

# *The Safe Environment Policy* of the Archdiocese of New York regarding Electronic Communication, Internet and Computer Use



ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK  
YOUTH FAITH FORMATION  
*Catechetical*



As catechetical leaders introduce and use new technologies in faith formation programs, there is a need to recognize how the use of technology relates to creating safe environments, indeed safe *virtual* environments, for children as well as adults. The policy that follows, *Electronic Communication, Internet and Computer Use* is section 12 from the *Archdiocesan Safe Environment Policy*. This section of the policy provides clear guidance on best practices in the use of technology. It is divided into six sections, the bulk of which deal with electronic communication (see 12.2a for examples), proper relationships in communications,

Internet and computer use, and social networking.

The rationale behind these policies is that appropriate, professional and Christian conduct should be the hallmark of ministry whenever we use technology. As we increasingly introduce new technologies into the faith formation setting, we need to have a clear idea of what is expected of us as catechetical leaders and catechists. Furthermore, we should be models for online behavior. The online environment, like its real world counterpart, needs to be evangelized. Each email, text, post, tweet or update should be a contribution to the building of God's Kingdom.

Although written with children in mind, the policy can also be used as guidance on best practices for the interaction between adults when communicating electronically, using the computer and on the Internet. Although there is a difference between working with children and adults, there are some points of convergence. The catechetical leader must maintain professional and appropriate boundaries with the adults to whom they minister. Catechists, for example, should be treated in a professional and Christian manner whether in person or online.

It is important for the catechetical leader, whether working directly with children or not, to be aware of these policies. There may be moral and legal consequences to our actions. Moreover, as leaders, we represent the Church. Please give appropriate time to read and study the policy that follows. Acting in a professional and Christian manner whether in-person or online, enables the people we serve to have the best of encounters, with Jesus Christ Himself.

You can find the complete *Archdiocesan Safe Environment Policy* online:

[https://archny.org/wp-content/uploads/Safe\\_Environment\\_Policy\\_Manual\\_07112017.pdf](https://archny.org/wp-content/uploads/Safe_Environment_Policy_Manual_07112017.pdf)

## **12 Electronic Communications, Internet and Computer Use**

### **12.1 General Principles**

In using the internet, computers, and the various methods of electronic communication, adults who are working with minors in Archdiocesan institutions and programs must maintain appropriate behavior, and serve as examples of Christian conduct. They must also take care to avoid any situation or conduct that might be misinterpreted, or that might be the source of scandal for themselves or others.

### **12.2 Definitions**

- a. The term "electronic communication" shall include, but not be limited to, telephone, cell phone, email, text messaging, instant messaging, comments posted on blogs or websites, chat rooms, social networking sites, on-line gaming, file transfers, internet phone calls, internet video or audio conferencing.
- b. The term "indecent material" shall include, but not be limited to, inappropriate sexually explicit or suggestive images or written material. The determination of whether material is indecent shall be in the discretion of the responsible administrator of the Archdiocesan institution or program, based on the moral doctrines of the Church and civil law.
- c. The term "webpage" shall include, but not be limited to, a website, a page on a social networking site, and a blog.
- d. The term "minor" shall mean any person under the age of eighteen, who is not related to the adult, and with whom the adult is working or has previously worked in an Archdiocesan institution or program.

### **12.3 Proper Relationships and Electronic Communications**

- a. Because of the easy, informal, and at times anonymous nature of many forms of electronic communication, the proper relationship between adults and minors can easily become confused. Adults must make sure that their use of electronic communication maintains a proper professional relationship with minors, and does not create or give the appearance of an inappropriate relationship, or encourage inappropriate behavior.
- b. In using electronic communications, proper and healthy boundaries between adults and minors must always be maintained:
  1. Excessive familiarity or a purely social relationship between adults and minors are not appropriate. Adults must recognize that there is a difference between being "friendly" and being "friends" with children. Minors are not peers of an adult who works with them in a church program or institution.
  2. It is always inappropriate for there to be a "special" relationship between an adult and a young person, or to give the appearance that a minor is a "favorite" of an adult.
  3. Adults are never to take on a role of a "surrogate parent" or "confidant" to a minor with whom they are working.

