Understanding the Unique Online Challenges Faced by Teens in the Foster Care System

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Abstract

While there has been much research studying technology in family contexts, little to no research has explored the challenges and risks faced online by teens and their parents in foster care situations. To address this gap, we have begun to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with foster parents of teens. Our preliminary findings suggest that teens in foster care situations face unique offline challenges (e.g., victims of sex trafficking or rape) that make them more vulnerable to online risks. In addition, foster parents struggle with managing the high-risk online behavior of their foster teens. The purpose of this paper is to present our early findings to help unpack the challenges and the problem context for online safety for "at-risk" adolescents in the foster care system.

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Foster Teens; Foster Parents; Foster Care; Online Safety; Qualitative Methods

ACM Classification Keywords
K.4.1 Computers and Society: Public Policy Issues

Introduction
The CSCW community has shown an increased interest in understanding adolescents' online behaviors,

including those involving online risks [1,8]. However, research has yet to empirically investigate the online risky behaviors that teens in foster home situations may encounter. In the U.S. alone, there are currently over 400,000 children in foster care [9]. Each year, over 200,000 children are taken away from their families and placed into foster care. About 30% of the children in foster care are between the ages of 13 and 20. This vulnerable population of teens is at a significantly higher risk of a myriad of risks, such as substance abuse [5], teen pregnancy [6], poor health [4], homelessness, criminal behavior, and mental illness [7]. Teens with histories of sexual or physical abuse or placement instability are more susceptible to experiencing these negative consequences in the future [7]. Yet, little research has examined online risk behaviors of foster youth. Therefore, the goal of this research is to identify the key challenges faced by foster parents and foster teens regarding their online safety. An end goal of our research is to find educational and design-oriented solutions to tackle some of these challenges. In this poster, we address the following questions:

- Do foster teens face unique challenges compared to typical teens? If so, what are they?
- Do teens encounter the same or different types of online risks as typical teens? If so, what are the characteristics of these online interactions?
- Do foster parents face unique challenges regarding online risk-seeking behaviors of teens in their homes? If so, what are they?

Methodology
Initial participants were recruited from a contact list provided by an acquaintance from Children and Family

Services. Their eligibility was based on the following criteria: 1) must be 18 years or older, and 2) must have been a foster parent to one or more teens (ages 13-17) in the last 5 years. Participants were given a $20 Amazon gift card for their participation. Thus far, we have interviewed 8 foster parents.

Informed consent was obtained prior to participating in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via face-to-face or over the phone (see side bar 1 for sample questions). Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to fill out a short demographics questionnaire and to refer us to other potential participants that may be eligible and interested in participating in the study. For descriptive statistics of our participant pool, see side bar 1. To answer our research questions, we combined contextual inquiry with thematic analysis [2]. This qualitative technique is frequently used for identifying patterns within text-based data. The first author, with the input of her advisor and a research assistant, worked to come to a consensus on the three most prevalent themes for this initial stage of analysis.

Interview Findings
The three main themes that emerged from this initial data collection are: 1) Unique Challenges of Foster Teens, 3) High-Risk Online Interactions, and 3) Online Mediation Parenting Challenges.

Unique Challenges of Foster Teens
The majority of the parents interviewed (5 out of 8) agreed that there are challenges that are unique to foster teens. Many of these challenges derive from the

"drama" and "trauma" these children have faced throughout their short lives (See P1 in side bar 2 for participant quotes). Teens presented attachment issues and the inability to regulate their emotions effectively. Approximately half of the foster parents described this challenge as the teen searching for "approval," "attention," or "affection" (See P3 quote). Therefore, teens tended to "look for love" in other places, which led to having high-risk interactions online. Many of these teens also faced rejection and disappointment from their biological families. The foster parents explained that this led them to have trust issues with many adults, including their foster parents.

High-Risk Online Interactions
We originally inquired about online risks that the teens may have encountered online (e.g., information breaches, online harassment, sexual solicitations, and exposure to explicit content [8]), expecting to hear fairly typical accounts of pornography exposure or occasional sexual flirtations. However, six parents described situations in which their teens would use technology to engage in extremely inappropriate behaviors, such as taking selfies of themselves naked or sexting (See P1 in side bar 2). Otherwise, teens had numerous conversations with untrusted adults (typically men) that manipulated them to sneak out of their homes. These "elopements" were often facilitated through the use of mobile devices (See P1 in side bar 2). Unfortunately, for some of the teens, these "rendezvous" led them to be "raped" or fall into the dark world of "sex trafficking" (See P4 in side bar 3). We were somewhat surprised by the high-level of risk posed to teens through their online interactions, as our previous work suggested that teens are not as risk-

seeking online, nor do they encounter such high-risk situations as frequently [8].

Parenting Challenges
All of the foster parents expressed some concerns with trying to manage their teens' technology usage. Four parents admitted that they typically allowed unmediated use because the teen "owned" the technology (See P2 in side bar 3). Therefore, foster parents explained that they had no control over their teen's online behavior, especially via the teens mobile phone. Some parents tried to set boundaries, but were frustrated that no matter what rules they intended to implement, the teen would undermine their authority. Furthermore, each parent was acutely aware the many challenges their teen had faced during their life. As such, five parents felt the need to "overcompensate" for these voids. Otherwise, some teens had a sense of "entitlement," making it harder for parents to implement house rules (See P1 in side bar 3). A key tension for the foster parents was that since they were not the teens' "real" parents, they did not feel that they had the same level of authority as a biological or adoptive parent. In summary, parents of foster teens felt at a loss for how to manage the negative online behaviors of their teens.

Discussion and Future Research
The initial findings presented in this paper suggest that teens in foster care situations are indeed at a higher risk of facing online challenges due to their troubled pasts. Additionally, foster parents face their own challenges when trying to keep teens in their homes safe from these online risks. Further research into these challenges will help us better understand this unique context and develop intervention strategies for

supporting foster parents and teens with these challenges. We plan to conduct further interviews to generalize our results and overcome some of the current limitations of our work. While it is typical to have a majority of female participants in family research [1,3], for instance, we plan to recruit more male foster parents. We plan to conduct interviews until we can ensure saturation of our findings. We have identified over 10 organizations within the state of Florida for participant recruitment and are in the process of forming relationships within these organizations.

Our future results will provide a solid foundation for understanding the unique needs of foster families so that we can design educational and technology-based intervention solutions. Finally, solutions for this particularly vulnerable population need to be customized to meet their unique challenges. To accomplish this, we plan to investigate this context more holistically by exploring the foster care system itself by interviewing case workers and teens in foster care. We will implement an iterative design process with our participants to potentially develop an effective mobile app solution for monitoring teen online behavior, as well as an educational program that will promote healthy online behaviors. The goal is to build an evidence-based and replicable program within the state of Florida that can then be implemented in foster care systems throughout the state of Florida.

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