



Social Media Guidance

Guidance for volunteers and other workers with children and young people on the use of Social Media

General Guidance for use by Volunteers and Paid Workers

Introduction

This guidance is for everyone who works on behalf of the Church with children and young people, whether as a paid worker or as a volunteer. Throughout this guidance such workers are generally referred to as either “leaders” or “volunteers”, although the guidance is equally applicable to both volunteers and paid workers. References to “young people” are to everyone under the age of 18.

The use of various social media websites and applications has become an essential part of everyday life for many young people and churches. Social media platforms are widely available and accessible to young people through their mobile electronic devices. As such, social media has substantially changed the way organisations, communities, and individuals communicate with each other. Whilst these can be valuable, and at times essential, communication tools for those providing services for people in the Church, they also present significant challenges in terms of maintaining good practice. As the purpose and use of these applications are continually evolving and expanding, often without adequate checks or controls, various difficulties can arise.

How does being a volunteer or paid children’s worker or youth worker affect how I use social media?

The use of social media is open to different interpretations and perceptions of what is appropriate and what is not. It can involve the transmission of words, sounds, moving and still images – all of which have the potential to be harmful in a safeguarding sense – so it is important to make joint decisions and to seek the advice of your group leader or Safeguarding Coordinator where necessary. It is vital that all members of the leadership team have attended the required safeguarding training and are familiar with the Free Church Safeguarding Policy (see the Safeguarding page of the Free Church website for more information).

For those working with young people in congregations, most of the challenges surrounding social media revolve around maintaining responsible boundaries between volunteers and the young people with whom they come into contact. By working with young people, for example teaching or assisting in Sunday schools, creche, youth groups, holiday clubs and other clubs, you are committing to being a Christian witness and teacher to these young people, and to following the Free Church policies and procedures.

Your role involves (amongst other things):

- Ensuring the safety, security and welfare of the young people in your care



- Sharing the Gospel message with the young people and teaching them about Jesus
- Advising the young people on spiritual matters
- Instructing and guiding the young people in their Christian walk; leading by example.

Further details on the roles of each member of the team should be given by your church leadership team.

Working on behalf of the Church with young people is regarded for the purposes of safeguarding as 'Regulated Work with Children'. Becoming a member of the Protecting Vulnerable Groups Scotland (PVG) Scheme is one part of ensuring that those who engage in this work are suitable for it. As a Christian organisation, it is important that, in addition to having our volunteers and paid workers join the PVG Scheme, we also provide safe and suitable environments and boundaries to ensure all of our volunteers and paid workers comply with the legislative requirements, including the Free Church Safeguarding Policy and procedures. Most importantly, we must apply Biblical wisdom to our conduct and the manner in which we interact with young people.

It is important to bear in mind that some of the challenges volunteers may face relate to how their conduct towards young people might be perceived by others as potentially harmful or inappropriate. What may look or sound OK to one person may be misunderstood or misconstrued by another and might well be considered harmful and inappropriate. This is especially true when it comes to communication and interaction on social media. The following guidance is written from a safeguarding perspective and seeks to identify good practice with a view to preventing harm or abuse to young people, as well as to help protect volunteers from any perceived issues.

So what CAN and CAN'T I do??

It is impossible to produce a complete list of "dos and don'ts" to cover every situation and circumstance that arise out of using social media. Whilst there are express boundaries and clear warnings relating to some conduct, there will be situations that require common sense and the application of general safeguarding principles.

1. Principles of Good Practice

It is helpful to consider our Christian witness when volunteering with the Church, and to apply principles of our faith and walk with Christ:

- **Integrity** – As Christians we are called to live Christ-like, holy lives. We should not distinguish between following Christ privately and publicly.¹ Therefore whatever words, images and videos we share with others online, whether privately or publicly, should be consistent with our faith and Biblical teaching.²
- **Transparency** – We should be transparent with all our social media accounts and profiles, remembering that, as Christians, we have just as much responsibility for our actions to the world over the internet as we do for our actions in person.

¹ "Whoever says he abides in Christ ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." (1 John 2:4-6)

² Read Ephesians 5:1-21 which is particularly applicable in this context.



