Privacy of Children in Foster Care

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Abstract

We present the argument that privacy research related to adolescents and their online safety is lacking, in that the current research tends to focus on general populations of teens and not on those who are most vulnerable to encountering online risks. Therefore, we present a case study of the privacy and online safety tensions experienced by foster parents and the teens (ages 13 – 17) they take into their homes.

Introduction

Privacy research in the past years has made great strides in helping understand how people make decisions affecting the information that they share with others, and how to design systems that may assist them in implementing their privacy preferences, whatever those may be. A significant limitation to a lot of this research, however, is that it has focused primarily on general populations and not on specific, vulnerable populations which may have been overlooked. While there have been efforts to investigate the privacy preferences of teens and how they differ from those of adults [5, 3], some subgroups within the population of underage users have not received as much attention.

This difference matters. Solutions that will work for adults may not work for teens as they are based on the adult user having full agency to decide what privacy preferences to se-

lect and how to enforce them. A one-size-fits-all approach to privacy will lead to settings that will not protect, or in some cases may even harm, the intended audiences. As a simple example, many Terms of Service agreements used by social networking sites require new users to report their age and set some features, such as the default visibility of information shared by the user, to be more restrictive for teens. Teens, in many cases, simply lied about their age in order to share freely without these constraints. [1]

One area of conflict is the difference between the safety needs of teens and their desire for privacy. *Safety*, in this case, refers to the teen's physical and emotional well being, while *privacy* refers to the desire for autonomy in their choice of presentation online [7]. A teen would ideally have both safety and privacy, but in many cases they will compromise both while pursuing developmentally inappropriate behaviors. Parents, on the other hand, want to keep their children safe, and would prefer to not to violate their privacy but will usually choose to do so if they feel the need is there. Parents will often monitor the online activities of their children [15] in order to make sure that they do not engage in high-risk activities.

Our research focuses on the online privacy needs of teens in the foster care system. In particular, we are interested in exploring if existing knowledge about privacy for teens applies to foster teens, how foster parents impart that knowledge to their foster teens, how caseworkers who manage these teens provide training and support to both foster parents and teens, and what contributions we may make to the foster community to improve online safety for these children. In this paper, we focus on the tension that there is between foster teens and parents on the issue of privacy

versus safety, and how that relates to individual differences in privacy.

Tensions Between Privacy and Safety

Privacy research has previously investigated tension between the competing needs of safety and privacy between parents and children [2, 14]. A parent wants to protect their child, while at the same time providing them the tools and knowledge that they will need to protect themselves once they have reached adulthood. Children, on their own hand, have a need to explore their boundaries and assert their independence from their parents. [2]. This tension creates miscommunications between parents and teens, causing the former to underestimate the risks the latter experiences, while also underestimating their ability to handle these risks. [16]

Foster Care in the United States

The foster care system in the United States has been set up to handle the protection of children who have been removed from their families due to endangerment or abandonment. If a judge rules that a parent is unable to care for a child, it is placed in a temporary home with trained caregivers who will raise the child as their own until the biological parent has shown themselves to be capable of caring for the child's needs. If unable to do so after a set amount of time, the parental rights are terminated and the child is put up for adoption.

While many issues that apply to non-foster children also apply to foster children, the latter are significantly more at risk for bullying and exploitation than their peers. [13] While non-foster children may depend on their family to provide a positive role model and a safe space, foster children may need to be protected from their family. [11] Foster parents also need to manage the fact that they are not the child's

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[1] https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/16/tech/social-media/facebook-teens-privacy/index.html

permanent parents, and may have competing priorities and responsibilities.

Tensions Increase with Teens in Foster Care

In our current research with youth in the foster care system [1], many of these teens have "mixed maturity" levels, where they are sexually mature but emotionally stunted, leading to extreme attention-seeking behaviors that put them at higher levels of online risk. Yet, when working with "at-risk" teens you may not see a tangible difference between their needs and that of typical teens. However, most foster youth lack educational, economic, and social infrastructures, which result in significant inequalities and negative life outcomes, including teen pregnancy [8], substance abuse [6], poor health [4], mental illness, criminal behavior, and homelessness [12, 10].

