

# Fostering in a digital age

A consultation with foster carers on their training in online safety, skills and needs

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## Introduction

Foster carers have to balance many competing responsibilities and onerous reporting, all while trying to build a good relationship with a child or teenager who may have had traumatic early life experiences.

This challenging role has become so much more complicated in the digital era. The need to keep a child safe online, to know what they are doing and who they talk to - along with an awareness of what could happen – can lead to an overwhelming desire to control what is happening. The arrival of smartphones and so many connected devices constantly expand the arena in which foster carers operate.

Now, Nominet have supported the development of training programmes in online safety expressly for foster carers. To undertake this, the **enable** consortium has been formed and our first steps were to consult 70 foster carers and 40 young people in foster care. This report reflects what the foster carers told us about their previous training, if any, their concerns, and their needs. The courses we develop in response to this consultation, will aim to provide what they said was needed. Those who undertake the training will help us further as the courses are evaluated.

In their own words, they describe scenarios, express their ideas and many contributed material for the website. Alongside this we have measured how many have prior training, how long ago it was provided, and whether or not it met their needs. They were asked about their priorities for the training programme too.

The number of children in care has increased by 25 per cent over the last decade to 80,850, a record high, according to figures released in 2021<sup>1</sup> and there are concerns over increasingly complex issues surrounding children entering care during the pandemic, including mental health issues and risks from county lines drugs gangs.<sup>2</sup> Foster care is the most common form of care.

By co-creating the training and the resources with those who will use them, it is our aim to serve this vital frontline service and their young people with relevant materials.

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<sup>1</sup> DfE November 2021

<sup>2</sup> Independent Chair, CSDG at Children's Services Development Group



## Foster Carers in the UK

While the number of fostering households and foster carers in England were at their highest ever levels at the end of March 2021, the need for more carers remains high as the number of children in care also reached a new peak. Patterns vary in the devolved nations.

At the end of March 2021<sup>3</sup>, there were 45,370 fostering households in 425 agencies in England. These households had 76,640 approved foster carers looking after about 55,990 children. About 65% of fostering households are local authority services with Independent Fostering Agencies accounting for the remaining 35%.

One foster carer described their role to the Foster Care in England Review 2018:

*“Being a foster carer is demanding, requiring an impressive skillset that goes beyond that of a parent. Foster Carers are required to fulfil all of the expectations of a parent, whilst also taking on administrative functions, undergoing continual professional development similar to that of any profession, ensuring compliance with a myriad of policies and procedures which can vary massively between placing authorities and acting as an advocate for the child when accessing services on their behalf. Being a foster carer is more than a job. It is a way of life.”<sup>4</sup>*

We are immensely grateful to all the foster carers who took part in this consultation. Their thoughtful contributions and comments are valued and have shaped the training. We hope to work closely with them in evaluating the training programme.

## About the Respondents

Seventy foster carers were consulted via an online survey which explored their experiences of fostering, online safety training and digital awareness. Foster carers provided useful insights as to what they consider important to include in e-safety courses specifically designed for carers.

Foster carers described situations they have faced and the importance of certain issues and concerns to their own experience of fostering.

Respondents were asked how they like to learn and whether they would be willing to remain involved with this programme in several ways, including giving an interview, being part of a focus group, providing a case study or doing the training course. They could opt for no further contact, which few did.

In this way, **enable** aims to build a community to help co-create this course and ensure we are better able to meet their needs.

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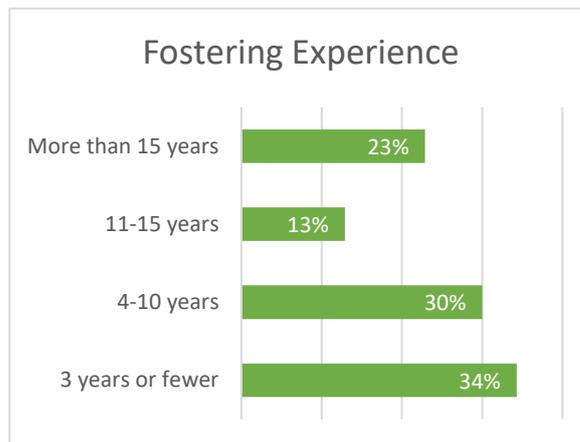
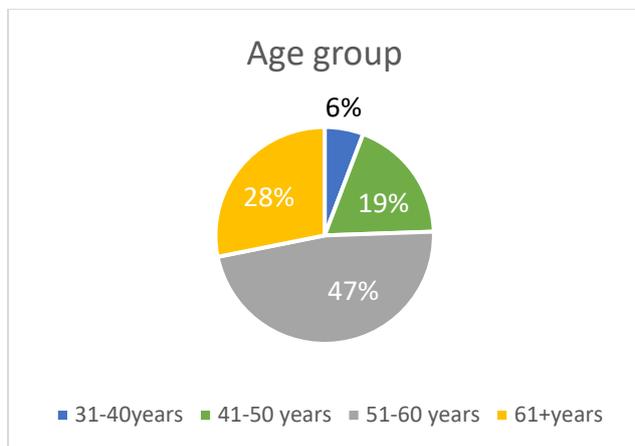
<sup>3</sup> Fostering in England 2020 to 2021: main findings. Ofsted. 2021

<sup>4</sup> Foster Care in England. A Review for the DfE. Sir Martin Narey and Ben Owers. 2018

## Background Information

Fifteen (21%) are male and fifty-five (79%) are female.

The majority of the respondents were over the age of 50, and most have been fostering for more than four years.



While most of the foster carers (60%) did not have their own children living with them, a large number did have children who still lived at home at least 'some of the time' (7%) or 'all the time' (33%).

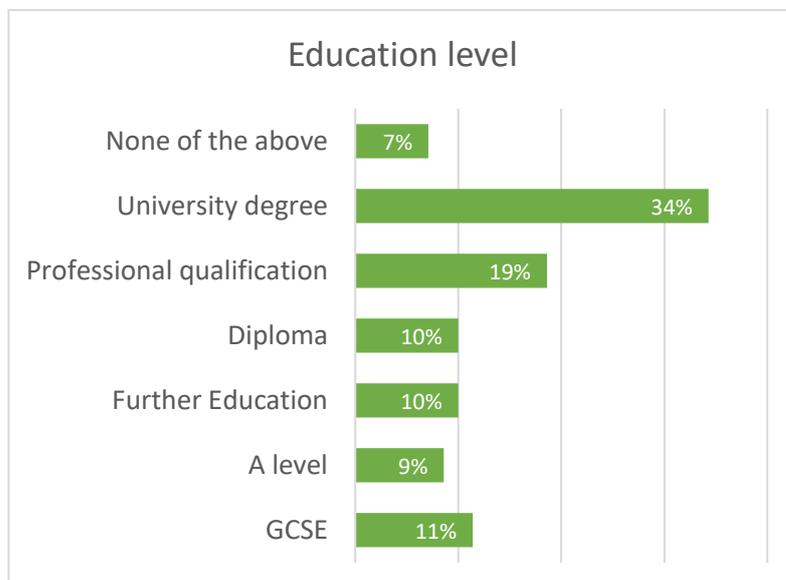
Similarly, most foster carers do not receive help from their own children when caring for children placed with them (47%), however 39% said they did 'sometimes' and we have been asked to take this into account for access to training.

