

TECHNOLOGY

In an increasingly complex world the opportunities for child abuse are growing. Those who care for children need to be aware of the opportunities for abuse through the misuse of the Internet, text messaging, video and other media. While good use of such media can be beneficial we must be vigilant and alert to the possibilities of misuse and the consequent harm that can result to young people.

USING COMPUTERS

If there is a computer being used within the programme of your organisation, it is important that guidelines are drawn up and a policy is agreed. See Section 13 for a sample policy on the use of computers within a church organisation.

CHILDREN AND THE INTERNET

Whilst the development of the Internet has revolutionised communication systems throughout the world and appropriately used is an excellent resource, care in its application needs to be exercised so that the safety of a child is not compromised. Children need to be aware of online safety in the same way they are taught road safety.

There are a number of helpful organisations who can offer training and advice in this area, please see the Taking Care website for further information.

CHURCH WEBSITES

When designing or developing a church or youth website or an Internet page please remember the following:

- Parental permission must be obtained before using any pictures of a child/group of children on a website.
- Avoid using photographs of individual children which can be easily copied onto other sites. It is preferable to use a group photograph.
- Names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses should not be given.
- Leaders should be aware that by advertising dates and times of events online, there is the possibility that other people, who would not have otherwise heard of an event, may turn up without warning.
- It should be made very clear to young people that the website should not be used to make arrangements to meet up with each other casually, e.g. going out for coffee. They need to be reminded that they don't know who is reading their conversation.
- A 'closed' page or password protected site can help to limit who can view the site.

COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE VIA THE INTERNET

Working with young people often requires a balancing act between being part of the world in which they live, in order to reach them, and yet maintaining a leadership role. In order to understand young people, it is important to live in their culture and at the same time be a role model to them. No place is this balancing act more difficult to get right than in the area of technology, namely the Internet and, in particular, social networking sites, blogs, micro-blogs and other public domain publishing methods.

If used well, methods of communication via the Internet can be effective tools in youth ministry. For example, social networking sites have a group facility which allows online groups to meet in a virtual space where all information and comments are seen by everyone in that group but no-one else.

It is worth noting that everything posted on the Internet – comments, opinions and photos – can potentially be seen and copied by anyone else using the Internet. Social Networking sites have privacy settings for this reason and these limit what any other person, whom you have not accepted as a friend, can view.

Leaders should think carefully before adding a child or young person in the organisation in which they are leaders, as a friend or follower on a social networking site. If a leader does choose to accept a child or young person as a friend or follower, it is important always to remember that the child or young person has access to all opinions, information and photos which are posted on the leader's profile, either by the leader or by their other friends. Leaders are recommended to evaluate photos of themselves that are posted on these sites and consider deleting or 'untagging' any photos in which they are depicted in what could possibly be construed as compromising situations.

Leaders should not post photographs of young people from the organisation in which they are leaders, on a social networking site or anywhere on the Internet, unless they have written parental consent.

Comments made on the Internet should be considered the same as if they were made in a public place. If a child discloses something to a leader via a social networking site, a chat room or any other public domain publishing method, then the disclosure must be dealt with by following the normal referral process (see section 3). If a leader is concerned about something that a young person communicates to him or her via the Internet, he or she should encourage the child to talk to a suitable adult about it or arrange to meet with the child (within the usual child protection parameters).

Leaders should limit the direct Internet communication they have with individual children and young people in the organisation of which they are leaders. While communication via the

internet can be highly effective, all such communication with children and young people should, as far as possible, be within an open forum, in order to protect both young people and leaders.

COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE VIA MOBILE PHONES

Those who care for children need to be aware of the opportunities for abuse through the misuse of mobile phone and text messaging. While good use of such media can be beneficial we must be vigilant and alert to the possibilities of misuse and consequent harm that can result to young people. Leaders must also take care to protect themselves and Kirk Sessions should take an active role to ensure that good practice is followed.

Leaders involved in Youth and Children's work should only have children's mobile numbers if the nature of their involvement requires them to phone or text Children. Such leaders might include those running an organisation for older teenagers, or an employed youth worker or a volunteer involved in coordinating youth work within the congregation. Kirk Session should be informed which leaders need to contact children for their specific roles.

- Parent's permission should be sought if the leader in this role will be contacting children via mobile phone.
- A method of accountability should be arranged e.g. copies of texts could also be sent to the Minister or to parents.
- If a leader has a child's phone number it should only be used for the purposes it has been given i.e. the leader should not share this information with other church members.
- It is recommended that an employed youth worker has a separate phone for work purposes rather than using their personal phone for contacting young people.

Texting - Communication not Conversation!

- Texts should be used for the purposes of reminding young people about events which are forthcoming.
- Texts can also be used as a means to encourage young people if it is appropriate e.g. 'hope exam goes o.k.'
- If it turns into a conversation, communications should be ended. A leader can suggest discussing the subject further at the next event or, if they are concerned about the young person; arrange to meet up to talk further (within the usual child protection parameters).

DVD MINISTRY

Many congregations now film services for home ministry purposes. The congregation should be given prior notice at least two weeks in advance, either from the pulpit or printed on the weekly announcement sheet. Children should not be identified on the film and the DVD should not be used for any other reason than its primary purpose.