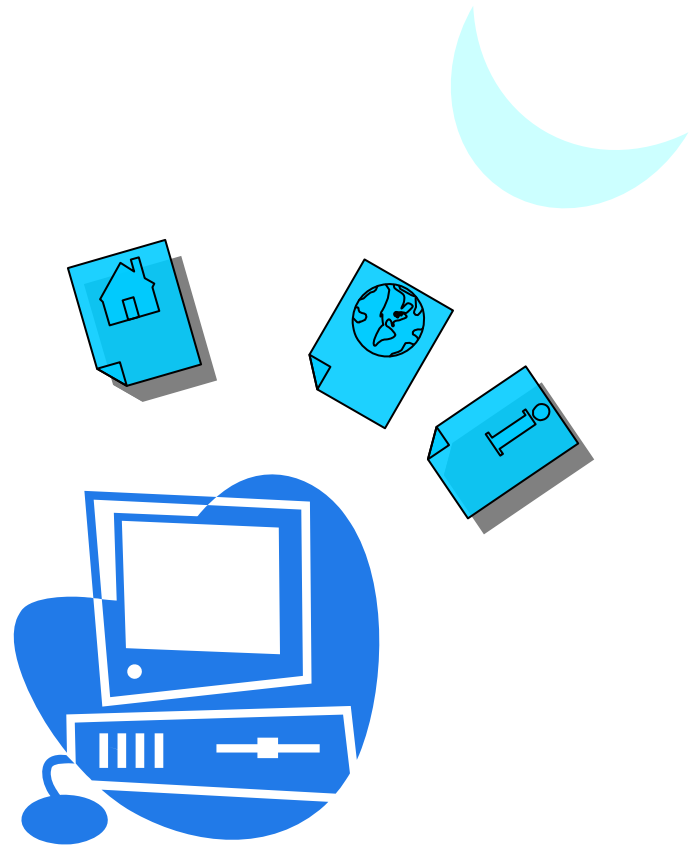


Foster Carers' Use of and Attitudes towards the Internet

(Report for the North Lincolnshire Council)



Written by Ellen J. Helsper¹ and Bianca C. Reisdorf²

¹ Media and Communications Department, London School of Economics and Political Science.

² Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.

Index

Background	2
Methodology	4
Findings	9
<i>a) Media Richness: ICTs in the Household</i>	9
PC access	11
Internet access	13
<i>b) ICT skills and confidence</i>	14
<i>c) Uses of the Internet</i>	19
Foster Carer's use	19
Foster Children's use	22
<i>d) Attitudes towards technologies</i>	22
Centrality of the Internet	23
Attitudes towards the Internet	24
<i>e) Concerns and Regulation</i>	26
<i>f) eMentoring programme</i>	28
Summary	29
References	34
Glossary of terms	35

Foster Carers' Use of and Attitudes Towards the Internet

Background

Use of the Internet has become a common and dominant way for information gathering and communication in Britain over the past few years. According to the Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS) 2009, nearly 70 percent of the British population are Internet users. However, use of the Internet is not distributed evenly across different groups, but correlates strongly with socio-demographic measures, such as age, education, income or social grade. Moreover, children in the household have a strong positive effect on the availability of computers and Internet access in the household and might also influence individuals' usage of the Internet.

A specific group of the British population are Foster Carers who look after children and young people who cannot live with their birth parents. Together with state authorities Foster Carers care for these children for a period of time. This time can vary from a few days to several years and can in some cases lead to adoption. Little is known about Foster Carers' as well as Foster Children's Internet use, this study is exploring these new grounds.

The group of Foster Carers and Children is highly interesting as they generally have a different relationship to one another than children have to their birth parents. Foster Children often come from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds than their Foster Parents and many have had traumatic or at least negative experiences growing up. We can thus not simply draw conclusions about the Internet use of Foster Children and Carers from the data on parents and children in the general population. Since most children stay in their Foster Homes for a limited period of time, they might show different levels of trust towards their Foster Carers and vice versa Foster Carers have a different relationship

of trust and familiarity with their Foster Children than traditional parent-child relations, which could affect the way they (are allowed to) use the Internet.

There are a number of other government schemes which aim to introduce ICTs into households where disadvantaged individuals are present (eg. The Home Access Taskforce scheme). The findings presented in this report offer the opportunity to understand ICT practices and perceptions of caretakers of children with a disadvantage in households that have no established habits between parents and children in this area. ICTs such as the Internet now play an important role in everyday life. The management of intimate relationships through ICTs and the attitudes and uses of ICTs by these temporary 'parents' can shed light on what the more general introduction of ICTs in 'unprepared' households might entail.

The North Lincolnshire Council eMentoring programme

The North Lincolnshire Council will be launching an eMentoring programme for children in Foster Care in late summer 2009. Foster Carers in the region are required to participate in the eMentoring programme which will connect them and the children in their care to council support, their peers and to their case worker. It is possible that implementation of this programme introduces Internet connections in households which have not had such access before or that Internet use habits, important in the relationship between Foster Carers and Children, might change. To understand the barriers that the introduction of ICTs and the eMentoring programme into Foster Carers' homes might run up against and to generally understand the Foster Carers' situation better, the North Lincolnshire Council asked researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute to conduct a study that could answer some of their questions.

The main aim of this study was to understand ICT use, skills, and attitudes in general, and to get a better idea of the concerns about the Internet and possible obstacles to the launch of the eMentoring programme in particular.

Methodology

Two surveys were analysed to examine the issues as regards the use of and attitudes towards ICTs amongst Foster Carers. The first was a purposefully designed survey making enquiries into the use of Foster Carers who were about to become participants in the eMentoring programme of the North Lincolnshire Council. The second set of analyses was based on the Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS) 2009 which served as a comparator with the national population for the data obtained in the Foster Carer Survey (FCS). By using both surveys it was possible to draw conclusions about the distinct characteristics of Foster Carers which might set them apart from parents in general in the UK. The analyses presented in this report compare the Foster Carers' demographics, Internet usage, Internet skills as well as attitudes towards technologies and concerns about the Internet to those of the general British population.

To facilitate comparison between the Foster Carers Surveys (FCS) and the Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS) the questions in the FCS were mostly taken from the OxIS questionnaires.

Foster Carer Survey

In May 2009, the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) carried out a survey together with the North Lincolnshire Council to examine Foster Carers' use of the Internet, their general attitudes towards technologies and their attitudes towards their (Foster) Children's use of the Internet. For the Foster Carer Survey, 52 Foster Carers were interviewed in the North Lincolnshire Council area. These Foster Carers volunteer to care for children that have been taken away from their birth parents by state authorities. In 30-minute face-to-face interviews, the 24- to 67-year-old Foster parents answered questions about the media in their household, their use of technologies, attitudes towards technologies and regulation, as well as questions regarding concerns about their own Internet use and that of their children and Foster Children. The questionnaire structure allowed for comparisons between users and non-users. Since the sample was fairly small, ex-users (4 individuals used to use the Internet) and non-users (8 individuals never used the Internet) were grouped to be able to compare them to the 40 current users of the Internet. For the same reason, only descriptive analyses are presented in this report and compared to the findings from the OxIS 2009, which used a sample representative of the British population.

