



## **Using the Internet and Electronic Communication Safely**

*Diocese of Guildford, October 2011*

Communicating with children and young people is at the heart of what the church does with them, and we have been doing this ever since the church began 2000 years ago. The issues surrounding modern forms of communication are in many ways the same as those surrounding more traditional methods of communication, except that the person is not with you so that neither of you can use facial expression or body language to clarify your meaning (except when using video messaging). It is also usually private, so others are not there to provide context and background.

However a number of specific issues can be thrown up, which we will address here.

### **1. Email**

a. When considering using email to communicate with children and young people, consent from both the individual and their parent/guardian should be obtained. This is done most simply when an individual registers to join a group, and email consent wording can be added to the general consent that is signed on the form.

b. A worker should use a specific and known account to communicate with the children and young people. This address should be known to the young people, children, parents and the worker's supervisor. It should be possible for the worker's supervisor to access all messages, both sent and received on this account. Under no circumstances should messages be sent or received on a separate account. Children, young people and parents should be aware that the supervisor has access to the

account, which is most simply done at the same time consent is given.

c. Clear and unambiguous language should be used. Nuance and tone in email can sometimes be hard to read, and ambiguity, flirtation, crude humour, ridicule or insulting language should never be used, even in jest. Be careful to avoid abbreviations that can be misinterpreted, such as 'lol' (laugh out loud or lots of love) and 'luv'.

d. Do not say anything in an email that you would not say face to face to the child or young person.

## **2. Instant Messenger (MSN etc.)**

a. All the above guidance for email should be taken into account, particularly consent, the use of unambiguous language and accountability.

b. There should be an agreed length of time for a conversation and a curfew from, say, 10pm to 7am. If you wouldn't meet a young person at a given time face to face, don't meet in cyberspace either.

c. Log all conversations in a text file (there is a setting to do this in MSN) ensuring that it is saved in an appropriate place on your computer. Inform people at the beginning of the conversation that this is going to be saved. Make sure your supervisor knows where the files are saved, and that they have access to them.

d. Take extreme care if using video or voice messaging, ensuring that you are in a public place when you do so, and that other people are around and aware of what you are doing and to whom you are talking.

## **3. Mobile Phones**

a. It is advisable for workers to be supplied with a mobile phone dedicated to work purposes. This allows the phone to be switched off when outside work and protects the worker's

right to a personal life. It also allows costs for calls and texts to be accounted for in an itemised bill.

b. If supplied with a work phone, workers should not supply their personal number to the young people with whom they work.

c. As with IM conversations, the worker should not use the phone outside reasonable hours, with a curfew from, say, 10pm to 7am.

d. Young people should be told that the number is for a work phone rather than a personal one.

e. Texts or conversations that raise concerns should be saved and passed on to or discussed with the worker's supervisor.

f. Many phones have cameras. All cameras used by workers should be covered by a separate policy on photography, including those in a phone. This policy will cover issues including consent, storage of images and their use in publicity and online.

#### **4. Social Networking Sites**

a. Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Bebo and the like raise issues that go beyond those covered in previous sections. All the general guidance surrounding language, curfew and parental consent should be followed.

b. Workers should consider having two profiles, with a dedicated one for work. This will protect young people from being messaged by contacts of the worker through the worker's profile.

c. Workers should only accept friend requests for this profile from young people known to them whom they have met offline.

d. Communication should be in the public domain where possible (by using group mailings or public wall posts).

e. Where groups are set up, they should be closed, and not open to the general public. The worker should retain

administrative rights and moderate the group, only sharing those rights with other trusted workers.

f. Photographs posted on these sites are subject to all the restrictions of posting any photograph on the internet, and workers should comply with their photographic policy at all times (see section 2D of Diocesan Safeguarding Policy).

g. Content that raises issues or concerns for the worker should be saved/printed and shown to or discussed with the worker's supervisor.

## **5. Places to go for further guidance**

a. The Diocesan Safeguarding Policy covers policy, procedures and good practice to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. Copies are available online at [www.cofeguildford.org.uk](http://www.cofeguildford.org.uk) – search for Safeguarding Policy.

b. The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service produces a number of leaflets giving general advice in this area:

[www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)

c. Childnet International works to help make the internet safe for children. The website offers resources to help in this area:

[www.childnet-int.org](http://www.childnet-int.org). This site also points to a host of other resources.

d. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) is a government-backed site to report suspicious behaviour with or towards a child. See [www.ceop.gov.uk](http://www.ceop.gov.uk).

e. For specific advice contact the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser in the first instance. Their details can be found in the Safeguarding Policy mentioned above.