Foster parents are trained to be able to handle issues which a child may bring in, ranging from abandonment, reactive attachment disorder, to post traumatic symptoms dealing from abuse. The foster parents are not, however, the legal guardians of the child as that authority remains with the state. Foster parents may act as parents, but the state is the ultimate arbiter of any decisions that may affect the child.

Teens in foster care, therefore, are cared for by someone who is undermined as an authority figure in the child's life. This authority must balance their personal beliefs, those of the state, and those of the biological parents with a child who has, at the very least, been removed from their supportive environment and is at higher risk for abuse.

Preliminary Empirical Results from an Interview Study with Foster Parents

We have begun to investigate the problem space of online safety for teens in foster care by conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 foster parents of teens [1]. Our initial findings have shown a great need for future research in this area as foster parents have confirmed that youth are using technologies to facilitate high-risk behaviors that have led to severe consequences, such as involvement in sex trafficking, rape, and emotional dysregulation through abusive online relationships. Parents have also reported a large tension between trying to provide privacy to their teens as well as keeping them safe online.

More than half (60%) of the foster parents found safety to be more important than privacy, because privacy does not keep teens safe from risks.

"*safety comes first. . . it is not a matter of privacy, privacy doesn't help when they get on the streets, abducted, gang raped, sold; that trauma.*" – P1, Female

Yet foster parents agreed overall that while both safety and privacy are ideal, it is impossible to have both, thus privacy is often neglected.

"*You can't have both. I'd love to do both and sometimes I try to find that balance. But if I am going to choose between their safety and their privacy, I am going to go with their safety.*" – P8, Female

Approximately 35% felt that it was their responsibility or right as a parent to keep their foster teens safe and "at any expense."

"*No. I am not really concerned about their privacy. I'm concerned about their safety. And I feel, you know, very re-*

sponsible for her and her safety. . . Because I'm their parent. And I think that the internet is a complicated and exciting world, and I also think there's real...real danger. Dangerous people and dangerous...you know, dangerous things to engage with." – P19, Female

Unfortunately, while safety is the top priority for these parents, they did minimal monitoring of their teen's technology use. Many parents talked about the importance of developing "house rules" or "expectations" as soon as the teen arrived.

"*You develop house rules when the child first comes into care. It's good policy to develop House Rules. Part of that will include use of Electronics*." – P1, Female

One parent even gave a time frame for when the expectations should be given.

"*there's a nuance between making a child feel comfortable in a crazy, crazy situation, in the first, you know, 5 hours to 48 hours, and making sure that you lay down expectations*." – P10, Female

This same parent, as well as others, emphasized the importance of making sure the boundaries are clear when setting expectations. Part of the expectation is that technology should be viewed as a privilege not a necessity.

"*She abused her cell phone privileges one time, before we had clear boundaries. So we've learned what clear boundaries need to look like. And her cell phone was a privilege that was taken away when she had gotten... in school suspension, out of school suspension. So she does realize that it's all privileges, it's not something that she gets automatically*." – P10, Female

However, parents did not provide context for the rules and applied them in general settings. Additionally, much of the consequences for not following the rules was restriction of technology or supervision.

"*Well for right now, she does not have a cellphone because I made sure I took that away from her, that wasn't going very well. But there's no cell phone and there is no tablet so what she does do, is to use my laptop. . . for school and she goes on there every now and again to play games and stuff like that on there. And when she's doing that, I have her sit right by me in the kitchen. So every now and again, I can walk over and see what she is doing*." – P3, Female

Designing for Youth in Foster Care

Poole and Peyton [9] outlined the challenges and best practices for conducting interaction design research within adolescent populations. For instance, they emphasized the importance of involving teens directly in research and design, as opposed to using adults (e.g., parents) as proxies who act on their behalf. We are envisioning using a similar approach, involving foster children directly in the design of solutions that will affect them. This paper is an early step in that process, looking into some of the issues that we will need to consider when designing to enhance privacy for this overlooked set of users.

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