

**TWITTER**  
.....  
**201**

*Twitter 201 for  
Child Welfare Professionals:*  
**STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES  
FOR USING TWITTER**

.....  
*to Reach Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families*



**Adopt US Kids**

*Together we hold their future*

## GETTING READY

---

### Have a Plan

#### *Laying the Foundation*

Once your agency makes the decision to start using Twitter, you may need to coordinate with your information technology staff. This is particularly true if your agency's employees are restricted from accessing social media sites on work computers, because you will need to get this restriction lifted for staff involved with managing your agency's Twitter profile.

#### *Assign Staff*

If your agency is going to start using Twitter, one of the first things you'll need to do is identify which staff will be responsible for "Tweeting" (i.e., posting content and responding to comments and questions on Twitter) on behalf of your agency.<sup>1</sup> Some key things to think about when making this decision include:

- Remember that this person will be communicating with the public in a public forum much like a spokesperson in a press conference does. Make sure that the person speaking on behalf of your agency on Twitter is knowledgeable about your agency, including its policies and practices; can communicate clearly and effectively in writing; and is skilled at knowing when to handle comments and questions on their own versus seeking input from someone in a supervisory capacity.
- Communicating effectively through Twitter has its own unique challenge, with the limit of only 140 characters, including spaces, for each "Tweet." This limit makes it particularly important that your agency be able to accurately get your message out concisely, especially if you also want to include a link to a Web page.
- The person who manages your Twitter profile should be supervised by someone who also has a strong understanding of how to represent your agency in public communications and how to respond to sensitive situations that may arise through people's interaction with your agency through Twitter.
- Age has nothing to do with ability to manage social media well, so do not make the assumption that a young person is automatically the best person to handle social media for the agency.

#### *Plan Content*

In any given month, your agency likely has multiple communications planned to go out to the public. These efforts might include emails to foster, adoptive, and kinship families; ads to run in local news publications; banner ads on websites; much more. These could also include community events such as recruitment activities and matching parties.

As you begin to plan how to implement social media communications within your agency, it is critical that you coordinate with your agency's communications staff—or program staff if they are responsible for distributing announcements to the public—to ensure that your agency's communication through Twitter aligns with broader communication plans and strategies.

Integrating your agency's Twitter presence with other communication efforts will have multiple benefits, including:

---

<sup>1</sup> Depending on your familiarity with Twitter, you may find it helpful to review the list of Twitter terms at the end of this publication. Although most of this publication uses non-Twitter specific language, there are instances where we use terminology specific to Twitter. Twitter-specific terms used in this document appear in quotation marks the first time they appear.

- Increasing the effectiveness of your messages by reinforcing them through multiple channels. For example, emails your agency sends will be more effective if supported by posting similar content to your Twitter profile at about the same time as the email is sent.
- Consistency in messaging across channels by coordinating what is being said. Emails, ads, and Tweets should contain the same critical information points, which will increase your audiences' understanding of your messages.
- The ability to repeatedly deliver your message to your audience with a lower likelihood of losing followers as compared to Facebook and other electronic communications. The culture and norms of Twitter are such that sending out the same content multiple times over a period of time is much more acceptable than it is on Facebook or on some other social media networks.
- Spreading the word to a wider audience about resources, information, and events because of Twitter's ease with which people can share content by "retweeting."

In addition to coordinating your Tweets with general agency messaging and communications, you should also be looking at what other resources and information you want to share with both current and potential resource families. Keep in mind that not all of these resources need to be or even should be from your agency. You should seek to share anything you think is useful and helpful to your audience on Twitter and is consistent with your own agency's message and goals.

Your agency should plan out much of this content in advance, probably one to two weeks at a time, leaving room for flexibility to respond to situations or take advantage of new information as it becomes available.

### *Have a Response Plan*

Not every Tweet you post is going to be popular or well received by everyone that follows your agency on Twitter, so you may receive some negative reactions. Additionally, there will be times when people post their own tweets to or about your agency that are either complaints or some other type of negative comment. Your agency must be ready for this and have a plan to deal with it.

