



Electronic
Communication
Guidelines
2011

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Background

In recent years it has become necessary to communicate with young people via a variety of electronic medium. The rate of technological advancement increases each year and in twelve months time there will no doubt be new ways of connecting with others. With this come challenges in the way we communicate as leaders and churches to our young people or congregations. There are positives and negatives to such communications and it is important to be aware of appropriate ways of conducting ourselves in these contexts in order to maximise connections and opportunities.

The question may be asked as to why we need electronic communication guidelines? Here are three simple reasons:

- (1) Some forms of communication are illegal and dangerous for youth influencers to be using with young people.
- (2) Youth influencers are looked up to and the way they use electronic communication tools can have an impact on young people.
- (3) Youth influencers need to be actively promoting safe environments for young people as well as protecting themselves and the organisation/s that they are involved with.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23, “Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial”. Considering that we are influencers in churches and involved in the lives of young people our use of such tools and communication with minors is to be above reproach. We are setting an example in our lives, even through using these tools, which can be seen by our peers and the young people we seek to reach out to. As we strive to be an example in speech, life, love, faith and purity these electronic communication tools portray our own maturity in Christ.

It seems, therefore, appropriate to consider how one uses applications and communication tools that interact with young people under our care. The issues surrounding these tools will only increase in the future and become more of a prominent feature within “youth ministry”. Being a youth leader or youth influencer is a full-time gig and these guidelines should be seen as part of the overall picture in dealing with young people.

Please realise that it is not possible to come up with every scenario that could occur within the life of living relationships. These are, however, some common sense ideas and recommendations that can be implemented in most cases.

It is suggested that these guidelines are not only good practice for communicating with young people but also with fellow believers within our churches or organisations.

Aim

This document seeks to outline guidelines and good practice for youth influencers in using electronic communication tools in a safe and encouraging way for those under the church's care.

Definitions

“guidelines and good practice”

These are some guiding principles and advice for youth influencers to be aware of and follow when using electronic communication with young people (youth group, church, wider community even).

“youth influencers”

Youth leaders are not the only people who deal with young people in the church community. While they perhaps come into contact with young people on a more regular basis than others, through the programs and gatherings of the church, there are a wider sphere of people who also need to communicate with young people. The term “youth influencers”, therefore, includes, but is not limited to, those who interact on a regular basis with young people (under eighteen) through youth group, small groups, one-on-one discipleship, music teams, services, and any other interactions that may take place under the umbrella of one’s church.

“electronic communication”

Interaction between youth influencers and a person under eighteen, using verbal or written forms, that is communicated through an electronic device. This would include, but is not limited to, a phone, a mobile phone, a computer, or a gaming console.

“safe and encouraging”

No doubt there are ways in which electronic communication tools can be used in negative or illegal forms. The nature of this document will hopefully portray ways of use that will enable a safe environment for communication between youth influencers and young people. And, a tone of encouragement that enables young people and youth influencers to continue to communicate positively.

“those under the church’s care”

This phrase speaks of those young people who interact with youth influencers within the church. There are a range of connections that can be made through the variety of church programs and gatherings. It is important to understand that anyone who comes to such gatherings are considered to be under the church’s care, particularly when interacting with youth influencers. This may range from a single interaction to regular weekly contact.

1. General

- a. Interaction with young people in electronic form should be carried out in a team context. Other leaders or influencers should be notified and made aware that you are communicating with a young person in electronic form. This would preferably be through physically being able to see the conversation or being notified in some form.
- b. Where possible and practical parents permission should be given before any electronic communication is used with their child.¹
- c. Youth influencers must not send any electronic communication that attempts to hide their identity or represent himself or herself as someone else.
- d. Pastoral care or deeper conversations with a young person should be face to face.

2. Telephone

- a. Preferably, when telephoning a young person, call on the home phone.
- b. Whenever possible ensure that a parent of the young person is aware of the phone call.²
- c. Mobile phone use should be kept to a minimum and never used for long call or more than 3 text messages within a conversation.³
- d. If a young person initiates a phone call that requires a long chat then move the conversation on to a land line.⁴

3. Email

- a. All emails to young people should have at least one other youth influencer cc'd into them.
- b. Emails should generally be restricted to purpose only emails.⁵
- c. As far as possible save all emails to and from young people.
- d. It is not preferable for pictures and other “junk mail” to be sent or forwarded to young people.