The largest percentage (79%) work for a local authority, with 20% working with an independent fostering agency. One person selected 'other'.

*'I have had to go off and find my own information and guidance how to protect vulnerable children online i.e., use of parental controls and how and when to implement these.'*

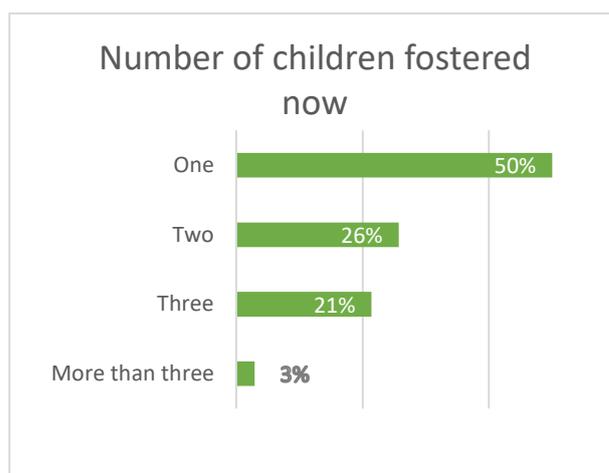
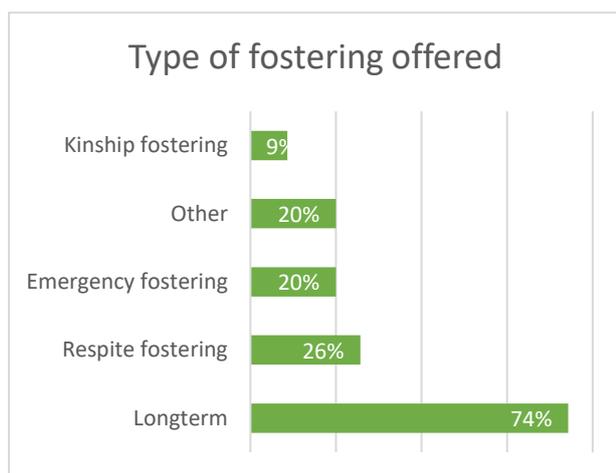
## Education

The highest level of education completed by the largest number is a university degree (34%), though 19% had a professional qualification. Of the 7% without one of the specified levels, only 3% left school prior to taking exams and the remaining 4% had CSE levels.



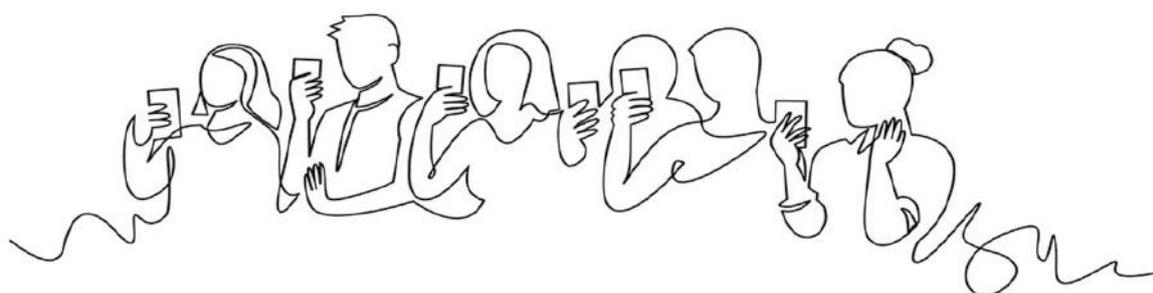
## About their fostering patterns

Almost three quarters of respondents (74%) are long-term fosterers, whilst just over a quarter (26%) offer respite fostering and one in five (20%) offer emergency fostering. Only 9% offer kinship fostering. In addition, 20% offer some other type of care, including parent and child fostering, short breaks and supported lodging. Some respondents answered more than one category option.



35 foster carers (50%) have one child placed with them, while 18 (26%) have two. 15 (21%) people have three children and 2 (3%) have more than three. One respondent offers parent and child support.

Children they are fostering are aged between 6 months to 19 with a wide age range in some homes, such as 10 months to 10years in one instance.



***'Foster carers have responsibility for setting up children's accounts, monitoring & reporting. This has data protection responsibilities, & human rights (privacy) consideration. Children's accounts are linked to foster carers' accounts & foster children use foster carers' internet connections - this has legal responsibilities which have never been clarified. There are no guidelines on preserving children's digital identity or data. When child move to a new placement often data linked to previous foster carers accounts are lost. For example, google does not allow the transfer of a child's account.'***

## Online safety training experienced

94% of respondents have received at least some training in online safety, whilst the remaining 6% have no experience of online safety training.

Of those with experience of training, 59% received this in the last two years and 36% between 2 and 5 years ago.

5% were trained more than five years ago. Whilst this low number is somewhat comforting, the advances in technology suggest that 3 year old training is no longer current. It became apparent that training for many was a brief 'add on' to safeguarding or child protection training.



### About the training received

- 37% of foster carers received training in online safety as part of their training to become a foster carer.
- 8%, received it as part of Child Protection training,
- 24% received it as part of their Safeguarding training.
- Over a third (34%) received no training in online safety within their foster carer training.
- 41% were last trained more than two years ago.