Based on best practices for social media, AdoptUSKids recommends including the following elements in your agency's plan:

- When you're on the receiving end of a negative Tweet, acknowledge it and if appropriate, apologize. Defensive positions are almost always met with backlash, especially in social media. Remember, the conversation is not just between you and the person posting; your interactions on Twitter will likely be seen by others as well.
- It's possible that some negative Tweets posted to or about your agency will not be true. Other people who see the Tweet may not be aware the post includes inaccurate information, so a response that aligns with your agency's protocols for handling sensitive or escalating situations be appropriate.
- When at all possible, the primary person in charge of managing your agency's Twitter posts and responses should also respond to negative comments and complaints. That person should know the appropriate answer or response, and who to ask when they don't know the appropriate response so one can be formulated.
- One important note about interacting with people through Twitter, and other social media networks: there may be some people who make an effort to engage your agency in arguments that are counter-productive and a waste of time and energy. Therefore, the best policy is to follow your agency's protocols for handling sensitive or escalating situations, just as you would if you received negative comments in person or by phone or email.

## Prepare the Staff

Once your agency decides to use Twitter, your agency leadership should communicate this decision with all agency staff and specifically address:

- Why your agency has decided to begin using Twitter
- What goals your agency plans to achieve through the use of Twitter
- Which staff will be responsible for managing the agency's Twitter profile
- Ways you think other staff might be able to be involved, whether that's through providing suggestions for content for Tweets or other ideas they might have

If your agency's staff is not allowed to access social media sites at work, then you should also be prepared to answer questions about whether or not this policy will be changing access to social media for staff who aren't involved in managing your agency's Twitter profile.

## Creating Your Agency's Twitter Profile

To create a Twitter profile for your agency, visit <http://twitter.com> and follow the instructions to sign up. As you do this, keep in mind the following tips:

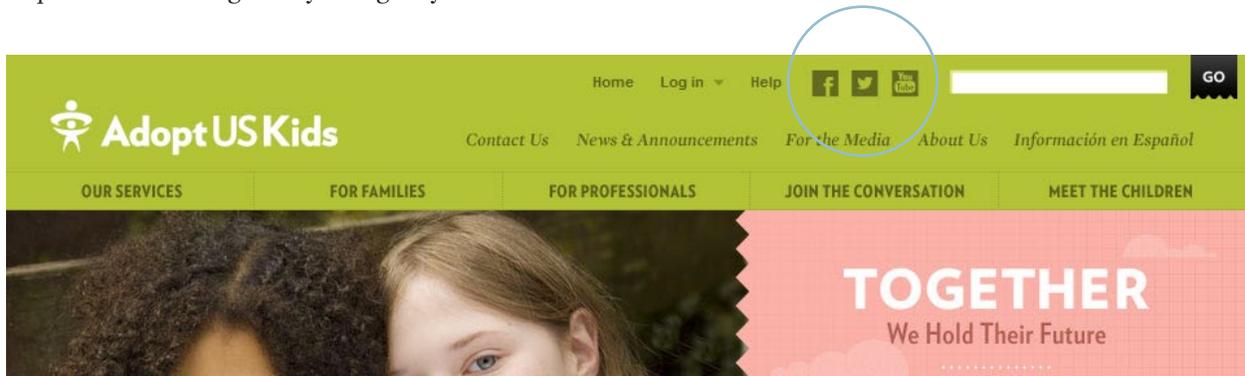
- If at any point you need support from Twitter during the setup process, this page on their site will be a great resource to start with: <http://support.twitter.com/groups/31-twitter-basics>
- You will need to include an email address when you set up your agency's Twitter profile. You may want to avoid using the email address of a specific person, for two reasons:
  - Twitter notifications will be sent to this email address, such as when you receive new followers or get retweeted, and these notifications should be accessible to all staff who manage your agency's Twitter profile
  - If the person whose email address you use for establishing your profile leaves the agency, you may not have access to your agency's profile and any notification emails from Twitter
- If possible, create an email account or alias email specifically for use with Twitter and other social media accounts your agency uses. You will most likely need help from your information technology department to do this.
- Your Twitter "username" should be both clear about who you are and as short as possible. Place greater emphasis on the username's ability to make you identifiable, and less on length. Having a shorter Twitter username is advantageous when people are trying to retweet you, but the higher priority should be on people being able to quickly identify who you are. Some examples of Twitter usernames that child welfare agencies use include @OKDHS (Oklahoma Department of Human Services) and @HamiltonCoJFS (Hamilton County Job and Family Services).
- Pay attention to the guidelines provided by Twitter of size requirements for your profile image—typically an agency's logo—and the background image. For the background image, you can choose to use a standard Twitter background or create your own. These images are part of your agency's branding, and should be of good quality and not blurry or pixelated.
- Make sure your agency fills out the "Bio" section of your Twitter profile so people who see your profile know exactly who your agency is and what they can expect you to be Tweeting about. Your agency's bio should include keywords that identify the type of agency you are, such as child welfare, human services, etc.

