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Safe and Healthy Electronic Communications

Frequently Asked Questions:

Policies for the Safety of Children and Youth



Dear friend,

Technology makes it easier than ever to communicate with friends and family. As Youth Workers, we also have an opportunity to communicate with the young people in our care.



While Electronic Communications give us an opportunity, they also present certain risks. As Youth Workers, we need to be mindful of how to best use our phones and apps to reach young people in safe and healthy ways: pointing them, first and foremost, to Christ.

We're happy to present answers to some of the most common questions we've received about using Electronic Communications as a Youth Worker. We hope it's beneficial as you help lead young people to the Lord.



In Christ,

Steven Christoforou
*Director of Youth &
Youth Adult Ministries*

Father Earl Cantos
Director of Youth Safety Compliance

“ THERE CAN BE NO KEENER REVELATION OF A SOCIETY'S SOUL THAN THE WAY IN WHICH IT TREATS ITS CHILDREN.

1) What Are Electronic Communications, Anyway?

Electronic Communications

include everything from texts and emails to social media comments and direct or private messages. Electronic Communications can come in a variety of forms: photo, audio, video, text-based, etc.



2) Why Do Electronic Communications Matter?

Electronic Communications are incredibly common. As much as they present opportunities to better connect with people, they also present risks. You may have had situations where a friend misunderstood one of your messages. This is an even greater risk when communicating with Children or Youth. An overly lax or casual mindset can lead to blurred or crossed boundaries, misunderstandings, or worse.



That's why Youth Workers should carefully consider the content and nature of any type of Electronic Communication with a Child or Youth.

3) Does That Mean I'm Not Allowed to Contact Children And Youth by Phone, Text Or Other Social Media?

Not at all! In fact, it can be necessary for you to communicate with Children and Youth in ways that they're used to (texting, social media, etc.). But you need to do so with common sense and caution: as a Christ-centered mentor who's helping lead young people to the Lord.



4) What Are The Different Ways I Can Use Electronic Communications With Young People?

There are four basic categories of Electronic Communications. As you'll see, not every category will be appropriate for you:

- a. INFORMATIONAL Electronic Communications: When Youth Workers contact Children or Youth for informational, organizational, or administrative purposes such as scheduling Youth Ministry Programs or Events or communicating news and updates.
- b. EDUCATIONAL Electronic Communications: When Youth Workers are either asked to (i) answer questions related to the Christian faith or the life of the Church, or (ii) volunteer information related to the Christian faith or the life of the Church.

c. PASTORAL Electronic Communications: When Youth Workers are asked to, or offer to, either (i) give advice making difficult life choices, navigating difficult personal issues, or otherwise dealing with complex situations and experiences; or (ii) listen to and be present for a Child or Youth in the midst of a difficult experience or situation.

d. CRISIS Electronic Communications: When Youth Workers are either (i) asked to, or offer to give, advice related to instances of self harm, violence, addiction, or Abuse; or (ii) contacted by a Youth or Child in imminent danger of either suffering or self-inflicting serious harm.

5) Can I Message a Young Person To Remind Them Of An Upcoming Ministry Event?

Yes. This is an example of Informational Electronic Communication. While you should keep the requirements of the Policies in mind (and always act accordingly), this is a relatively straightforward kind of communication. Feel free to send necessary messages about events, news, etc.



6) Can I Message a Young Person To Answer Their Questions About Church Teachings?

That depends. This is an example of Educational Electronic Communication. This is a slightly more complicated kind of communication, and you can engage in it if you're properly trained and prepared. For example, if a Youth asks you to explain how Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human, then you should only offer an answer if you have the appropriate theological training.



(This can include seminary or other theological certifications.)

It's ok not to have the answer. In that case, it would be better to refer the Youth to someone who is theologically trained. Again it's always better to steer these conversations away from online messages to the next in-person event.

7) Can I Message a Young Person To Help Get Them Through a Difficult Time?