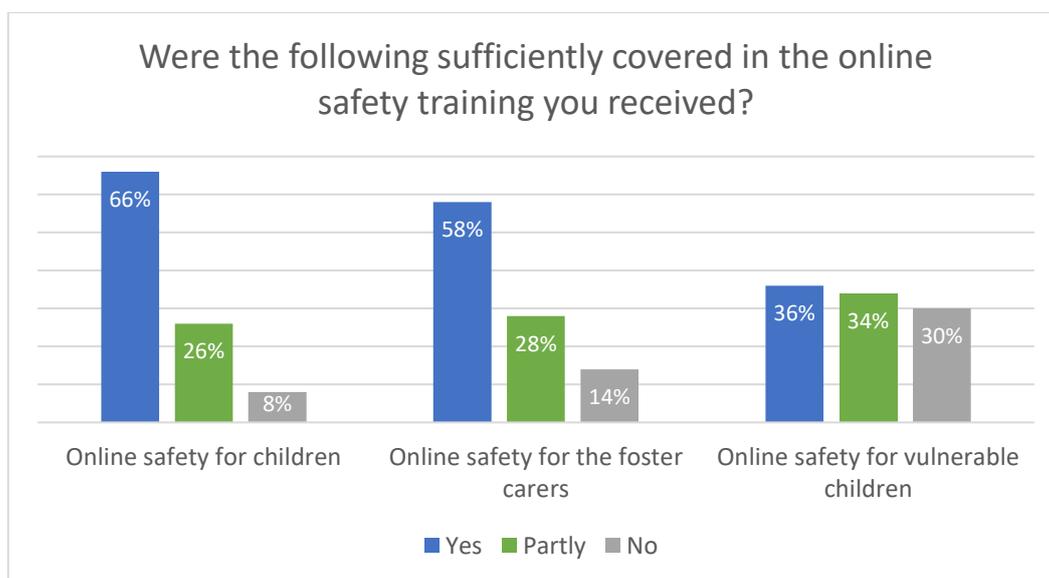
*“It was not an issue when I became a foster carer”*

*“Can’t remember but don’t think [there was] any [training].”*

## What did the training address?

Where foster carers had received online safety training, this focused mostly on helping a 'mainstream child' to stay safe online, with less emphasis given to online safety for foster carers or how vulnerable children experience the digital world.

Only 36% said that online safety for vulnerable children (e.g. children with Special Educational Needs, disabilities, trauma experiences, mental and emotional difficulties or care experience) had been sufficiently covered.



## Who needs training?

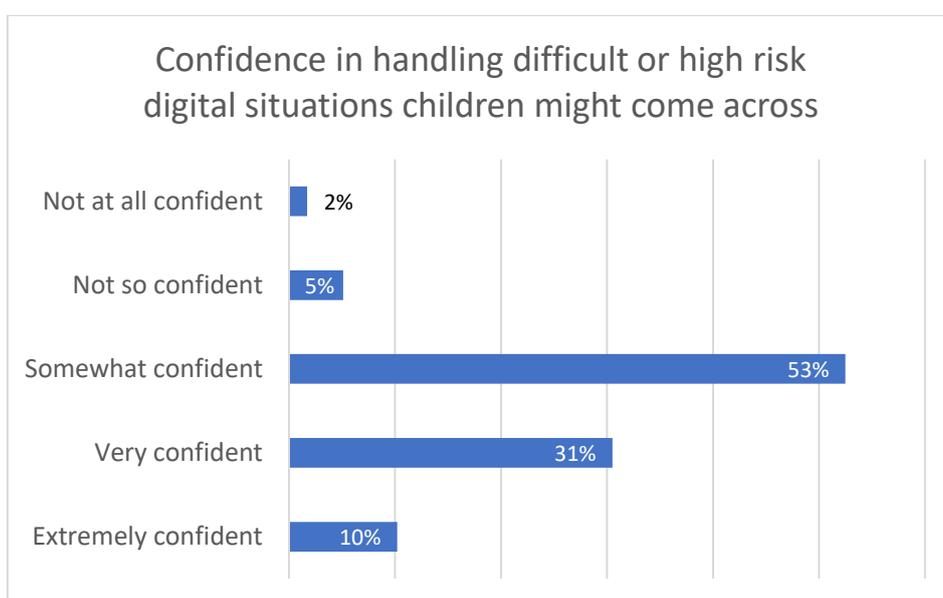
**enable** was seeking to understand where there were gaps in training, or which issues were not covered in the training carers had received. The consultation also aimed to identify groups of carers who were lacking appropriate recent training.

- Most likely to have had no online safety training were kinship carers (60%), followed by male foster carers (21% vs 2% females) and those who usually only have one child placed with them (11% vs 0% multiple children placed).
- Carers with 10 or fewer years of experience (10% vs 0% with 11 or more years),
- Carers aged 51 and older (8% vs 0% 50 and younger),
- Carers working with the local authority (6% vs 0% independent fostering agency)
- Respite carers (6%) were also likely to require online safety training.
- All longterm and emergency foster carers had received training.

## Foster carers' confidence in handling online issues

The consultation explored how confident the foster carers are if dealing with difficult or high-risk online issues children may experience.

It revealed that only 10% were extremely confident, though 31% described themselves as very confident. Worryingly, 53% were only somewhat confident, 5% not so confident, and 2% not at all confident. That suggests around 60% were not as confident as they could be, although modesty might have prompted many to say 'Somewhat' confident.



### Does training impact confidence?

Interestingly, among the foster carers who had received no online safety training, levels of confidence were generally high: extremely confident (25%), very confident (25%), suggesting that training has not always made a difference. However, given that half of these individuals were only somewhat confident, concerns remain about how well equipped they are when faced with difficult or high-risk online situations.

### How current is their training?

Foster carers who had 11 or more years of experience (12%) were most likely to have received their training more than 5 years ago, followed by male foster carers (10%).

Despite kinship carers being least likely to have received training, if they had done so, they were the group most likely to have received it recently.

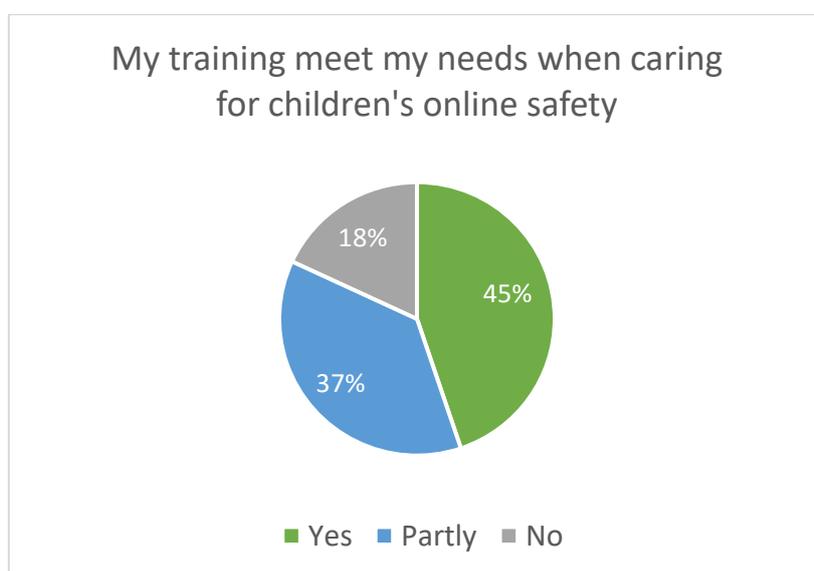
Up to date training is essential to ensure that carers are aware of current risks, dangers and methods to deal with these situations.

## Did the training meet their needs?

Those under 50, or fostering for a short time, are least likely to say training met their needs.

