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Protecting God's Children for Adults

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“Friending” Students On Social Media

By [Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D.](#)

Many educators have embraced technology and are constantly using it in new ways to encourage and improve learning, inside the classroom and beyond. One question that persists, however, is whether it is appropriate for educators, coaches, youth ministers and youth advocates (referred to as youth-serving adults) to connect with youth through social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Much value would come from youth-serving adults interacting online in a professional/educational manner with youth while establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries. Nevertheless, there are important considerations to keep in mind for youth-serving adults wanting to connect with students online.



Potential Pitfalls

The most serious potential risk involves adults failing to maintain proper boundaries, or youth misperceiving the online attention they receive as something more than educational and platonic. Of course, these concerns are also present in off-line communications between adults and youth as well (both in and outside of school/parish activities). That being said, youth-serving adults should refrain from “friending” students on social networking profiles they use for personal purposes (e.g., connected with the adult’s own adult friends and loved ones). Clearly distinguishing between their work and personal lives is crucial, particularly since youth-serving adults within ministry or educational settings are to consistently model attitudes and behaviors that reflect character, integrity and maturity—and some of the content they have on their personal profiles may undermine the image they should be projecting when viewed and interpreted by teens.

Another concern raised is that online communication environments can make it too easy to move from discussing school assignments to asking more “personal” (even if innocent) questions, sharing private world views or engaging in candid self-disclosure. Anonymity and geographical distance while online, coupled with feelings of loneliness and the desire to connect



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Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. is a Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida Atlantic University and resides within the Diocese of Palm Beach. He co-directs the Cyberbullying Research Center (www.cyberbullying.us) and frequently holds workshops around the country presenting to educators, parents, and youth on identifying, preventing, and responding to cyberbullying, sexting, and unsafe social networking. He works with the U.S. Department of

with someone through cyber communication, make inappropriate messages between youth-serving adults and adolescents a very real possibility. This is especially problematic since there is little or no oversight by others to monitor the activity within that adult's "personal" social media account.

There have also been cases where adults have used technology to connect with youth for the purpose of fostering improper relationships. The responsibility to maintain proper boundaries is always that of the adult. Apart from the devastating consequences that could result with the child, adults who abuse these technologies may lose their job and/or any professional licenses and be subject to criminal prosecution.

Added Responsibility

Another issue of which to be aware is that youth-serving adults who connect with youth online often have an obligation to intervene if they see inappropriate content or evidence of a violation of school/parish policy or the law on the young person's profile. For example, if there is discussion of illegal activity and/or potential harm, the youth-serving adult has a duty to respond. Imagine the serious consequences that could come from an adult who does not take action if someone were seriously injured or killed as a result of the online communication. By choosing to interact with students online, youth-serving adults, or any adult for that matter, must respond to any illicit behavior or information that may put youth in harm's way.

Legislative and Policy Considerations

Over the last few years, some states have waded into this discussion by proposing or passing laws that specifically restrict educators from communicating with students online. Apart from state laws, some schools are enacting policies that forbid teachers from interacting with their students via social networking websites. For all environments, we must remember that it is not necessarily the method of communication that needs to be prohibited but the nature and content of that communication. Prohibiting teachers from interacting with their students online is akin to saying that they should not be allowed to talk to students they see in the mall or elsewhere in the community.

Terri Miller, the president of the group Stop Educator Sexual Abuse, Misconduct, and Exploitation argued during Education Week back in 2009 that "policymakers should not enact reactionary legislation regarding contact between teachers and students. What they really need to focus on is training in proper boundaries." Youth-serving organizations should have their own policies that outline the nature of youth/adult interactions online, and adults must be aware of these policies.

Recommendations

There are many youth-serving adults who utilize social networking sites in a positive way to interact with their youth. They create invite-only groups to constructively comment on peers' photos, videos, or other digital creations. They create websites for historical and literary figures and encourage students to post relevant and compelling status updates as if they were that person. And they connect with students through Facebook and Twitter to remind them of upcoming events, exams and deadlines. Creating Facebook Fan Pages (as opposed to personal profile pages), allows youth-serving adults to post information for students to view (event updates, interesting videos, changes in schedules, etc.), without opening up broader access to the content of the student's or adult's personal profiles.

As mentioned earlier, interacting via technology allows for personal thoughts, emotional content and private feelings to be shared more readily than in person. It also allows for one-on-one conversation outside of the purview of others, removing accountability and perhaps increasing notions of undetectability. The vast majority of youth-serving adults will not abuse this—but some will. Instead of prohibiting youth-serving adults from utilizing all available tools to educate their youth and promote their healthy development, focus should be placed on informing both students and staff about appropriate boundaries and keeping the discussion/interaction professional, with proper oversight.

Education and many state departments of education to improve their policies and programming related to the prevention and response of teen technology misuse. Dr. Hinduja is a member of the Research Advisory Board for Harvard University's Internet Safety Task Force.

Dr. Hinduja's co-authored book "[Bullying beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying](#)" was named *Educator Book of the Year* by ForeWord reviews. An additional book for educators was published in April 2012, "[School Climate 2.0: Preventing Cyberbullying and Sexting One Classroom at a Time](#)." His latest co-authored book "[Words Wound: Delete Cyberbullying and Make Kindness Go Viral](#)" came out in December 2013. His interdisciplinary research is widely published in a number of peer-reviewed academic journals, and has been featured on numerous local, state, national, and international media programs, including: CNN's "Anderson Cooper 360," NPR's "All Things Considered," BBC, and The New York Times. He has also been interviewed and cited by hundreds of online and print media outlets.

Dr. Hinduja received his Ph.D. and M.S. in Criminal Justice from Michigan State University (focus area: cybercrime) and his B.S. in Criminal Justice (minor in legal studies) from the University of Central Florida Honors College. At FAU, Dr. Hinduja has won both

Conclusion

Teachers, school staff, coaches, youth ministers and all other youth-serving adults must continually exercise extreme care when communicating online with students.

All adults need to recognize that social media is the manner in which youth communicate these days. They do not pick up the phone and call, nor do they typically email. They text and they message using Facebook. They Instagram and increasingly Tweet. If adults want to effectively communicate with kids, they are going to have to adopt some of these technologies in a prudent, professional way. It can open up lines of communication that were previously unavailable.

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1) Please select one of the following answers to explain why youth-serving adults should refrain from becoming online “friends” with youth via the adult’s personal social networking account.

- A) The content on the youth-serving adult’s personal page may reflect negatively upon the adult’s character.
- B) Ministry/School-related conversations can very quickly move to a more personal nature that may eventually become inappropriate, with no accountability or supervision from other adults.
- C) It places greater responsibility on the youth-serving adult to provide a formal report if the adult sees unethical or illegal behavior on the child’s profile.
- D) All of the above.

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