

Diocese of Jackson
Protection of Children
Electronic Communications Policy

Introduction:

For the purpose of this policy “employees/volunteers” refers to adults serving in a ministerial role working with minors. As such, all employees/volunteers are representatives of the Catholic Church. As we move forward with technology, it is important that all adults, specifically our employees and volunteers, recognize their role in keeping young people safe. 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 Communication 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/volunteers and the Catholic Church. To do this, guidelines and procedures must be established and implemented so that Church officials can appropriately monitor communication between employees/volunteers and the young people with whom they minister.

Whenever an employee/volunteer 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 young people and children at risk and can result in termination of employment or the volunteer status.

This policy is not intended to limit your ability to communicate with minors of your church or organization but to allow the communication to revolve

around a professional or organizational level. 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.

Church and 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.
- 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@ourladyofhope.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, MySpace, 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/volunteer turnover, things still run smoothly and changes are properly made and maintained.

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. This allows for quicker response time to urgent requests and helps to ensure all postings are appropriate. Also, with the potential of teen crises or time relevant information needed, it is vital that the page is frequently monitored by official organizational personnel.
- 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/volunteers are prohibited from communicating with minors using personal social networking unless it is from the organizational site and you 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/volunteers 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/volunteers 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.

- Parents are encouraged to set up a public email address that is used by the parent and the minor child as the account for church contact with the child and parent.
- Ensure that the “chat mode” is disabled on your church or organizational social website.
- In using the Message feature through social media, another adult such as parent, pastor, or LEM must be included in the message sent.

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 or volunteers. Do not encourage minors to use texting for communicating personal messages to you in your role as employee/volunteer 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.
- Parents are to be copied if they have made the request and provided a cell number.
- If an employee/volunteer receives a text message of an inappropriate personal nature from a minor, the employee/volunteer is prohibited from responding to the minor. In order to prevent any appearance of impropriety, the employee/volunteer 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/volunteer receives a text message from a minor indicating an emergency situation, the employee/volunteer must immediately contact the pastor, supervisor, and/or parent/guardian.

E-Mailing and Instant Messaging:

- Employees/volunteers are prohibited from sending instant messages to minors and/or e-mailing minors using their personal e-mail accounts. All emails/instant messages should only come through the designated organizational email account of the employee/volunteer. This process maintains the appropriate boundaries and keeps the relationship professional.
- Parents should be informed that emails and instant messaging 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/instant messages if they have made the request and provided a valid email account.
- If a minor attempts to communicate via the employee/volunteer personal e-mail account or by instant message, the employee/volunteer must notify his/her supervisor or pastor immediately.

The following are a few best practices to keep in mind when sending emails and instant/text messages:

- Always 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. 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.
- Be aware that what you write will more than likely be read by others. It is easy to share and forward messages.
- **There is no such thing as a private email/instant message, social media post or text message.**
- Ask yourself if you would be embarrassed if a supervisor/pastor read your message. If the answer is yes, then don't send it.
- 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.
- Never send messages when you are in a hurry or when emotions are involved.