## 12.4 Electronic Communications in General

- a. Any adult who misuses any form of electronic communication or computer is subject to disciplinary action, including dismissal from employment or volunteer service.
- b. Adults shall not transmit or display any indecent material to minors by any means of electronic communication.
- c. There shall be no private direct electronic communication between an adult and a minor, except as provided below. The use of a private email account to communicate with a minor is never permitted. Text messaging a minor is never permitted, except as set forth in section (g), below.
- d. Adults are permitted to have email communications with a minor through an official email account of an Archdiocesan institution, provided that: the account is subject to monitoring and oversight by a supervisor, only matters relating to the official Archdiocesan activity are communicated, and a proper professional relationship is maintained at all times.
- e. If electronic communication is necessary for the orderly operation of an activity sponsored by or connected with an Archdiocesan institution or program (e.g., to notify participants of changes of schedule, weather cancellations, etc.), the adult moderator of that activity should contact a parent or guardian first, and subsequent communication should be from parent to parent, or from minor to minor (e.g., a telephone tree). If that is not feasible, the policy in section (g), below, should be followed.
- f. An Archdiocesan institution, or an adult moderator of an Archdiocesan program, may send group emails to minors with whom they are working in an Archdiocesan institution or program (e.g., an email to all members of a club to notify them about scheduling matters or to remind them of events). Only matters relating to the activity are to be communicated, and parents or guardians are to be sent a copy of such emails, if possible. An official email account of the Archdiocesan institution or program must be used for these communications, and never a personal account. In all such direct communication with minors, a proper professional relationship must be maintained at all times.
- g. If an adult is serving as a chaperone on a trip sponsored by or connected with an Archdiocesan institution or program, the adult may have direct electronic communication with a minor to the extent that it is necessary for safety or maintaining order (e.g., a telephone call or text message to a minor who has become separated from the group). Only matters relating to the activity are to be communicated, and such communications must be immediately terminated when the trip is concluded or such communications are no longer necessary. In all such communication with minors, a proper professional relationship must be maintained at all times.
- h. An Archdiocesan institution or program may establish a system for sending emergency alerts to minors through text messages, emails or voice mails (e.g., a warning about a significant imminent threat to safety at a school). Only matters relating to the emergency are to be communicated, and parents or guardians are to be sent a copy of such alerts, if possible. This system shall only be used for emergencies, and not for routine communications.
- i. If a minor initiates a private electronic communication with an adult, the adult shall advise the minor that, under the policies of the Archdiocese, private direct communications are not permitted between an adult and a minor, and then seek to

- establish contact with the minor's parent or guardian instead, or with the minor through an official email account of an Archdiocesan institution, as set forth in section (d), above.
- j. If a minor initiates an electronic communication to report a violation of the Archdiocesan Policy Relating to Sexual Misconduct or the Code of Conduct, or any civil law relating to child abuse or neglect, the adult must immediately comply with Archdiocesan policies regarding the reporting of incidents (see Section 10 of these Policies).
  - k. Any questions about the application of these policies to particular circumstances should be directed to the responsible administrator of the Archdiocesan institution or program, or to the Safe Environment Office.

## **12.5 Internet and Computer Use**

- a. Adults who use any computer that is owned by or used in an Archdiocesan institution or program must consent to and abide by the proper usage policies of the institution.
- b. Adults may not view or download from the Internet any indecent material on any computer that is owned by or used in an Archdiocesan institution or program. Adults may never give, transmit or display such material to minors by any means. Adults may never display or save such material in any way in which a minor may have access to it.
- c. No image of a minor who is involved in an Archdiocesan institution or program may be posted on a webpage associated with that institution or program (e.g., an official school website), without the written permission of the responsible administrator of the program and the minor's parent or guardian. Such images must be removed immediately if the minor's parent or guardian refuses or withdraws their consent.
- d. No personal information about minors involved in an Archdiocesan institution or program may be posted on a webpage associated with that institution or program (e.g., listing of names and contact information of sports participants or altar servers on an official parish website).
- e. Adults may not maintain links on their personal webpage to a minor's webpage.
- f. No images of a minor may be posted on the personal webpage of an adult who is working or has worked with that minor in an Archdiocesan institution or program.
- g. The policies set forth in Sections 12.4 (e) and (f) shall not apply if the adult is related to the minor.
- h. Adults should not patrol the Internet for the minors with whom they work, monitor their behavior online, or seek out a young person's personal sites for details of his or her life. This policy shall not apply if the adult is the parent or guardian of the minor.
- i. Adults may never post to any webpage any statements, pictures, or other materials that are false, derogatory, defamatory, degrading, malicious, disrespectful, or threatening to any minor.
- j. Adults who maintain a personal webpage must be aware that any information displayed may be evaluated in light of the individual's position in the Church. The posting of any indecent material on such a site may lead to disciplinary action by the Archdiocesan institution or program in which the adult works.

## **12.6 Social Networking Sites**

- a. Archdiocesan institutions and programs may maintain social networking sites only under

the following circumstances:

1. Access to the site is strictly restricted to those adults and minors who are actively involved in the program;
  2. Access to the site is subject to the invitation and approval of the program's adult moderator;
  3. Private direct communications ("chat" or private messages) may not take place between adults and minors;
  4. To the fullest extent possible, adults must use the social networking site's privacy settings to block private direct communications;
  5. The adult moderator of the program oversees the content of the site and ensures that no inappropriate or indecent material is posted; and
  6. The adult moderator of the program ensures that no personal information or photographs of minors involved in the institution or program are posted without the written permission of the minor's parent or guardian.
- b. Adults may not use personal social networking sites to have private direct communication with a minor with whom they are working or have previously worked in an Archdiocesan institution or program.
  - c. Adults with personal social networking sites may not have on their groups, friends lists or buddy lists any minor with whom they are working or have previously worked in an Archdiocesan institution or program.
  - d. Adults may not post on their personal social networking site any image of a minor with whom they are working or have previously worked in an Archdiocesan institution or program.
  - e. The policies set forth in Sections 12.5 (b), (c) and (d) shall not apply if the adult is related to the minor.
  - f. Adults should not patrol social networking sites for the minors with whom they work, monitor their behavior on those sites, or seek out a young person's personal site for details of his or her life. This policy shall not apply if the adult is the parent or guardian of the minor.
  - g. Adults may never post to a social networking site any statements, pictures, or other materials that are false, derogatory, defamatory, degrading, malicious, disrespectful, or threatening to a minor.
  - h. Adults using social networking sites for their personal use must be aware that any information displayed may be evaluated in light of the individual's position in the Church. The posting of any indecent material on such a site may lead to disciplinary action by the Archdiocesan institution or program in which the adult works.