



The Office of Safe Environment
NEWSLETTER



Of Billboards and Phone Calls

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Many of the folks who receive this newsletter will be interested to know that a brand new policy has been set in place here in the Archdiocese of New York regarding the use of electronic communications, web pages, social networking sites, and other internet communication tools. In the interests of following up the official dissemination of that information, we thought it worth the time to give a quick overview here as well.

Bearing in mind the sheer volume of information rocketing around the ether online, perhaps a little scaling down is in order. Or as I often have said in lectures, as we discuss these topics, every time I mention "email/instant messaging/texting", substitute the words "phone call." And every time I mention "social networking/web page/blog" substitute the word "billboard." Because, digitally speaking, that's what they are! One is a personal, one-on-one type of communication. The other is openly viewable by anyone who happens to digitally drive by.



Some guidelines that apply to any relationship with minors apply just as strongly to online relationships. For example:

1. We as adults have to remember that there is a big difference between being "friendly" and being "friends" with children. Minors are not peers of an adult working with them in a church program or institution. Excessive familiarity or a purely social relationship between adults and minors are simply inappropriate.
2. Speaking of inappropriate, there should never be a "special" relationship between an adult and a young person. So don't play favorites. In fact, it is probably for the best that you don't even appear to be playing favorites.
3. And do not fall into the trap of assuming the role of a "surrogate parent" or "confidant" to a minor with whom you are working.

Now...regarding electronic communications:

Have you ever clicked "send" and immediately regretted it? Sometimes you spotted a typo at the last second; sometimes you responded in haste; sometimes you forgot to attach a file; who knows? It happens all the time. Imagine what can result if mistakes are made communicating between an adult and a minor! Here is a relatively simple rule of thumb about communicating with our kids online: If you are not willing to

personally make a phone call to the child's home about it, do not click "send". Why? Because you are initiating a personal, private conversation with a minor. You're just not using your mouth to do it.

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These are some of the guidelines covered in the new policy that relate specifically to personal digital communications:

- Let's start with the obvious. Do NOT transmit or display any indecent material to minors.
- There shall be no private direct electronic communication between an adult and a minor, except as provided below.
- Make every effort to send all electronic communication to minors through their parents or guardians, or through an email account of an Archdiocesan institution that is monitored by a supervisor (e.g., an official school email account).
- Using a private email account to communicate with a minor, and text messaging a minor, are never permitted.
- It is OK to send "group" emails to minors with whom you are working in an Archdiocesan institution or program (e.g., to notify a club about scheduling matters or to send reminders of events). But keep the message on the topic of the activity, and send a copy to the parents and guardians as well, if possible.

- If electronic communication is necessary for the orderly operation of an activity sponsored by your organization (e.g., to notify participants of changes of schedule, weather cancellations, etc.), contact a parent or guardian first, and then subsequent communication should be from parent to parent, or from minor to minor (e.g., through a telephone tree). If that's not feasible because of the circumstances, follow the policy outlined below for emergency communications on a trip.
- Adult chaperones for a trip sponsored by or connected with a Church organization can have direct electronic communication with a minor to the extent that it is necessary for safety or maintaining order (e.g., a telephone call to a minor who has become separated from the group). Again, keep the focus matters relating to the activity. And once the activity is concluded, communications should be concluded as well.
- If a minor initiates a private electronic communication with an adult, adults would do well to advise the minor that, private direct communications are not permitted between an adult and a minor, and that it would be more proper to establish contact with the minor's parent or guardian instead. If a parent or guardian is not available, the adult shall advise the minor that further communication must be with the minor's parent or guardian, and conclude the communication.
- And now for one of the scarier ones. If a minor initiates an electronic communication to report a violation of any civil law relating to child abuse or neglect, then it is time to IMMEDIATELY follow the reporting procedures of the Archdiocese. Do not, I repeat, DO NOT sit on this type of communication. This also goes for any violation of local diocesan sexual misconduct policies, also known as codes of conduct.



Moving on to social networking sites and personal web pages...

Ever heard the phrase "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas?" Well...the internet hasn't. In fact, it seems to operate on a completely opposite train of thought along the lines of "What happens online is permanently available for everybody for free!"

"What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today?"

Pope Benedict Speaking to the U.S Bishops; 16 April 2008

Every day, people are casually uploading silly stories with even sillier (or worse) pictures to their numerous social networking sites thinking it might be good for a laugh. In actuality, some find it even better for clicking "Save As" or "Copy-Paste". Adults have mortified themselves on these sites time and again just communicating with other adults. So it is not difficult to conclude that, given the easy, informal, and at times anonymous nature of these sites, maintaining the proper relationship between adults and minors can be a sticky web indeed.

It is appropriate for Church institutions and programs to maintain social networking sites, but only under the following circumstances and with certain restrictions that protect both the adults and the minors:

1. Access to the site is strictly restricted to those adults and minors who are actively involved in the program;
2. Access to the site is subject to the invitation and approval of the program's ADULT moderator; admittedly, there can be a lot of truth pertaining to the abilities gap between our generation and the ones coming up behind us when it comes to computer skills, but make sure your teens are helping with the site, not running it.
3. Private direct communications ("chat" or private messages) may not take place between adults and minors;
4. In fact, it is for the best if, the fullest extent possible, ADULT moderators use the social networking site's privacy settings to block private direct communications;
5. The ADULT moderator of the program oversees the content of the site. Think of this as being the final content editor.
6. And finally, make sure, make VERY sure, that no personal information or photographs of minors are posted without the written permission of the minor's parent or guardian.

So remember the law of the internet, what goes up on the net, probably stays there forever. No matter how many times it's deleted. And don't forget that it is very easy to get carried away with the casual give and take of email, instant messaging, texting and the like. But don't so much think before you speak as think before you send. Professional courtesy and caution will go a LONG way to avoiding misunderstandings and misperceptions on the web.

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