



Safe Communication Online with Children and Young People Factsheet

During the COVID-19 pandemic, with the absence of normal face to face activities, organisations are having to look at alternative ways of communicating with the children and young people, including online. Organisations are using lots of different methods to stay connected such as text messaging, email and video calls. However, communication via these means brings safeguarding challenges that must be managed.

Here are some guidelines to help staff and volunteers communicate safely with children and young people online:

Risk assessment – Organisations must consider the most appropriate method of communication, and assess the risks involved. Measures must be put in place to reduce any risks identified.

Seek approval from your organisation – The communication must be approved by the organisation itself; no staff member or volunteer should contact a child or young person without prior approval from their Line Manager/Volunteer Coordinator.

Use your work account – Staff/volunteers should use their work account/number for any communication and not their personal ones. Work devices should also be used where possible.

Obtain parental consent - Communication with children and young people, including online must only take place with prior written consent from their parents/carers. Some organisations ask for consent from the young person themselves if they are 16 years+. It is recommended parents should give consent alongside the child/young person in these circumstances.

Make sure parents/carers are fully informed – Send an email to parents/carers which explains what method of communication you intend to use, the purpose of the contact, who will be involved, and practical things such as a date and time. Their reply could incorporate their consent.

Consider communicating in groups – Organisations can get creative about how they communicate! Link up with a colleague and try an activity with a group of children and young people, rather than one to one interaction.



Use the parents/carers email address or telephone number to send the invite to. They can oversee the call.

Set boundaries - Remind parents/carers about choosing an appropriate space in their home for the call to take place, again preferably where they can oversee it. Appropriate dress is another issue to consider and keep it professional – everyone should remember the purpose of the call. Where there is a group of children and young people involved remind them that the normal ground rules apply e.g. listening to leaders, being respectful, not using bad language. Where live streaming is involved, children and young people need to know that any comments they make will be seen by others and it is unlikely they will be able to delete them. These boundaries/guidelines should be issued in advance of the session and participants should be reminded of them at the beginning of the session.

Adhere to your organisation's Safeguarding Policy: Your Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy still applies. Staff and volunteers should adhere to the guidelines in their Code of Behaviour and follow agreed reporting procedures if they have any concerns or where a disclosure is made.

Avoid the use of social media platforms – these can share a lot of data. Some organisations are using apps such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams as less information is required to access them. Each of these platforms has their own privacy policy. Staff should familiarise themselves with these and make parents/carers aware of them.

Familiarise yourself with the platform settings

- Set up the online session with a meeting ID and passcode to be issued to participants.
- When setting up the session on your platform, set video cameras on/off accordingly. If cameras need to be turned on, consider the use of virtual backgrounds so that participants can keep their environment private.
- Use the waiting room function. Don't allow participants to join the session before the host and only admit those registered.
- Consider the screen share settings – Who has permission to share their screen? What can/can't they share? When can they share it?
- Think about the sound settings – if needs be mute people on entry, before you run through the boundaries and ask that microphones are muted by participants when they aren't speaking.
- Consider the chat settings – who has access to information shared via chat? If needs be set the chat function to be viewed by the host only.
- Familiarise yourself with the function for removing participants.
- Report users through the platform if they have acted inappropriately.

KEEPING
SAFE



With children and young people spending more time online organisations, parents and carers can use this opportunity to educate them on how to stay safe. They can also encourage children and young people to model responsible behaviour themselves when they are online.

Further standards and guidance on Keeping Children Safe can be found [here](#). Volunteer Now also have an [E-safety Factsheet](#) and a [Keeping Children and Young People Safe from Online Sexual Abuse Factsheet](#).

Parents and carers can also access the award-winning Safer Schools App provided by The Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), in partnership with the INEQE Safeguarding Group. This supports all school staff, parents and carers to keep children in their care safer online. It can be accessed [here](#).

Visit our [safeguarding page](#) and find out about training available.

Further guidance around volunteering during the COVID-19 crisis can be found [here](#).