Oxford Internet Surveys

The biennial Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS) are carried out by the Oxford Internet Institute (University of Oxford) and survey a representative sample of the British population. The 2009 sample consisted of 2,013 individuals from England, Wales, and Scotland. In 90-minute face-to-face interviews individuals between 14 and 94 were asked about their attitudes towards information and communication technologies, use of the Internet, importance of different media for information and entertainment, politics and other related

topics (for more details see Dutton, Helsper & Gerber, 2009). To ensure a better comparability of the data only adults in the age group of the Foster Carers and with children in the household were selected from the OxIS 2009 sample. After these adjustments, the OxIS dataset included 533 individuals aged 24 to 65 years with children in their household. As the small sample of the FCS only allows descriptive and no multivariate analyses, the OxIS 2009 analyses are similarly based on frequencies and cross tabulations.

Sample composition

The FCS sample differs significantly from the general adult population with children in terms of demographic measures. This is not very surprising, considering that Foster Carers have to meet a number of requirements to be allowed to look after children that are not their own. Table 1 summarises these differences between the OxIS (the general population) and the FCS samples.

Table 1 Demographics of OxIS 2009 and FCS

Demographics	OxIS 2009 (N)	OxIS 2009 (%)	FCS (N)	FCS (%)
Gender:				
Male	209	37%	8	15%
Female	356	63%	44	85%
Age Category:				
24-34	199	35%	3	6%
35-44	237	42%	13	25%
45-54	117	21%	20	38%
55-67	11	2%	16	31%
Education:				
Basic/secondary	248	46%	15	29%
Further	174	31%	21	40%
Higher (University)	120	21%	10	19%
Other	0	0%	6	12%
Employment Status:				
Student	13	2%	1	2%
Employed	367	66%	30	57%
Retired	3	1%	3	6%
Unemployed	54	10%	1	2%
Caretaker	122	22%	17	33%

Base. OxIS 2009: N=533 (individuals between 24 and 65 with children); FCS: N=52.

⇒ In both samples, respondents with children in the household were mainly female. The adjusted OxIS sample included 63 percent women and 37 percent men. The high proportion of women was even more distinct in the FCS sample: 85 percent (N=44) of the Foster Carers were female, only 15 percent male.

⇒ The Foster Carers' average age was a lot higher than that of the OxIS sample. While the average age of individuals with children in Britain was 38, the Foster Carers' average age

- ⇒ Educational level was slightly higher amongst the Foster Carers; 40 percent had received further education and 29 percent left the educational system after secondary school. In contrast, 31 percent of the British population obtained further education while 46 percent received basic or secondary education. In both samples, one fifth of the respondents obtained a university degree.
- ⇒ Notably more individuals in the Foster Carer Survey were doing housework (33%) than in the British population (22%). This is in line with the distinctively higher proportion of women among the Foster Carers. The same low percentage of individuals was studying (2%) and a small number of people were retired. In both samples the majority of the respondents were in employment, albeit substantially more of the Britons (66%) than of the Foster Carers (57%).

Table 2 Age of Foster Children

Age of Foster Child	
Younger than 10 years	46%
10 to 14 years	35%
15 to 18 years	19%
Total number of Foster Children	98

Base. FCS: N=51

Most Foster Carers (38%) cared for one Foster Child at the time of the interview and only 15 percent of the respondents looked after two children. All in all, North Lincolnshire Foster Carers were looking after 98 Foster Children at the time of the interview or until

¹ The British population will from here onwards refer to adult Britons with children in their households

shortly before the interview. Just under half of these children were under 10 (46%), a smaller number (35%) between 10 and 14 and one fifth (19%) between 14 and 18 years old. The age of the Foster Children is important because OxIS shows that younger children are less likely to access the Internet according to their parents/caretakers.

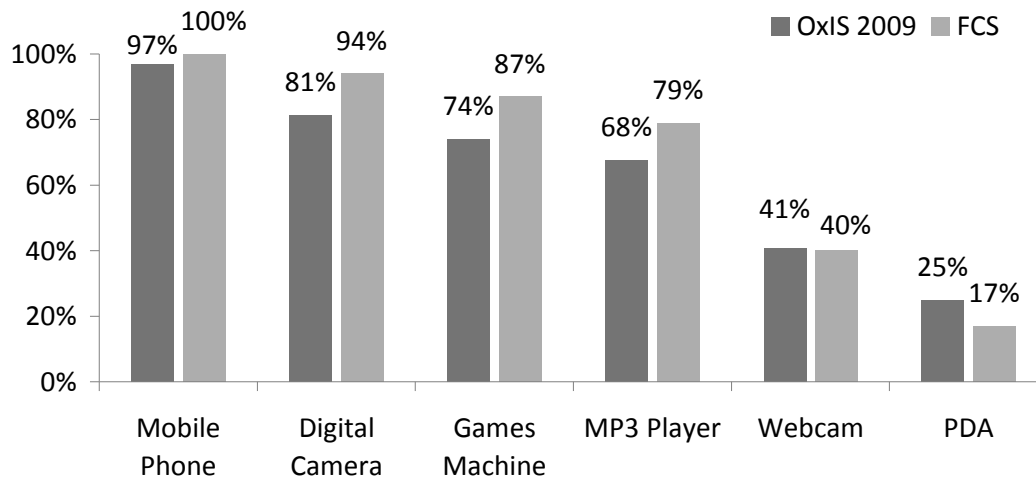
Findings

This section will discuss the findings of the survey which looked at (a) the media richness of the households in which the Foster Carers find themselves, (b) their skills and confidence in dealing with ICTs, (c) the way in which they use the Internet, (d) their attitudes towards ICTs, (e) their concerns about Internet content and the regulation available to the children in their care as well as (f) their opinions about the introduction of the eMentoring programme later in 2009. For each of these sections comparisons are made with the OxIS data where possible, and for sections a, b, d, and e comparisons were also made between those who use and do not use the Internet.

a) Media Richness: ICTs in the Household

Compared to the British population, Foster Carers lived in households that were more media rich. For example, all of the Foster Carers' households owned a mobile phone and most owned a digital camera (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Media Richness of British and Foster Carer Households.



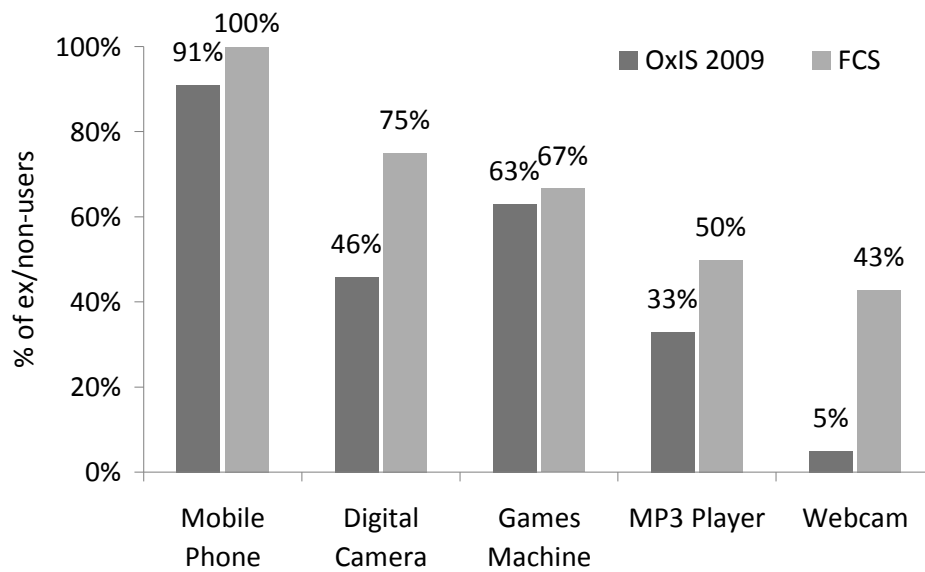
Base. OxIS 2009, Households with children: N=559; FCS, Foster Carers Households: N=52.

