Creating safer places online

Guidance for communicating and working safely with young people online.

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An opportunity to innovate

Digital technologies present a huge range of opportunities for innovation. Even when we're not able to physically meet with young people in groups or as individuals, the Internet enables us to connect in a range of ways.

Young people who find it difficult to meet and talk in person can often feel much more comfortable communicating behind the 'safety' of a screen. Connecting through a smartphone or computer opens up huge potential for a different kind of outreach, where we can invite young people to view and even participate in activities without ever having to cross the threshold of a church or other physical meeting space.

Online youth work can take many forms, but these might typically include:

- Meeting as a group through an online video chat platform
- Connecting with individuals and groups through messaging software
- Broadcasting activities or video on social platforms
- A video call with a young person and two approved youth workers

Each of these methods can provide a great opportunity for youth work which otherwise might not happen, or even for an enhanced experience of what is possible. But all come with risks, which we need to understand and plan for.

What are the risks?

It's important to remember that communicating with young people one to one online, whether via messaging or video, is the equivalent of meeting that young person in a room on your own with no one around.

Communicating with groups and holding virtual gatherings via online platforms also presents challenges that should be considered before giving access to your virtual environment to those who you may not know.

It is also always important to remember that some people do not have access to reliable technology. So when we plan activities that might only be accessible online, we should consider who might inadvertently be left out or isolated by this method.

Some risks that should be kept in mind include:

- The opportunity for grooming/sexual exploitation
- Sharing of personal contact details of young people and youth workers
- Inappropriate conversations between young people and workers
- Potential allegations against workers
- Use of apps with minimum age restrictions
- The facilitation of abusive or unkind behaviour (cyber-bullying) between young people
- Particular risks associated with children in care or those known to children's services

Good practice tips

As with working one to one with young people in person, there are some ways in which we can still enable safe, innovative work to take place:

Code of conduct

Where you have a Code of Conduct for your groups, translate those into what they would look like when participating in online groups or interactions, for example respectful modes of behaviour and speech, appropriate physical presentation such as clothing, venue, environment and timings.

Supervision

As in normal circumstances, unless unavoidable, contact with young people should take place with appropriately vetted and checked workers present and not by any single worker on their own.

Record keeping

Ensure a written record is kept of all one to one video calls held and the content covered in each call. If having assessed the risks of any situation, you believe there is a compelling need to record these calls in place of the usual safer working arrangements, ensure that permission has been sought from the young person (and where necessary, their parent/carer) and the recording is stored securely in line with your usual safeguarding protocols. Where children or young people are either in local authority care or have child protection or children in need plans, additional consents from social workers must be obtained prior to participation in such activities.

Profiles and devices

Avoid using personal accounts to enable video chats. Use organisational profiles and devices wherever available.

Group calls

To minimise risk, always consider if a group communication can be achieved rather than one to one. Where a one to one video call is required it's good practice to have an additional colleague in the room with the worker and (dependent on the young person's age) also better to ask if a parent can be home at the same time. Recordings of group calls should not be made unless there's a compelling reason to do so.

Call set-up and admin

Ensure the call organiser has the ability to mute/block participants in the event they are displaying/sharing anything unsuitable or illegal.

Age appropriate apps

Respect the minimum age requirements for video chat enabled platforms and consider a minimum age limit for any one to one chat. Do not invite young people to register for apps, software or platforms which are not age-appropriate for them.

Reporting mechanisms

As with online chat groups, having a link to the Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre (CEOP) or agencies such as Childline, NSPCC etc. ensures that young people can report anything they are concerned about in regards the behaviour of a worker toward them. You should also ensure that parents are aware of who your Safeguarding Coordinator is in order to discuss any concerns.

Regular review

Ensure you periodically review these arrangements to identify any poor practice or any challenges to positive and safe engagement.

Additional sources of support:

Kidscape is a national charity providing a wide range of resources and support for those working with young people.

YoungMinds is a national charity supporting the mental health of young people.

ChildNet International is a non-profit organisation working to help make the internet a safe place for children.

Click CEOP is a resource for children and young people worried about online abuse to report concerns.

ChildLine is the national helpline for children and young people to talk about concerns (part of the NSPCC).

Making a connection

Here's some guidance when thinking about some of the most common forms of online connection with young people:

Video calls with individuals

Best practice would be to include two approved workers on a call with an individual young person. If you're planning to record the call, make sure you have parental consent for this in writing, and are able to store the recording securely (password protected). You should not need to record a call with a young person where two approved adult leaders are present.

Video calls with groups

Always ensure you have an appropriate number of approved workers on a group chat, in line with your policy for off-line work. Use an organisational account, rather than a personal account for all calls. Recordings of group calls should not be made unless there is a compelling reason to do so. Wherever possible you should look to password-protect video calls, in order to prevent uninvited people trying to join.

Interactive online broadcasting

Make sure that names and personal details of young people are never shared publicly, e.g. through a live chat function. If you are making your video available publicly, do not share any specific information about young people in what you say. Use an account which is accessible to several members of the team, in case private messages are received. Online broadcasts should not be recorded or stored.

Use of messaging software

Always adhere to your church's safeguarding policy on use of social media and messaging apps. Consider age restrictions for social media apps. Ensure that no communication takes place privately, and that two approved workers are always involved with any messaging correspondence with a young person.

A note about policy

If your organisation works with young people you should already have a safeguarding policy which your leadership are accountable for implementing.

Having a well thought-through safeguarding policy demonstrates that you take the protection of young people seriously. Your policy should be a working document that is continually reviewed and updated as your work develops.

As you establish new ways of communicating and working with young people online you will need to ensure that this is covered in your policy. Many organisations will create a separate policy specifically for issues related to online safety.

Online safety policy

Although this document provides guidance on communicating and working with young people safely online, it is not a policy. An online safety policy should include:

- Expected ways of communicating with young people online
- Which online platforms have been agreed for use by your organisation
- Consent and permissions (what level is needed for what and by whom)
- Codes of conduct / acceptable use
- How to respond to concerns

You can download the thirtyone:eight online safety policy template from our website which can be adapted to your own setting: thirtyoneeight.org/online-policy

The work your organisation does with young people doesn't operate in isolation from any other activities you may run. Here's five questions to help you think through how your online activity fits with the bigger picture:

1 Does your organisation have a safeguarding policy and appropriate forms?

2 Does everyone know what to do if there's concerns about possible abuse?

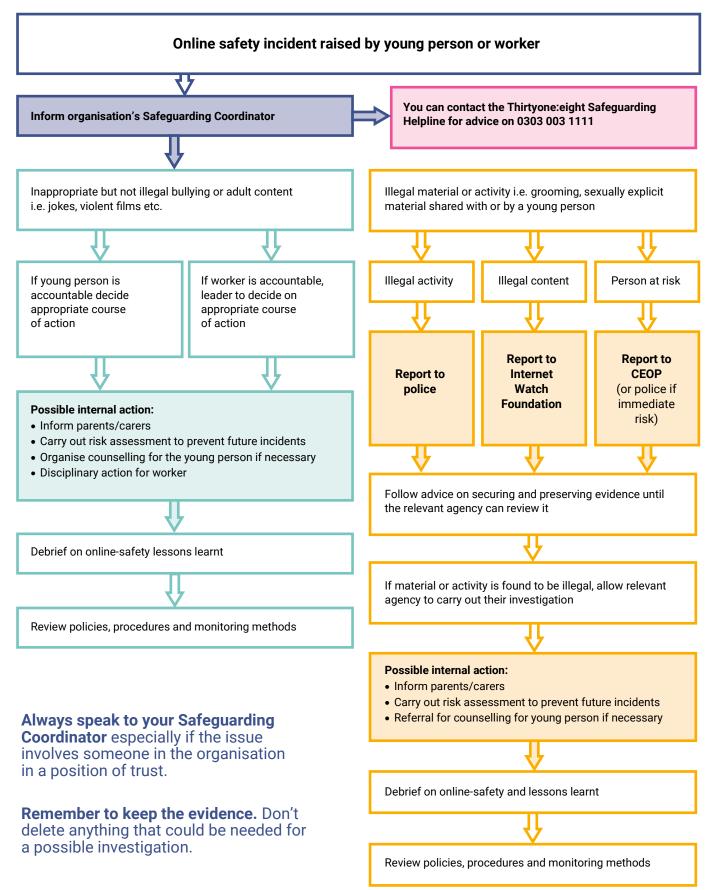3 Are you recruiting workers safely including DBS checks where possible?

4 Are you training and supporting your leaders and youth workers?

5 Do those who attend or connect with your activities and services know what you are doing to keep people safe?

Responding to online concerns

If you or the young people you're working with have any concerns it's important you raise these appropriately. Speak to your organisation's Safeguarding Coordinator to find out what the process is for your organisation. Below is our suggested flowchart for responding:

Online safety incident raised by young person or worker

Inform organisation's Safeguarding Coordinator

You can contact the Thirtyone:eight Safeguarding Helpline for advice on 0303 003 1111

Inappropriate but not illegal bullying or adult content i.e. jokes, violent films etc.

Illegal material or activity i.e. grooming, sexually explicit material shared with or by a young person

If young person is accountable decide appropriate course of action

If worker is accountable, leader to decide on appropriate course of action

Illegal activity

Illegal content

Person at risk

Report to police

Report to Internet Watch Foundation

Report to CEOP (or police if immediate risk)

Possible internal action:
- Inform parents/carers
- Carry out risk assessment to prevent future incidents
- Organise counselling for the young person if necessary
- Disciplinary action for worker

Follow advice on securing and preserving evidence until the relevant agency can review it

Debrief on online-safety lessons learnt

If material or activity is found to be illegal, allow relevant agency to carry out their investigation

Review policies, procedures and monitoring methods

Possible internal action:
- Inform parents/carers
- Carry out risk assessment to prevent future incidents
- Referral for counselling for young person if necessary

Always speak to your Safeguarding Coordinator especially if the issue involves someone in the organisation in a position of trust.

Remember to keep the evidence. Don't delete anything that could be needed for a possible investigation.

Debrief on online-safety and lessons learnt

Review policies, procedures and monitoring methods

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Call us	0303 003 1111
email us	info@thirtyoneeight.org
or visit	thirtyoneeight.org
follow us	@thirtyoneeight

PO Box 133, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7UQ

Youthscape

Call us	01582 877 220
email us	hello@youthscape.co.uk
or visit	youthscape.co.uk
follow us	@youthscape

Bute Mills, 74 Bute Street, Luton, LU1 2EY