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Archdiocese of Los Angeles - Our Lady of the Angels Region

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### Protecting God's Children for Adults



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### Social Media Rules to Follow with Children

By [The VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Programs](#)

As an employee or a volunteer within your diocese or organization, there may be times where you need to



communicate via technology with children and youth within your ministry or program. This brings us to a question we frequently hear at the VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Programs: *Do we need to treat in-person interactions more carefully than electronic interactions?*

You will certainly hear a different answer to this question depending on whom you ask. When it comes to *transparency* and *monitoring* interactions—it's just as important to follow appropriate standards for electronic interactions as it is for in-person interactions. It's important to have transparency and monitoring in our actions as we follow appropriate standards in online environments—because they involve situations that are already inherently more isolated than face-to-face communication. In this way, our in-person interactions serve as our baseline approach, and we incorporate more checks and balances in environments involving technology. Technology such as social media, email, text and texting apps can be great tools that help us as we serve others in ministry, and they can be beneficial in expanding avenues of communication. However, like any tool, communication through technology must be used appropriately and safely, or it can cause significant harm.

Below are some general guidelines for safe adults in ministry, whether you are communicating with youth who are involved in

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your ministry, or who are simply associated with the ministerial environment. Reviewing these guidelines encourage us to engage with healthy boundaries, help us to be proactive with any type of technology, and help us to model appropriate online behavior for the children in our care.

## **DO NOT**

- Do not use your personal social media accounts to "Friend" or "follow" children in your ministry.
- Do not email from a personal email address.
- Do not create a ministry-specific account without your organization's permission.
- Do not "troll" any child or youth's personal social media accounts, comment on them, or try to obtain more information about the child based on what they post.
- Do not take or post photos or videos of youth upon any social media account, unless you have approval from the organization (such as for inclusion in a parish or school newsletter), signed, parental permission, and subsequent permission from the child himself/herself.
- Do not "chat" or "private message" or "text" children one-on-one.

## **DO**

- Read and follow the rules regarding social media usage from your parish, school, diocese or overarching organization. Speak with your organization if they do not have any policy or rules, or if the policy needs to be strengthened.
- Contact children and youth only utilizing social media platforms approved by your organization.
- Request that your organization create a ministry-specific email address that you can utilize to communicate with youth, instead of a personal one.
- Behave with transparency in all electronic interactions, which can mean copying a parent listserv to all interactions, or utilizing an app (approved by your diocese) to text youth so that the content is not coming from your own phone number nor your personal account.
- Keep your own social media profiles and pages tidy and clean; be aware of clothing, what is portrayed by the images you share or are tagged within, perceptions that you could lend to others, be mindful of removing images/jokes involving alcohol, etc. (This is simply a good practice in general, and most useful in case kids do come across your accounts).
- Set your personal accounts to "private" so it isn't as easy for children to "stumble" across your personal material. Your relationship with people in ministry is predicated upon your role, and not your personal life.
- Communicate with youth during appropriate timeframes—the same timeframes that you would generally call a "landline."
- Refer children to your office hours if they contact you "after hours." It helps to clearly state this in advance, that you are available between "xy" hours, and that messages will not receive responses until those office hours.
- Be "friendly" with minors in social media interactions, but avoid being a "peer" type of friend.

Additionally, if you receive a "friend" or "follow" request on a personal social media account from a child or youth, do not accept it. Instead, refer them to the parish, school or program social media account. If you are meeting with a child or youth via a video-based option (such as Zoom), take steps to keep it transparent, such as inviting another adult to participate in the meeting, or having yourself within the sight and hearing of other adults.

One of the most important ways to protect children and youth is to maintain an ongoing dialogue with them about healthy social media interactions. It is also helpful to familiarize yourself with current trends and popular apps, as youth may come to you (one of their safe adults) with questions. Sometimes children may come to you with a disclosure of abuse that happened to them in the past, or that is currently happening—or perhaps is about to happen. We always believe children when this occurs and report it to the appropriate entity. To report any disclosed or suspected sexual exploitation of a child or youth, call the [child protective services](#)<sup>1</sup> within the state. If a child is experiencing abuse via social media or other electronic means, you can help them to make a report to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's [CyberTipline](#)<sup>2</sup> or make a report on their behalf. You can also contact law enforcement.

### **Conclusion**

Social media can be a wonderful tool that can enhance communication within a parish, school or other program—as long as it's used appropriately and in a way that promotes healthy boundaries. If you have any questions about your organization's social media policy, please reach out to them directly for more information.

### **Available Resources**

For additional information on technology safety, please visit:

- NetSmartz  
<https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/resources>
- Common Sense Media  
<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/social-media>
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children  
<https://missingkids.org/home>

### **References**

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse\\_Reporting.cfm](https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.missingkids.org/cybertipline>

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### **1) Which of the following is an action that safe adults SHOULD take when interacting with children and youth in their programs on social media?**

- A)  Read the rules regarding social media usage from your parish, school, diocese or overarching organization, and only follow the rules with which you agree.

- B)  Contact children and youth only utilizing social media platforms approved by your organization.
  - C)  Behave with transparency in every live setting and interaction with children and youth, but don't worry about interactions involving online settings.
  - D)  Stay away from social media at all costs and never contact any children or youth using social media.
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