Among those who had been fostering for more than 15 years (63%), said their training had met their needs. In contrast, carers under the age of 50 were least likely to agree (29%) along with 1/3 of those who had been fostering for 3 years or less. This echoes some of the messages above where training appears to have weakened or focused on different issues over time.

The overview of training amongst the whole sample showed that training did not fully meet the needs of the majority:

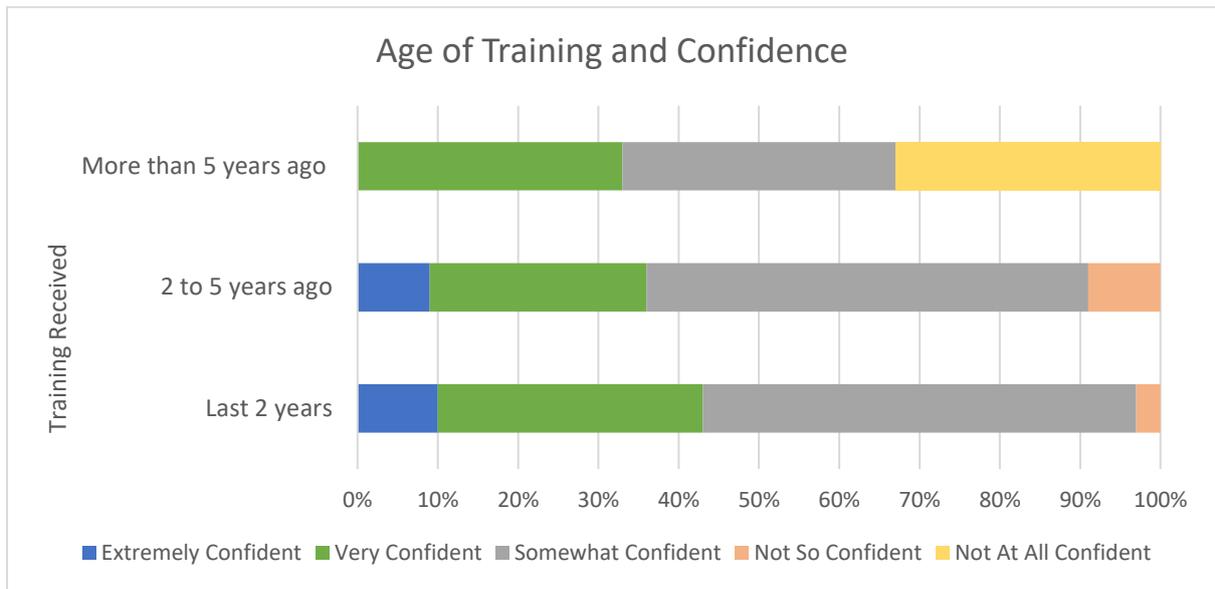


Considering the potential harms that may arise from dangerous or high-risk situations online, it is worrying to see that more than half of the foster carers (55%) felt that their online safety training did not sufficiently meet their needs.

Ultimately, online safety training should equip foster carers with skills and knowledge which will help them to keep children safe online as well as manage their own online safety requirements.

"I feel very vulnerable. I don't know what I don't know."

"It is difficult as there is always something new to be aware of, I feel you can never be completely up to date."

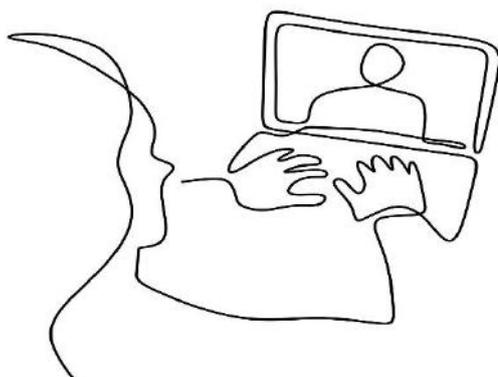


More recent training was associated with greater confidence. Only carers who received their training more than 5 years ago gave a response of 'not at all' confident (33%).

If training had been received within the last five years, the carer was most likely to say they were extremely or very confident.

The most widely selected response was 'somewhat confident'

**“I understood then what to enable and not, but as technology improves and online becomes more prevalent in daytime activities, I don't think we have enough information.”**



## Which foster carers are least confident?

### Number of children placed with them

Foster carers who usually have only one child placed with them, tend to be more confident in dealing with online life (43% extremely or very confident) in comparison to those with multiple children placed with them (38% of whom selected extremely or very confident). This may be because of the difficulties associated with dealing with multiple risky online situations at one time and different age groups with varied needs.

### Age

Older foster carers (aged 51 and above) were more likely to be less confident (67% chose somewhat, not so, or not at all confident) compared to younger foster carers (27%).

“[Training] made me more aware of what is going on within the internet as I am still learning myself and am not the most confident, but I need to be aware because of the children I look after.”

Given that this older group of carers were also more likely to need online safety training, the training course should include methods of dealing with difficult or risky digital situations.

There are other foster carers who lack confidence in their abilities to handle difficult or risky online scenarios. These individuals are among those who require focused, supportive and detailed online safety training to help them keep their young people safe online.

### **Specific worries which foster carers described include:**

*‘Changing technology and young people being more savvy in tech than the carer’*

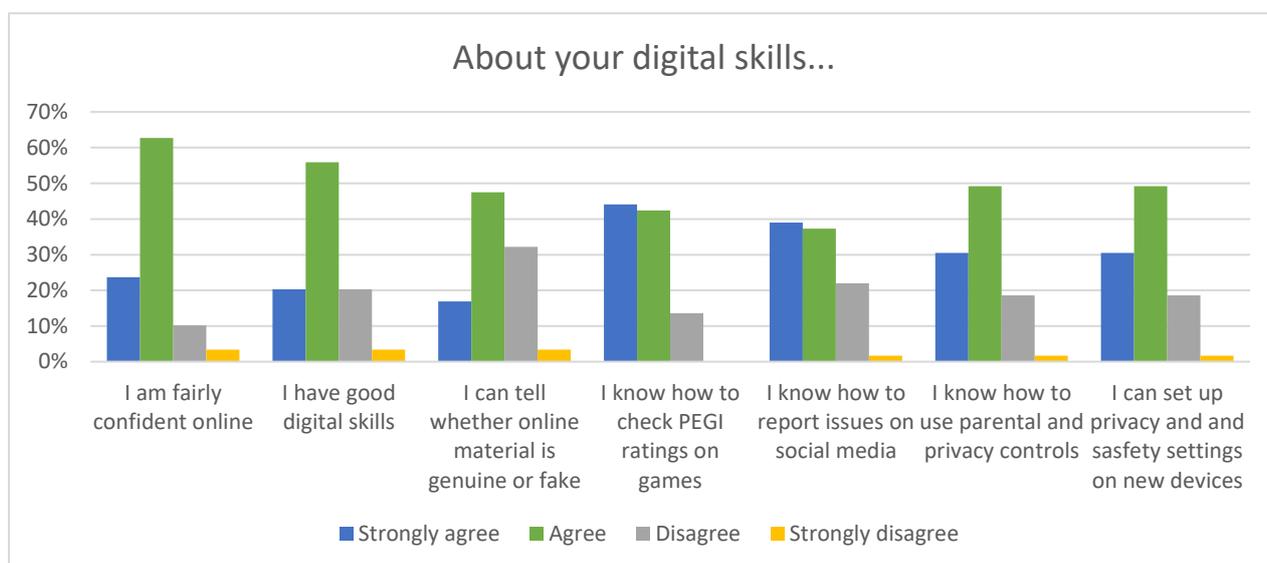
*‘Hidden sites, grooming, keeping young people safe, as they know more than me about technology’*