Again, that depends. This is an example of Pastoral Electronic Communication. This is an even more sensitive kind of communication, and you can engage in it if you're properly trained and prepared. For example, if a Youth asks for your advice about how to deal with a

difficult situation at home, then you should only offer an answer if you have the appropriate pastoral training.

(This can include seminary or other chaplaincy training.)

Given the sensitivity of these kinds of questions, it's best to assume that you're not prepared to have these conversations. And that's ok.

In that case, it would be better to refer the Youth to someone who is pastorally trained. And it's always better to steer these conversations away from online messages to the next in-person event.

8) Can I Message a Young Person To Help Them Deal With a Crisis?

Probably not. This is an example of Crisis Electronic Communication.

This is the most serious and sensitive kind of communication, and you can only engage in it if you're properly trained and prepared. For example, if a Youth tells you that she is planning to hurt or kill herself, then you should only offer an answer if you have the appropriate crisis training.



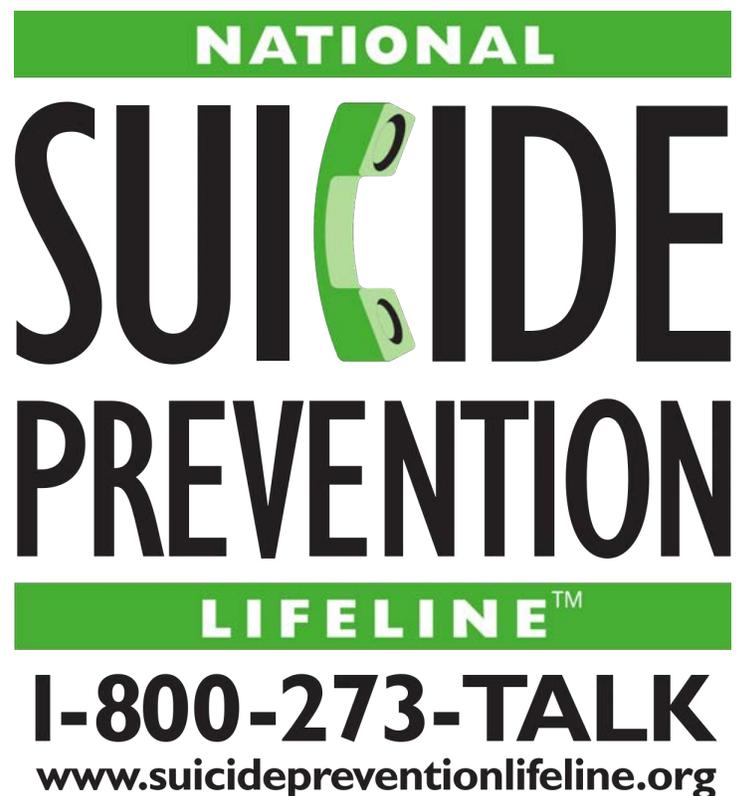
(This can include mental health or other crisis training by a certified organization.)

Given the seriousness of these kinds of questions, it's best to assume that you're not prepared to have these conversations. In fact, all Crisis Electronic Communications should immediately be referred to the proper state authorities (as described below in Question 9).

9) How Do I Report Abuse Or Make Sure It Is Abuse?

Youth Workers, Subject to applicable law, must promptly report instances of Abuse to their Supervisor and to the appropriate authorities. The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline can assist your in determining FIRST if it is abuse and SECOND to which agency it needs to be reported. Their number is 1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453. The Child or Youth in question may also speak confidentially to Childhelp.

If a Youth Worker is contacted by a Child or Youth who threatens to attempt suicide or discloses suicidal ideation, that Youth Worker must



immediately call 911 and seek the immediate intervention of trained professionals. You can also call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at [1-800-273-8255](#).

10) Can I Give My Phone Number To A Child Or Youth?

Remember that, as a Youth Worker, you're not on an equal footing with the Children or Youth in your care. While you may choose to give your number publicly available to all the participants in a particular program, that's different than giving your contact information to one Child or Youth in particular.



