

Children and Youth social media and communications guidance for churches

You should contact your Church/Circuit Safeguarding Officer, District Safeguarding Officer or the Connexional Safeguarding Team immediately for advice if you have any safeguarding concerns about a child or young person, and also follow the safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance.

When used properly, social media is an excellent way to communicate with groups of parents or young people in order to provide information or make them aware of upcoming events and activities. However, for those not familiar with it, social media can seem strange and sometimes intimidating.

There are a variety of platforms that leaders need to be aware of, such as:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- WhatsApp
- YouTube

Some of these are appropriate for the relationship between children/young people and their leader, but some are not. Each of these platforms will be covered in this document. Please apply the same principles to any other platforms that are not mentioned in this document. For guidance on Zoom, click [here](#).

By following some simple guidelines you can avoid potential pitfalls, and these media can be safely used as a tool and a means of communication. Social media is great for promoting a group or event or communicating to parents, children and young people, as well as being a fun way to unwind and stay in touch with friends; it is essential to keep these two worlds separate.

All contact and communications with members of organisations and group leaders must be seen to be open and transparent. This is the case whether communications are by traditional means or electronic means.

Leaders must not communicate with children or young people (0-18 years) via leader's personal social networking profiles or email accounts. Messages must be in a group format with more than one leader in the group. Only children/young people who are known should be involved via communication in this way.

Consent Forms

Please note this section does not apply to Uniformed Organisation Activities (Scouts, Guides etc.), as they have their own consent forms that apply.

Permission from the parent/guardian of any young person (under the age of 18) needs to be obtained before you can contact them, post pictures or videos of them etc. If the child is over 12 they are also required to sign the consent form.

If the young person is 16 or above and living independently/is estranged from their parents then the form must be signed by the young person and a social worker/youth work/appropriate adult.

These will need to be filled out annually.

It is worth mentioning that these consent forms only cover activities and images taken within a church capacity. Images of Church activities involving children and young people should not be on personal accounts, unless the children or young people are a part of your family. Images taken outside of this context that are shared on personal accounts are not covered by these guidelines.

If you find photos that have been posted in the past that contain images of children who have not given consent for images of them to be shared, they must be taken down. Similarly, even if they have consented but subsequently request for an image to be removed, you must take every effort to remove the photo.

If you see images posted by others that you wish to reshare, you cannot assume that the correct consent has been obtained. Only share images to channels you manage if you have signed consent forms for the children in the image.

Even in a closed group, do not post images that you do not have the appropriate consent for. This goes for images that are posted by other people in the group. Any images posted outside your control to a group you manage should be removed if they contain any individual whose consent has not been given.

Consent forms should be kept either in a church office or if your church doesn't have an appropriate space, in the homes of the minister or one of the youth leaders.

Safer Recruitment and DBS

If you work with children and young people you should already have been through a safer recruitment process to be employed to your role and this will include a DBS check.

However, it should be noted that regular moderation of an online forum (for example a facebook group) used wholly or mainly by children or young people requires an enhanced DBS check including barred list.

For a public church page, it is not considered to be used wholly or mainly by children and therefore you don't need the enhanced DBS with barring. You do, however, still need a DBS check.

If you do not have a DBS or enhanced DBS, you can find out more details about the process [here](#).

Social Media Policy

Leaders should not add or accept requests to follow or friend young people (under 18) from personal profiles if your relationship with them is only as a leader (i.e. Church Minister, Youth Group Leader etc.). It is fine to be friends with your own children or Godchildren, for example. The only

interaction must be in a space where two or more leaders are able to see what is being communicated.

If you take on a leadership role in the Church that has been agreed by Church Council or become a leader in a midweek group or Sunday Group or Messy Church, you should not have any friends on your personal social media who are under 18 who are not related or you are their legal Guardian or God-parent. If you currently have friends under 18 you should explain to them that you now have a leadership role working with children and young people and that requires you not to have contact with under 18s via your personal social media accounts. If they are a part of your Church or Youth group they can make the decision to join the Official Social Media spaces that is regulated as per the guidance in this document.