*‘Level of control the young person has. Young people feel they are entitled which can make fostering very difficult’*

*‘Contact with inappropriate family members Accessibility to inappropriate sites. Protecting the vulnerable from further trauma or abuse. Having v bucks bought by a stranger and the vulnerability this poses for what child is expected to do to in exchange. Addiction. Vulnerability in paying for other people/not understanding the risks posed. Being groomed.’*

*‘My child will be able to download TikTok and other bad things and will be very clever in hiding her phone. She will also get contact with her Mom and Dad.’*

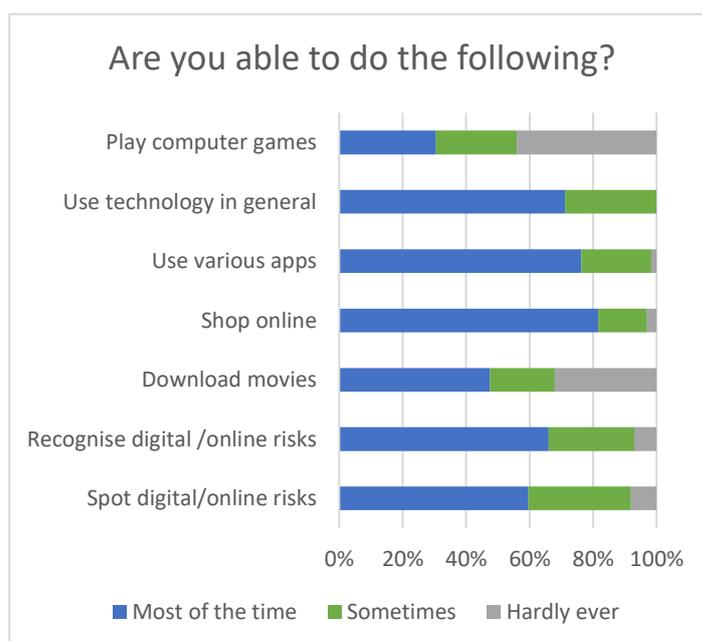
## Foster Carers' Digital Skills and Abilities



Most children and young people will play games at some time, it is also an easy way to join in with them and share an activity. Nevertheless only 44% strongly agree that they know how to check PEGI ratings on games and 39% strongly agree that they can report issues on social media, both much needed with children and young people. Worryingly, only 24% of carers strongly agreed that they are fairly confident online, with one in five strongly agreeing that they have good digital skills.

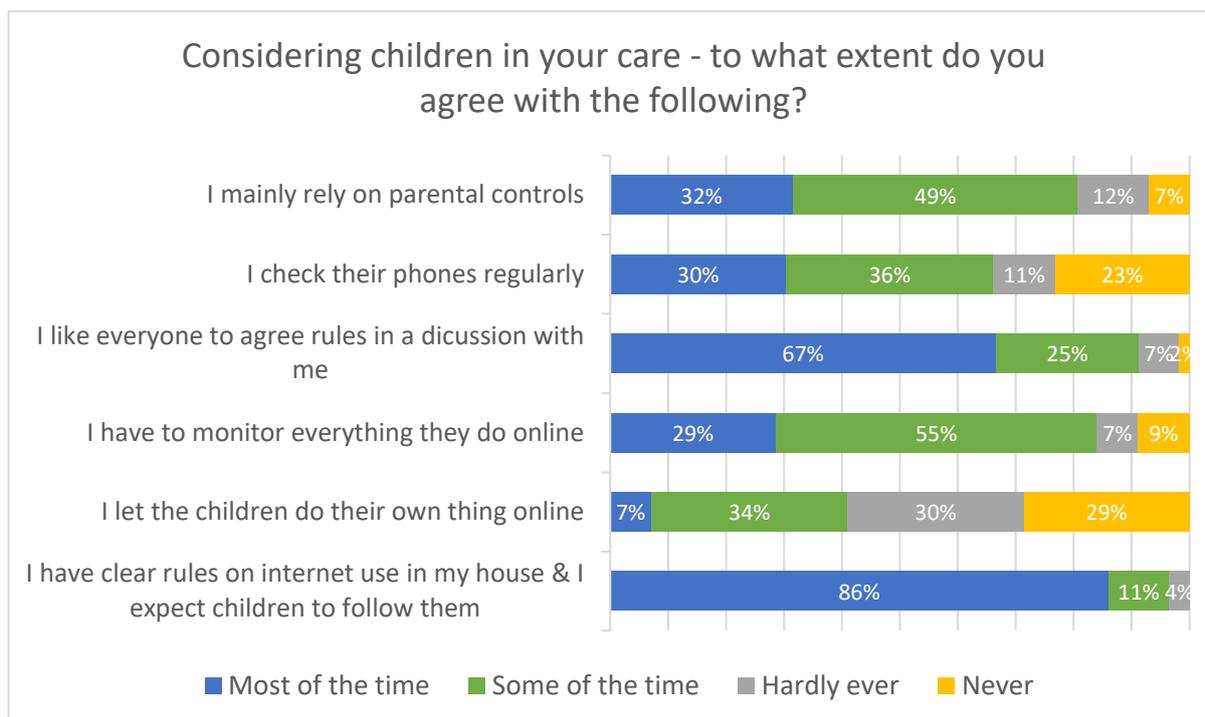
Despite caring for children who are known to be vulnerable online<sup>5</sup>, it seems that foster carers are not sufficiently equipped with the digital abilities to help keep these young people safe. The skill which carers were least confident about was identifying genuine or fake material. This is an important skill to have as young people can be exposed to or come across online content which may be faked or manipulated.

It is also useful for foster carers to be digitally able, to show an interest in young people's online activities and to demonstrate digital competencies. However, 24% revealed that they are never able to play computer games, and 17% that they are never able to download movies. Most confidence was apparent in online shopping, using apps and using technology in general.



