

# Safer Environment and Activities - Section 4

## 4. Social Media and Mobile Communications.

**4.1. Basic Principles.** Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, are online platforms that allow users to create, rather than just consume, online content. Typically they allow users to upload photographs, daily updates, comments, and so on. Social media usage is widespread, particularly amongst younger adults and children: for many young people the distinction between the 'online' and 'offline' worlds is an artificial one. As some have pointed out, if the church does not engage with young people on social media, then the church will not engage with a major aspect of their lives.

**4.2. Other Resources.** The world of social media changes rapidly; by the time guidance is in-print it can be out-of-date! This section provides some general pointers, but it is highly recommended that readers familiarise themselves with the following online resources which provide more detailed advice which is regularly updated:

- [Thinkuknow](#)
- [Parentzone](#)
- [Parents Protect – Internet Safety](#)
- [ChildNet International](#)

**4.3. Don't be too restrictive!** The evidence suggests that taking a highly restrictive approach to social media usage with young people is unhelpful, as they will usually find a way to use it anyway and may end up taking more risks because their usage is already 'illicit'. The evidence also indicates that the majority of young people are capable of identifying risks in the online world and avoiding them. It is important to avoid treating the world of social media as 'scary' and of seeing dangers everywhere; for many young people, their social media use is a positive and enjoyable aspect of their social lives.

**4.4. Best Practice.** However, sensible precautions should be taken in the use of social media within a Church context. In many ways, these precautions are simply online versions of safe practice in the offline world:

- Avoid 'lone working' in the online world: Practically, this means avoiding one-to-one online chat (e.g. direct messaging) between adults and young people.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in the online world: Just as in the offline world, it is important to keep a distinction between our private lives and our work within church, and to pay particular attention to the dynamics of power and influence as discussed in [Section 1](#).

- Do not use personal social media accounts to contact children. The simplest way to observe the above two precautions is to avoid having leaders and young people as 'friends' on social media (e.g. Facebook). It is far preferable to have an official account for the group in question (such as 'St Andrew's Anywhere Youth Group'), and to ask young people to 'like' that page. Any news about group events or anything else can be posted on that page. More than one leader should have access to this page, providing for accountability and transparency.  
Conversations between leaders and young people should happen in the public section of these pages (such as the 'wall' or in comments under posts) where everyone can see them, rather than via direct messages.
- Behave in the online world as you would offline: Simply put, if you would not say it offline, do not say it online! This includes posting links to offensive or otherwise inappropriate content, making comments about someone's appearance that could be interpreted as either sexual or offensive, or 'liking' inappropriate content on social media.
- Treat online 'consent' the same as offline 'consent': You will need the consent of the individual and/or their parents to use and store photographs, to retain any information relating to them online, and so on. (See [Section 5](#) for further guidance regarding the use of images). It is a good idea to make their parents aware of the social media that your church uses and ensure that you have their consent to their child's usage (depending on the age of the child – older children can consent in their own right).

**4.5. Mobile Devices.** If a church employee is required to use a mobile telephone in the course of their work, then as far as is practicable they should be supplied with a phone dedicated for work purposes. This may also be the case for certain volunteers, such as youth group leaders. This allows for the phone to be switched off outside 'working hours', and for usage to be accountable. This means that the church officer's personal number can remain private. Texts or conversations that raise concerns should be saved and passed on to the local nominated safeguarding officer. If a church employee is provided with a 'work mobile', they should be required to sign to say that they will use it only in accordance with the guidance in this document.