4. SMS Communication

- a. SMS communication should be restricted to purpose only text messages.⁶
- b. Do not text more than 3 texts in a row within a conversation with a young person.⁷
- c. Record or save text messages that you send and receive from young people. This would include the content, the time, the date and the recipient/sender.

5. Social Media Communication

There are numerous social media tools that are now used. No doubt this will grow in years to come. Below, however, are the main social media tools that young people use. The recommendations given in the “Facebook” section would also cover the majority of the other social media sites.

Facebook

- a. All youth influencers should be very careful as to whom they interact with and what is on their profile.
- b. It is advised that youth influencers do not actively seek out young people to be “friends” with but it is OK to confirm positively if they are “friend requested”.
- c. Posting written comments, photos, or videos of a personal nature should be done with the utmost care. Thinking through how comments, photos, or videos may be seen by other people is important to understand.

- d. Posting on other people's profiles should be general and kept to a minimum, particularly with young people.⁸ It is best to keep conversations public so other people can see what's going on.
- e. Internal messages should be purpose only messages and have at least one other youth influencer in the conversation.⁹
- f. Comments to young people, whether on their profile or in comments, are to be kept to a minimum. They are not to be crude or rude and are to be done in a way that will not be misconstrued by a third-party viewing them.
- g. Do not post any private details of a young person on any other "wall", "profile" or "event". Please check with other youth influencers if they are happy for their details to be published in an open forum also.¹⁰
- h. It is recommended that "offline" be the default position of youth influencers regarding FB chat.
- i. Regarding "Photos" please see the "Photo" section.

- j. Be conscious of what you write and how others may interpret it. Sarcasm, irony, and jokes can seem funny in your head but can be misinterpreted by others.
- k. Do not write negatively about other people or organisations.
- l. Set an example of good behaviour, in verbal and visual form.
- m. Do not publicly express anger, disappointment and other such emotions when posting. As gratifying as it may be FB is not the place to do this.
- n. Keep a close eye on the ever-changing privacy settings.

MySpace

- a. Take as much care as possible and follow the instructions used in the FB guidelines.
- b. Delete followers who may not be appropriate and who you do not know.

Twitter

On one hand Twitter is more private than FB. It does not enable an over abundance of photos, it requires short posts, and the content is mainly driven by the user rather than others. In this case the following advice is recommended.

- a. Be careful what one posts and the way in which it can be interpreted.
- b. Ensure that care is taken with who you 'follow' due to people being able to see who it is and their posts on your profile.
- c. Be an example of good Twitter use in all your tweets.
- d. Do not post negative comments about people or organisations.

Formspring¹¹

- a. It is recommended that no youth influencers within your church use Formspring to interact with young people, as it is far too anonymous and prone to cyber bullying.

Instant Messaging (MSN, FB Chat, Google Chat etc)

- a. All youth influencers are to avoid personal chat with a young person where possible. It is preferable to move the conversation to another form.
- b. If a youth influencer and a young person do use instant messaging make sure that it is possible to record or save the conversation somewhere.
- c. If a conversation is occurring in an instant messaging application then inviting a third person into it is highly advisable.

Video Chat (mobile phone or internet etc)

This can include, but is not limited to, Google Chat, Skype or any other applications that allow personal conversation via video form.

- a. Youth influencers should not be entering into any conversations of this nature with a young person.

6. Photo's

- a. Any photos of young people at a specific gathering should be taken by someone appointed to do so.
- b. Do not photograph a person who does not wish to be photographed.
- c. Photos should focus on the activity rather than on particular people or individuals.¹²
- d. Do not identify in writing the person/s in the photograph.¹³
- e. Do not allow a young person to take a photo of a youth influencer with their mobile phone.
- f. No youth influencer should take a picture of a young person on their mobile phone. This is illegal.
- g. If a young person is taking photos then make sure they are general in nature and do not include a youth influencer/s on their own.