<sup>5</sup> Katz, A., & El Asam, A. (2019). 'Vulnerable Children in a Digital World.'

## Current Parenting Practices



The most popular approach to online safety was to say, 'I have clear rules on internet use in my house and I expect children to follow them' (86%), however the second most popular was agreeing rules in a discussion (67%).

Despite these two being the most popular practices, they suggest opposite approaches to parenting, with the first indicating an absence of involvement of the child when discussing or determining rules.

Meanwhile, as might be expected, only 7% of foster carers let children do their own thing online 'most of the time', whilst 32% mainly rely on parental control. 30% check the children's phones regularly and 29% have to monitor everything they do online.

### Different approaches to rules

Foster carers who have training in online safety were more likely to have clear rules (89%), whilst those with no training were more likely to agree rules in a discussion (75%).

Both younger (50 or younger) and older (51 or older) foster carers were likely to have clear rules which they expected children to follow (80% and 87% respectively), but younger carers were more likely to monitor everything the child does online (40%) and older carers more likely to agree rules in a discussion with the child (70%).



## Approaches to dealing with online safety concerns

Three distinct approaches emerged when foster carers explained how they deal with difficult or high-risk online situations. Many carers listed the controls, settings and rules they have put in place and how they reinforce these. Others described how they would talk to the child or young person to explain their concerns. A third group combined controls, settings and rules with talking to the child.

### Group 1. Controls and Settings

"I have their passwords"

"Only allow age-appropriate content"

"*Reviewing browsing history and monitor game usage. Spot checks of devices and discreet listening*"

*'By using appropriate controls to limit access and exposure to these risks and situations'*

*'Block sites. Limit screen time. Utilise parental controls'*

*'Have parental locks and no phones in bedrooms'*

### Group 2. Talking

"Talk to them about the risks"

"I try to talk to the child and explain what could happen if they continue with what they are doing"

"I have also spoken with them regarding inappropriate material and what is expected in the home"

"Speak to the child straight away and let them know that what they are watching/playing is not appropriate for them and you, as their responsible adult, are trying to keep them safe"

### Group 3. Communication and rules

"Being open from the outset on what is acceptable, building trust, talking about it regularly and setting clear boundaries and expectations"

"Talk about it, review online safety protocols on devices"

"Talk and limit use and restrict areas"

"Open conversations and keeping strict control on the material and apps that are available to them"

Others sought advice from a social worker, link worker, or a family member:

***"Get my husband involved as he knows more than me about managing the risks"***

***"Speak to my link worker for advice"***

Some carers discussed reporting of incidents:

***"Reported online bullying involving a foster child to the police"***

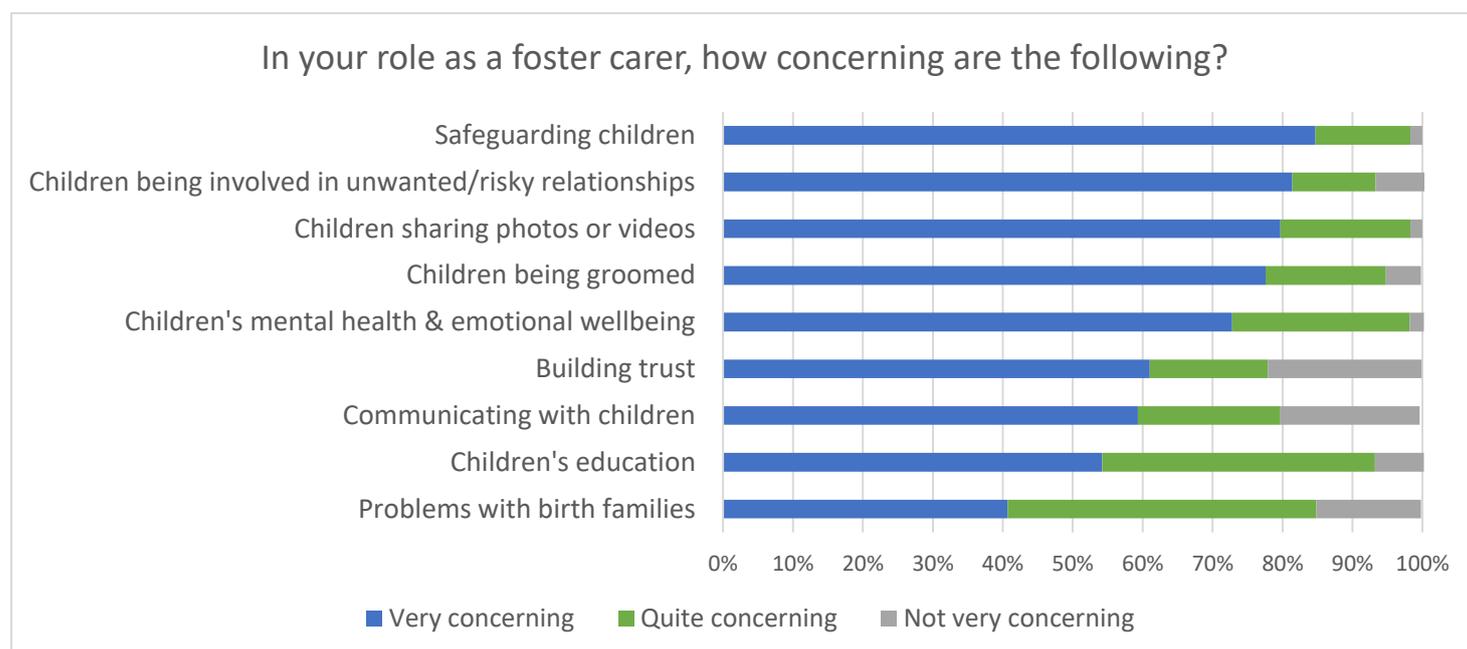
***"Report risky sites"***

Punishments were less frequently discussed, but when they were mentioned, consequences involved removal of the internet or digital device:

