

Using Social Media to Engage and Communicate with Young People in the Church: Safeguarding Guidelines for Youth Workers and Volunteers

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 **can not** 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. Accounts should be clearly identifiable by their name (e.g. Gorse Hill Baptist Church Friday Night Fun). 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. You should include another youth leader (or appropriate deacon or minister) as an additional administrator for the group.
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, 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 (this will depend on the reason for their message).
- 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 Designated Person for Safeguarding (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 have 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
Twitter	13
Pinterest	13
YouTube	13
Google Hangouts	13
WhatsApp*	16
SnapChat**	DO NOT USE
House Party***	DO NOT USE

*Please note that the minimum age to register for a WhatsApp account is 16 years old. As such we strongly advise that you don't not use this platform to communicate with young people under this age, even if they say that they have an account.

** 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.

*** Houseparty is an app that is designed for groups of friends to gather together – it focuses on informality and is not a secure platform where you can manage precisely who attends the 'party'. There are other video conferencing facilities which give a viable alternative and where people respond to a specific invitation which may be more appropriate to use.

Video Conferencing

We recognise that video conferencing has become a valuable tool as we look at ways to meet together as church and as a youth group, particularly at a time when we are not able to meet physically. There are many difference platforms available for this such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Google Meeting, FaceTime and Google Duo. 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

Use of Email with young people

Email is a useful form of communication particularly when attaching documents that may need printing, e.g. trip forms, term dates, consent forms, activity sheets. For all emails:

- Send to all leaders involved in the activity. If you are the only leader then include the minister or relevant deacon.
- Send to the parents of the children/young people as Bcc.
- Send to the young persons' personal email if they have one as Bcc.

Email addresses and permission to send emails, for both parents and young people, should be collected as part of registration forms for all attendees at activities.

Engagement of Parents using Social Media

This policy focuses primarily on the engagement of young people using social media. It is recognized that using social media can also be a useful tool in engaging parents, to inform them of events, to offer encouragement and to support families as a whole. It is acceptable to create social media groups to include parents and youth leaders. It would remain best practice to have more than one youth leader (or additional deacon or minister) in the group and to ensure posts within these groups uphold the principles of Gorse Hill Baptist Church and the Christian faith. Any concerns or disclosures should be dealt with as per the church safeguarding policy.

This policy was adopted by a resolution of the Gorse Hill Baptist Church members meeting held on **Thursday Xth XXX 2020**.