

Safeguarding guidance on communicating electronically

The use of social media, mobile phones, emails and the internet are popular amongst children and young people and can be a normal part of their everyday life. These methods of communication can be efficient and easily accessed for most but it is important that certain safeguards are put in place by the parish to ensure safety and accountability. We need to keep contact on behalf of the parish via electronic means professional and separate from our private communications.

Vulnerable people often find it easier to communicate via electronic means rather than talking face-to-face. This creates a false sense of security and can lead them to sharing more personal or sensitive information about themselves (or someone else) than if they were talking in person. Abusers know this and those who wish to abuse young people often start with electronic communications in order to bully or lure them into an unprotected face to face meeting.

This guidance is intended to raise awareness and provide recommendations for safer use of the various forms of electronic communications within our parishes and ensure that those who supervise and lead our young people hold themselves accountable.

Cyberbullying

With the use of electronic communications, bullying has moved out of the playground and into what should be children's safest space – home. Incidences of bullying via text, social media and email are increasing rapidly and can have devastating consequences. It is important that those working with our children and young people are alert to the signs that could indicate that someone is being bullied.

You may see the young person –

- Becoming withdrawn, anxious or diminishing in confidence;
- Becoming aggressive, abusive, disruptive or unreasonable;
- Beginning to stammer;
- Changing their routine;
- Starting to bully others;
- Being afraid / reluctant to use the internet or their mobile phone or
- Being nervous or 'jumpy' when a cyber-message is received.

You may hear / see the young person –

- Threatening or attempting suicide or self-harm;
- Threatening or attempting to run away;
- Asking for or taking money;
- Making improbable excuses for their bad behaviour.

Research suggests that at least 33% of 9 to 19 year olds have received unkind or unpleasant communications but worryingly only 7% of parents / carers are aware of this – as with other forms of abuse, children and young people aren't "telling".

Texting

This is one of the most used method of communication amongst children and young people – at least 33% of 7 – 8 year olds have a mobile phone rising to 90% of 11-16 year olds; texts can be sent anywhere at any time and an immediate response can be received.

This form of communication is however difficult to monitor; workers and volunteers using this method of communication must be accountable for what is said. It would be advisable for a leader who has to communicate often using this method to be supplied with a parish mobile phone. Itemised bills will then provide for accountability. The limits as to the usage of texts and the responsibilities associated with this form of communication must be made clear to workers and volunteers.

Sexting

Sexting has been defined as “the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude, or nearly nude, images” (Lenhart, 2009). In simple terms this is taking a sexually explicit image and texting (sharing) it via your mobile ‘phone to others. ***Making, possessing or distributing an indecent image of a child is a crime.***

It is easy to distribute sexually explicit content between people using smartphones, the internet and social media. Indications are that a high number of young people have done this on at least one occasion (between 39% and 59%). In doing this they are committing criminal offences – 1. Making an indecent image of a child (themselves); 2. Possessing an indecent image of a child; 3. Distributing an indecent image of a child. Young people could face charges for doing this, something they rarely realise.

Young people also need to be aware of the other dangers associated with these actions and the problems it can lead to –

- Once sent, they have no control over the further distribution of the images.
- They can be the target of cyberbullying (see above).
- They can be the subject of grooming by a sexual predator.
- The above can lead to serious mental health issues caused by the fear of what may happen leading to depression and desperation that can drive young people to self-harm or to contemplate suicide.

It is possible that a young person will confide in their youth leaders as, generally, they have good relationships with their group members and are frequently viewed as someone who can be trusted. Adult leaders should be vigilant and, if they become aware that this has happened, need to support the young person in referring it to the internet service provider or social media platform. Support can be sought from Childline or CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection service).

Social media

What is it?

In simple terms, social media is a set of online tools used to communicate and engage with other people and includes –

- Writing or commenting on blogs;
- Micro-blogging (i.e. Twitter);
- Personal profile pages on networking sites (i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+);
- Using specifically designed “Apps” (i.e. Snapchat);

- Reviews of products or services on retailer sites / customer review sites;
- Taking part in online votes, polls or surveys and
- Taking part in conversations on both public and private web forums (message boards).

If choosing to use this method of communication within our parishes, great care needs to be taken in order to avoid crossing boundaries into the private lives of group leaders / parish clergy.

As well as observing the 'Golden Rules' below, we would strongly advise the following:

- Have a separate 'page' for the parish / group where only business relating to the parish / group is discussed.
- Do not take or post images without express consent (this needs to be given by a parent / carer when the subject of the image is under 18) and do not 'share' these outside of the group. In addition to parental consent, the young person themselves must be happy to have the image posted.
- Ensure that the privacy settings allow only approved friends (members of the group) can message or add people as a friend – these should also be members of the group.

Golden rules

- Always obtain parental consent before using any electronic method of communication.
- Use clear unambiguous language that cannot be misinterpreted. For example, don't sign off with 'luv', 'xx' or 'lol'. Use a friendly, but not over-familiar or personal tone.
- The content of messages should relate only to the group / club attended.
- To ensure accountability, all communications must be accessible to the person supervising the group leader sending them and this must be made explicit to all those involved.
- Add a 'rider' regarding confidentiality to the foot of each email.
- Send group texts / emails not individual ones.
- Any electronic communications which raise concerns must be shared with the leaders' supervisor.
- All electronic communications should be sent / responded to within set time boundaries i.e. not between 9pm and 8am.
- Not every person will have access to a mobile phone / computer so ensure that there are other methods of communication too.
- Images should only be taken / shared with consent (from both the parent carer when under 18 and the subject in the image) and should be stored securely in accordance with Data Protection and not left on mobile phones. This includes images on social media sites or on 'YouTube'.

Please remember that, legally, if a conversation / comment is accessible to even one more person it is deemed to be published information and in the public domain. It would therefore be subject to libel and defamation, data protection and copyright laws.

Concerns

If you become concerned about the content of conversations on social network sites, you should take the following actions:

- If you believe someone is at immediate risk from harm, do not delay call 999 (i.e. if you believe that a young person is on their way to meet someone they met on the internet where you have good reason to suspect they are not genuine).

- Do not close down the conversation. This will potentially lose any evidence.
- Always seek help and advice first – if there is a CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) button, click on that and follow instructions. Advice can also be sought through the [CEOP website](#).
- Ensure you preserve any 'paper trails'. If necessary copy and paste any conversations and have these witnessed, signed and dated.

Information and support

[Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre](#) (CEOP). Some excellent resources including 'Think U Know' training for safer use of the internet (frequently used in schools) and some video clips available on You Tube (i.e. 'Exposed' and 'Confessions') which are ideal for use within youth groups to raise awareness.

The [Advice for Parents / Carers on cyberbullying](#) (pdf) from the Department of Education also contains contact details for providers if content needs to be removed and tips for how to achieve this.

[NSPCC advice for Parents / Carers](#).

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