## GETTING STARTED

### Promoting Your Page

#### *Promote Through Your Website*

Once your agency creates a Twitter profile, you will likely want to promote it and get the word out so that people can follow you. One of the primary ways to promote your Twitter profile is through your website. The most common and quite effective way to do this is to put links to your Twitter profile on the homepage of your website, typically in top and bottom navigation. Making this addition to your agency's website will likely require coordinating with your agency's website administrators.



**Figure 1.** AdoptUSKids includes links to social media networks in the top right side of our website pages. They are also included with links in the footer on our website pages.

#### *Promote Through Other Communications*

Your agency probably communicates with families and the general public in a variety of ways, and many of these communication vehicles can be opportunities to promote your agency's Twitter profile. Examples include:

- Email campaigns and newsletters—adding a link to your agency's Twitter profile in the email template you use for your campaigns and newsletters is an easy way to promote your profile on an ongoing basis
- Posters, banners, and other promotional materials created for special events
- Anywhere you list your website address, also list your Twitter username. *Note: If your agency also has a Facebook page, list all three if there is room; if there's only room for two, choose the social media network that is a higher priority for your agency.*

#### *Consistently Provide Good Content and Engagement*

One of the best ways to gain and keep followers on Twitter is to provide them with valuable information. If you regularly Tweet good content that people want, actively engage with people who follow you, and are prompt in responding to questions or complaints, these activities will go a long ways toward growing and maintaining your Twitter following.

Another key to growing and maintaining a following on Twitter is to engage with your audience. The nuances of engagement on Twitter are a little more complex than on other social media sites, but having a solid, engaged Twitter following can be a huge asset to your agency. We cover more on how to effectively engage on Twitter in the next section.

# MANAGING YOUR AGENCY'S TWITTER PROFILE – BEST PRACTICES

---

## Nuances of Twitter

Communication through Twitter has some unique characteristics. In fact, Twitter may be the easiest social media site to start up and use, but one of the most difficult to use really well. Here are some basic pointers to help you better understand and use Twitter effectively.

### Retweets

“Retweeting” is at the heart of Twitter. Most of the tweets posted are done so with the hope that people who see it will retweet it (i.e., share it with their followers). There are two ways to retweet:

- Reposting a Tweet exactly as it is with no added comments. Depending on how you do this (e.g., via Twitter directly versus via a third-party Twitter management tool mentioned on page 7 in the section “Tools for Managing Twitter”), it may even appear to your followers as if the Tweet actually came from the person you retweeted from instead of from you.
- Retweeting the original Tweet, but adding your own content to it. This is often a preferred way of retweeting because you can add your own view or expertise to the Tweet, plus it will appear in the original Tweeter’s “mentions”<sup>2</sup>, which makes it easier for them to see that you have retweeted them and they can acknowledge you.

### Hashtags

A “hashtag” is any word or phrase, without spaces, immediately preceded by a “#” symbol. When a hashtag appears in a Tweet, it becomes a searchable link, meaning you can click on the hashtag and get a list of any other Tweets that contain the same hashtag. There are three common ways that hashtags are used on Twitter:

- **Keywords:** At AdoptUSKids, we often include the hashtags #adoption, #fostercare, or #childwelfare in our Tweets. This serves to ensure that if someone searches Twitter for these terms, or clicks the same hashtag in someone else’s Tweet, our Tweets will appear in the search results.
- **Events or conversations:** AdoptUSKids frequently attends child welfare conferences, such as the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) conference, and we’ll Tweet from sessions we attend. So that people can follow all Tweets from that event, everyone who Tweets from the conference will use the same hashtag (e.g., #NACAC). This is so we can all see what others are Tweeting from the conference, and so that all of our followers can follow Tweets from the sessions. Using hashtags in this manner is a great way to not only connect with others at an event, but to share content from an event with those who cannot attend in person.
- **“Flavoring”:** Sometimes you may see hashtags in Tweets that don’t appear to serve a purpose for searching by topic or event. An example might be #ihatemondays or #happytobeamom. Someone might include a hashtag like this to convey a thought or emotion, but it does not serve a larger purpose and is probably not going to be used by anyone as a search keyword. While this is probably not a way your agency might use hashtags, we are including this information to help you understand how others might use them.