In addition, Foster Carers had at least one TV and accessed content mostly via digital terrestrial TV. Most Foster Carer households owned games machines and mp3 players with the proportion of households in Britain owning these consistently lower. No differences were found for the possession of webcams (40% in both samples) and only small differences for hand held personal digital assistants (PDAs), such as Blackberries or iPhones; 17 percent of the Foster Carers' households had one, as did 25 percent of the general British population.

Comparing users to ex- and non-users of the Internet, it is noteworthy that the households of the latter in the Foster Carer sample were significantly better equipped than the households of average British ex-/non-users. The differences between those individuals using the Internet and those not using the Internet were substantially smaller in the Foster Carer sample than in OxIS.

Figure 2 shows that Foster Carers who are currently not using the Internet had technologically well-equipped households, owning gadgets from mobile phones to Webcams, whereas ex- and non-users in the general British population were poorly equipped with technological gadgets.

Figure 2 Media Richness of Ex-/Non-User Households



Base. Ex-/Non-Users. OxIS 2009: N=95; FCS: N=12

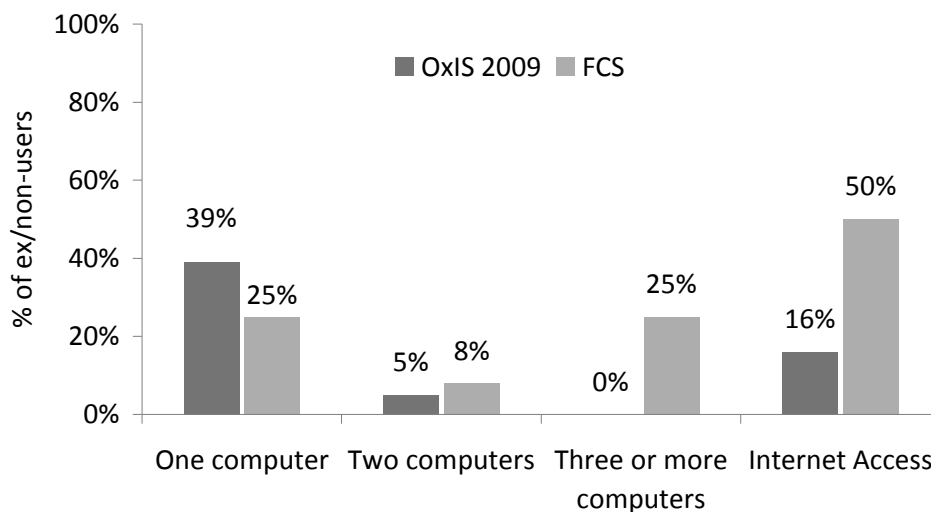
PC access

A considerable difference could be observed in the number of computers available in the household as well as in access to the Internet and the kind of access. Again, the Foster Carer households were significantly better equipped than the average British household. More than half (52%) of the Foster Carers' households had three or more computers available at their homes, including laptops. However, only 16 percent of British households had this number of PCs and laptops; most of the OxIS interviewees (48%) said that they had one computer available in the household in comparison to 17 percent of the Foster Carers.

Only 5 percent of the Foster Carers households did not have a PC in their home. The council plays an important role in the proliferation of PCs amongst Foster Carer households, 40 percent of the Foster Carers said that they received at least one of their computers from a local authority or council.

Foster Carers who did not use the Internet had more computers available (average=2.2) than other British ex- and non-users of the Internet (average=1.4). Only 44 percent of ex- and non-users of the Internet in the general British population had at least one computer at home in contrast to 58 percent of ex- and non-users in the Foster Carer sample (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Computers and Internet Access of Ex-/Non-User Households

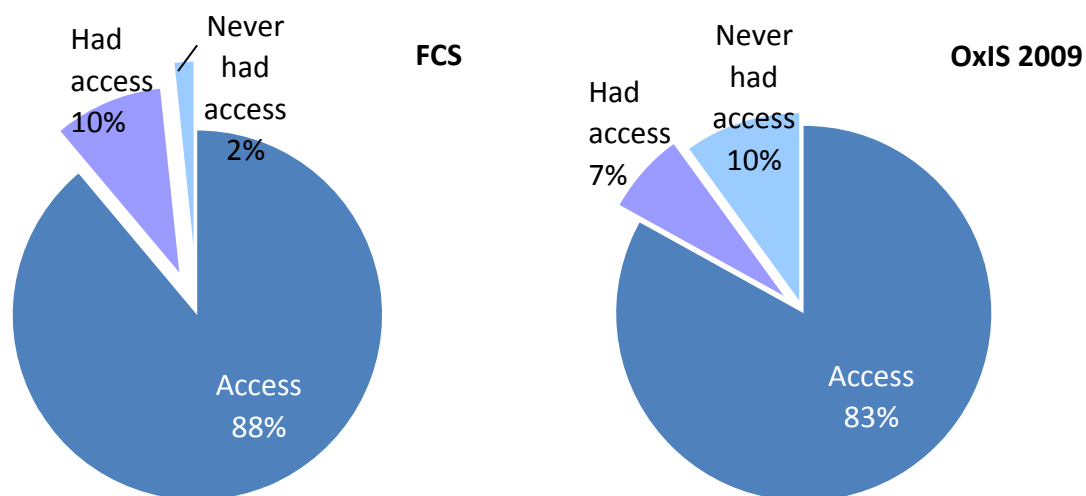


Base. Ex-/Non-Users. OxIS 2009: N=95; FCS: N=12

Internet access

In addition to the greater variety of media apparatus in Foster Carers' households, the number of Foster Carer households that had access to the Internet was slightly higher than in the population.

Figure 4 Does your household currently have access to the Internet?



Base. OxIS 2009: N=564; FCS: N=52

While 88 percent of all Foster Carers had Internet access at their homes only 83 percent of the British households with children had Internet access at home in early 2009. 10 percent of the Foster Carers had access in the past (5 households) and only one of the FCS respondents had never had access to the Internet in their household (2%). In comparison, 7 percent of the British population had had access to the Internet in the past and 10 percent had never had access to the Internet in their household. Home-access is said to improve the experience of using the Internet for many so this is an important finding. However, even more important is what type of connection they have. In terms of quality of

the connection Foster Carers and the British population were very similar; around 80% had broadband access.

It is important to keep in mind that access to the Internet in the household should not be confused with actual personal use of the Internet. Striking is that half of the Foster Carer ex- and non-users had access to the Internet in their household compared to 16 percent of the general population.

Foster Carers' households are rich in media in comparison to the average British household with children.

