



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

ONLINE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

KEY QUESTION

"How can I communicate effectively and safely with young people online, in my youth work role?"

FACTS AND FIGURES

There are many means of online communication including email, text messaging, and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and a host of other platforms) not forgetting online gaming.

On average in 2015, 8-11's spent 11.1 hours per week online, while 12-15's spent 18.9 hours online (that's 3 hours more than watching TV)

- 91% 8-11's and 98% 12-15's have internet access at home (34% with access in their bedroom)
- 16% of 12-15's, said they had seen something online that was worrying, nasty or offensive in the past year, while 6% say they have experienced bullying online.
- 69% of 12-15's own a smartphone, and 34% of 12-15's mostly use a mobile to go online
- Tablets are the device most often used for going online, among all age groups except 12-15's
- 74% of 12-15s have a social media profile. 58% 12-15's say Facebook is their main profile, though this is on a downward trend. The fastest growing social media platform is Snapchat, though still only 11% 12-15's have this as their main profile.
- 15% 12-15's say they chat with people they don't know when playing games online.

(all the above statistics from OFCOM, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, 2015)

For many young people, who are growing up as "digital natives", the idea that the online environment is a "virtual" world is inadequate. Communication via social media is a real and major part of their lives.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

If we are to relate well to young people, we need to enter their world to some degree. There will always be an element of risk, including the risk of rejection and the risk of misunderstanding. There are principles and practices we can follow which will reduce this risk, including:

ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY

- Obtain parental permission for online communication with young people (see the model parental consent forms in *The Protection and Safeguarding of Children* document pp.46-49)
- Ensure another adult appointed to work with young people has sight of online communication with young people. Avoid private messaging.
- Keep a log of online communication with any unusual content or issues of concern and show to the appropriate person in the church.

BOUNDARIES:

- Keep online communication to reasonable hours (e.g. 8am – 10pm) and avoid school hours.
- Uphold minimum age limits for social media platforms which are set with safeguarding issues in mind (n.b. for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram & Snapchat this is 13 years old).
- Don't make direct online relationships with young people through your personal social media account (e.g. by accepting them as your 'Facebook friend'). EITHER set up a separate social media account for work with young people OR communicate with young people indirectly e.g. through a closed Facebook group for church youth. Make sure that you have parental permission, the agreement of the church leaders, and a means of accountability).

CORPORATE APPROACH:

- Keep communication appropriate to your role, friendly but unambiguous (e.g. avoid abbreviated language such as 'lol' and the use of 'x' at the end of a message).
- Make sure you know and follow your church policy and procedures.
- If your church do not yet have a policy for online communication with young people, start the ball rolling. Contact one of the Diocesan Children Children & Youth Work Advisers for assistance.

DEMONSTRATE GOOD E-SAFETY:

- Make sure your privacy settings are set at a sufficiently high level.
- 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.

EDUCATE:

- Educate yourself about developments in social media. For the novice, a good place to start is www.net-aware.org.uk
- Explore online communication issues with young people, including the opportunities it presents for friendship, learning, and campaigning for a better world, as well as e-safety, cyber-bullying and sexting.
- An excellent place for all ages to learn about e-safety is www.thinkuknow.co.uk

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 rue
H elpful
I nspiring
N ecessary
K ind ?

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 the young people actually use?* Surveys suggest Facebook is still the most commonly used platform by young people, though use of newer platforms (e.g. Snapchat) are growing fast among young people. However, the best advice is to ask the actual 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.
- *What is your church policy?* For example, some platforms (e.g. Snapchat) may be less conducive to transparency and accountability than others.

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

Yes - if you follow the Diocese good practice guidance to have a separate Facebook account for use solely in your church youth work role. 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, the Rochester Diocese good practice guidance is that 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)

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.

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

Informed consent must be obtained from both the children 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. (e.g. this could be incorporated into the general information and consent form for a regular group or specific event.) For more details, see the Diocesan document, *The Protection and Safeguarding Of Children* p.30.

4. 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 it's 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.

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. Download and make a paper copy of the material and show the person who oversees the church's work with young people and/or the Incumbent. Together, follow *The Protection and Safeguarding Of Children* pp.14-15

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

www.net-aware.org.uk A simple guide for parents to the huge range of social media platforms used by children and young people

www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology and <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, a book by Bex Lewis ... an informed and balanced view on this important issue from a leading thinker and practitioner in this area.

The Protection and Safeguarding Of Children: Diocesan Policy, Procedures and Good Practice for work with Children and Young People in Parishes, available in the safeguarding section of the Rochester Diocese website www.rochester.anglican.org/resources/safeguarding

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