***"He was warned that if he did it again, the wi-fi would be switched off"***

***"Take away the device from the child as a consequence"***

## What should training include?



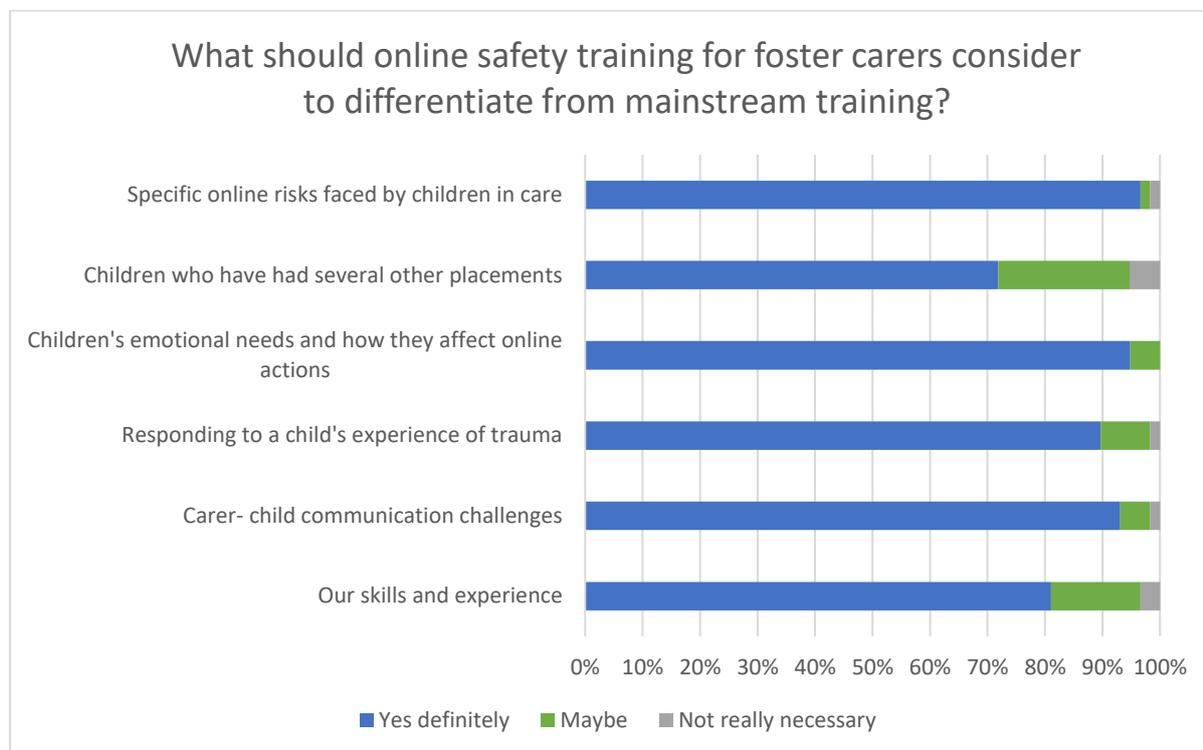
Respondents were asked to rate nine specific issues based on how concerning they were in their experience as a foster carer. While our research shows the importance of parental support with online safety and the role of psychosocial factors, foster carers viewed building trust (61%) and communicating with children (59%) as some of the least concerning issues. Children's education (54%) and problems with birth families (41%) were even less of a concern.

This may be because these matters were not proving difficult at the time, or they felt confident in dealing with them, or having the school do so. However, the centrality of communication and trust to the online safety agenda being explored here, and the fact that for the children in our workshops, building trust was seen as critical, it is vital that we address building trust and communication in our courses.

Qualitative responses identified the most worrying risks that the internet and mobile phones bring to a foster carer. Categories which emerged include:

- **Inappropriate, traumatising, or risky content** – “The easy access to unsafe content”
- **Inappropriate interactions** – “Access to young people for those who would prey on vulnerable children”
- **Loss of control** – “Not knowing what they are doing on mobile phones”
- **Privacy vs safeguarding** – “Checking messages and browser history all whilst balancing their need for privacy”
- **Legal responsibilities** – “Lack of engagement by social workers and the transfer of risk to the foster carer”
- **Long-term damage** – “Underestimation of children's development being impaired, i.e. social skills”

## Considerations for online safety training



When developing online safety training exclusively for foster carers, there are certain topics which should be considered. Specific online risks (97%) emerged as the area which carers considered most important, followed by children's emotional needs and how they affect their online actions (95%). All of the areas were considered important, but while we know that teenagers in particular tend to have several placements,<sup>6</sup> how to deal with situations like this, was considered the least necessary for the course to cover. (72%)

Importantly, although building trust and communicating with children were considered a low area of concern in a previous question, here foster carers value learning about carer-child communications:

***“The ability to discuss ground rules and consequences, grooming, radicalisation, bullying, text speak”***

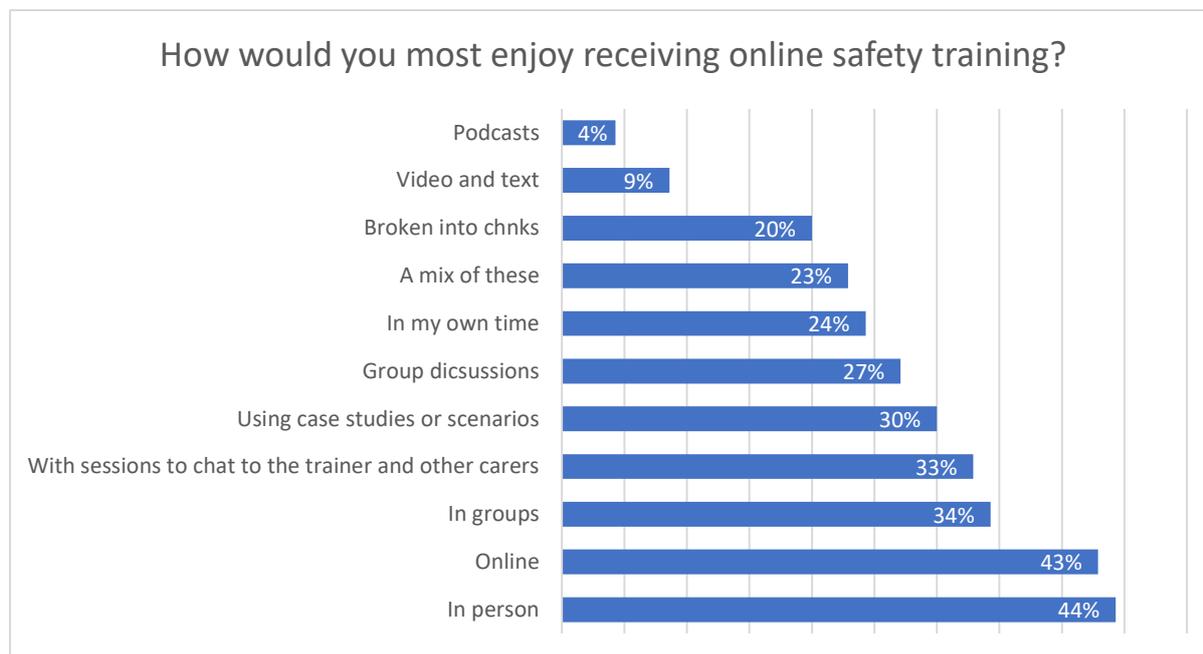
***“Online grooming, how to recognise signs of this happening and how to have conversations about this”***

***“Regular open dialogue with children about the harm the internet can have on children if used unwisely”***

***“Open discussions and impact of instant access”***

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education. (2013). *‘Improving permanence for looked after children.’*

## What format should online safety training take?



The most popular method of receiving training was in person, however online sessions, group training and courses where carers are able to talk to the trainer and other foster carers were also popular. Podcasts, and video and text were the least popular option.