If a young person turns 18 and becomes a leader, they should unfriend any young people under 18 that are involved in their youth group and follow the guidance for group leaders. This is part of forming new boundaries as a leader.

If, while on a personal account, you do see posts from young people (e.g. shared by someone you are friends with) do not like, react or comment on the posts. You should also not comment using the church profile, as it can be seen either as you commenting anyway (if you're known as the admin) or anything you say can be seen as the official words of the church, which may or may not be appropriate.

Your personal accounts should have all its privacy settings set as high as they can be so that a young person cannot access your photos, posts etc, and you have to approve requests to friend/follow you.

There might be a temptation to set up a separate "work" profile for Facebook. Unless you do not already have an account, setting the correct privacy settings is always a better option than creating a new profile.

Any posts made by leaders into any sort of group should be consistent with the tone and aims of the organisation.

If any posts, photos or videos mention names, ensure they mention first names only.

Any inappropriate posts by children or young people or leaders to a group should be removed by the admin/s of the site. The reasons must then be explained to the person who posted the content.

Examples of inappropriate post content could be:

- Racism
- LGBT+-phobia
- PREVENT issues
- Mental health worries
- Explicit personal images

If anything posted concerns you, you must take the additional step of talking to your manager or Church/Circuit Safeguarding Officer. Inappropriate posts on social media can be part of a larger spectrum of issues (family abuse, peer-to-peer abuse, severe mental health concerns etc.) that other organisations may be aware of, even if you are not.

Any disclosures of abuse reported through a social networking site must be dealt with in accordance with The Methodist Church Safeguarding procedures and Policy, available **here**. If in any doubt, contact your Church/Circuit Safeguarding Officer.

Facebook/Messenger

Facebook is a platform where you can post text, images and videos to your “wall”. It also allows for groups and pages to be set up for specific organisations/events.

Messenger is the direct messaging (DM) function of Facebook. It has a separate app.

While the majority of young people no longer use Facebook for its original purpose of connecting with people and sharing day-to-day details of your life, it is highly likely that they have accounts – Messenger is still popular as an alternative to texting. If the young people you work with agree it would be useful, a Facebook group is an excellent way to have safe communication.

On Facebook, you can set up a Group or a Page. Of the two, you should use a Group as it allows for group chats (which means those with Messenger can be communicated), and those within the Group can post on the wall, comment on posts etc.

It is important to set it as private. This means that people outside the group or page cannot see the posts inside it, and they cannot join the Group without one of the admins giving them permission.

It is not appropriate to include a parent in a Facebook group with children, even if their child is not on Facebook and they want to be able to pass on information. If they want to be part of the group, they need to have a DBS check.

The DBS check you need to moderate a church group does not extend to any other groups you may be involved with outside of church. Each group working with vulnerable people will require a separate DBS check.

If a young person leaves the church or youth group, or turns 19, they should leave the group or be removed.

The leaders should discuss what would be appropriate for young people who exceed the group age range or leave the group and perhaps set up a group appropriate for young people in this context in accordance to guidelines. This should be approached the same way you would a weekly group that meets face to face.

The Group should always have two or more leaders as admins. It is important to note that their personal accounts will be the ones visible in the group when they post, so personal account privacy settings are very important.

It doesn't matter who fulfils the role of admin in a group as long as they are over 18, and can be decided on a church by church basis. However, it is essential that they have been through the safer recruitment process.

Twitter

Twitter is a platform that allows users to write short posts (up to 280 characters). It also allows picture and video to be shared, and there is a DM function.

You can create a page to be private, with the owner of the page having to approve people viewing it. You cannot create groups, so other people will not be able to post to your “wall”.

An official church account should take every effort not to follow anyone who is under 18, or comment, like or retweet any of their posts.

