RESOURCE LIST

SAFESTRONGSUPPORTIVE

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How can the child welfare system help youth and families access needed technology?

Although the need to address the [digital divide](#) has persisted for years, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and [magnified inequities](#) in accessing essential technology equipment and broadband. This was particularly true for children and families involved with the child welfare system, as they needed quality access to technology in order to connect with a variety of critical services, including [telehealth](#), and maintain [family time](#) and family connection. Many of the strategies taken to improve technology access for children in foster care and their families during the pandemic remain applicable, providing an action plan template for today.

Ensuring all youth and families have equal access to virtual services is key to preventing child maltreatment, and promoting overall child and family well-being. **Computers and internet access should be considered basic needs for youth and families involved with the child welfare system, and federal, state, and local policies and budgets should reflect that.**

Technology for families

Technology reaches into many aspects of everyday life. Parents rely on the internet to find and apply for jobs and places to live. Schools use technology to [engage and communicate with families](#). Research shows that when schools send [text messages](#) to caregivers about their children's attendance and class performance, students improve their attendance and pass more classes. In addition, many family resources and services — such as childcare subsidies and other government assistance programs — are accessed online. Learning how to use technology also may be especially critical for families with older caregivers, such as grandparents.

Technology for youth in foster care

Longitudinal studies of youth in foster care in three California counties 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. 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 the 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 often are excluded from opportunities to connect with their family and peers via online platforms.

The purchase of cell phones (for children, parents, and foster parents) is an allowable expense under Title IV-B and 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.

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 Pew Research Center, as of February 2021, 43% of people whose household income is $30,000 or less report not having access to broadband at home, compared to 8% of people whose household income is $75,000 or more. Although most major internet providers offer cost breaks to subscribers with low incomes, customers may be unaware of the discounts.

It is estimated that nearly 17 million K-12 students do not have internet access at home. This affects students' ability to complete homework: a 2018 survey found that 17% of youth reported challenges completing their homework because they lacked internet access. This digital 'homework gap' is especially pronounced among Black students and students from lower-income households. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance argues that nationwide efforts to expand broadband availability tend to focus on rural communities, thereby often excluding Blacks and urban communities of color.

As is the case for all young people, technology use by youth in foster care comes with risks, including the 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 education and training and, if needed, restrictions to potentially harmful content. In addition, special attention should be paid to kinship caregivers, particularly older adults who may need assistance in understanding and ultimately mitigating the risks of open access to technology.

Local strategies

Examples of action taken to ensure youth and families have access to technology:

Resource	Details
Arizona Department of Child Safety, *Fostering Achievement through Computer Technology* (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.
California Public Utilities Commission and iFoster, *California LifeLine program* (2019)	A pilot program provided current and former youth in foster care with mobile phones, complete with unlimited data, text, and voice. When the pandemic hit, the California Department of Social Services expedited the foster care verification process to speed up access to technology for youth in foster care. California Gov. Gavin Newsom allocated extra funding to assist youth in foster care in accessing technology and directed the state to distribute state surplus laptops to youth in foster care attending higher education institutions.
Pritzker Foster Care Initiative, *Foster Care Counts* (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, the foundation expanded its efforts to meet the needs of foster youth in college by providing access to technology to help them with their schooling.

Efforts to shrink the digital divide

Several federal programs and nonprofit agencies focus on addressing the digital divide providing devices and training:

Program/Agency	Details
Affordable Connectivity Program	A Federal Communications Commission benefit program launched in 2021, the Affordable Connectivity Program provides discounts on internet service and purchases computers and tablets for people whose household income is below 200% of the federal poverty line or who meet other specific criteria.
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 devices and training to families with low incomes, including households with children in foster care.
EveryoneOn	Connects low-income families to affordable computers and internet service providers, and provides digital skills training.
iFoster	Delivered over 5,000 devices to children in foster care during 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. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the FCC waived usage requirements and sped up enrollment for people who lost their employment.
One Simple Wish	During the COVID-19 pandemic, distributed laptops to youth in foster care through community partnerships and to alumni of foster care directly.
Older Adults Technology Services	Helps seniors learn and use technology. This program may be helpful for grandparents or older relatives caring for children.
Ticket to Dream Foundation	During the pandemic, the foundation provided laptops and other essential technology to youth in foster care through its nationwide network of nonprofit partners.

Resources to access technology

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

Source	Details
HighSpeedInternet.com, *Are there Programs Available to Help Make Internet Service More Affordable?* (2020)	List of programs offering free or low-cost internet access.
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, many of which may be applicable today.
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.

Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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