



# Using Social Media to Engage and Communicate with Young People in the Church

Safeguarding Guidelines for Youth Leaders and Volunteers

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## Safeguarding guidelines - Using social media to engage and communicate with young people within the church

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 cannot 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 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.



## Social Media Platforms and minimum age criteria

You will note that the minimum age for most social media platforms is 13 years old but not all. It is important, even if young people under that minimum age are using these platforms for other communication that you do not engage with them through this medium.

With all of these social media platforms it is important to note that parental consent is required for a young person to register for an account. However, this does not override your need as a youth worker to seek this consent from parents as well.

Social Media Platform	Minimum Age
Facebook	13
Instagram	13
TikTok	13
X (formerly Twitter)	13
Pinterest	13
YouTube	13
WhatsApp	13
*SnapChat	DO NOT USE

\* We strongly advise against the use of Snapchat and any other app where the messages are not stored. Snapchat is designed specifically so people can share their immediate thoughts and images and then they disappear. This leaves young people vulnerable to exploitation and grooming because perpetrators know that this is the case and will target young people using Snapchat for this reason. In addition, Youth workers leave themselves open to allegations with no way to evidence what has been said or posted as it is impossible to produce a record of these communications as part of an accountability process or if there were safeguarding concerns.

## Video Conferencing

We recognise that video conferencing has become a valuable tool in engaging with young people and the wider church alike. There are many difference platforms available for this such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Google Meeting, FaceTime, Facebook Rooms and Google Duo. As we have already stated it is important to ensure that in using this technology, we still apply our safeguarding policies and procedures:

- It is important to ensure that there are always at least 2 youth workers in the call and that they are online first.
- Just as you would do usually if you have concerns about someone then follow the reporting procedure within your church.
- **Do not be tempted to record your virtual youth group meeting.** If you are following your usual safeguarding policy and procedures, then you do not need an added record. Keeping a record of what is said and done in this way presents an added challenge of
  - where this is subsequently stored
  - parental and personal consent to the recording
  - the potential breach of an individual's right to privacy

## Using Video Conferencing for Mentoring and Pastoral Support with Young People

We know that churches offer a great variety of work with young people, including mentoring and individual pastoral care. We understand the value of this work when is carried out by skilled and experienced youth workers.

Ideally mentoring and individual pastoral care should be carried out in person, with regular face to face meetings. However there may be occasions when offering mentoring online is the best option for the young person you are working with. Providing online support and mentoring takes into consideration the needs of young people who struggle to leave the house or have a disability that prevents them from doing so. It allows them to engage in the youth work provision at the church alongside their peers.

Please consider the following advice should you wish to do so:

- The youth worker **and** Designated Person for Safeguarding should complete a risk assessment focussed on working one to one with young people online considering the following:
  - Do you have a youth worker that is skilled and experienced in engaging and supporting young people through mentoring and pastoral support programmes?
  - What are the benefits of providing pastoral support and mentoring online at this time – does this need to be a broad offer to all young people or are there specific young people who need this support and where there are no other agencies already providing it?
  - What risk factors do you need to consider in your decision to use video conferencing to conduct mentoring or pastoral support meetings online?

- How will you mitigate these risk factors in arranging meetings and keeping a record of them?
- Seek written consent of both the young person and the parent or guardian before arranging the meeting – is this something that the young person wants and is the parent happy with it going ahead.
- Ensure that the meeting is booked in advance and that someone else is aware that it is taking place.
- Keep all mentoring and pastoral support meetings within the working day.
- Keep a written record of when meetings have taken place, and an outline of the topics discussed... including any actions. Ensure that this record is stored securely. For computerised records this should be encrypted with a password or stored in a secure online location that can only be accessed by agreed personnel. If you are making handwritten records these should be stored securely in a locked cupboard. All records should be kept in line with the church record retention policy.
- Ensure that the young person is aware that you will be making notes of the discussion and that if you have any concerns that you will have to pass them on in line with the safeguarding policy
- Agree with the young person where they will be in the house when you have the meeting. We strongly advise that they are not in their bedroom, although we also recognise that for some young people there will not be another private space in their home. Consideration needs to be given to this in the risk assessment.
- Avoid conducting online meetings with young people from your own bedroom or personal space. If this is not possible use the technology to change the background either to a neutral image or so it is fuzzy.
- Remember that young people under the age of 16 cannot legally register for a Zoom account. However this does not preclude them from using Zoom if it is set up by an adult. On this basis it is likely that the account will be held by the parent or guardian. This is another reason why a parent or guardian to be aware of the meeting taking place.



**This guide has been produced for use in Baptist churches in England and Wales**

**Updated: October 2024**



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