A minister or leader may have a public profile for personal use. Due to the nature of the platform, that means that anyone can follow you, but because it is public facing it does not constitute being a forum used wholly or mainly by young people.

Instagram

Instagram is an image-sharing platform, with options to add text and comments. It is a great way to be visible, and it's easy to create a profile for a church or youth group. However, you can only share images of young people if you have signed consent from their parents.

Many young people use Instagram, and as a platform for advertising events/sharing about events afterwards etc. it can be great. People are also able to follow the account without you having to follow back.

You can create a page to be private, with the owner of the page having to approve people viewing it. You cannot create groups, so other people will not be able to post to your "wall".

Since you will have permission from anyone you may be posting photos of, you can have a public page if it would be beneficial for advertising events/outreach.

While it is not a place for group conversation, there is still a DM function and so it is important that at least two leaders have access to the account in case a young person contacts it.

An official church or youth group account should take every effort not to follow anyone under 18, or like or comment on any posts they make.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a form of social media that allows people to send photos, videos or messages to other people on their friend list. These photos and messages disappear after being viewed. There is also the function to add to a "story" which is viewable by people on your friends list for up to 24 hours.

It is also possible to have a public profile, where anyone can view your story.

This is **not** an appropriate platform for leaders to communicate with children and young people.

It is important to be aware that young people in the group may have each other as friends on Snapchat though, and if issues of peer-to-peer abuse are raised it is an area to be looked into.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp provides an alternative to texting. It is possible to create group chats, which can be a useful way of communicating with a group. However, your mobile number is visible to everyone in a group chat, so this is only to be used if there are two leaders in the chat, and both of them have a non-personal phone number i.e. a church-issued phone if you are lay employees.

Under no circumstances should the leaders message young people directly outside this group. Alongside this, any young people in the group should have consent from their parents or guardians to be a part of the group and their consent for their phone number being added to a WhatsApp conversation. Good practice would be to inform parents on what the group is for and what you are

communicating. Sign post parents to [The NSPCC](#), [Net-Aware](#) or CEOPs [ThinkUKnow](#) for parents so they are fully informed on how each Social Media App works.

YouTube

YouTube is a video sharing platform. It's not really social media, but it has comments sections and people are able to interact with each other on there.

YouTube is **not** suitable for use as a medium for communication.

If you're producing videos (only with signed consent on behalf of those being filmed) a YouTube channel is a good place to host them since you can make them private/unlisted so only people with the link can see them.

If you have a personal YouTube account, be aware that it can be found, so be mindful of content you create.

Communication

Always conduct yourself the same way on the internet as you would face to face. Be aware of what you say and how you say it, as well as how it could be interpreted. Try not to use abbreviations, as these can sometimes be misconstrued. Never provide personal details of yourself, young persons or volunteers.

In the case of online video meetings, such as on Zoom or Skype, guidelines should be given and boundaries explained and agreed at each contact when facilitating virtual groups. These should include suitable attire during visual group meetings and consideration to the environment i.e. there are no personal or intimate items in view.

Leaders should keep a log of any group contact which includes the date and time, who was present, a brief outline of what was discussed and how long the contact lasted. This should be kept securely.

Do not communicate with young people outside of standard working day hours (9am – 5pm). The only exceptions to this would be if any evening activity is happening and reminder needs to be sent beforehand or closing message afterwards.

Only communicate with a young person in a group context involving two or more leaders. If you are contacted in a private setting, do not reply. If their communication needs responding to, add another leader to your conversation in order to remain accountable. Or if anything arises from this contact someone with authority to speak one on one with young people (a minister or safeguarding officer)

If you are contacted directly on a church or social media, alert the other admin or account holder that this has happened in order to remain accountable. Do not engage in conversation beyond responding to simple queries.

If a young person contacts you and appears to need urgent help or appears to be at immediate serious risk, contact 999, social services or other relevant services, and inform your Church safeguarding office who may consult with the District Safeguarding Officer. If you are unable to contact the church/circuit safeguarding officer, please contact your District Safeguarding Officer.

