Creating safer places online.

Guidance for communicating and working
safely with young people online.

March 2020

Digital technologies present a huge range of opportunities for innovation. Even when we're not able to physically meet with young people in groups or as individuals, the Internet enables us to connect in a range of ways.

Young people who find it difficult to meet and talk in person can often feel much more comfortable communicating behind the 'safety' of a screen. Connecting through a smartphone or computer opens up huge potential for a different kind of outreach, where we can invite young people to view and even participate in activities without ever having to cross the threshold of a church or other physical meeting space.

Online youth work can take many forms, but these might typically include:

- Meeting as a group through an online video chat platform
- Connecting with individuals and groups through messaging software
- Broadcasting activities or video on social platforms
- A video call with a young person and two approved youth workers

Each of these methods can provide a great opportunity for youth work which otherwise might not happen, or even for an enhanced experience of what is possible. But all come with risks, which we need to understand and plan for.

What are the risks?

It's important to remember that communicating with young people one to one online, whether via messaging or video, is the equivalent of meeting a young person in a room on your own with no one around.

Communicating with groups and holding virtual gatherings via online platforms also presents challenges that should be considered before giving access to your virtual environment to those who you may not know.

Some risks that should be kept in mind include:

- The opportunity for grooming/sexual exploitation
- Sharing of personal contact details of young people and youth workers
- Inappropriate conversations between young people and workers
- Potential allegations against workers
- Use of apps with age restrictions (13 for Facebook, 16 for WhatsApp)

Good practise tips

As with working one to one with young people in person, there are some ways in which we can still enable safe, innovative work to take place:

Code of conduct

Where you have a Code of Conduct for your groups, translate those into what they would look like when participating in online groups or interactions, for example respectful modes of behaviour and speech, appropriate physical presentation such as clothing, venue, environment and times.

Supervision

As in normal circumstances, unless unavoidable, contact with young people should take place with appropriately vetted and checked workers present and not by any single worker on their own.

Record keeping

Ensure a record is kept of all one to one video calls held and the content covered in each call. If you intend to record these calls in place of the usual safer working arrangements, ensure that permission has been sought and the recording is stored securely in line with your usual safeguarding protocols.

Group calls

In order to minimise risks, always consider whether a group communication can be achieved rather than one to one. Where a one to one video call is required it is good practice where possible to have an additional colleague in the room with the worker and (dependent on the age of the young person) also better to ask if a parent can be in the home of the young person at the same time. Recordings of group calls should not be made unless there is a compelling reason to do so.
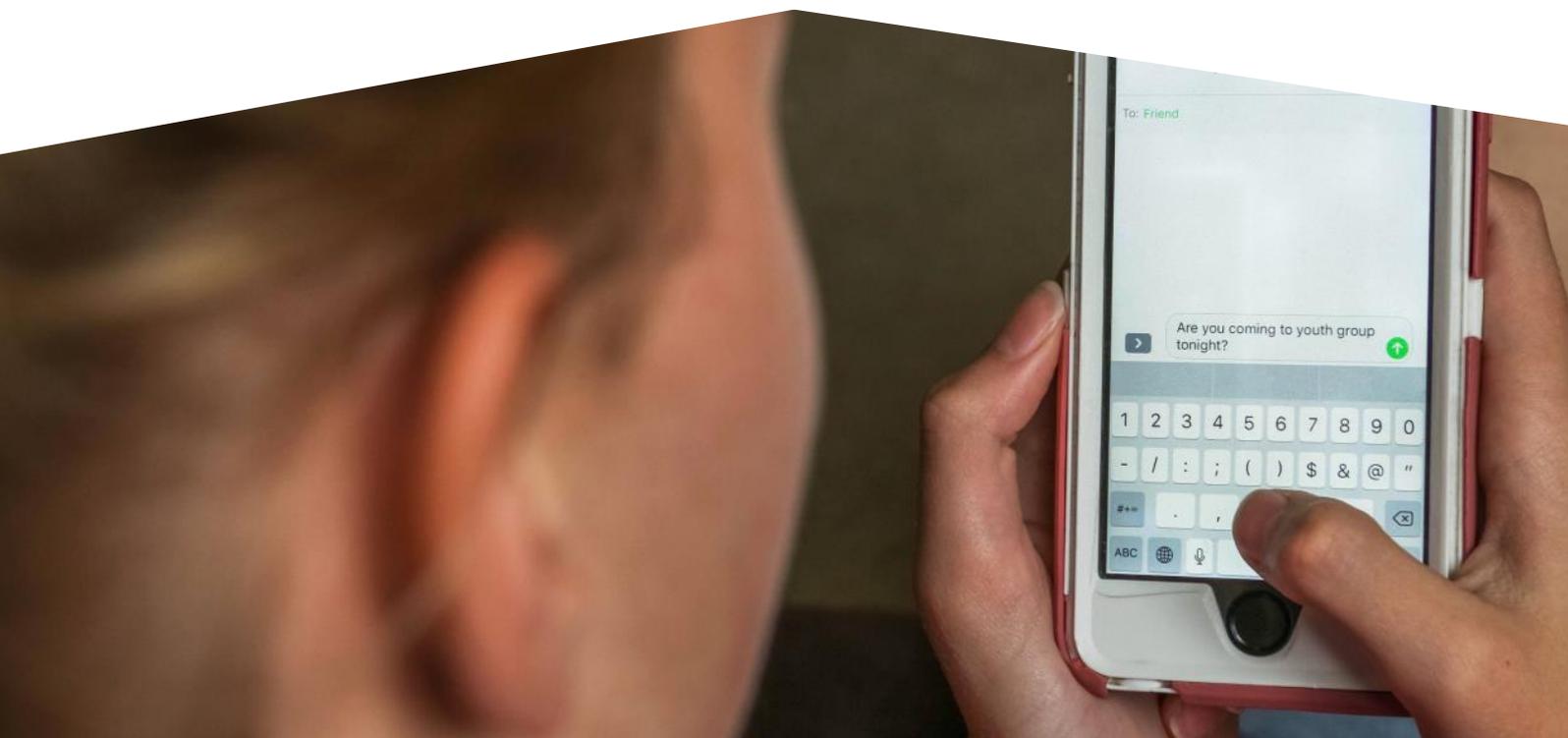
Reporting mechanisms

