

Safeguarding guidelines

Using social media to engage and communicate with young people within the church

Coronavirus update – 20 March 2020, 5.00pm

We are aware that some churches have agreed that their youth leaders can gather virtually with their youth groups; please make sure these gatherings operate within your church's safeguarding policy and procedures.

We would recommend 2 adult leaders present in the virtual group from the start of the call (first to join, last to leave) and consent obtained from parents beforehand. It's important that we keep in touch with the children and young people that we're serving and phone calls, WhatsApp groups, messaging can all be done in ways that are transparent and safe.

Social media has become a key aspect of communicating, not just with young people but to the church community as a whole. There are some specific points that we suggest you consider when you are thinking about how you engage with young people in your church.

Our advice to churches has always been that great care must be taken if you plan to use social media to communicate with young people both inside and outside the church. This is because it is very hard to regulate the information that is shared, and to monitor the interactions between adults and young people through this medium.

We recognise that some youth leaders are confident in the use of social media and alert to the risk associated with its use. However, we feel it may be beneficial to set out some checks and balances that youth leaders can put in place. This does not replace a need for you to conduct a risk assessment for your specific church group as with other activities with young people.

Set up and procedural guidelines

1. As youth leaders if you do not feel confident in using social media then do not use it to communicate with young people.
2. Remember that children under the age of 13 are not allowed social media accounts and there may be other children in the church whose parents do not let them have access to it. On this basis it is important to have a variety of methods of communicating with young people.

3. Parents still need to know what activities their children are involved with and parental consent should always be sought before taking children and young people to off site activities (this is in addition to the consent forms in place for the everyday church activities). You can not rely on young people to communicate what is happening to their parents. This remains the responsibility of the youth leader.
4. When using social media consider using a platform (i.e. WhatsApp or Facebook) that allows for secure, group communication and where people can only join with the consent of the administrator.
5. When using social media consider setting up a separate account from any personal social media accounts and ensuring that there are limitations on its use. Make it clear that this is your youth leader/worker account, and the only one they are to access. If any young people try to add or contact you through your personal accounts, deny the requests.
6. Consent should be sought from parents for direct communication with young people to take place, whether this is via social media or using text message, WhatsApp or email.
7. Where there is a paid youth worker, they should be the first point of contact for young people and it is wise for them to have a separate mobile phone for work use – this can then be used for all communication with young people.
8. Where all youth leaders are voluntary then consideration could be given to the purchase of a youth work mobile that can be held at the church and used to communicate with young people, either via social media or direct messaging.
9. When considering which social media platforms to use it is best to use one where there is a record of what has been posted to any group or where there is evidence of messaging threads. An example of a platform that **does not** have this capability is Snapchat.

Involving young people in the process of engaging with social media

10. Consider agreeing with young people a list of ground rules for communicating via social media – this could include:
 - Being respectful of others in the group, their opinions and experiences
 - Not sharing group members' contact details outside of the group without their consent
 - Not using the group to bully or put down other members of it
11. Be clear with young people that if they share something on social media that makes you concerned then you will have to pass it on, in line with the church safeguarding policy.
12. Model healthy social media use:
 - Only post messages before 8pm;
 - Do not respond to messages after a specific time at night;

- Regularly review the information shared within the group to ensure that it is beneficial, uplifting and sits within the purpose of the group;
 - Set 'office hours' when you as the youth worker will have the phone on you. e.g. 8am-8pm (unless at an event with the young people where you might need it for emergency communication).
 - In terms of posts/pictures on your youth work pages, make sure they are in line with the church safeguarding policy and procedures, and are wholesome and suitable for all audiences under the age of 18.
13. Always ensure that you are using social media to communicate with the whole group. Do not use it to communicate with individual young people.
14. If young people direct message you through social media/WhatsApp outside of the group chat:
- Keep screenshots or documentation of the messages and any response.
 - Ask that the young people do not message you that way again.
 - Consider whether an immediate response is needed, particularly if it is late at night – even if there is a simple and quick response, consider leaving it until the next day within your 'office hours'.
 - Consider sharing the response with the whole group rather than getting into a one-on-one discussion with a young person
 - Note: If your phone is off outside of 'office hours' then you will not see these messages until the next day when you are again at work. This is a good habit to get into and takes the pressure off maintaining boundaries around communication with young people.
15. If, despite your best efforts to maintain the boundaries around when you are available, a young person in crisis contacts you 'out of hours', think about how you respond.
- If they appear in emotional distress or are threatening to harm themselves then you should contact the DPS immediately and initiate safeguarding reporting procedures. You may also need to contact the parents and even the police if the risk of harm is imminent.
 - If they appear to need to have talk through a situation, consider arranging a time to meet with them in the following days to work through it. (This meeting should take place in line with your church safeguarding policy and procedures)
 - Keep a record of any discussion that has taken place and send it to the DPS within 24 hours.