

Children and youth ministry social media guidance



Many young people regularly communicate using the internet and mobile phones. Using these methods can really help a group to stay connected and keep them up to date with what is going on.

However, it is important to use these methods in a safe way to protect yourself and the young people you work with. It is important to follow safeguarding policy for both in-person and digital ministry.

Below are some specific guidelines for communicating with young people through digital platforms. Generally speaking, most social media platforms require a minimum age of 13.

The diocesan Young Leaders' Community (YLC) is utilising 'Spond' (spond.com) to communicate with 10 – 18-year-olds and youth leaders across the diocese. Spond is designed for parents / carers of under 13-year-olds to accompany their child(ren) in the app, and they are able to see all conversations their child(ren) take part in. Private / direct messages are turned off for all users under 18, so all comments are made in group chats where adult leaders (and parents/carers of under 13-year-olds) can supervise. A code of conduct has been created to ensure the YLC group on Spond is a safe place for all.

Social media

If using a social media platform (like Instagram, WhatsApp, Discord etc), communication with young people aged 13 or over should be via a group or page with a minimum of two leaders in the group. Be aware that not all young people are online, or use the platform you choose. Consider other ways to communicate with the whole group.

Any online groups or pages should be set to private, and care should be taken to only accept members of the youth group to the group or page.

Posts in a private group or page can still be captured and shared more widely. With this in mind, care should be taken when posting any content.

It is not advised that leaders befriend or follow young people (under 18s) on social media, even with a 'work account'.

It is not advised to use your personal social media account, phone or email to communicate with children or young people.

Care should be taken to use social media platforms that do not reveal the young person's mobile number or email address, as this could more easily enable direct messages to take place between leaders and young people. Discord (discord.com) has a number of helpful features to enable safer communication in groups including the ability for users to turn off direct messages. Spond can be used to turn off private/direct messages for under 18s, and requires that parents/carers accompany children in the app. Spond is a good option for youth groups to use to communicate

with the youth group, but care should be taken to set up permissions and settings safely.

Consent from parents or carers should be obtained, outlining the ways in which an online group or page will be used and moderated.

For general public posting (i.e. advertising the youth group, or sharing stories about the group's activity), leaders should not state any unnecessary personal details or information relating to the young person, e.g. full names, addresses, schools attending. If a young person has received an award then it is appropriate to use their full name with parental or carer consent. Under GDPR guidelines, young people aged 13-year-olds and older who have the capacity to decide for themselves, can give their own consent for photos or videos of themselves to appear online, but consider informing the parents or carers also. Parental or carer consent should be obtained for all under 13-year-olds* to appear publicly online in any instance. (*Or older children who are unable to make the decision for themselves because of disability, condition or trauma).

Any disclosures of abuse reported through social media must be dealt with in accordance with safeguarding procedures and policy. If in any doubt, please contact the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer at Church House (safeguarding@sheffield.anglican.org).

Any inappropriate posts by young people or leaders should be reported to the main group leader, and removed by the admin/s of the account if possible. Reasons should then be explained to the person who posted the content. All those who use the platform should be made aware of what the purpose is and that any inappropriate images or content that is not in line with the values of the group is not acceptable.

Regularly check the privacy and security settings on whatever platform you choose to use with young people. These can change from time to time.

Avoid using platforms where messages can be set to disappear after a time (like Snapchat and WhatsApp). This is not helpful from a safeguarding point of view. Most social media platforms allow message senders to delete messages also. Any messages of a serious safeguarding nature should be screen shot or archived if possible.

Children or young people may set up their own online groups. It is wise not to be a part of these, and you may need to suggest some safeguarding guidelines for them to follow to avoid hurtful or harmful activity.

Online meetings (e.g. Zoom or Teams)

As with any in-person meeting, all leaders should be recruited by following the 'Safer Recruitment' guidelines, including DBS checks. A register should also be taken.

Enable the waiting room so that an adult is not alone in a meeting or breakout room with a person under 18.

All participants should display their own name and be encouraged to have their camera turned on so leaders can engage relationally as much as possible.

It would be wise to disable private chat if possible.

A parent or carer should ideally be visible at the beginning of the session and for younger children should be encouraged to be present throughout the session.

Recording or screen shots should be avoided unless consent has been given by parents or carers for under 13-year-olds.

Mobile phones and texts

A work phone should be used for any communication with young people. This phone should be monitored by a line-manager / supervisor.