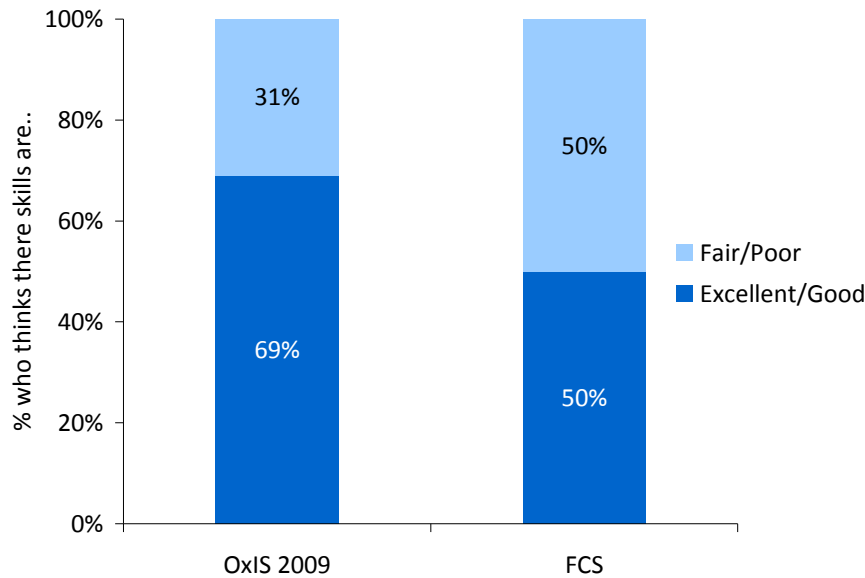
b) ICT skills and confidence

The following section will describe the Foster Carers' Internet use and their skills to handle information and communication technologies; the relationships between socio-demographics and these skills will be analysed through simple descriptive statistical analyses. These results will once again be compared to findings from OxIS 2009. Most of the differences between men and women, between those with and without children of their own and between those with different levels of education were not significant and therefore not reported.

The North Lincolnshire Foster Carers were rather similar in terms of current Internet use of the respondents to the British Internet users in general. The Foster Carers had used the Internet slightly longer than the average Briton; 60 percent of the Foster Carers used it for more than seven years compared to 41 percent of the OxIS 2009 sample. In the average Foster Carers had used the Internet for 8 years, the average Briton for 7 years.

Nonetheless, the Foster Carer sample estimated their ability to use the Internet significantly lower than the rest of the British population (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Self-perceived Internet skill level

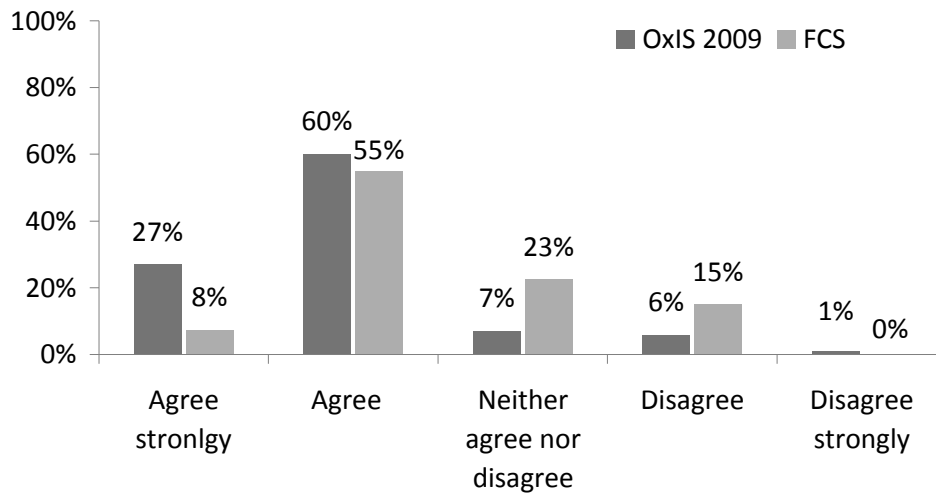


Base. Internet Users. OxIS 2009: N=469; FCS: N=40

Half of the Foster Carers thought they were excellent or good at using the Internet, the other half thought they were only fair or poor at it. In contrast to that, 69 percent of the general population thought their competence in using the Internet was excellent or good and less than one third (31%) thought it was fair or poor.

These self-evaluations are mirrored in the answers the Foster Carers gave concerning their abilities to look up information online or judging the reliability of online resources.

Figure 6 I find things quickly when I look for them on the Internet



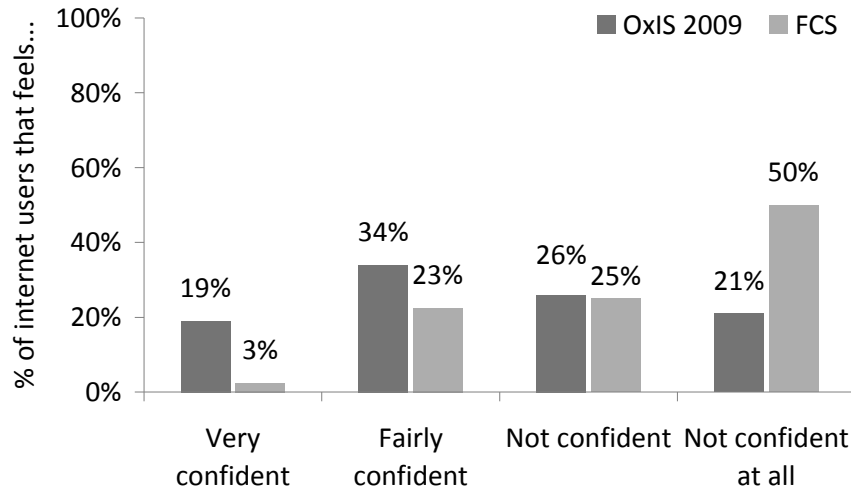
Base. Internet Users. OxIS 2009: N=469; FCS: N=40.

While 87 percent of British Internet users estimated their ability to find things online quickly as rather good, only 63 percent of the Foster Carers thought so. The figures for finding the information they were looking for are slightly better, but still the Foster Carers trusted their own abilities considerably less than the average Briton. Although 83 percent agreed that they find the things they look for online, 13 percent disagreed. In contrast 92 percent of Internet using Britons agreed that they usually find what they are looking for online. Moreover, the Foster Carers seemed to enjoy looking for information online notably less than the average Briton. While 73 percent of the British population said they enjoyed looking for information on the Internet, only 65 percent of the Foster Carers agreed with this statement. Most Foster Carers felt (fairly) confident about performing simple tasks online, such as gathering information online, although their confidence values were significantly lower than those of the general British Internet user.

The differences between the Foster Carers and the average Internet user were even more apparent when looking at more complicated computer- and Internet-related tasks,

such as cleaning a computer of viruses, uploading photos online or downloading and saving music files.

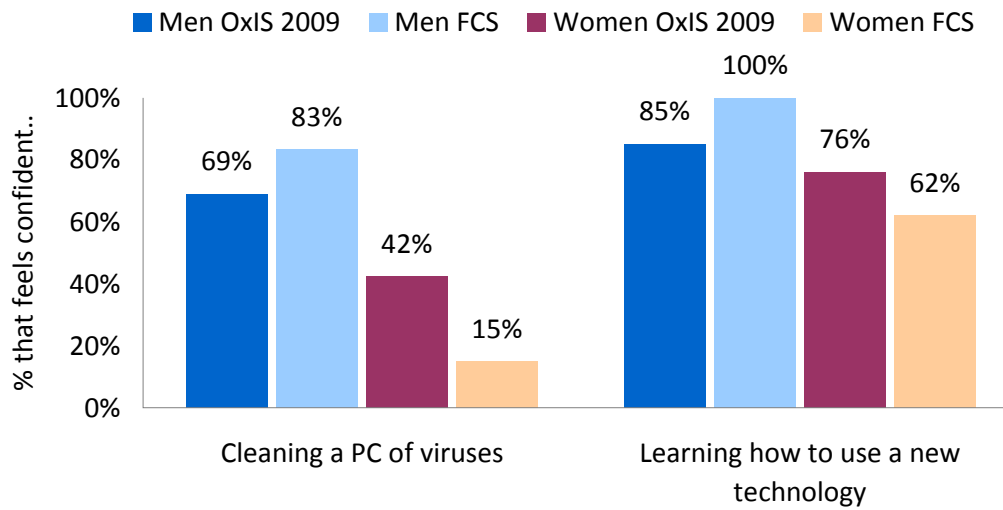
Figure 6 How confident do you feel about cleaning a computer from a virus?