- **Privacy** – We should be aware of our privacy settings and what information is available to our friends and family, but also to the general public who may search for our profile (including young people, parents and other leaders). This is not to be mistaken as contradicting the previous points. Instead, it is an important aspect of controlling what information about ourselves, and especially about our work with children, is accessible and available to the general public.
- **Sensitivity and Confidentiality** – Social media does not change our fundamental understanding about confidentiality across the whole life of the Church. When telling a story about a situation which involves someone else, always ask yourself: Is this my story to tell and do I have permission to tell it? Would it cause distress, inconvenience, upset or embarrassment to others if I share in this way? If in any doubt, do not share it online.

2. Checklist for using Social Media

Consider the questions below before using any type of social media (including use of mobile phones, social networking sites, messaging and taking photos/videos), and use them to review its ongoing use:

1. What information do you want to capture, store, transmit, communicate or use and why? Who is the target audience? Have you got permission/consent to share it (parental consent applies to anyone under the age of 18, and personal consent also applies to anyone over the age of 11 – consent forms must be completed)?
2. What type of media are you using and why?
3. What privacy settings and controls have you set and who can see the information? Is the information you are sharing personal/confidential? Who is identified in the communication (images/words/sounds)?
4. How might others interpret the information? Can the information you want to share be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted?

If in doubt about any of the above, check with your group leader or Safeguarding Coordinator. Always re-read before sending/posting.

3. Specific Boundaries

When using social media in the context of your work with young people there are specific rules and responsibilities which must be followed in order to protect both the young people, and yourself. Along with the Principles of Good Practice and Checklist for using Social Media given above, there are some areas in which specific boundaries have been created in order to safeguard ourselves from potential pitfalls:

- **Communication with young people** – There should be no electronic communication between volunteers and young people in their care. If communication does take place, it is only allowed with the consent of parents, and all messages should be kept (not deleted). This includes accepting any friend requests from any young people.

- **Facebook Groups** – If you decide to use Facebook to keep in touch, the best option is to create a closed Facebook group for your group and co-ordinate with your group leader and Safeguarding Coordinator on how to maintain and moderate this (for example there should be at least two leaders in the Facebook group). The privacy controls should be set up so that only young people and leaders have access to any videos and photographs. There should also be an option in place for allowing/inviting parents who may wish to join the group to see their child's activities.
- **Private Messaging** – There is the possibility that a young person may send personal private messages to you without being accepted as a 'friend', which you cannot prevent from happening. Whilst some young people may be contacting you for spiritual guidance or advice, others may be contacting you to confide in you about something they heard at a church activity, or in response to another situation. It is not possible to produce a definitive list to cover every eventuality, and therefore it is vital you remember that your duty as a leader continues after church activities are over, and as such you should advise and seek guidance from your group leader or Safeguarding Coordinator. If a young person is reporting a safeguarding issue to you, this should be reported to the Safeguarding Coordinator in accordance with the Free Church Safeguarding Policy. Transparency is especially important in this area so any private messaging conversations should be stored and not deleted.
- **Personal Information** – You should not have the personal mobile number, email address or any social media username of a young person. Whilst contact numbers may be required in the event of an emergency for any planned outings away from church premises, this should be done under the instruction of the group leader only and any numbers stored should be deleted at the end of the activity. There should be no need to give any young person your own personal number.
- **Photographs** – Photographs should only be taken of young people who have had parental permission and who, for young people 12 years and over, have also given their own permission. Photographs should be taken by the leader appointed as photographer and should afterwards be dealt with according to your congregation's policy – for example be saved in one agreed location then deleted from the photographer's device.
- **Snapchat/Photo sharing Apps** – You should not add, or accept invitations from, any young people to connect via any photo sharing applications. In particular, no volunteers and young people should connect on Snapchat. Applications such as Snapchat are open to abuse by users and specifically do not store records of what has (or has not) been shared. This could cause difficulties should any allegation be made regarding the use or abuse of this application. As above, for photo-sharing apps which store all correspondence, this may be permissible with parental permission, although it is not recommended.
- **Consent** – Get permission from all involved (young people/parents/guardians/representatives) if words or images (photographs and video) are to be shared in any way.

