E-safety: Electronic Communication and Social Networking

Safeguarding children and others today requires the recognition that abuse can happen both online and offline. Whilst computers, mobile phones and all other electronic communication devices are by very nature neutral, unfortunately they can be used as vehicles to bring harm, and as a tool to groom children.

Children can be groomed through the internet and via messaging services, such as text messages, all forms of social media, the use of Skype and other web-cam services, with chat facilities, within online games and through the facility to send and receive digital pictures and images.

We live in a changing world of technology which, although sophisticated, is also easily accessible and allows for those who wish to exploit children to gain trust with them. For whilst children may be technically competent, they can also lack the maturity to understand the dangers they may be exposed to. Those with responsibility for the care and welfare of children should therefore ensure that they are technically competent in the area of what is called 'e-safety'. The purpose of these guidelines is to help safeguard staff and volunteers from allegations and protect their privacy, as well as safeguard children and young people.

Due to the increasing personal use of social networking sites, everyone needs to be aware of the impact of their personal use on their professional standing. In practice anything posted on the internet will be there forever and is no longer in your control. When something is on the internet even if you remove it, it may have already been "snapshotted" by a "web crawler" and so will always be there. Current and future employers and others may see it. Teachers, children and young people and their parents, friends, family members and carers may also see it. When working with young people, you need to keep clear boundaries between your professional life and your private life – and you may need to limit what you post on-line on social networking sites in order to do this.

General dos and don'ts

Staff and volunteers are in a professional position and are responsible for the care of children and young people. Communication between children and adults by whatever method should always take place within clear and explicit boundaries. This includes face to face contact, mobile phones, text messaging, emails, digital camera, videos, webcams, websites, blogs and social media messaging.

Therefore, staff and volunteers should:

- Ensure that all electronic communications are appropriate and professional;
- Not engage in any activities which may harm the welfare of children or young people;
- Not engage in activities on the internet which might bring the Diocese or the Cathedral into disrepute;

- Not browse, download, upload or distribute any material that could be considered offensive, illegal or discriminatory;
- Ensure that all electronic communications are appropriate and professional.

Communicating electronically with children and young people – dos and don'ts

- Obtain consent from the parents or guardians of any young people or children you wish to communicate with digitally, including to obtain their mobile phone number;
- You should not give your personal contact details to children or young people, including mobile telephone numbers, personal email address, details of any personal blogs, or personal web sites;
- Always copy another worker into all e-mails to ensure accountability. When using e-mails and instant messaging (IM), ensure that the general protocols for ICT communication are taken into account;
- When communicating with a group of children or young people, use a group e-mail or text message and not individual ones. This saves time, and ensures there is no favouritism as everyone will receive the same message;
- Use a specific e-mail account to communicate with children and young people. The address should be known by the young person or child, their parent or guardian, and other staff. This should not be your personal e-mail account;
- Use clear and unambiguous language. Many abbreviations are currently used which are open to misinterpretation, for example 'lol' could mean 'laugh out loud' or 'lots of love'. Nuance and tone in communication can sometimes be hard to read, so ensure that language is clear and not open to misunderstanding;
- Stick to an agreed length of time for a conversation with a child or young person through instant messaging, and an agreed curfew when no communication takes place, for example between 10pm and 7am;
- Log all conversations in a text/Word file and ensure that it is saved in a specific area on the computer. At the beginning of each IM conversation, you should inform the child or young person you are communicating with that the content of your conversation will be saved;
- Any text messages that are received, which cause concern, should be saved and passed to your Parish Safeguarding Coordinator

Social Networking - Dos and Don'ts

Social networking sites provide a great way for people to maintain contact with their friends. However, through the open nature of such sites, it is also possible for third parties (including children and young people and their parents and carers) to access this information. The following guidance for staff and volunteers is to protect children and young people and keep staff and volunteers safe from allegations:

- Where the parish or the Cathedral has a Facebook account, communication with children will be monitored e.g. by having a closed group.
- You must not post or share work related information on your personal social networking pages, whether written or pictures.
- Under no circumstances should comments be made on social networking sites, in chatrooms or in any other electronic forum, about the Diocese, the Cathedral, its staff or volunteers.
- Under no circumstances should comments be made on social networking sites, in chatrooms or in any other electronic forum, about children or young people you are working with in the Church or Cathedral.
- You must not send or accept friendship requests on social networking or messaging sites from children or young people (or their parents/carers and family members) that you work with under the age of 18. Also remember that young people you no longer work with may still have friends that you may have contact with through your work with the Church or Cathedral.

- Social networking sites such as Facebook have a range of privacy settings which are often set up to expose your details to anyone. When 'open' anyone can find you from a search of the social networking site or even from a google search. Therefore, it is important to change your setting to 'just friends' so that your details, comments and photographs can only be seen by your invited friends. However, always remember anyone who can access your site can potentially copy and paste your comments into the public domain, making it visible to all.
- You may have your own profile set to private, but when joining a group or a network, be aware that everyone in that group or network is able to see your profile. Have a neutral picture of yourself as your profile image, do not put online any text, image, sound or video that could upset or offend or be incompatible with your professional or volunteer role with the Diocese or the Cathedral and do not post embarrassing material or comments about yourself.
- Choose your social networking friends carefully and ask about their privacy controls. Exercise caution, for example, on Facebook if you write on a friend's 'wall' - all of their friends can see your comment, even if they are not your friend. Your friends may take and post photos that you may not be happy about. You will need to speak to them to request that it is removed.
- If you have younger friends or family members on your social networking groups who are friends with young people (or their parents/carers and family members) that you work with, be aware that posts that you write will be visible to them.
- You should always be aware of the privacy settings on photo sharing websites. If you or a friend are tagged in an online photo album (Facebook, Flickr, Instagram) the whole photo album may be visible to their friends, your friends and anyone else tagged in the photo album. You do not have to be friends with anyone to be tagged in their photo album; if you are tagged in a photo you can remove the tag but not the photo.
- Do not use your personal profile in any way for official business.

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