As with online chat groups, having a link to the Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre (CEOP) or agencies such as Childline, NSPCC etc. ensures that young people can report anything they are concerned about in regards behaviour of a worker toward them. You should also ensure that parents are aware of who your Safeguarding Coordinator is in order to discuss any concerns.

Call set-up and admin

Ensure the call organiser has the ability to mute/block participants in the event they are displaying/sharing anything unsuitable or illegal.

Age appropriate apps

Respect the minimum age requirements for video chat enabled platforms and consider a minimum age limit for any one to one chat.

Profiles and devices

Avoid using personal accounts to enable video chats. Use organisational profiles an devices wherever available.

Regular review

Ensure you periodically review these arrangements to identify any poor practice or any challenges to positive and safe engagement.

Additional sources of support:

 Kidscape is a national charity providing a wide range of resources and support for those working with young people.

 YoungMinds is a national charity supporting the mental health of young people.

 ChildNet International is a non-profit organisation working to help make the internet a safe place for children.

 Click CEOP is a resource for children and young people worried about online abuse to report concerns.

 ChildLine is the national helpline for children and young people to talk about concerns (part of the NSPCC).

Making a connection

Here's some guidance when thinking about some of the most common forms of online connection with young people that you may want to include in your policy:

Video calls with individuals

Best practice would be to include two approved workers on a call with an individual young person. If you're planning to record the call, make sure you have parental consent for this in writing, and are able to store the recording securely (password protected).

Video calls with groups

Always ensure you have an appropriate number of approved workers on a group chat, in line with your policy for off-line work. Use an organisational account, rather than a personal account for all calls. Recordings of group calls should not be made unless there is a compelling reason to do so.

Interactive online broadcasting

Make sure that names and personal details of young people are never shared publicly, e.g. through a live chat function. If you are making your video available publicly, do not share any specific information about young people in what you say. Use an account which is accessible to several members of the team, in case private messages are received. Online broadcasts should not be recorded or stored.

Use of messaging software

Always adhere to your church's safeguarding policy on use of social media and messaging apps. Consider age restrictions for social media apps. Ensure that no communication takes place privately, and that two approved workers are always involved with any messaging correspondence with a young person

Five Essential Questions

1 Does your organisation have a safeguarding policy and appropriate forms?

2 Would everyone know what to do if there was a concern about possible abuse?

3 Are you recruiting workers safely including DBS checks where possible?

4 Are you training and supporting your leaders and children's workers?

5 Do those who attend activities or come to services know what you are doing to keep children and adults safe?

For expert help, easy to follow advice and guidance from the UK's only independent Christian safeguarding charity contact us and find out how membership with us could help you.

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