7. Gaming Consoles

Xbox, PlayStation and other gaming consoles (incl. computers) have interactive games that work across platforms and the Internet.

- a. Youth influencers should avoid “chatting” to others playing the same game as they are, particularly if a known young person is on playing the game also.
- b. Do not initiate chat to other young people within the game.
- c. Make sure that the parents of the young person know that you are playing a game with their child across the Internet. At all times obey and follow the parents instructions, even if you don't think it best.¹⁴

8. Blogs (Tumblr, Wordpress, Blogger etc)

Blogs are now a common form of expressing personal ideas and thoughts to the world. Youth influencer's are to be aware of what they express on their blog, whether it is personal or not. Like much of the previous advice continue to be diligent in online godliness and conscious of the impression that your blog will give to those who read it.

Acknowledgements

Some of these guidelines are taken directly from the National Council of Churches in Australia, their Safe Church Training Agreement, who acknowledges that their information has come from the Professional Standards Unit of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.¹⁵

Thanks must also go to a number of youth pastors and leaders who have given feedback while this document was still in draft form.

Other Resources

www.cybersafetysolutions.com.au

www.netalert.gov.au

www.netsmartz.org

www.netsafe.org.nz

www.ceop.gov.uk

www.cybertipline.org

www.isafe.org

www.bullying.org

www.wiredsafety.org

www.digizen.org.uk

www.getnetwise.org

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Endnotes

¹ Depending on one's context I believe this is quite hard to achieve. Parents are often unknown to youth influencers, particularly if they are not part of the church community. Having said this, we should be actively seeking to engage with parents and build relationships with them, not only with their child. While text messages, email, and Facebook ("FB") posts cannot be stopped from coming in there can be ways of informing parents that you are communicating with their child.

² One can either call the parent/s to notify them that you would like to speak to their child. Alternatively, if they are home at the time of the call, make sure you speak to them and introduce yourself.

³ 3 texts messages should be sufficient to get any information across to a young person. If it is going to take longer then it is recommended that one move to a phone call. In terms of the phrase "within the conversation" this could be between 3 minutes or 3 days. You will be the best judge of the conversation.

⁴ It is now possible to live without a home phone. It is unlikely to be the case in terms of the young person but could be the case with a youth influencer. There are other options available to continue conversations with young people; however, caution is advised with calls over 10 minutes.

⁵ These are emails that announce specific instructions or general in nature. i.e. “Meet here are this time”, or, “How was your basketball game this afternoon?”.

⁶ These are text messages that announce specific instructions or general in nature. i.e. “Meet here are this time”, or, “How was your basketball game this afternoon?”.

⁷ 3 texts messages should be sufficient to get any information across to a young person. If it is going to take longer then it is recommended that one move to a phone call. In terms of the phrase “within the conversation” this could be between 3 minutes or 3 days. You will be the best judge of the conversation.

⁸ i.e. “Hey, it was great to see you Sunday night, have a great week”.

⁹ If a young person initiates this it is recommended to change communication forms or copy and paste the conversation to another youth influencer for accountability. It is understood that once a FB message has been sent no other people can be asked to join the conversation. It is best to always carbon copy other youth influencers in on conversations with young people.

¹⁰ These are details that include, but are not limited to, address, phone number/s, email address, and the like that can be posted on any wall, comment, group, or event page.

¹¹ Formspring.me is a simple social media site that enables people to ask questions of you which you can reply to.

¹² “Closies” and “seflies” should be done with great care, only of the face, and possibly avoided altogether. It is not recommended that close-ups of young people be uploaded onto the Internet.

¹³ The nature of “tagging” on FB does change things a little with this. Having said that, if a young person “tags” the photo and it has been uploaded onto an organisations “group” or “page” then this might be a safe option.

¹⁴ If they tell you to stop playing the game with their child then obey their instruction. If it is known to you that the young person has been “grounded” from playing that particular game then do not encourage them to disobey their parents. This could include advising them that they should stop playing if one sees that they are online.

¹⁵ http://www.ncca.org.au/files/SCTA_Electronic_Communication_Guidelines_V2.1.pdf