If they do not seem to be at immediate risk, contact your minister or Church Safeguarding Officer as soon as possible. If you are unable to contact the church/circuit safeguarding officer, please contact your District Safeguarding Officer.

Via Social Media

Any communications made via social media posts should avoid tagging people or using full names.

Generally, posts should be announcing events, wishing people luck with exams etc. If the social media in question is a closed Group on Facebook, then posts asking questions can also be appropriate. If asking for Prayer requests ensure you set boundaries around this.

Via Email

Any emails sent to multiple young people/parents should have their individual email addresses put into the BCC section so they won't be able to access each other's addresses. A second leader should be copied into email as a direct recipient or CC. Alternatively, send from an email address that multiple leaders have access to.

Via Texting/WhatsApp/Direct Message

Leaders involved in children and youth ministry should only have children's and young people's mobile numbers if they have been given on the consent form as a means of communication.

Texting should only be for communication, not conversation. With that in mind, it can be used for the purposes of reminding children and young people about meetings and events, or sending a general encouragement e.g. "Praying for everyone taking exams this week!" If it turns into conversation, make every effort to end it as soon as possible and let another leader know this has happened.

You should avoid texting one on one where possible. Group texts (MMS) are possible, but not all phones have the capability. A better option if you want to text is to use WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger in order to set up a group conversation. This should include two or more leaders.

Photography/Video

Leaders, children and young people should not send pictures that are obscene, indecent or menacing.

It is a criminal offence to take, make, permit to be taken, distribute, show or possess an indecent or sexually explicit image of a child under 18.

When posting photographs or video on social media settings should be set up so that individual children and young people cannot be tagged.

Leaders should be aware of the prevalence of cameras on phones (they all have them) and the difficulties surrounding photographic consent that come with that. Leaders are responsible for

making young people in their group aware of issues of consent, why it's important, and how to respect someone's wishes not to be in photos/be tagged in photos on social media.

Even with tagging turned off, people can still be tagged in the comments of a photo. If a child has been tagged by someone else on a public facing image, the comment should be removed so that anyone viewing the image cannot immediately get to the young person's profile.

If a young person comments on an image, or tags themselves, this is okay unless it presents a safeguarding concern in which case you should contact your Church/Circuit Safeguarding Officer.

Storage

Images taken by leaders should be taken on church owned equipment (phone/camera) rather than personal mobile phones where possible. They should then be stored safely in an electronic file on devices that have security passwords. Where possible these devices should also be owned by the church/organisation, not the group leader.

Photos should not be taken on personal devices unless they can immediately be moved to church storage and all backups removed from the device. Be aware of apps like Google Photos, which by default will automatically upload any photos taken on a device to the cloud.

If in doubt, do not take photos.

If any electronic device/memory that contains video or images is disposed of the images and video should be wiped from the memory in such a way that it cannot be recovered on that device.

Mobile Phones

Since most people now have access to a smart phone, it is important for leaders to guide group understanding around when it is and is not appropriate to be on your phone during an event or session – in particular around the usage of the camera for both photography and filming. It is also leader's responsibility to guide young people on what is an acceptable use of the phone – see the section on Photography above.

Situational Awareness is important. Mobile phones should not be allowed where they would be a distraction from a safe awareness of the environment.

In any event or session when phone access is restricted, parents/carers must be made aware of a leader who they can contact in case of an emergency.

Use of church owned equipment i.e. computers, tablets, games consoles etc

If devices are used as part of activities within the organisation or group, leaders should ensure all games, videos and films are age appropriate for the group.

Passwords should be in place on any device such as a tablet or computer (admin password).

Internet searching should be monitored and age appropriate. If Wi-fi is available, safe-settings or parental controls should be in place.

Final Reminder

You should contact your Church/Circuit Safeguarding Officer, District Safeguarding Officer or the Connexional Safeguarding Team immediately for advice if you have any safeguarding concerns about a child or young person, and also follow the safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance.