

Brentwood Catholic Youth Service

Safe use of the Internet and Mobile Phone –

Advice for volunteer leaders working with 14-18 year olds in the BCYS

This advice is offered in conjunction with the BCYS Child Protection policy.

Introduction

Social Networking sites (Facebook, Bebo) and other Internet forums for sharing personal information (YouTube, Flickr) can be a massive benefit in Youth Ministry as they allow ease and speed of communication across wide groups of young people and young adults. Events can be easily publicised, opinions sought and photographs shared. It is easier than ever before for young people who attend events and who live far from each other to keep in touch, and continue friendships begun in Lourdes, Youth Gather, etc.

The ease and generally open nature of these communications can give a slightly false sense of security, particularly for young adult leaders who are very familiar with a range of networking sites. The reason for this advice sheet is that there are, in fact, some potentially very serious problems with safeguarding (child protection). The advice given here is intended to make sure that no leader inadvertently gets into a situation where they, a young person, or the BCYS is compromised by the way that they have used the Internet or a mobile phone. This advice has to be taken seriously: failure to follow it could have consequences not only in the present but which could last well into the future, and affect employment.

The risks when it goes wrong

The first risk is an **emotional dependency**. In a small group in Lourdes, etc., it is likely that a young person will have a powerful experience. That is wonderful, and as it should be: they see their faith in new ways, they make new friends, they discover new gifts in themselves. If you have been their small group leader in that experience, then they will view you in a particular way – in some ways, they may idolise you. When you come back from Lourdes they may seek you out on networking sites; they may ask for your phone number. They will do this in all innocence – and you will want to respond generously. There are ways you can keep in touch with them – they are given in the next section – but in considering these, consider the risk that a week or two after Lourdes they will be missing what they had there, and may be relying on you to try to re-create that for them. If you have given your phone number, you may be overwhelmed with calls and texts at many hours of the day and night. If you have given your personal email, then you may receive lots of messages which others cannot monitor.

The second risk is **your personal credibility**. If you are at university, you may want to post photos from freshers' week or various parties. That is fine for your group of friends to see, but is it really fine for the fifteen year olds' in your small group? If you are a little older and especially if you are working with young people, perhaps as a teacher, what would your employer think if they saw you were facebook friends with a number of people aged 15 or 16? Incidentally – one note about photos posted on Facebook. It is within the site terms and conditions that Facebook retain a copy of those photos – even if you take them down, or close your account – and can publish them as they see fit.

The third risk is **the credibility of the BCYS**. Parents – who may not be very familiar with the idea of social networking – may well not be very comfortable with their son/daughter being “friends” with a youth leader they have never met. They may be even less comfortable if they see photos of you at freshers’ week, etc. This could have serious implications for the credibility of the Youth Service. We trust that you are a leader with us because you value what the BCYS is and does: please, please be aware of how your social networking can affect us.

All of these risks can come into play in situations where you have done nothing wrong, or illegal, but where you have been a little careless. What follows is a set of advice about how you can keep young people, yourself and the BCYS safe online, to avoid the risks we have just mentioned.

What do I do if a young person contacts me and wants to keep in touch, but I do not think it is right for me to “Friend” them based on the advice in these pages?

For all the reasons given above, it will almost certainly NOT be right to friend young people in school year 10 or 11 unless they are well known to you as family members. It may well not be right to friend young people in school year 12 or 13 either – remember they are still “children” in the eyes of the law, and remember that they may have vulnerabilities you are not aware of.

SO, DIRECT THEM TO THE FAN PAGES! There is a Brentwood Catholic Youth Service fan page, and one for Walsingham House. They can write on the wall, and so can you, and everyone can see it. It is also an easy way for them to receive updates about future events.

Keeping yourself, young people and the BCYS safe online

This advice refers to communication between leaders (aged 18+ and no longer at school) and young people (aged up to 18 or 18 and still at school). The advice relating to young people also applies to any contact with vulnerable adults (for example, special needs groups)

- The first key factor is **the context in which a leader has met a young person**. If you are friends prior to a trip, because you are in the same parish or because you have mutual friends, then you may already be linked on a networking site. If the first time you meet a young person is as their small group leader, or as a BCYS leader, then you need to be more aware of how contact with them will be perceived. Remember that they – and you – will have the “post Lourdes high” and don’t rush into contact with someone who would not normally be part of your social networking group.
- **Transparency**. Imagine a social networking site is like a crowded party. Most of it is visible to a lot of people, and easily witnessed. But there are some hidden corners. Just as when in physical contact with young people, you need to be visible and transparent, so too on the Internet. This means: do not (except in case of emergency) give your mobile phone number to a young person (and if you do have to do this, tell the BCYS staff member who is organising the event / trip). Do not give your personal email to a young person. If you do network with a young person, use the “wall to wall” or equivalent feature for messaging, rather than personal messaging. Keep it open, where everyone can see it.

- **Use the privacy settings.** Most networking sites allow you to control what others see. Learn how these features work, and use them. That way, you can share an (appropriately) different level of privacy with a young person than with one of your closest friends from uni or work.
- **Be aware of the policy about photos / videos.** The BCYS policy here is to advise parents that we cannot guarantee where photos and videos taken on BCYS trips will be displayed. The simple reality is that so many people have digital cameras that photos from our trips / events will end up on the web. However, for some young people there may be an issue with the display of photos. If that were the case we would talk sensitively to the small group leader and young person, and would ask every leader to accept that on occasion we may ask you to remove a photo taken on one of our trips from your facebook page for pastoral reasons. We follow the same protocols on the BCYS website.
- **Don't proactively seek young people as friends** on networking sites. If you do, it could appear that you had the wrong sort of motives, and with safeguarding (child protection) people's perceptions of what you are doing matter. Also, it could look to other young people like favouritism; if you linked with some and not others it could seem to be exclusive. Just as in Lourdes you would try to treat each of your small group with similar friendliness, the same thing should apply once back at home. Let the young people who want to find you on a networking site do so, and then make a judgement about linking to them.
- **Don't use the "live chat" or equivalent feature.** This relates to transparency: again, just as if you were physically present to a young person, don't do anything where it would end up as their word against yours in terms of what was said or done – be transparent.

What do I do if I think another leader is not following this advice?

Please tell us. Just as if there was a situation where a young person was present and you felt uneasy, you would tell someone. The same thing applies on the Internet. It may be that they have not seriously considered the risks, or – and we pray this would never be the case – it may be that a leader is behaving inappropriately with a young person. In either case they are putting not only that young person and themselves at risk but – even if they are behaving carelessly rather than maliciously – their own reputation and employment prospects in serious jeopardy.

What do I do if I misunderstood the advice and now think I have done something that puts me or a young person at risk?

Please tell us. If you have not set privacy settings and a young person's parents have seen some inappropriate photos, or you have sent a message that was worded carelessly, or whatever it is, it is much better that you tell us than that we hear about it because a parent has contacted us (or the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer).

What do I do if a young person is very demanding in their requests for me to become their friend?

Please tell us. We will chat through the circumstances with you and together work out the best way to approach that young person so that they get the support they need without you feeling the need to give into their pressure / emotional needs.

In all matters, please do also refer to the Safeguarding (child protection) policy for the BCYS, as this will help in making sure both you (as a leader) and every young person has a safe and happy trip, with support and friendship in the best and most appropriate ways. Thank you for volunteering to be a leader in the BCYS.

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