“Hands on, show me the buttons to press.”

“More workshop scenarios where we can look at situations and work out how to best deal with them.”

“Carers and case studies. The good, the bad and the ugly.”

## Is there an interest in online safety training?

76% wanted to be kept informed, and 32% already wanted to complete the training course.

Respondents were asked if they would be interested in providing focus groups, interviews or case studies to provide some consultation about the training course and to provide more detailed information about their thoughts on what should be covered in the course. 14% wanted to give a focus group, 14% offered to give an interview, and 5% offered to provide anonymised case studies. 14% wanted no further contact and 14% responded ‘ask me later.’ There is a clear interest in specific online safety training for foster carers, and the information explored in this report identifies important areas of focus, as well as highlighting particular groups who would require training.

## The way forward: Improving skills and confidence

To determine needs for the course further, foster carers' responses are analysed by:

- Age
- Gender
- Length of time fostering
- Agency
- Whether or not their own children still live at home
- When their online safety training was received

Carers were asked if they were:

1. Confident to handle difficult or high-risk online situations
2. Trained in how to help children use the internet safely

And whether:

3. Their training had included online safety for vulnerable children
4. Their training had met their needs when caring for children

The purpose was to identify their needs and establish goals for the training course. Scores of those with low confidence were grouped and compared with those with high confidence, and those whose training did not or partly met online safety needs.

		Handling difficult or high-risk online situations?	Online Safety for Vulnerable Children	How To Help Children Use the Internet Safely	Did your training meet your needs when caring for children?
		Low Confidence	No/Partly	No/Partly	No/Partly
<b>Gender</b>	Female	66.00%	62.70%	45.10%	57.70%
	Male	33.30%	69.20%	30.80%	46.20%
<b>Age</b>	<50 years	27.30%	69.20	61.50%	71.40%
	older	67.90%	57.20%	46.90%	59.40%
<b>Experience</b>	3 years or fewer	38.90%	65.00%	50.00%	66.70%
	4-10 years	77.80%	73.70%	52.60%	57.90%
	11-15 years	87.50%	55.60%	33.30%	55.60%
	More than 15 years	46.70%	56.30%	25.00%	37.50%
<b>Own Children</b>	No children living	60.60%	66.70%	38.90%	54.10%
	Have children	57.70%	60.70%	46.50%	56.20%
<b>Agency</b>	Independent	44.40%	41.70%	33.30%	41.70%
	Local authority	61.20%	69.20%	44.20%	58.50%
<b>When trained in online safety</b>	Last 2-years	56.70%	58.30%	44.40%	58.30%
	>2 years	64.00%	70.90%	34.40%	48.00%

## Confidence in handling difficult or high-risk online situations

### Gender and age influence confidence

Two thirds of women (66%) and those over age 50 (68%) said they had low confidence in handling difficult or high-risk situations, compared to men (33%) and carers under 50 years (27%).

### How long they had been fostering has a bearing on confidence

The number of years a person had been fostering also had an influence on their confidence levels. Those with 3 years or fewer tended to be the most confident, (61% high confidence) followed by those who had fostered for more than 15 years (53%). In contrast, the data showed that, of those who had fostered for between 4-10 years, only 22% were highly confident and of those who had fostered for 11-15 years, as few as 13% felt the same. This gives a nuanced picture of confidence levels to build upon in the training and possibly reflects trends and changes in training over the years.

### Local authority or independent agency

Those who were affiliated with local authorities had markedly lower confidence than those with independent agencies (61% said their confidence was low vs 44%).

### How long ago the training was received

If training took place more than 2 years ago, confidence was lower than among those trained within the last 2 years (64% of the former had low confidence vs 57%).

## Training focused on the needs of vulnerable children

### Carer age differences and whether the needs of vulnerable children were specifically addressed.

Our research has shown that a generic one size fits all online safety training is not sufficient to cover the needs of vulnerable children<sup>7</sup>.

In relation to this vital issue, one of the strongest findings was about the age of the foster carer. Those older than age 50 were less likely to have had online safety training that specifically addressed the needs of vulnerable children (as many as 71% vs 29% of those younger than 50). This suggests that in recent training, more attention has been paid to vulnerable children.

Yet training covering this issue was generally lacking across all respondents. The only group among whom more than half had this focus in their training, were carers with independent agencies (58%).

Trends in training change over time; as many as 74% of those who had been fostering for between 4-10 years did not have this in their training, so it was unlikely to have been addressed when they began fostering.

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<sup>7</sup> El Asam A. & Katz, A. 2018; El Asam, A. Street, C. & Katz, A. 2021

## A gaping hole: Training to help children use the internet safely

### Age, gender and length of time fostering indicate the likelihood of this focus in training

Only 24% of male foster carers had received this training. This suggests training should be offered to all those in the household who will be caring for a child.

Unexpectedly, only half of those who had fostered for 3 years or less had been trained to keep children safe online. In contrast, the longer foster carers had been fostering the more likely they were to have been trained at some time to help children to use the internet safely (those who had been fostering for 11-15 years 67%, and those who had fostered for more than 15 years, 75%)

### Their own children still living at home may increase carers' confidence

Those with their own children still living at home (61%) were more likely to feel confident in helping children use the internet safely compared to 54% of those with none of their own children still living at home. They may ask their older or adult child for help or be updated by them from time to time. Requests have been received for other adults in the household to be offered training.

### Differences by agency become apparent

Those with independent fostering agencies (67%) felt confident to help children use the internet safely, compared to 56% of those with local authorities

## A tale of unmet needs

Above all in this analysis, it is the scale of unmet need that is alarming, given that children in care are at high risk online, through no fault of their own.

71% of those under age 50 and 67% of carers with three years' experience in fostering said their training had not met their needs. Deficits also appear among those trained by local authorities and those trained in the last two years (58% of whom feel their needs were not met). The same percentage of women feel this way.

More than half of foster carers with as much as 4-10 years of experience also describe unmet need (58%). The course will need to: build confidence; focus on the needs of vulnerable children; explore supportive parenting and find new ways to deliver engaging, enabling training that supports foster carers.

The lack of information respondents had been given to help with their own online safety within the home and in the performance of their duties, such as how to monitor a child's phone or set up their home router or a device, illustrate how basics are needed along with more complex issues.

We hope to offer the authentic voice of the foster carer and respect their knowledge and experience within this new course as we respond to what they told us. Future training should be "more than technical skills" and consider the needs of foster carers, children and young people, be they social or psychological. Finally, children and carers are not homogeneous groups, they all have different needs, skills and challenges.



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