One other way that hashtags are frequently used on Twitter is for question and answer sessions. For example, AdoptUSKids holds one of these sessions each year during National Adoption Month in November. During a pre-advertised one-hour session, we’ll have an expert on adoption from foster care on hand—such as the

---

2 A tweet where their Twitter username appears – see the list of Twitter terms at the end of this publication for more on this.

AdoptUSKids national project director—to answer questions from families and professionals alike. For these sessions, we use the hashtag #AdoptUSKids, and people can follow along with the questions and our answers by monitoring that hashtag through Twitter’s search functions.

## Communicating With Your Followers

### Best Practices

The tips below are important reminders of ways to maximize your effectiveness when communicating with your agency’s followers on Twitter:

- **Post regularly.** A Twitter profile that only has content added to it every few months is not serving you or your audience very well. Social media is for you and the public to engage with each other, and part of that engagement requires making sure you’re providing valuable content on a regular and somewhat frequent basis. How often is often enough? Opinions vary, but anywhere from five to 20 Tweets per day is within an acceptable range.

How do you know what to Tweet? At AdoptUSKids we use a “Rule of Thirds” as a very rough guideline:

- Approximately one third of our Tweets are content that we provide or generate (i.e., either links to our website or articles and resources we’ve found on the Web)
- One third of our Tweets are retweets of good, relevant content from other people or organizations we follow on Twitter
- The other third of our Tweets are answers to questions we receive, “thank you” Tweets, and other acknowledgements

We allow ourselves a lot of flexibility in that ratio, based on what content from us or others is available at any given time. With that said, do not neglect the second two parts of the Rule of Thirds and focus too much on the first. Twitter culture is **very** reciprocal, and being part of this reciprocal approach is important to being successful on Twitter.

- **Respond promptly.** Whether people mention you in a Tweet to their followers, or Tweet directly to you, it’s good to acknowledge them, and to do so in a timely manner. It could be as simple as Tweeting “Thanks!” back to them or posting a more elaborate response, if appropriate. If someone posts a question or concern, it’s even more important that your agency respond as quickly as possible. To that end, there should be someone monitoring the Twitter profile for comments and questions regularly throughout the day during business hours.
- **Follow back.** Unlike other social media sites such as LinkedIn or personal pages on Facebook, a follow on Twitter is not automatically mutual. Other social media sites require both participants to agree to be “connections” or “friends,” whereas on Twitter you can simply decide to follow someone. The exception is for Twitter users who have set their profiles up as “private,” meaning that they must manually approve new followers. It’s good practice to follow back everyone who follows you. Not only is following back an expected part of the reciprocation on Twitter, but it also allows you to send private direct messages back-and-forth. This means if someone wants to ask you a question privately via Twitter, you must be each be following each other for them to be able to do so.
- **Remember that Tweets are public.** Always treat people with respect, kindness, and professionalism, just as your agency does in all other communications. Always be as honest as policies and best practices will allow. Everything you post on Twitter is public for the world to see, just as if you were on live TV.

## Seek Your Agency's Guidance Before Implementing These Ideas

The guidelines in this document apply equally to both public child welfare staff and the staff of private agencies that provide services on behalf of the public agency.

Child welfare systems across the country are in varied stages of exploring and using social media. The ideas included in this document are general suggestions for ways to use social media in child welfare work and are intended for agency leaders and managers as they decide if and how social media can support their communication, outreach, and engagement efforts. As with all new approaches, you should consider how these suggestions might work within the context of your jurisdiction and your State's public child welfare agency's policies, guidelines, and best practices. The ideas and tips included here should not be used if they conflict with any policies of your State's public child welfare agency, regardless of whether your relationship with the agency is that of employee-employer or contractual, and should only be implemented with the support of the public agency's leadership.

### *Efficient Following: Lists*

As your agency uses Twitter, you will likely be following others just as they're following your agency. Some of these Twitter users might share content of particular interest to you or your audience that you'd like to share, or retweet, with your own followers. The easiest way to keep track of specific Twitter users that are of interest to you is to create "Lists." These lists could contain other public agencies or national organizations involved in child welfare (such as @AdoptUSKids or @nrccwdt). Spending time reading the Tweets by users you've put on a list will be more efficient than trying to read all Tweets from everyone you follow.