Youth Workers should avoid proactively distributing their personal contact information (i.e. personal cell phone number, personal email address, etc.) to only a few or a particular Child or Youth. A better practice is to make contact information available to all the participants of a Youth Ministry Program or Event.

While it can be good to be available to receive messages from young people, Youth Workers are discouraged from proactively initiating any Electronic Communication with Children or Youth, except for [Organizational Electronic Communications](#). When Youth Workers proactively initiate Electronic Communications, they run the risk of blurring boundaries and exploiting the unequal power between Youth Workers and Children/Youth.

11) Can I Contact Children And Youth Using My Own Personal Social Media Accounts?

Yes, though a better practice would be to use [Institutional Social Media Channels](#) to post news, updates, media, and other items, rather than to access a Child or Youth's social media accounts. These are the social media accounts that belong to a community or program rather than your private account. These Institutional Social Media Channels can be accessed by multiple Youth Workers, which makes them more transparent (and safer).



12) Can I “Follow” Or “Friend” The Children And Youth Of Our Church On My Own Social Media?

Yes though, given the unequal power dynamics we explored earlier, you should not proactively “follow” or “friend” young people. You may accept requests that are initiated by young people. Regardless, you should always be mindful of keeping any Electronic Communications with young people safe and healthy.

As discussed in Question 11, it's a better practice to use [Institutional Social Media Channels](#) to post news, updates, media, and other items, rather than to access a Child or Youth's social media accounts directly, in the privacy afforded by your personal accounts.

13) Should I Keep My Electronic Communications With Young People Secret?

No! Secrets, at best, increase the likelihood of scandalous misunderstandings and, at worst, provide the space for inappropriate communications and contact. If you're texting or messaging a young person, you should make sure that your Youth Ministry Program or Event Supervisor knows. You should also let the parents of this young person know.

TRANSPARENCY



In fact, Youth Workers should make an effort to get to know the Parents of the Children and Youth in their care and inform the Parents that such Electronic Communications occur. You can do this by copying parents on emails or including them in group texts. Whenever possible, you should keep copies of Electronic Communications with Children or Youth, just in case anyone needs to review them in the future.



14) What If A Child Or Youth Becomes Flirty or Says Something Inappropriate?

Youth Workers should immediately notify their Supervisor if any Electronic Communication from the Youth or Child is sensitive, inappropriate, or not within the acceptable spectrum of interactions between a Youth Worker and a Child or Youth.



If it's a Crisis Electronic Communication, you should immediately contact the proper state authorities. This may include communication that reveals danger, harm, abuse, flirtatious content or invitations, sexually explicit content, and personal photographs or information.

15) What Are Some "Rules Of Thumb" I Can Use To Navigate Social Media and Texting Interactions?

Remember, as a Youth Worker you're a mentor that's leading people to Christ. So you want to engage in Electronic Communications that help reinforce clear, appropriate boundaries and avoid interactions that could be misunderstood. For example, you should:



- avoid extended back and forth communications, or conversations at odd hours (late at night, etc.);
- try to steer conversations back to in-person events;
- be extra careful when communicating with Children or Youth of the opposite sex;
- never discriminate or show favoritism;
- avoid confrontations or arguments; and
- immediately report any inappropriate electronic communications.



16) Should I Reflect On What I Put On My Own Social Media?

Absolutely! Remember as a Youth Worker you are a role model and potentially a mentor. Your postings and comments can be read by all on-line. That especially means you should refrain from:

- using Electronic Communications to depict the abuse of alcohol and drugs, or sexual behavior;
- engaging in sexual harassment or Bullying; or



- using obscenities or profanity.

17) Can All Youth Workers Use The Same Church Social Media Channels?

Yes. In fact, the more people who have access to such a channel, the more transparent it is (and the less likely it is for a person to be hiding inappropriate interactions). Your Priest and Ministry Leaders at the Parish should discuss this possibility, and who would have access to such accounts.



For more guidance, please review the [Policies FAQ](#) document, available at goarch.org/safety.

If you have any questions, please email Father Earl at youthsafety@goarch.org.

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