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Equipping your youth ministry! Use Of Social Networking and Child Protection

Outline

As an organisation working with young people we acknowledge the impact and involvement that social networking & messenger sites/apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp have on the lives of young people and their role in the ways which young people interact with each other. There is huge potential for these tools to be used by youth workers to communicate activities with young people, to encourage them in their faith and to play a part in the discipleship of young people beyond face-to-face groups.

At the same time we acknowledge the dangers and potential risks that these sites can pose to both young people and youth workers and have the potential to be abused as ways of interacting with young people. Therefore as an organisation any youth worker using social networking as part of their ongoing work with young people must abide by the following guidelines to safeguard both workers and young people involved.

This guide has been put together to help you decide on a policy for your organisation and we recommend thoroughly reading and adapting it to your context before use.

Guidelines For Using Social Networking With Young People

Use of Messages & Communication With Individuals

All social networks allow private messaging to take place between 'friends'. There are times when one-to-one communication is appropriate however we would strongly advise that any one-to-one communication using social media is kept to a minimum and that it is done via a platform that keeps a record of these messages (i.e. Facebook messenger) and is ideally done using a specific work account.

When using social networks to communicate with young people we highly recommend that you:

- Use a separate, designated Facebook account for the purposes of the youth organisation. This account may be examined by any of the trustees/your line manager and should be used for YWR purposes only and not as a workers personal account.
- Any communication using this Facebook account should be kept public or kept logged. Messages should be saved and kept (both incoming and outgoing).
- All contact with young people using Facebook should be kept appropriate and not use abbreviations/language that could be misunderstood by a parent or guardian (e.g. LOL, IDK (I don't know) and smilies).
- It is recommended that staff do not use this account after 10pm in order to maintain a safe boundary between work and personal life.
- All communication with young people on social media should be done with parental consent.

Specific Site Guidelines

Facebook

We highly recommend that young people are only added to a specific work Facebook account with parental consent. This can be done by adding a tick box to your regular consent form. Facebook has a function that allows you to download an archive of your profile. We recommend doing this periodically to enable you to have a local copy.

Messaging on Facebook is typically logged which means a record of individual and group messages are automatically kept. When using group messages we recommend that another adult is also part of this message.

In all communication with young people using social networking sites it is advisable to not use abbreviations (for example: lol) as these can often be misinterpreted by parents.

If you are concerned about a young person from their posts on a social media network then you should seek further advice from the Child Protection advocate at your church and consult your safeguarding policy.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp can be a great tool for creating group messages between young people however when doing this make sure you have sought parental permission first.

We recommend that at least 2 adults are part of a WhatsApp group chat.

When using WhatsApp group chats you should be aware that adding people to the group discloses their mobile number to the rest of the group. WhatsApp allows you to backup your chats and we highly recommend doing this.

Twitter

The public nature of the majority of twitter profiles means that young people can freely choose to 'follow' you on the platform. It also means you can freely choose to 'follow' them back. If you use a public twitter account or one specifically for your youth work you should make sure that your content is appropriate (i.e. a good witness) and only reply to young people when absolutely necessary.

If you use Twitter we recommend using public communication as much as possible as the direct message feature isn't easy to back up or keep a log of.

Instagram

We recommend using Instagram for the purpose of sharing photos only rather than using messaging features as these are difficult to keep a back up of. If you have a youth ministry account then please make sure you have permission from parents before sharing photos of young people.

Snapchat

The nature of Snapchat makes it completely inappropriate for use with young people as messages disappear after a designated amount of time. If you use Snapchat as an individual please ensure that you have to give permission for people to follow you and that you do not add any young people.