## Tools for Managing Twitter

### *Get More Done in Less Time*

There are a number of tools, known as third party applications, that are either free or very inexpensive that can help you manage your agency's Twitter profile. Some of the more popular ones include HootSuite, Tweetdeck, and CoTweet. These tools make managing Twitter for your agency far more efficient, especially if you only have a few hours each week to dedicate to it.

The benefits of using a third party application to manage your Twitter profile include:

- The ability to schedule your agency's Tweets ahead of time, so you can essentially post all of your planned content for the week all at once and have them automatically posted to Twitter at the time you designate.
- The ability to monitor "mentions" – Tweets either directed to you or that include your agency's Twitter username. These Tweets are important to see because they are likely to either be questions for you to answer or retweets of your content that you'll want to acknowledge.
- The ability to monitor direct messages, Twitter's version of private messaging that is only between you and the person who sent it to you. People may choose this method of asking questions, and having a tool to watch for direct messages will help you be responsive to them.
- The ability to set up ongoing searches for certain keywords so you can monitor Tweets about certain topics. For example, you can monitor Tweets containing hashtags such as #childwelfare or #social-work. These keyword search results will show Tweets from people whether or not you follow them, allowing you to look for opportunities to provide information and resources to people who need assistance but who might not know that your agency could help.

- The ability to allow multiple people to manage your Twitter profile, while keeping track of what actions each person has taken so as to avoid duplication or missed tasks.
- Most third party Twitter management applications also include “link shorteners,” which take a long Web address and shorten it. Given Twitter’s 140 character limit, link shorteners are very valuable for getting all of the information you want into a Tweet.

## HOW TO REQUEST TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

---

We offer free training and technical assistance (T/TA) to public child welfare agencies to help you build your agency’s capacity to use social media as part of your recruitment and retention efforts. You can access our T/TA services in any of the following ways:

- Connect with us online at [adoptuskids.org/nrc-recruitment](http://adoptuskids.org/nrc-recruitment)
- Contact your Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Regional Office staff to initiate a request for T/TA
- Contact us to discuss your needs by calling 303-726-0198

## TWITTER TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

---

The definitions below are taken or adapted from the Twitter Glossary. For a more complete list of terms and definitions, refer to the full Twitter Glossary: <http://support.twitter.com/groups/31-twitter-basics/topics/104-welcome-to-twitter-support/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary>

- **Direct Tweets** = A Tweet to a user that starts with their username. These Tweets are not private messages and they can be seen by people other than the individual Twitter user to whom you send the Tweet. *@AdoptUSKids, can you point me to foster care resources?*
- **Direct messages** = Also called a DM and most recently called simply a “message,” these Tweets are private between the sender and recipient. Tweets sent over SMS become DMs when they begin with “d username” to specify who the message is for.
- **#FF or #FollowFriday** = Twitter users often suggest who others should follow on Fridays by Tweeting with the hashtag #FF. For example, AdoptUSKids might Tweet: *#FF our friends at @adoptex and @nrccwdt, as they're great resources.*
- **Hashtag** = The # symbol is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet.
- **MT** = Similar to RT, an abbreviation for “Modified Tweet.” Placed before the retweeted text when users manually retweet a message with modifications, for example shortening a Tweet.
- **Retweet (noun)** = A Tweet by another user, forwarded to you by someone you follow. Often used to spread news or share valuable findings on Twitter.
- **Retweet (verb)** = The act of forwarding another user’s Tweet to all of your followers
- **RT** = Abbreviated version of “retweet.” Placed before the retweeted text when users manually retweet a message. See also Retweet.
- **Username** = Also known as a Twitter handle. Must be unique and contain fewer than 15 characters. Is used to identify you on Twitter for replies and mentions.
- **Via @XXXX** = Credit for source of content for a Tweet, where “@XXXX” is the Twitter username of the source. *State Adoption and Foster Care Information <http://ow.ly/dDoA2> via @AdoptUSKids*



**Toll-Free**  
888-200-4005

**Email**  
INFO@ADOPTUSKIDS.ORG

[WWW.ADOPTUSKIDS.ORG](http://WWW.ADOPTUSKIDS.ORG)

*AdoptUSKids is operated by the Adoption Exchange Association and is made possible by grant number 90CQ0002 from the Children's Bureau. The contents of this resource are solely the responsibility of the Adoption Exchange Association and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau, ACYF, ACF, or HHS. The Children's Bureau funds AdoptUSKids as part of a network of National Resource Centers established by the Children's Bureau.*

