



DIOCESE OF DOWN & CONNOR



Addendum 4:

Guidance for text and email messaging

BEST PRACTICE IN SAFEGUARDING AND
PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
AND THE ADULTS WHO WORK WITH THEM

GUIDANCE FOR TEXT AND EMAIL MESSAGING

Introduction

Text messaging and email are very common and useful methods of communication that have many benefits: they are cheap, quick and direct forms of communication and most people including young people have ready access to mobile phones and computers and are very familiar with their use. At the same time they do carry risks and consequently the Diocese has produced these guidelines to assist staff and volunteers working in parishes to ensure that effective safeguarding measures are in place to protect children and young people and to minimise risk. Implementation of these guidelines will also minimise risk to staff and reduce their exposure to possible allegations and ensure that staff can demonstrate adherence to good practice.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for 44th World Communications Day, chose as his theme: *The priest and pastoral ministry in a digital world: new media at the service of the Word.*

He states, “Using new communication technologies, priests can introduce people to the life of the Church and help our contemporaries to discover the face of Christ. They will best achieve this aim if they learn, from the time of their formation, how to use these technologies in a competent and appropriate way...” (CiNews, 27/01/10)

Text messaging: benefits and risks

The benefit of text messaging is that it is one of the most direct forms of communication as most young people have mobile phones with them at all times.

For children and young people the safeguarding risks associated with texting include:

- inappropriate access to, use or sharing of personal details (e.g. names, mobile phone numbers)
- unwanted contact with children/young people by adults with poor intent; text bullying by peers
- being sent offensive or otherwise inappropriate materials
- grooming for sexual abuse
- direct contact and actual abuse

For adults involved risks include:

- misinterpretation of their communication with young people
- potential investigation (internal or by statutory agencies)
- potential disciplinary action

Guidelines for using Bulk (or Bundled) Text Messaging

The advantage of using bulk (or bundled) texts, i.e. the same text message being sent to several young people involved with a particular activity or programme, is that it presents fewer opportunities for misuse and abuse than personal, one to-one texting arrangements between volunteers and children. On that basis one-to-one texting should be strongly discouraged and only occur in exceptional circumstances. The following guidelines should be followed by all groups in parishes involved in providing activities for young people.

1. Only staff/ volunteers that have been through relevant safeguarding checks (e.g. enhanced level Access NI checks and references) should use and have access to the text messaging system. These staff/ volunteers should also have attended the Parish Information session / Safeguarding Children training.
2. The numbers of staff/ volunteers with access to the system, particularly data relating to young people, should be kept to a practical minimum, and their details recorded and maintained by the group's leader or someone in a Line manager role. A record should be made of the mobile phone number/s which will be used to send the texts – ideally this should be a single number used consistently.
3. Consent must be obtained prior to sending the young people text messages. For young people aged 15 or under, specific consent must be obtained from their parents via the group specific parental consent form or a similar, amended form. Parents of younger children should be offered the option to be copied into any texts their child will be sent. Although parental consent is not required for young people aged 16 and over, written consent must be obtained from these individuals themselves. Please note that for young people over 16's (who are children as defined by the Children(NI) Order 1995) it is still recommended that their parents are also informed of the intention to send their children text messages, the reason for this, and that the Diocese/ parish has taken steps to ensure their child's safety in this respect.
4. The young people's mobile phone numbers should be stored in either a locked secure cabinet, or on an electronic system which is password protected, with access only available to the staff/ volunteer identified in point 1 above. The mobile phone numbers should not be shared with anyone else, and should only be used for the purposes of the text messaging system regarding the parish activity.
5. All text messages must be sent via a bundle to a group of young people i.e. the same standard text message being sent to every member of the group. The text messaging system should never be used to send text messages on an individual basis (i.e. to just one person), or to less than 5 people.