Leaders should only have young people's mobile numbers if the nature of their involvement requires them to phone or text the young people. (This might include those running groups for older teenagers or young adults or volunteer young leaders involved in coordinating children or youth ministry.) As much as possible group chats should be set up with two to three other leaders included in communication. One on one texts should be avoided with under 18-year-olds and where possible parents should be included in the text.

Group texts can be used for the purposes of reminding children and young people about meetings and events.

Parental permission should be sought and a risk assessment completed if the leader in this role will be contacting children or young people via mobile phone.

If a leader has a young person's phone number it should only be used for the purposes it has been given. E.g. providing times, dates, details of group meetings, events, planning.

Texts may also be used (with parents' / carers' permission) as a means to encourage children or young people if it is appropriate e.g. 'Hope your exams go ok'. If it turns into conversation, a leader can suggest discussing the subject further at the next in-person session. Be mindful of child protection's usual parameters.

Photos and videos

Pictures or videos of children or young people should not be posted on leaders' personal social media accounts, but with proper consent and permissions, may be used on official church or children's/youth group accounts.

For young people aged 13-years old and older, leaders should ask their direct permission to take a photo or video and explain what the purpose of the photo or video is for. Parents and carers should also be informed. For 12-year-olds and younger (or older if children do not have the capacity to give their own consent), parental or carers consent should be obtained. Follow GDPR guidelines (article 8¹).

- Images should be stored safely in an electronic file on devices that have security passwords.
- If any electronic device/memory that contains video or images is disposed of the images and video should be wiped from the memory in such a way that it cannot be recovered on that device.

¹ <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/childrens-information/children-and-the-uk-gdpr/what-are-the-rules-about-an-iss-and-consent/>

- Leaders, children and young people should not send or post pictures that are obscene, indecent or menacing.
- It is a criminal offence to take, make, permit to be taken, distribute, show or possess an indecent or sexually explicit image of a child under 18. This includes pictures sent by and of the young people themselves when they are under 18.

Should you receive such an image, you should **report it to the police without deleting it**. Do not send it on to anyone else as this is an offence. After reporting the matter, the police would not be looking to criminalise the young person, but would first look to safeguarding them and providing the appropriate support where needed.

Emails

All emails sent to young people should have a second leader copied into it. Young people are advised to respond to emails by copying in the nominated leaders. Parents' or carers' consent should be obtained in order to email the young person. Parents/carers should be copied in to any email sent to under 13-year-olds.

After completing a risk assessment, you may decide that the risks are low enough to allow leaders to email older young people (with a level of independence) without the need to copy in another leader. Parents' or carers' permission should be obtained in this instance and other leaders made aware that this is happening. A culture of accountability and challenge between leaders is important.

General

Leaders should avoid communicating with young people on social media, email, texts or calls between 9pm and 7am, or during school hours.

If a young person in crisis contacts you 'out of hours', think about how you might respond:

- If they appear in emotional distress or are threatening to harm themselves then you should phone 999 before then contacting the PSO and initiating 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 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 and if appropriate, you could invite a second leader to accompany you). Keep a record of any discussion that has taken place and send it to the PSO within 24 hours.

Parents or carers should be asked to give their consent for leaders to communicate with their young people via social media platforms or by any other means of digital communication e.g. email. This can be included on the annual consent forms. Parents or carers should be the main point of contact and should be copied into any communications to their children.

Always conduct yourself on the internet as you would face-to-face and be aware of what you say and how you say it. If you wouldn't say or do something in person, then don't do it online.

Be careful using language that could be misinterpreted. Avoid banter and abbreviations that may have more than one meaning.

Complete a full risk assessment before using any digital communication.

Ensure young people or children know who they can talk to if they are not happy with any kind of communication from anyone, including leaders.

As a parish or mission area you may adopt this set of guidelines in your own children's and youth ministry. If you wish to work outside of its guidance, you should undertake a full risk assessment and with due regard, present your alternative guidelines to the PCC for approval. Further advice is available from the Children and Young People's Adviser

✉ (mike.north@sheffield.anglican.org).

Other information and sources on e-Safety

The following websites provide information for leaders, parents and carers about e-safety:

- **Childnet:** www.childnet.com
- **Anti-Bullying Alliance:** www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk
- **NSPCC Helpline** <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/reporting-abuse/nspcc-helpline>
- **CEOP Think You Know** www.thinkuknow.co.uk
- **UK Safer Internet Centre** www.saferinternet.org.uk

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