and trade associations</i> have signed the pledge.
Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <i>Letter to child welfare leaders</i> (2020)	This letter permits the purchase of cell phones (for children, biological parents, and foster parents) as an allowable expense under Title IV-B and/or the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood if access to a cell phone helps facilitate participation in program services and case management. However, it does not include support for the purchase of laptop computers.
Think of Us, <i>March 2020 virtual town hall</i> (2020)	During the pandemic, <i>Think of Us</i> co-hosted virtual town halls with the Children's Bureau that involved over 1,000 youth in foster care, alumni of foster care, and advocates. During the March town hall, technology was the fourth most commonly listed need (after food, housing, and healthcare).



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Local strategies

Examples of a few states and localities that have taken action to ensure youth and families have access to technology:

PROGRAM/AGENCY	DETAILS
Detroit Public Schools Foundation, <i>Connected Futures Initiative</i> (2020)	This collaboration of philanthropic, community, and business leaders was able to provide devices and internet connectivity to 51,000 students within three weeks of the pandemic hitting the city of <i>Detroit</i> (where as many as 90% of students lack access to a device or the internet at home).
California Public Utilities Commission and iFoster, <i>California LifeLine program</i> (2019)	<i>Pilot program</i> provides current and former foster youth with cell phones, including an internet hotspot and unlimited data, text, and voice. When the pandemic hit, the California Department of Social Services <i>expedited the foster care verification process</i> to speed up access to technology for youth in foster care. California Gov. Gavin Newsom <i>allocated extra funding</i> to assist youth in foster care in accessing technology, and directed the state to distribute laptops in the State Surplus Property Program to youth in foster care attending higher education institutions.
Arizona Department of Child Safety, <i>Fostering Achievement through Computer Technology</i> (2018)	Provides training and technology to youth in Arizona's foster care system, and includes online safety/responsibility training provided by the Phoenix Police Department's Internet Crimes Against Children Unit and the state Attorney General's Office.
Pritzker Foster Care Initiative, <i>Foster Care Counts</i> (n.d.)	Partners with advocacy organizations in Los Angeles to address gaps in service and improve access to resources for youth in foster care. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, sponsored additional efforts to meet the needs of foster youth in college, including access to appropriate technology to keep up with schooling.



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Efforts to shrink the digital divide

Several federal programs and nonprofit agencies focus on decreasing the digital divide through the provision of devices and training:

PROGRAM/AGENCY	DETAILS
ConnectHomeUSA	Increases access to technology for people living in U.S. Housing and Urban Development-assisted housing.
Connected Nation	Develops and provides tools and resources to local communities, states, and federal agencies to improve broadband and access to technology. Connected Nation has several digital inclusion programs , including one in Kentucky and Tennessee that provides families with low incomes with devices and training, including children in foster care. Its Community Connectivity COVID-19 Response Plan includes step-by-step strategies to improve connectivity, including access to devices, internet service, and training; community outreach; and development of long-term plans to expand infrastructure and connectivity.
EveryoneOn	Connects low-income families to affordable computers and internet service providers, and provides digital skills training.
iFoster	Provides training and resources to children in foster care, and delivered over 5,000 devices in the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Lifeline	Offers discounts on phone and internet access to low-income households through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC says it has made it easier and faster for people to access these discounts during the COVID-19 pandemic by waiving usage requirements and speeding up enrollment for people who lost their employment during the pandemic.
One Simple Wish	Distributes laptops to youth currently in foster care through community partnerships and to alumni of foster care directly.
Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)	The mission of OATS is to help seniors learn and use technology. This program may be helpful for grandparents or older relatives caring for children.
TechSoup	Provides software and refurbished computers to nonprofits at deep discounts, as well as on-call technical support .
Ticket to Dream Foundation	Provides laptop access and other essential goods to youth in foster care through its nationwide network of nonprofit partners.

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Resources to access technology

These resources provide information about programs and strategies that aim to increase access to technology:

SOURCE	DETAILS
American Bar Association, <i>Tips to Ensure Your Child Clients Have Access to Technology</i> (2020)	List of organizations providing free or low-cost technology and internet access to youth in foster care.
HighSpeedInternet.com, Are there Programs Available to Help Make Internet Service More Affordable (2020)	List of programs offering free or low-cost internet access. A survey was recently conducted to learn more about the experience of families in accessing these services.
National Digital Inclusion Alliance, State Government COVID-19 Digital Inclusion Response and Local Government COVID-19 Digital Inclusion Response (2020)	Compilation of state and local government responses to digital inclusion during the pandemic.
Think of Us, How to Ensure Youth Have Technology Devices (n.d.)	Ideas and resources to help youth in foster care gain access to technology.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

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