Base. Internet Users. OxIS 2009: N=458; FCS: N=40.

These differences between the average British Internet user and Foster Carers might be explained by the high proportion of women amongst the interviewed Foster Carers (85 percent). Most of the Foster Carers said they were confident learning how to use a new technology but on average their confidence was lower than that of the general British Internet users. This reflects partly the differences between genders which were more extreme amongst Foster Carers.

Figure 7 Gender differences in skills in the general population and Foster Carers

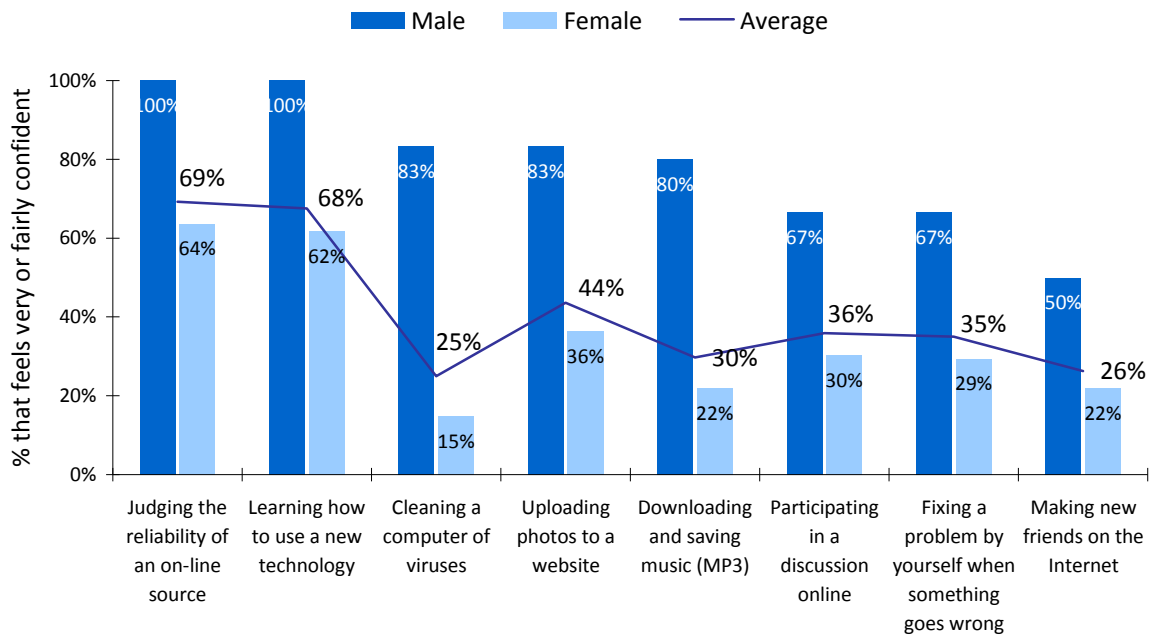


Base. Internet Users. OxIS 2009: N=466; FCS: N=40

A comparison of female OxIS respondents and the women in the Foster Carer sample reveals that women in the general population were more confident than the Foster Carers. This might be related to lower socioeconomic levels of Foster Carers but is nevertheless surprising since the educational levels of the Foster Carers were higher than in the general population.

In OxIS, there were no gender differences found for gathering information or enjoying this task but women did show lower confidence measures for web 2.0 related tasks, such as downloading and saving music, making new friends on the Internet or putting up pictures. This is reflected in the FCS survey.

Figure 8 Gender differences in skills in FCS



Base. Internet Users. FCS: N=40 (Differences not significant)

(Female) Foster Carers especially lacked confidence in relation to cleaning computer viruses (only 15% were confident), and uploading and downloading content as well as the different activities that involve interacting with others online.

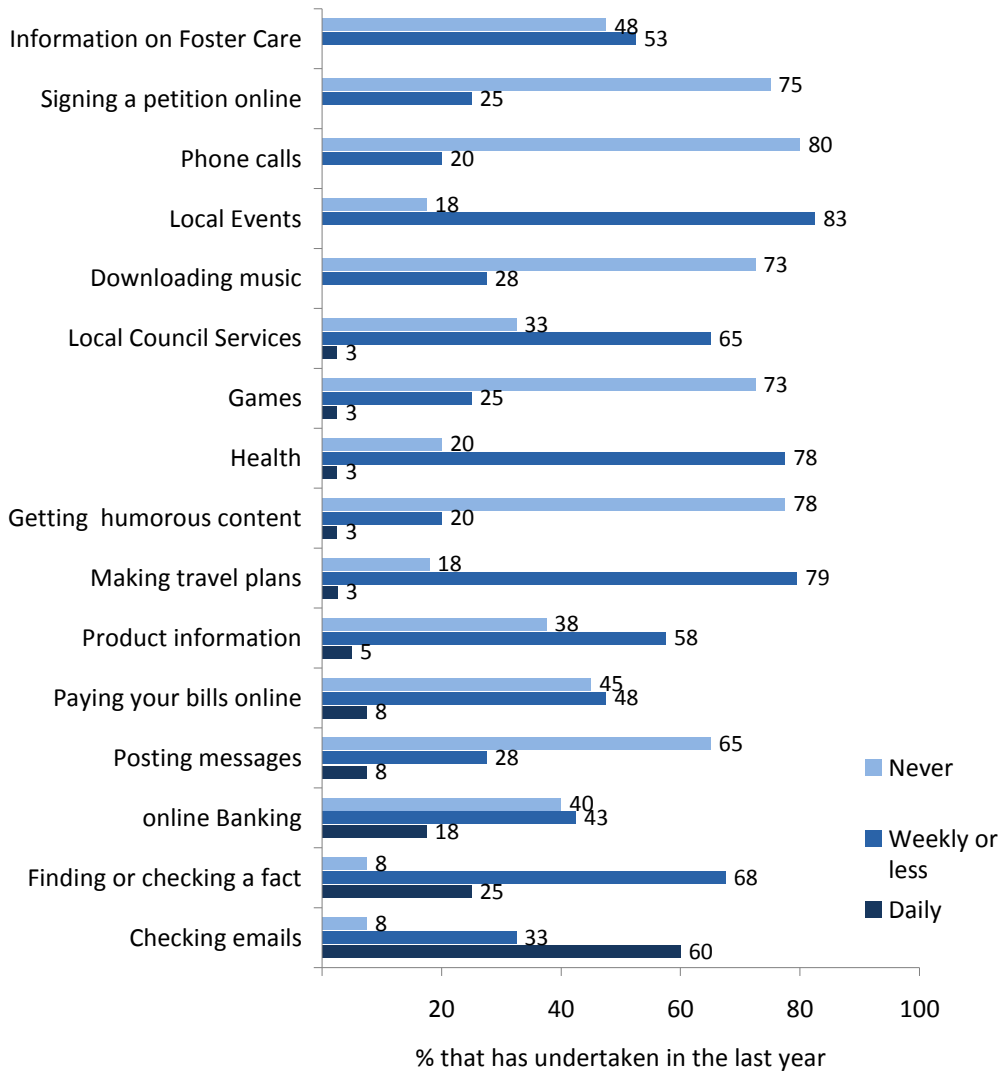
Foster Carers feel less confident about their ICTs skills than the general population even when gender differences are taken into account. Interactivity is especially problematic for the mostly female Foster Carers.

c) Uses of the Internet

Foster Carer's use

The majority of the Foster Carers used the Internet very frequently for basic online tasks, such as checking emails or a fact. Most of them checked their emails at least daily, if not several times a day.

