



Policy on communicating with young people electronically

Terms

Throughout this document the term “Worker” refers to adult Staff and Volunteers who are working with young people through a Youth Space project.

1. Rationale:

We recognise that using the internet and other forms of electronic communication are important parts of the lives of the young people we work with.

We understand that use of the internet is a regular part of young people’s lives and has a significant impact on their social development. In accordance with the Youth Space Safeguarding Policy, we recognise that we must take all reasonable steps to protect young people from significant harm or risk when using the internet or any other form of technology whilst in our care.

We also recognise the importance of establishing and updating procedures to ensure staff and volunteers who work with young people are protected.

All staff and volunteers are responsible for reading any policies produced regarding safeguarding and communication matters and are expected to adhere to the guidelines in current Youth Space Policies. Youth Space will run training events for both new and existing volunteers in order to maintain a high level of knowledge and skill in ever changing mediums.

2. Reasons for contacting Youth People via the Internet and E-mail

It is not appropriate to have private (non-project related) contact with children and young people that we work with in the format of electronic communication.

We recognise that there will be times when it is necessary and important to use electronic communication: However, we recognise the need for an appropriate response and always encourage face to face communication alongside online methods of communication

Staff and Volunteers within the project should only use electronic communication for reasons relating to their work with young people, not for general socialising (see guidelines that follow)

Staff and Volunteers should ensure that one of their line manager/group leader/safeguarding officer is aware when they are using electronic communication with young people. This should by preference be a group communication and not an individual conversation.

3. Parental awareness

Informed consent for using electronic forms of communication is essential. This is obtained within Youth Space by the inclusion of participants’ mobile numbers and e-mail address on the Participant Details form which both participant and parent/carer must sign.

It is important to explain our policy and practice to parents and carers. To this end our policy document is displayed on the Youth Space website. We also endeavour to run training for parents on keeping young people safe online during which we will explain the practicalities of this policy.

4. Email Communication

Email Communication refers specifically to the sending of written text and attachments (which may include images) sent from personal or work accounts.

Email should only be used to communicate specific information (e.g. Time and date of events, location of consent forms to download)

The use of groups and electronic mailing lists is encouraged rather than sending messages to individual young people. Such groups and mailing lists should include a way of identifying the group being communicated with. At least one responsible adult as a member of the group. An opt out should be offered from the group to its members.

Attachments to e-mails to young people should be limited. Instead a link to the information online or direction to a download from an appropriate website should be given.

Communications should not share more information about recipients than is necessary (recipient e-mail addresses should only be visible to administrators/moderators)

Large group e-mailing lists should be moderated so as to maintain the integrity of the group. The use of an external moderation and archiving service (such as Google Groups) is strongly encouraged.

Workers should encourage appropriate face to face contact where possible. Conversation (by repeated sending of emails between two individuals) via e-mail is discouraged as this can sometimes be mis-communicated.

Workers should ensure that the safeguarding officer or other appropriate adult is copied in to any e-mails sent to young people or that such conversations are forwarded to such an adult as soon as is practicable afterwards.

Workers should use an appropriate e-mail address that makes it clear with whom young people are intending to communicate (such as project specific e-mail addresses or addresses that clearly belong to a specific leader and not another family member in the same household).

A history of e-mail communications with young people should be kept and clearly dated.

5. Electronic communication and accountability

As specified above the primary role for using e-mail should be the sharing of information. It should not be used as a tool to build relationships. However, if a disclosure or concern arises via e-mail, the following procedure is to be followed:

1. Follow the current Youth Space Safeguarding procedures relating to disclosures
2. Do not respond to the e-mail. In consultation with the Safeguarding Officer or Circuit Safeguarding Officer decide further appropriate action.

6. Language

All language should aim to be appropriate and without ambiguity. Workers should take great care not to use language that might give the wrong impression or create suspicion.

In particular the use of abbreviations and text language is strongly discouraged due to possible mis-reading and further complications.

Where possible 'standard responses' should be used (e.g. if you have sent out an e-mail containing event details any further requests for information should receive extracts from this communication or the project website)

7. Chat facilities and instant messaging

Use of live chat facilities between workers and young people is not permitted.

This includes but is not limited to Facebook Chat & MSN Messenger.

