

Policy for Communications with Minors
Via Social Media
And Other Electronic Communications

Diocese of Paterson

REVISED EDITION

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Scope

All who serve the mission of the Catholic Church within the ministries of the Diocese of Paterson must comply with this "Policy for Communication with Minors via Social Media and Other Electronic Communication" and with the "Living and Working with Integrity, Code of Pastoral Conduct" issued by the Diocese. The "Code of Pastoral Conduct" may be obtained by visiting www.patersondiocese.org or www.rcdp.info or by contacting the Office of Child Protection by e-mail pgc@patersondiocese.org or by telephone at 973-777-8818, ext. 277 or 221.

Definitions

For purposes of this policy, the following definitions apply:

Church Personnel - includes:

- Bishops, priests and deacons;
- All Seminarians for the Diocese of Paterson;
- Those who are enrolled in the Diocesan Permanent Diaconate Formation Program;
- All people in religious life, including members of Religious Institutes or Societies of Apostolic Life who are working for and/or living in the Diocese of Paterson as well as Hermits and Consecrated Virgins residing within the diocese;
- All paid personnel, whether employed in areas of ministry or other kinds of services by diocese, its parishes, schools, or other agencies; also those who contract their services to Catholic Church agencies; and
- All volunteers.

Social Media – any web site that is driven by content of its members and allows for member interaction. Common examples of Social Media include, but are not limited to: Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest, etc.

Other Electronic Communication – electronic communication technologies that are not defined as Social Media. Common examples include: cell/smart phone, land-line telephone, e-mail, texting, etc.

Basic Policies

- In all interactions with minors via the internet, church personnel should model healthy relationships between adults and young people. Therefore, all communications with minors must reflect appropriate content and be church or education-related.

- There must be at least two adults with administrative rights for each social media account used for ministry communication. Personal social media accounts must not be used for ministry communication.
- It is not the role of Church Personnel to patrol the internet for the young people to whom they minister. Those who work with minors on behalf of the church should never usurp the role of the parent. Intentionally monitoring and probing where minors have shared their intimate thoughts not only violates their privacy but also may call into question the boundaries of the minister who is investigating.
- The depiction of minors in photos or videos on ministry Social Media sites, web pages, emails, etc. should be limited to documentation or promotion of group activities and must not be used for the identification of individual group members. Parental permission must be obtained before posting photos of minors. "Tagging" or other identification of minors shown in photos or videos is not permitted.

Church or School Electronic Communications Accounts

- The supervisor or information technology specialist must be in possession of, or have access to reset, all passwords used to access church or school related electronic communications. This information should also be available to those charged with monitoring these interactions.
- Church Personnel who establish an electronic communications account for church or school business purposes will cooperate with supervisors in providing all necessary information for access to the account.

Some examples of appropriate content for church or school related electronic communications media include information on upcoming activities; permission forms; calendar of events; descriptions of projects, including procedures; expectations; biblical studies and other spiritual links and prayer resources.

Some examples of inappropriate use of this media include counseling, socializing or other personal interaction with minors.

Personal Social Media accounts must not be used for ministry communication.

Web Pages

- Web Pages should reflect clear goals consistent with church teaching and the ministry for which they are designed.
- Privacy and the protection of minors must be an essential goal in the establishment of a Web Page. Telephone numbers, personal e-mail addresses and/or other identifying information of minors must not be published on the Web.
- Care should be taken to protect personal contact information of Church Personnel, avoiding the Web publication of home addresses, telephone number, cell numbers, and home e-mail addresses.

Communicating with minors using Social Media or other Electronic Communication

- Parents or guardians must be notified of the methods of communication which are used in each particular ministry and must be granted access to participate in such communications.
- Social media may not be used to communicate with minors who have not reached the 9th grade.
- Social Media groups should be "closed" or "private" groups, with administrator approval required for joining.
- Communication through Social Media groups should also be sent to group members by Other Electronic Communication means as well (i.e. Facebook messages should also be sent by email).
- Acceptable hours for communication with minors using "other electronic communication" shall be between 8:00am and 9:00pm. Communication outside of the acceptable hours may be used only in emergency situations or to communicate time-sensitive information related to the ministry or event. Communications via "other electronic communication" should be to a group rather than to individual minors, where practical.
- On-line "chatting" with minors is not permitted.

E-mail and Other Text-Based Communication

- The boundary issues that relate to verbal communication between Church Personnel and minors also apply to the use of e-mail, texting and instant messaging. All such communication must reflect appropriate content and be church or education-related.
- The use of a personal e-mail account for church/school related communications with minors is prohibited. It is preferable to set up a separate e-mail account (e.g., Gmail, hotmail, yahoo mail, etc, are free services), or use an account provided by the appropriate diocesan entity for this purpose. It is advisable to save copies (either hardcopies or electronic copies in a "saved" folder) of all communications with minors.
- It is advisable to post "group" e-mail messages using the "blind carbon copy" option; this prevents the possibility that personal information can be forwarded to non-intended recipients.
- If possible, adult volunteers, teachers, catechists, and/or parents should be copied on all electronic communications with minors. It is prudent to make 'hard copies' of all communications with minors if at all possible.
- Electronic communication can be misinterpreted; therefore, it is preferable to communicate in person whenever possible.
- Communications that might be construed as having sexual overtones are to be scrupulously avoided. It is never appropriate to reply to any such e-mail from a minor. Hardcopies should be made and one's supervisor notified immediately.

Social Networking

The Diocese affirms the usefulness of this medium under the following parameters:

- Church or school personnel having "personal" social networking pages must not advertise that site to minors, nor "friend" minors to their personal pages.
- Should the creation of a professional networking page be approved for clarification and dispersal of information regarding a particular church-related ministry or regular activity, it must be registered in the name of the appropriate diocesan entity - not that of an individual.
- As a general rule, neither personal nor ministry Social Media accounts should be used to contact minors individually. If minors contact particular adults engaged in ministry, the ministry account should be used to reply by sending a group message (i.e., when the personal contact was for information relevant to all in the group). When the contact is such that a group response is not appropriate, the adult is to avoid using a personal Social Media account to respond. In those unusual cases where Social Media is used to respond, adults should maintain copies of all such messages.
- All church or school-related sites are to be monitored consistently by appropriate Church/School Personnel (supervisors, IT specialists, etc.).

Blogging

Blogging (an abbreviation of the term "web log") targeting minors by Church Personnel should be limited to the following purposes:

- Promoting a youth ministry program, school, the parish and/or the Diocese, as well as serving as an evangelization tool.
- Establishing productive communication between the youth ministry program or school and home by providing ongoing information about programs, opportunities, expectations, policies and requests for support.
- Providing young people with information that will help them become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Some examples of appropriate content for Church or school-related blogs include information on past or upcoming activities; permission forms; calendar of events; descriptions of projects, including procedures; expectations; biblical studies other spiritual links and prayer resources.

Anyone who ministers and works in pastoral or educational settings with young people must not:

- Use their blogs to conduct or promote outside business activities.
- Defame or cause defamation of the character of any individual, organization or institution.
- Divulge any personal information about young people, or jeopardize their safety in any other way.