

Introduction

We live in a free society, and communication (particularly electronic communication) between individuals, regardless of age is part of daily life. There are situations when access to a mobile phone will make a positive contribution to the safety and welfare of young people and workers, particularly when an emergency occurs. However there is evidence of the use of mobile phones and other electronic communication for grooming or other purposes by workers and others in positions of trust.

Good practice guidelines

Workers **MUST** only use work phones and computers to contact young people and should not give out their personal/private number(s) or email address to young people for any reason

Making and Receiving calls during sessions

Concerns have been raised about the use of mobile phones by workers during sessions, for the purposes of either making or receiving calls. One of the primary responsibilities of the worker must be the supervision and safety of the children or young people that they are supporting through the provision of a structured, quality experience. Anything which compromises the workers ability to maintain a safe environment and give their full attention to the supervision of young people is discouraged. Similarly sending and receiving text during a session is also discouraged for the same reason.

Use of text and email

A number of organisations have experienced cases where workers have misused text messaging and other forms of electronic communication. There have also been incidents of young people becoming very distressed as a result of bullying by workers using phone and text.

It is not considered good practice for workers to text or e mail individual children or young people. Workers need to be aware of the appropriateness of these means of communication and the need to maintain their professional boundaries..

Contacting children and young people by phone, text or e-mail should never be undertaken without parental knowledge or consent.

Additional communication relating to events and other information should be directed to the child or young person's parents or legal guardian if possible.

Group text should be used whenever possible. Communication should be limited to the exchange of information about programme.

Similarly workers should not be e-mailing children or young people directly as individuals, but may do so as part of a group list (having received permission) Again communication should be limited to information in relation to sessions or events. Group e-mails should also give individuals the opportunity to have their contact details removed from the list by including a statement such as: "If you wish to be removed from this e-mail list please contact the administrator".

Online Social Networking, Blogging and other internet tools.

Workers **should not** use chat room, messenger services or **share any personal web sites** e.g. Bebo, MySpace etc. to communicate with young people.

Should workers use a website for cataloguing/detailing/recording a projects' progress, workers should ensure that all measures are taken to protect the identity and privacy of the young people involved in the project, and not publish online any material about the young people without prior written consent of their parents/guardians.

Should workers decide to post information online about young people it is recommended that they use a web facility that controls access to the site/page, and limit that access to the workers, young people and/or parents' involved in the project. Should a child protection case arise as a result of posting this their information online the list of those responsible is narrowed to those who had access to the site. *It should be noted that this does not stop users from taking the information/images you post online, offline and using it for other purposes.*

Receiving bullying/threatening or inappropriate text or emails

Workers should not delete these. They should record the incidents and inform their line manager.

Camera and Video Phones

The use of phones for photography and video are subject to the policy on the use of photography and digital images. Parental consent is required. However it is NOT considered good practice for workers to use mobile phones for this purpose. It leaves workers open to accusation.

Guideline development.

This document provides initial guidelines to workers. Any worker can put forward ideas and thoughts to help develop these guidelines on safe practice. All comments should be forwarded to the Youth Officer for Child Protection. It should be recognised that these are, at present, guidelines for good practice. There will always be times when unforeseen issues or incidents arise.

Workers need to be aware of their responsibilities to protect themselves, the young people they work with and the organisation.

Any incident where a member of staff feels that his/her actions have been, or may be misconstrued, a written report of the incident must be submitted to the line manager as soon as possible.