Figure 9 Foster Carers' Uses of the Internet



Base. Internet users FCS: N=40.

Note. Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding

Figure 9 shows that amongst Foster Carers there were a few activities more popular than others, these in general corresponded to the basic activities that are popular amongst the general population. For example, 60 percent checked their email and 25 percent looked up facts daily. Moreover, most Foster Carers used the Internet for other ‘practical’ purposes less common amongst the general population, such as getting health information (81%), getting information about Foster Carers services (53%), or using their bank’s online services

(61%) and paying bills online (55%). While this is encouraging, this also means that about half of the respondents did not use the Internet to get information related to Foster Care nor did they use online banking.

Figure 9 also shows that the Foster Carers very rarely used the Internet for entertainment purposes and web 2.0 applications, which reflects their general lack of confidence in these areas. The majority (73%) of the respondents never used the Internet to download music, posted messages on discussion boards (65%), made calls via the Internet (80%) or played games online (73%). These are exactly those activities that are likely to be popular amongst their Foster Children and which might come in handy when interacting through the eMentoring programme with case workers and other support staff.

Confirming what was found for the types of sites people visit, the type of information they looked for was also more instrumental in nature than that of the average Internet user. Foster Carers looked up facts and information on health more often than the average British Internet user. One quarter of the Foster Carers looked up a fact on the Internet at least once a day, while this was the case for only 17 percent of the OxIS. Figure 10 shows that the average British Internet user with children in the household was slightly less likely to use the Internet to look for health information than Foster Carers who use the Internet; 20% of Foster Carers had never done this compared to 27% of the average British Internet user.

On the other hand, the Foster Carers use the Internet much less for entertainment purposes, such as downloading music or playing games online. They also make less use of eCommerce and online shopping. While 13 percent of the British online population said

they never compared products and prices online this was true for 38 percent of the interviewed Foster Carers.

Foster Carers are oriented towards instrumental, practical use of the Internet rather than interactivity or entertainment oriented.

Foster Children's use

The Foster Carers were also asked about their (Foster) Children's computer and Internet use. Almost four fifths (78 percent) of the Foster Carers' households with Internet access said that their Foster Children were using the Internet at home. However, the 22 percent of Foster Children who did not use the Internet at their Foster Carers' homes were all under 10 years old. This corresponds to trends in the general population which show that giving children access to the Internet was for most caretakers highly related to the age of the children: The younger the children, the less likely they were (allowed) to use the Internet and the less likely that they had access in their own room.

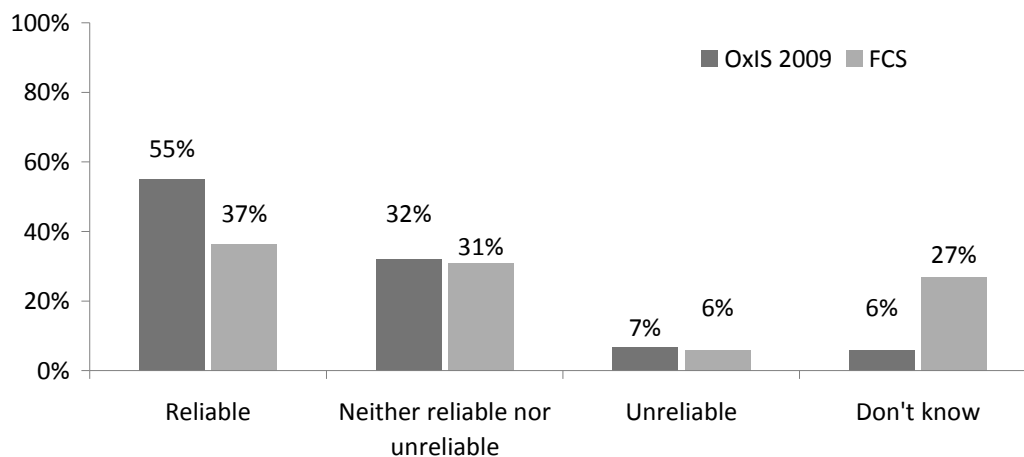
d) Attitudes towards technologies

The Internet usage patterns of Foster Carers and the general British online population are reflected in their attitudes towards the Internet. In contrast to the last two sections on skills and usage of the Internet, we included ex- and non-users in this part of the analysis, as most of them have an opinion about ICTs even when they do not use them themselves.

Centrality of the Internet

For most Foster Carers the Internet was an important source of information (71% agree). However, they were slightly more sceptical about the reliability of the information they got online than the general British population.

Figure 10 How reliable and accurate would you rate the information found on the Internet?



Base. OxIS 2009: N=564; FCS: N=52

Only 37 percent of the respondents thought the Internet was a reliable source for information, while more than a quarter did not know what they think about the reliability of the Internet as a source for information. In the general population, 55 percent of the respondents thought that the Internet was a reliable source for information and only 6 percent did not know if they would evaluate the Internet as reliable or not (see Figure 10).

The Foster Carers' infrequent use of the Internet for entertainment purposes was reflected in their attitude towards the importance of the Internet as a source for entertainment. 40 percent of them rated the Internet as not (so) important for

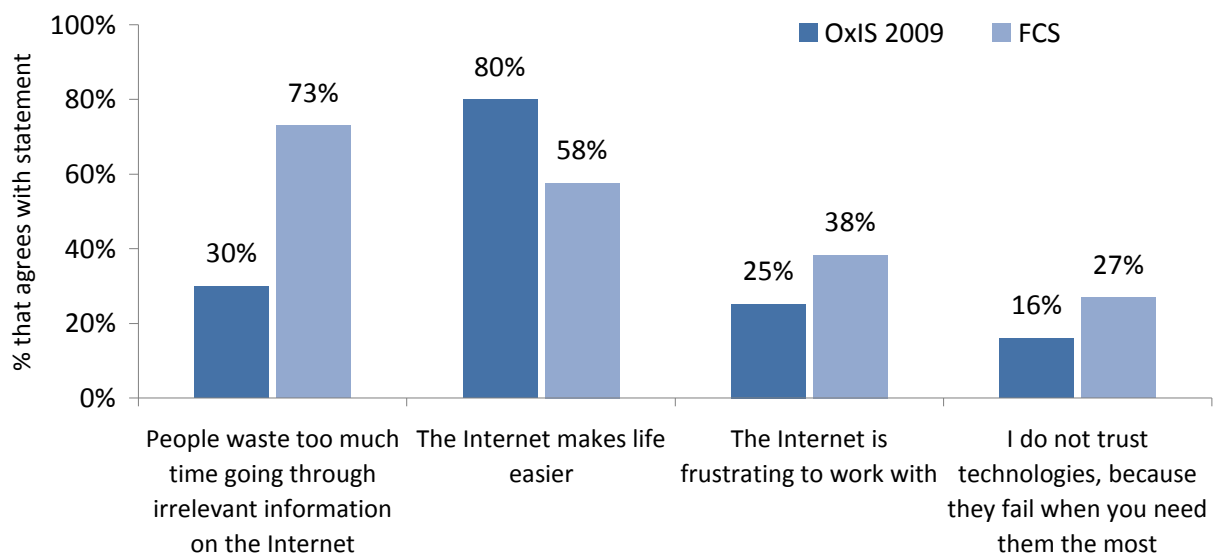
entertainment purposes (28% of the British population), while only 23 percent thought the Internet was very important or even essential as a source of entertainment (43% of Britons).