6. All text messages sent, must make it clear to the young people receiving it, who has sent the message, rather than simply giving the mobile phone number that the system uses to send the message.
7. Young people should not be given the opportunity to text back to the system. It should only be used as a one-way communication channel.
8. The text messages which are sent must never contain any offensive, abusive or inappropriate language.
9. When this guidance is being provided in relation to diocesan/parish related activities, all of the text messages sent must be directly related to diocesan/parish related activities. The text messaging system and mobile phone numbers must never be used for any other reason or in any other way.
10. All of the text messages sent should include a sentence at the bottom which provides the young people with the opportunity to unsubscribe from receiving any further text messages
11. Consideration will be given to initiating the Diocese's child protection and disciplinary procedures should any breaches of this protocol arise, including consultation with or referral to statutory agencies if indications of illegal activity (e.g. grooming for abuse) come to light.

Guidelines for use of email

Many Diocesan and parish groups may utilise emails to help to improve and promote the success of their activity, by helping to remind young people about the activity sessions that they have signed up to, and to promote additional activities. The use of email may attract more young people to parish based activities and improve the session retention rates. It may also be useful in effectively signposting the young people to other diocesan/ parish related events.

For children and young people the safeguarding risks associated with email include: inappropriate access to, use or sharing of personal details (e.g. names, email addresses) ;inappropriate material; online bullying by peers; direct contact and abuse

For adults involved risks include: misinterpretation of their communication with young people; potential investigation (internal or by statutory agencies); potential disciplinary action

All Diocesan/ parish bodies and groups should follow the guidelines below when using emails to communicate with young people. The guidelines are based on the principle that the same email is sent to several young people involved with a particular activity or programme as this presents fewer opportunities for misuse and abuse than personal, one-to-one email arrangements between staff/volunteers and children.

Email Guidelines

1. Only staff / volunteers that have been through relevant safeguarding checks (e.g. enhanced Level Access NI checks and references) should use and have access to the email messaging system. These staff / volunteers should also have attended the Parish Information Session.
2. The numbers of staff / volunteers with access to the system, particularly data relating to young people, should be kept to a practical minimum, and their details recorded and maintained by the group's leader or someone in a Line manager role. A record should be made of the staff / volunteer responsible for sending out the emails, and of the computer which will be used – ideally this should be a single, secure, organisational (rather than a private) computer used consistently.
3. The young people's details should be stored in either a locked secure cabinet, or on an electronic system which is password protected, with access only available to the staff / volunteer identified in point 1 above. The names and email addresses **should not** be shared with anyone else, and should only be used for the purposes of the communication system as related to the activity.
4. Consent must be obtained prior to sending the young people email messages. For young people aged 15 or under specific consent must be obtained from their parents, e.g. via the parish group specific form. Parents of all children should be offered the option to be copied into any messages their child will be sent. Although parental consent is not required for young people aged 16 and over, written consent must be obtained from these individual young people themselves. Please note that for the over 16's it is still recommended that their parents are also informed of the intention to send their children emails, the reason for this, and what steps the Diocese/ parish has taken to ensure their child's safety in this respect.
5. All emails must be sent to a group of young people i.e. the same standard email message being sent to every member of the group. The email messaging system should never be used to send messages on an individual basis (i.e. to just one person), or to fewer than 5 people.
6. All emails sent must make it clear to the young people receiving it, who has sent the message, rather than simply giving the issuing email address or name of an individual.
7. Young people should not be encouraged or given the opportunity to email back to the system. It should only be used as a one-way communication channel.
8. The emails must never contain any offensive, abusive or inappropriate language.

9. All of the emails should include a sentence at the bottom which provides the young people with the opportunity to unsubscribe from receiving any further messages, and signpost to how any concerns arising can be reported.

Consideration will be given to initiating the Diocese's child protection and disciplinary procedures should any breaches of this protocol arise, including consultation with or referral to statutory agencies if indications of illegal activity (e.g. grooming for abuse) come to light.

Diocese of Down and Connor Safeguarding Office January 2012

This policy and guidance is in keeping with Standard 3- Preventing harm to children, *Standards and Guidance Document for the Catholic Church in Ireland (Jan 2009)*