

Guidelines: Online Communication with young people

If we are to relate well to children and young people, we need to enter their world to some degree. Communication via social media is a real and major part of their lives. There will always be an element of risk, including the risk of rejection and the risk of misunderstanding but there are principles, policies and practices we can follow which will reduce this risk.

This guidance relates to any means of online communication which includes:

- Email
- text messaging, and
- social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Whatsapp, YouTube and a host of other platforms) not forgetting online gaming.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

- Obtain parental permission, and the consent of a child over the age of 13, for any online communication (see the model parental consent on the Guidance – Children section of the Diocese of Rochester website [here](#))
- Avoid private messaging.
- Ensure a named person approved by the PCC has sight of online communication with young people and has access to any accounts.
- Keep a log of online communication with any unusual content or issues of concern and show to the named person in the church.
- Make your PCC aware of these guidelines and how you are adopting them in your online communications with children and young people.

BOUNDARIES:

- Keep online communication to reasonable hours (e.g. 8am – 8pm) and avoid school hours.
- Uphold minimum age limits for social media platforms which are set with safeguarding issues in mind (currently 16 for Whatapps and 13 for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube).
- Don't make direct online relationships with young people through your personal social media account by accepting 'Facebook friend'.
- EITHER set up a separate social media account for work (e.g. On Facebook a 'Page') with young people OR communicate with young people indirectly through a closed Facebook group for church youth.
- Avoid video calling (e.g. Facetime) when unsupervised.
- As mentioned above, make sure that you have parental permission, the agreement of the church leaders, and a means of accountability for any official accounts.
- Make sure privacy settings for social media accounts are set at an appropriate level for the activity.

- Consideration should be given to including an 'expectations' statement in the profile somewhere such as: "I am a youth worker with a keen interest in social media which I use to share about the groups and events we run through St Key's Church. I also post lots of links that I think young people who come to our groups would find interesting. I generally only log in to Facebook a few times a week during my work hours. If you need to contact someone from St Key's urgently then please call 01234 567890 or visit www.stkeyschurch.org"

CORPORATE APPROACH:

- Keep communication appropriate to your role, friendly but unambiguous. Avoid abbreviated language such as 'lol' and the use of 'x' at the end of a message.
- Make sure you know and follow your Diocesan safeguarding policies and procedures.

DEMONSTRATE GOOD ONLINE PRACTICE:

- Refer to the [Diocesan Social Media guidance](#) regarding individual social media practice and consider adopting the [Church of England's Digital Charter](#).
- Don't post content online which you would not want other people to see, both now or in the future.
- Avoid sharing of personal details on social media.
- As with all modes of communication, think carefully about what you communicate and how it might be interpreted by the recipient. The THINK acronym can be helpful. Is what you are going to say: **T**True **H**elpful **I**nspiring **N**ecessary **K**ind
- Educate yourself about developments in social media and take the opportunity to explore online communication issues with young people; the opportunities it presents for friendship, learning, and campaigning for a better world, as well as e-safety, cyber-bullying and sexting.

A FEW FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

1. WHAT IS THE BEST SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM TO USE IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?

It will depend on answers to some other questions:

- *What social media do young people actually use?* Newer platforms are growing fast. However, the best advice is to ask the young people with whom you want to communicate.
- *What sort of communication do you want to make possible?* Different social media platforms are effective for different purposes. Facebook pages are great for one-way publicity while Facebook groups make small group discussion and sharing of photographs relatively easy. Twitter is great for sharing pithy quotes and reminders about events or pointing people to content on blogs and websites. Instagram and snapchat are designed for quick and easy sharing of images.
- *How much time do you have?* For busy volunteers, this pragmatic consideration is likely to affect your decision.

IS IT OK TO BE FACEBOOK 'FRIENDS' WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH YOUTH GROUP?

Yes - if you follow the Diocesan good practice guidance to have a separate Facebook account/page for use solely in your church youth work. It creates a clear boundary around your online communication with young people and makes it easier to be both transparent and accountable to others.

No - If you are using your personal Facebook account, good practice guidance in the national safeguarding children policy, [Protecting All God's Children](#), says you should not make a relationship with a young person (other than family members) by accepting them as your 'Facebook friend'. However, there are two other options:

- set up and use a public Facebook page which young people (and anyone else) can 'like' and from which they can opt to 'receive notifications' (this is ideal if you are just seeking to publicise information about events and activities)
- set up and use a closed Facebook group to include the young people and two or more youth leaders (this is more appropriate for two-way communication, group discussion, and sharing of photos within a limited group). Ensure a named person approved by the PCC has sight of online communication with young people and has access to any accounts.

