

Diocese of San Diego

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS WITH MINORS POLICY

For the purpose of this policy “employees” refers to adults who receive compensation for a ministerial role in the Church. As we move forward with technology, it is important that all adults, specifically our employees, recognize their role in keeping young people safe. Young people are minors and a minor is defined as anyone below the age of 18 years. A person who habitually lacks the use of reason is considered equivalent to a minor. Our main methods of communication regarding church activities and events with minors will be through electronic media including emails, text/instant messages, cell phones and social media sites while maintaining proper guidelines.

The goal of the Electronic Communications with Minors Policy is to provide a safe environment for our children, to teach our children safe procedures when using electronic communication devices, and to protect the reputations of employees and the Catholic Church. To do this, guidelines and procedures must be established and implemented so that Church officials can be clear about what is proper communication between employees and the young people with whom they minister.

Whenever an employee is acting in their capacity as a “representative” of the Catholic Church, they shall abide by this electronic communication policy. Any violations of this policy and the regulations below are counter to the goals of creating a safe environment for our children and youth. Consequently, failure to observe this policy places people at risk and can result in disciplinary measures.

This policy applies to communication with all minors whom employees get to know in the context of the ministry of their church or organization. It is not intended to limit your ability to communicate with them but to allow the communication to maintain a professional character and organizational focus. It is imperative in keeping with our goal of creating and teaching a safe technological environment that our communications with minors stay within appropriate boundaries that maintain a professional ministry relationship.

Social Networking:

Social networking may be used to connect minors with Church ministry activities as specified below.

- If these sites are used to connect minors to church activities and ministries, ministry leaders must set up a separate site for dedicated parish use and the site name must reflect this. The leaders must also utilize the dedicated organizational email account to create the website/page. The ministry site must be completely separate from any personal site. Make sure to check on the terms of use, age restrictions and privacy options/controls for each site you plan to use prior to establishing a page for your organization and ensuring it is set up

securely and properly. Make sure that the “no tagging” option is set to ensure no one’s privacy is breached.

- Minimum of two adults in a functioning official organizational capacity should have full access to all organizational accounts/sites.
- Both adults should be registered to have email alerts of page activity sent to their official organizational email accounts.
- Parents should be informed that a social networking site is being utilized as a standard part of the ministry.
- All information displayed on the social networking sites must reflect the values of the Catholic faith and should always follow the teaching of the church.
- Employees are prohibited from communicating with minors using personal social networking unless it is from the organizational site and they are an administrator. This allows only the proper people to communicate exactly what is going on and eliminates any miscommunications for events/activities.
- Personal social networking profiles and blogs of employees must be private and inaccessible to minors. The intent of this policy is not to dictate what is on your personal site; however, minors should not be given access to your site. Employees with profiles on social networking sites may not request to be social networked “friends” with minors or approve “friend requests” from social media from minors. The minors should request to be friends of the organization. This allows us to maintain the appropriate boundaries and in keeping it a professional relationship.

Text Messaging

Text messaging is only to be used when communicating about a church or organizational activity. Messages of a personal nature are not to be sent to minors by Church employees. Do not encourage minors to use texting for communicating personal messages to you in your role as employee of the Church.

- Parents should be informed that text messaging is being used as a form of communication with the minors of your church/organization and that it is a standard part of the youth ministry.
- Text messages sent to minors must be copied to the Supervisor or his/her Church designee and/or parent.
- If an employee receives a text message of an inappropriate personal nature from a minor, the employee is prohibited from responding to the minor. In order to prevent any appearance of impropriety, the employee should notify his/her supervisor or pastor of this incident immediately and forward the text. The parent/guardian should be contacted by the supervisor or pastor.
- If an employee receives a text message from a minor indicating an emergency situation, the employee must immediately contact the pastor, supervisor, and/or parent/guardian.

E-Mailing

Where there is an organizational system, employees are prohibited from sending instant messages to minors and/or e-mailing minors using their personal e-mail accounts. All emails should only come through the designated organizational email account of the employee. This process maintains the appropriate boundaries and keeps the relationship professional.

- Parents should be informed that emails are being used as a form of communication with the minors of your church or organization and that these are standards of the youth ministry.
- Parents are to be copied on all emails
- If a minor attempts to communicate via the employee personal e-mail account, the employee shall respond to the youth with the instruction to use the organizational system or copy the parents in the message.

Best practices for emails and text messages:

- Whenever possible, use organizational email accounts and not personal accounts.
- Communications should always be professional and relevant to the current activity/need.
- Maintain professionalism and keep appropriate boundaries in all communications. Do not overstep the boundaries of adult/child relationships.
- Avoid communications that involve sexual overtones or photos of a sexual nature. Do not reply to any messages received from teens of this nature. Make and keep a copy of the inappropriate communication and notify your supervisor or pastor immediately.
- The acquisition, possession and distribution of child pornography is illegal and strictly prohibited in any context.
- Be aware that what you write will more than likely be read by others. It is easy to share and forward messages.
- Ask yourself if you would be embarrassed if a supervisor/pastor read your message. If the answer is yes, then don't send it.
- Never send messages when you are in a hurry or when emotions are involved.
- Remember that there is no such thing as a private email/instant message, social media post or text message.
- Flocknote is an app that conveniently enables parishes and schools to comply with the directives of this policy. Other apps that can be used in accordance to the policies are GroupMe, Instagram Group Messaging, Remind 101, and Whatsapp. The Office for Youth Ministry will maintain a current list of usable apps.
- Finally, emails can easily be misread or misunderstood. Always double check to see if anything could be "read" into what you have typed. If you think it can be misread, either retype it or don't send it.

Parish and School Ministry Websites

- One of the best ways to promote youth events and activities are through your parish or organizational websites. It is recommended that you create a secured youth or youth ministry page/website dedicated to their activities and calendar of events.
- It is critical that someone is dedicated to keeping these sites updated on a regular basis.
- All web content should consistently represent the views/teachings of the Catholic Church.
- No personal information or contact information regarding minors should be posted or available on public websites.
- Written permission from parents or guardians must be obtained prior to posting pictures or identifying information of minors on any website. Be sure when posting pictures of minors to only provide a first name if you are going to provide captions. The use of the media release waiver is strongly recommended.
- Moderators should make sure “comment boxes” or “feedback” sections, if available on the media, are properly moderated to prevent abuse and misuse of the media.

There are necessary best practices to follow when utilizing any website and the following practices should be consistently met for any/all Catholic parish or organizational websites in order to provide protection for church staff, minors and those who use the media:

- Minimum of two adults in a functioning official organizational capacity should have full access to all organizational accounts/sites.
- No inappropriate pictures/information of any parish or organizational staff/volunteers should appear on any page/site. This does include family pictures, social events, home phone numbers/addresses and personal emails accounts, etc.
- Your official logo or standard pictures/images should appear on the site to identify it as the organization’s official site and not a personal/individual site/account.
- An organizational email account (i.e. - youthministry@ourladyoflourdes.org) should be created to allow minors/visitors a means of communication to a specific department and not an individual. Organizational email accounts for leaders, administrators and volunteers (as needed) should be created for professional communication means.
- Any social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.) that are linked to your website/page should have the organizational email account associated with it and not a personal email account. This keeps a barrier between “someone” reaching out to the minor or the “organization” reaching out. This also allows a means to create/delete administrators for the website/page so when there are staff turnover, things still run smoothly and changes are properly made and maintained.
- Ensure that the “chat mode” is disabled on your church or organizational social website.