Attitudes towards the Internet

The majority of Foster Carers agreed on the usefulness and positive outcomes of using the Internet. However, reflecting earlier findings, the Foster Carers' attitudes towards the Internet were not as positive as those of the average Briton. Between 15 and 20 percentage points fewer of Foster Carers than of the British population agreed with the statements that the Internet makes life easier, that it helps people save time, and that it is a great tool to keep in touch with people.

Many of the Foster Carers are moreover rather sceptical towards technologies in general and the Internet in particular. In contrast to the general population, a bigger proportion of Foster Carers did not trust technologies or were unsure if they did.

Figure 11 Attitudes towards the Internet



Base. OxIS 2009: N=564; FCS: N=52

Figure 11 shows that 27 percent of the Foster Carers agreed with the statement that they do not trust technologies because they fail when you need them the most, whereas only 16 percent of the British population distrusted technologies. Furthermore, Foster Carers were more frustrated about working with the Internet and a vast majority of them believes that people waste too much time going through irrelevant information on the Internet (73 percent of Foster Carers v. 30 percent of Britons). Moreover, 71 percent of the Foster Carers agreed that there is too much immoral material on the Internet, in comparison to 46 percent of the general British population. The Foster Carer sample was furthermore slightly more concerned about receiving SPAM, getting computer viruses when surfing the Internet, or making unpleasant experiences online.

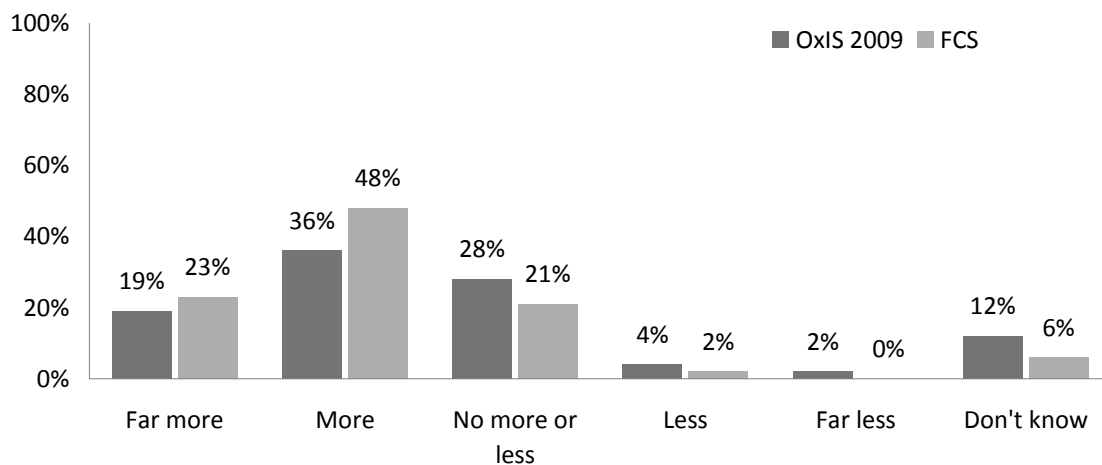
In summary, Foster Carers' attitudes towards the Internet can be characterized as less positive and much less trusting than those of the general British population. To be sure that these differences between the Foster Carer sample and the OxIS 2009 sample do not derive from gender distinctions or differences in having (own) children in the household, we compared the Foster Carer data to those specific groups of the OxIS. However, there were only slight and non-significant differences to be found between the attitudes of these groups amongst the Foster Carers, whereas the differences between the Foster Carers and the British population are rather large.

Foster Carers are more sceptical about the Internet and more concerned about the negative experiences they might have on the Internet than the average Briton.

e) Concerns and Regulation

Not surprisingly, considering the concerns expressed by Foster Carers as reported in the previous section, the majority of the Foster Carers thought that Internet content should be regulated more and that Children’s content should be restricted. Their concerns were larger than those of the OxIS sample as regards regulation as well. Even so, the same proportion of parents in the Foster Carer sample and the general British population did not give their Children or Foster Children access to the Internet in their rooms (67 percent of Foster Carers compared to 68 percent of the general population).

Figure 12 Degree of regulation required for children’s online content

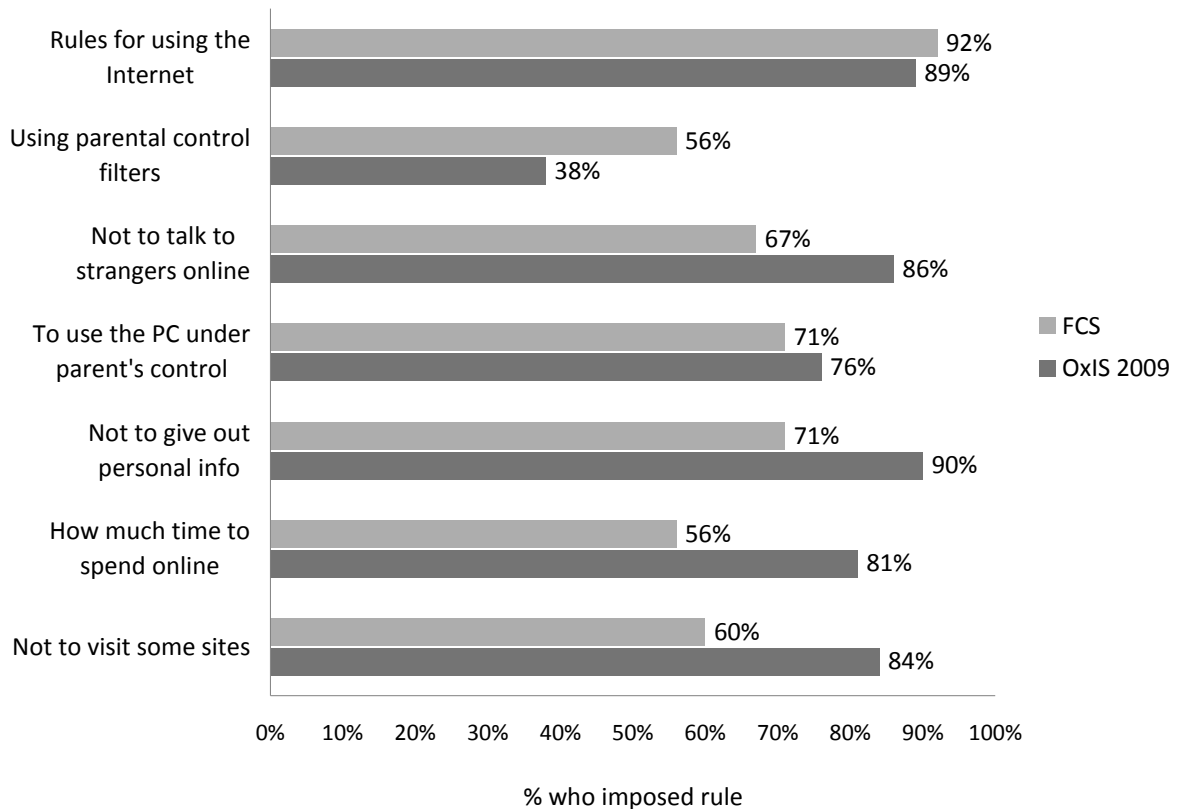


Base. OxIS 2009: N=564; FCS: N=52

The Foster Carers did not differ significantly from the general population when it came to having rules about the children for using the Internet inside or outside the home. Around one tenth did not impose any rules upon their children as regards their use of the Internet, around 90 percent did do this.