Live chat services and chat facilities cannot be kept on record or reliably shared with a wider group and are therefore an unsuitable form of communication between workers and young people.

8. Skype and other visual methods

Use of Skype and any other web camera or visual communication via the internet is not permitted. Workers should refrain from using such methods on a 1to1 basis as they cannot be recorded.

The exception to this is use for conference call purposes, when this is considered appropriate and standard safeguarding procedures for meeting with a group of young people are followed (two in a room etc.).

When using such methods there should be a clear aim and purpose for this use. Always seek to inform a line manager, group leader and safeguarding officer if such a meeting is to take place and keep appropriate records of the interaction.

9. Hours of communication

When using electronic communication with young people this should happen within the hours of 09:00 – 22:00

Should it be necessary to send a communication beyond these hours workers should be prepared to explain their reasons or use a message delay service to allow delivery at a more sociable time.

Workers should consider how they are modelling behaviour in the hours they are sending their messages.

10. “Adding Friends” to Facebook and other similar social networking sites

Workers should not add any young people that are involved in Youth Space projects as “friends” to their personal social networking accounts.

Workers should use an agreed project account which is registered with the safeguarding officer (such as “Ian YouthSpace” on Facebook) to “friend” participants or should use an appropriate “Group” to interact.

“Groups” allow for open communication amongst participants of projects and workers in either a public or closed forum.

Such groups should always have an archive feature and include another responsible adult within its membership.

Workers should ensure that any personal social networking account has sufficiently high security settings as to prevent young people from accessing information and pictures of a personal and private nature.

Workers are reminded to read the EULA for such social networking sites, abide by their terms and conditions and not encourage young people to break these terms (e.g. the minimum age for Facebook is 13, so those under 13 need to find any information you post on Facebook elsewhere and are not eligible to join any groups you run)

Any group set up to be for an official project of Youth Space should have at least 2 responsible adults as “administrators” (this may be in addition to any young people acting as administrators)

Use of mobile phones and texting

Youth Space has a Duty Mobile phone and other pay as you go phones available for the purposes of the project. These phones are for the day to day communications of the project and are open for others to scrutinise what they have been used for (including regular memory backups and itemised billing)

All mobile phones have a PIN code to protect the phone numbers stored within them should the phone be lost or stolen.

In general try to send group messages rather than having a text conversation with individual young people.

Don't use text abbreviations as these can be mis read or have multiple meanings.

Websites and other Broadcast mediums (e.g. Twitter/Blogger)

Workers should remember that through website editing and other broadcast mediums any message they publish can equally be read by adults or young people and so should be appropriate to be read by any members of such audiences.

Access to edit such information streams should not be restricted to only one person to allow for modification whilst retaining accountability for those who have made changes.

The public nature of such spaces should be celebrated and maintained, so the use of Direct Messaging or similar features is strongly discouraged.

All images of young people shared through such communications are placed in a public domain and so require permission for these images to be shared. This permission is generally granted through a standard Youth Space participation form but this should be checked prior to publication of any images containing young people

When using photos images of groups should be used in preference to individual young people

Nothing that identifies the name of the young person(s) should be added to the image. This includes the "alt" tags, accompanying text and image filename.

Internet access through Youth Space

Any internet access provided by Youth Space should be through computers with appropriate filtering software and firewalls installed.

In any area where internet access is encouraged safety guidelines on using the net and other electronic forms of communication should be obviously available. Also displayed should be the details of Childline, CEOPS and BeatBullying.

Participants over the age of 18

With regards to young people who have left the group or who are now over the age of 18 please use your discretion with regards to this policy and seek advice where necessary.

If unsure as a minimum such a contact should be registered and recorded with one of your line manager/group leader/safeguarding officer.

Additional Related Information

All of the above policy should be read in association with the Youth Space Safeguarding Policy and Volunteer Agreement.

Further information and guidance can be found in;

The Methodist Church Social Media Guidelines

With Integrity and Skill

Safeguarding Children and Young People 2010

www.ceop.police.uk

www.thinkyouknow.co.uk

Ratification and Review

This policy was agreed by the Youth Work Management Group on 13th April 2011 and its contents and implementation are to be reviewed annually.