Existing relationships - There is a 'grey area' when it comes to existing relationships on social media with young people who are, for example, family friends. Be transparent and accountable to your co-workers and church leaders about this and, for clarity, ensure that church youth work communication is done through the means suggested above.

Please note that Facebook has set the minimum age for users at 13 years old for safeguarding reasons. Therefore, it is not good practice to encourage under 13's to use Facebook (e.g. by accepting them as a 'Facebook friend' or by inviting them to join a Facebook group.)

Whichever approach you take, it is good practice to gain parental consent for online communication with young people as part of your church youth work role and to be transparent with and accountable to your co-workers and church leaders about this communication.

2. IS IT OK TO POST PHOTOS FROM THE YOUTH ACTIVITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

Informed consent must be obtained from children over 13 and their parents/carers for photography and video to be taken and used by church children's / youth leaders.

For putting photos online, then the consent must be in writing. It should be clear why the photos / video is being taken and where they will be displayed.

This can be incorporated into the general information and consent form for a regular group or specific event.

- Find more information about photography and consent forms on the Diocesan website [here](#)

3. HOW CAN SOCIAL MEDIA ENHANCE THE YOUTH WORK IN MY CHURCH?

As well as helping with publicity, it offers the possibility of continuing discussions into the rest of the week; of sharing in the ups and downs of young people's lives; of offering encouragement at the time its most needed; of engaging in online campaigns to change the world; of studying the bible together even when the group cannot meet; of greater participation of young people in planning and decision-making.

- Contact the Communications team to find out when they are holding their next social media training session (communications@rochester.anglican.org)

4. CAN I USE MY OWN MOBILE PHONE WHEN LEADING CHURCH ACTIVITIES WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Anyone engaged to lead church activities with children and young people should be supplied with a mobile phone dedicated for work purposes.

This allows for the phone to be switched off outside working hours, and for any usage to be accountable.

The work phone number should be the only number that young people are given; a worker's personal number should remain private.

Texts that raise concerns should be retained parish Safeguarding Officer/Incumbent should be informed and they may take advice from the Diocesan Safeguarding team.

5. WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I RECEIVE INAPPROPRIATE MATERIAL ONLINE FROM A YOUNG PERSON VIA ONLINE COMMUNICATION?

As with any inappropriate advances it is important to be transparent and accountable.

The material should be retained and the parish Safeguarding Officer/Incumbent should be informed and they may take advice from the Diocesan Safeguarding team.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

- [Safer Environment and Activities guidance](#) – Church of England (2019) – This updated guidance includes a whole section on appropriate use of engagement by church officers, particularly in relation to young people. (page 26 to 27)
- www.net-aware.org.uk A simple guide for parents to the huge range of social media platforms used by children and young people
- <http://mashable.com/social-media> ... news on the latest information, issues and trends in social media.
- www.thinkuknow.co.uk ... Excellent and accessible e-safety advice designed for children and young people in different age-groups

- [*Raising Children in A Digital Age*](#), Bex Lewis, an informed and balanced view on this important issue from a leading thinker and practitioner in this area.
- [Labs Learning](#) – a great blog from the national church Digital Team full of articles and advice to help churches better use social media.
- **Youth Ministry in a Digital Age** = Y54, Liz Dumain - grovebooks.co.uk
- **Leadership and social networking**, L6, Anna Drew grovebooks.co.uk
- **Sharing faith using social media**, Bryony Tailor EV115, grovebooks.co.uk
- **Protecting All God’s Children** available in the [safeguarding section](#) of the Rochester Diocese website
<http://www.rochester.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1428504898.pdf>

KEY CONTACTS

**Cheryl Trice - Diocesan Team Lead Adviser
Children & Young People’s Mission & Ministry
Team**

Tel: 01634 560021

Email: cheryl.trice@rochester.anglican.org

**Greg Barry -Lead Diocesan Safeguarding
Adviser and Rochester Cathedral Safeguarding
Officer**

Tel: 01634 560000

Email: greg.barry@rochester.anglican.org

Jennifer Ross - Communications Officer

Tel: 01634 560000

Mob:07526 171 583

E-mail: jennifer.ross@rochester.anglican.org