There may be certain exceptions to the advice contained in this guidance. If you have unanswered questions or if you are in any doubt whatsoever, seek advice from your group leader and/or Safeguarding Coordinator. Most importantly, keep written records of any decisions made by you and your group leader/Safeguarding Coordinator about your use of social media where there may be room for misunderstandings or misinterpretation. Keep an audit trail of all communications (if any)

you have with young people, e.g. do not delete records of phone and email communication. If you are in any doubt at all, don't do it.

General Guidance for use by Young People

Social Media and Mobile Phone Use by Young People

It is likely that most young people (with the exception of the very young) will own a mobile phone or other electronic device which they may have with them at some church activities, and that the device will be linked to various social media platforms. The group leader, in consultation with the rest of the team, will have the responsibility of deciding what restrictions (if any) on the use of electronic devices are in place for the young people and volunteers in their group. This will be dependent on the age group and type of activity, where limitations will be required to differing degrees.

1. Mobile Phones

A central part of church activities for young people is the interaction between the young people themselves, and between the young people and the leaders. Access to and use of mobile phones should be regulated at to ensure that young people are encouraged to fully immerse themselves in the different activities and conversations without the use of their mobile phones. Leaders should lead by example in this area also! While there may be some activities where the use of a mobile phone would be helpful, this use should be limited to allow the young people to participate fully in activities. Below are some points to consider in managing the use of mobile phones at church activities:

- **Security** – Many mobile phones are very valuable. If phones require to be stored by leaders, there must be a safe and secure way of storing them.
- **Time restrictions** – For some activities, for example residential trips, phones will, of course, be required by young people at various times. If young people do not have open access to their phones, the agreed time set aside for young people to contact home should be shared with parents prior to the event. If this is not possible, the young people should inform their parents on the first day of the residential of the agreed time for mobile phone use. Parents should be made aware that mobile phone use is something over which the team leader has discretion during the trip.
- **Leaders' use** – The leaders are reminded to set an example when it comes to interacting with young people. Efforts should be made by leaders to speak to all the young people present, and not to isolate themselves by using their mobile phones.
- **Bible Apps** – Careful consideration should be taken if Bible apps or note-taking apps on mobile phones are permitted to be used. Some groups allow mobile phones to be used for the Bible reading at the start of the talk and then ask everyone to switch off their phones and put them away; others display the readings on a projector screen or ask young people to use hard copy Bibles. Young people could also be asked to put their phones on aeroplane mode if they plan to use their phones for taking notes during the talks. Each individual



situation will be different and will need to be worked out by the group leaders – what works well for one group may not work so well for another group.

2. Social Media (including photo/video sharing)

Young people should be aware that general restrictions which apply to mobile phone use above also apply to social media use, whether on mobile phones or other electronic devices.

- **Taking photos/videos** – the church should be considered a safe area, which means both young people and leaders can expect a level of privacy. Any photography or filming should only take place with prior written parental consent and with consent from all young people 12 years old and over, and should only be carried out by those who have been specifically appointed by the group leader to take photos/videos. Young people are not permitted to take photos/videos of leaders and other young people without consent.
- **Posting photos/videos online** – There have been instances of photos/videos being taken of young people and leaders (who were unaware) and that media then posted online without any consent. As above, when in church premises and engaged anywhere in church activities, the privacy of young people and leaders must be respected. The group leader will decide if any activities can be photographed or filmed and by whom and then arrange the appropriate means by which this can be shared with the young people.
- **Cyberbullying** – Some applications provide the opportunity to create groups of contacts, and it has been known for some young people to create group chats but exclude one or two members of the group. The purpose of this can be to talk about that person, gossip or bully that individual. As above, careful consideration should be given and leaders should be vigilant if it appears any devices are being used by young people for malicious purposes.

Conclusion

Volunteer and paid leaders play a significant role in setting an example on how they use (and don't use!) electronic devices and social media. The interactions between leaders with each other, and also their interaction with young people directly, will be a means by which their Christian witness is observed by all. Please be aware of how your use of mobile phones, photography, video recording and all aspects of social media can be observed by young people and other volunteers and the possible impact this can have on them.

Please also be aware of how the young people are using mobile phones and social media, and do not be afraid to enforce the agreed arrangements. Be vigilant and discuss any concerns you may have about young people's use of electronic devices with your group leader as soon as possible.

Finally, in relation to the use of any type of social media: **if in doubt, don't use it.**