A surprising result, however, is that the Foster Carers gave their own children as well as their Foster Children less specific advice on how to use the Internet than the general British population. They relied more heavily on technology to control their children's use.

Figure 13 Do you have any rules about any of the children using the Internet? Which kinds of rules?



Base. OxIS 2009: N=305; FCS: N=52

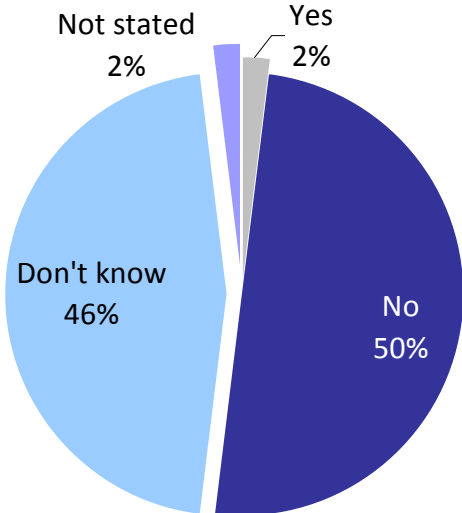
Figure 13 shows that Foster Carers were especially less likely to tell their children not to talk to strangers online, to spend less time online and to refrain from visiting certain sites. On the other hand, 56 percent of the Foster Carers used parental control filters on the Internet, while only 38 percent of the general British population did.

While Foster Carers are more concerned about regulation of online content than the average British parent they rely less on specific rules and more on technological fixes to keep their children safe online.

f) eMentoring programme

All of the above would suggest that the Foster Carers have concerns about the introduction of ICTs into their everyday lives and their interactions with their own and their Foster Children. This could be potentially problematic for the eMentoring programme to be established by the North Lincolnshire Council. The study therefore also evaluated if Foster Carers had any specific concerns with the eMentoring programme.

Figure 14 Do you have any concerns about your child using the Internet through the eMentoring scheme?



Base. FCS: N=52

Figure 14 shows that only one of the Foster Carers expressed concerns about the launch of the North Lincolnshire eMentoring programme for the Foster Children, half (50%) had no concerns at all and 46 percent did not know what to think about it. This lack of concern and opinion might reflect a lack of insight in the programme or a 'withdrawal' from it where they decided to see what will happen when the programme is introduced. Unfortunately, the one person with concerns was not willing to state the reasons for their

concerns, so that no conclusions can be drawn about what the possible concerns with the eMentoring programme might be.

There seems to be general confusion amongst Foster Carers about the implications and implementation of the eMentoring programme.

Summary

The Foster Carer Survey revealed a number of noteworthy differences between Foster Carers in the North Lincolnshire area and the general British population that should be considered for the implementation of the eMentoring programme of the North Lincolnshire Council. The reader should keep in mind that the Foster Carers interviewed for this report were almost all mothers. This probably reflects the greater role of them in the care of Foster Children in comparison to fathers. Nevertheless, it is important not to forget that there could be broader family dynamics playing a role that this project was not fully able to capture. The older age of the Foster Carers in comparison to parents in the general population might also explain some of the results of this study in terms of ICT confidence and trust issues. This reflects tendencies in the general population and means that Foster Care programmes intending to use ICTs, such as the eMentoring programme in North Lincolnshire, will need to take into account the general attitudes and skill levels of older generations and have a better understanding of problems with ICTs in this age group.

The most important conclusions can be summarised as follows:

- ⇒ Foster Carers and their children live in media richer households, current Internet users and ex-/non-users alike, and those who use the Internet have on the average had longer experience with the Internet than the British population.
- ⇒ Foster Carers are less confident about their online skills than the British population.
- ⇒ Foster Carers are more sceptical about the usefulness and benefits of the Internet, and less trusting when it comes to ICTs.
- ⇒ Foster Carers' use of the Internet is rather practical than experiential. It is mostly information-orientated instead of entertainment-orientated.
- ⇒ Foster Carers are very concerned about risks and about regulation of the Internet. They use significantly more parental control filters, but do not give specific rules or restrictions as regards their (Foster) children's Internet use.
- ⇒ Almost half of the Foster Parents do not know what to think about their Foster Children accessing the Internet through the eMentoring scheme. More awareness of the implications and implementation of the eMentoring programme seems to be required.

Recommendations

The conclusions derived from analysing the FCS and comparing the results to the data of the general British population, lead to a number of recommendations for the implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the eMentoring programme in North Lincolnshire Foster Homes.

Foster Carers homes were surprisingly well equipped with ICTs and no alienation from the eMentoring programme can be expected based on a lack of familiarity with technologies, even amongst those who currently do not use the Internet.

⇒ The recommendation is to **continue the council's involvement in providing ICT support for Foster Carers**, they have been important in distributing PCs and can have the same role for Internet connections. Since many households have PCs, Internet roll out should be smooth amongst the 12% who do not have access.

More work is definitely needed in the area of skills and confidence which were lower than in the general population and might explain why considerable numbers had access to the Internet at home but did not use it. At least half could do with confidence boost.

⇒ To increase confidence and trust in the services offered online the council could offer **training for Foster Carers exploring their issues with Internet use**. This can be organised in the comfort of their own home with their own equipment (and children) present or outside of the home if this is more comfortable for the person. **Trained case workers could integrate this in general interactions with Foster Carers**. This training should especially focus on learning how to judge safety in interacting with others and online sources of information.

The breadth of activities undertaken by Foster Carers is encouraging. However, a considerable minority is reluctant to access information and services online.

⇒ Caseworkers need to be aware of this reluctance and explore why this might be the case on an individual basis to **make sure they get full access to the services and information they need whether offline or online**.

In contrast to children's Internet usage, the Foster Carers' use is mostly information-oriented instead of entertainment-oriented. This means that they are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the services most used by young people.

⇒ In **joint sessions between children and carers**, the Foster Carers could observe their (Foster) children's way of surfing and utilizing the Internet and learn from them.

However, especially older children might be very reluctant to do this. A simple session in which the different platforms are discussed (in positive and negative light) with the children and the foster carers would be useful for their piece of mind.

Worries about content and about regulation are prevalent amongst Foster Carers.

Considering the age of the children in their care (very young), it is not surprising that Foster Carers try to be more restrictive of their children's Internet use. Research shows that children with traumatic experiences in the past are more vulnerable to online risk taking and victimisation, therefore this concern might be especially justified amongst Foster Carers.

⇒ **Providing leaflets** available from organisation such as KidsWise could be useful, as well as a discussion about different **active mediation strategies** beyond passive technical means. It is important that **the positive aspects of Internet use and online interaction for children are also discussed**. A dialogue about these issues could be a continuing part of interactions with case workers and phone availability guaranteed if Foster Carers or their children need to talk about online experiences.

Important for this report is that there seems to be confusion about the implementation and the benefits of the eMentoring programme.

⇒ An **information event** for Foster Carers about the council's **detailed plans and aims of the eMentoring programme** could help the Foster Carers to get a better idea of the project and understand what it might mean for the children in the care and the way in which they care for them.

References

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Glossary of terms

ICTs Information and Communication Technologies

FCS Foster Carer Survey

OxIS Oxford Internet Survey

British population/Britons In this report: Individuals with children in the household who are between 24 and 65.