

Ministry in the Digital World: Best Practices during COVID

When the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, youth ministry activities and groupings were required to be conducted virtually due to State guidelines. Directors of Youth Ministry and volunteers quickly and creatively adapted digital technology to serve the various needs of youth during this time. The Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries worked closely with the Office of Child Protection to ensure that a safe environment could be maintained while using digital platforms for ministry.

The following guidance was issued in response to questions from Directors of Youth Ministry to help them safely interact with youth during the pandemic. Please keep in mind that this is a temporary situation. Once the current crisis has ended, the waiver for all these activities will be immediately rescinded. These are temporary...not new permissions.

Use of Direct Messaging

Most social media and digital platforms have direct one-on-one messaging capabilities. In accordance with the *General Guidelines for Social Media in the Code of Conduct*, this type of communication with minors is not permitted, even when multiple adults are monitoring the account. There is absolutely no one-on-one texting or private texting chats. This will be enforced by an immediate “No with Cause” in the OPCYP database. This means you would no longer be permitted to work with minors and would trigger permanent termination of the employee or volunteer.

The best practice is to use Email to communicate with minors while making sure to copy their parent(s), a legal guardian, or an additional adult volunteer. Multiple adults should still be involved in monitoring Email accounts. During the current crisis, the application *GroupMe* may be allowed with the understanding that you will need to screen capture or print all the messages.

Research before Using

Research new apps and social networks before you begin using them. It can be tempting to start an account on the latest favorite app among young people, but there are often concerns regarding security and whether or not they are appropriate for use. The [Smart Social App Guide](#) is an excellent resource to aid in your assessment and is also as a helpful tool to share with the parents in your parish. The guide is frequently reviewed and updated, presenting a current, realistic view of the benefits and dangers of each app.

Some applications, such as *Marco Polo*, should never be used for interactions with minors due to their lack of transparency. Similarly, applications such as *TikTok* and *Snapchat* have become the main applications for predator trolling, gathering information on teens and reaching out to them under false pretenses. *TikTok* is a sieve, meaning it gets hacked regularly and has its information stolen. *Instagram* is far more secure when considering your social media options for young people.

Video Conferencing with Minors (Zoom)

In the current situation, Video Conferencing is allowed for ministry with minors with the expectation that the standards listed in *Code of Conduct* are maintained. It is important to become familiar with the permissions, security, and safety features on the platform you choose to use.

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Consider the following points prior to starting any video call with minors:

- **Permission Slips:** If a teen has not already completed a permission slip to be a part of the ministry in your parish which includes photo/video release, then they should complete one. If a teen has already submitted a permission slip, you should send a note to the parents explaining that “during this unique time, youth ministry has expanded its ministry options and will be using the following online apps: (list them).”
- **Adult Ratios:** A minimum of two adults must be present on video calls and within breakout rooms to meet the ratio. There is no minimum number of teens required to be present once the adult requirement is met. If one adult is using two devices to monitor separate breakout rooms, they can be counted as an adult in each online breakout room but must be able to honestly monitor what is happening in each room.
- **Video Recording:** Online conference calls with minors should be recorded and the chat logs saved. These records should be treated like you treat a permission slip. In other words, they should be saved until everybody on the call is 21. Ideally your parish has a network where this can be saved and backed up.
- **Private Messaging/Chat:** As mentioned above, private messaging is not permitted. As the host, you can choose who the participants can chat with or disable chat entirely in the settings. Instead, ask the students to email you at the parish account if they would like to have a conversation with you or one of the adult leaders.
- **Backgrounds:** When you or other adult volunteers are leading a video call with young people, one adult should be assigned to keep an eye on what is visible in the backgrounds of the young people. If they have items visible which are not acceptable for a youth ministry gathering (alcohol, tobacco, weapons, drug paraphernalia, inappropriate posters, etc.) then you should address it at that moment. Turn off their video and send them a private message that they need to remove the item before you will turn their video back on. While sending private messages during video calls is not typically permitted, this is one situation in which you are attempting to solve a more serious immediate concern without raising undue attention. Be sure to save the chat and then follow up with the student’s parents afterwards.
- **Teen Maturity:** Remember the age of the individual and the nature of teens on electronic apps; They have less impulse control than if they were in person. Electronic means opens the door for teens to take screen shots and recordings for use as memes or gifs. You could include a line in the permission slip asking them to promise not to do this, however, it is not mandatory. Keep in mind that it is part of the medium and they might do it anyway and send it throughout the chat rooms.
- **Family Ministry:** A best practice here would be that if it is a family activity, then everybody must participate as a family. In this case there would not be a need for adults all being OPCYP compliant nor permission slips. However, you would not want some teens participating on their own, while others are there with their families. It is either a family event or it is not. This is similar to not mixing youth, college students, or young adults at the same event or call.

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- **Publishing Virtual Meeting Information:** This information should not be published on social media or websites. For a youth event you should directly email the young people and their parents. Links and Passwords can be sent separately as another level of protection.
- **Webinar Feature:** If you are attempting to contact large numbers of youth from your parish (and do not have their email addresses), then you should not host the event as a conference call, but rather as a webinar. Then if people want to contact you during or after the webinar, they could do so via your parish email address.
- **Settings for Safety:** If you are publishing Zoom information anywhere, then you must be very careful to use the “waiting room” feature on Zoom. This requires a person to announce who they are before you invite them into the conference call room and allows you to control access to the meeting. In addition, be sure to keep everybody from being able to share their screen to prevent unwanted messages or disruptions. Zoom has created [a list of ways](#) to keep people from crashing your conference calls.

Virtual Meetings for Scouting BSA (formerly know as the Boy Scouts)

For Scouting BSA meetings, *and these meetings alone*, the following policy regarding virtual meetings are to be followed:

- **Video Recording of Virtual Meetings:** Should **not** take place meeting National and NCAC requirements.
- **Screenshot(s) of all attendees:** Attendees (and their parents) should be notified that, for tracking purposes, a screenshot is being taken and the picture will be held by the troop and parish for auditing purposes. Only one screenshot. The picture should be sent to the parish/school scouting liaison. If a youth arrives late after the snapshot has been taken, their name should be annotated in the email to the parish/school scouting liaison.
- **Adults in Virtual Meetings:** Only adults that are complaint with child protection policies of the Diocese of Arlington and the child protection policies of the governing scouting organization may participate in the meeting. Both (Diocesan/Scouting) safe environment training programs are required to be complaint. The Diocese of Arlington provides a 45-day grace period after the diocesan child protection application has been submitted before an individual is required to have completed the safe environment training. Of course, the background checks of both organizations must be "CLEAR" prior to beginning service.

Minecraft Server

Online gaming is a popular way to engage young people. You can create a private Minecraft server if you are certain that you have created a gaming opportunity where at least two OPCYP adults from your parish are able to monitor the game/chat of the group. No strangers should have access to the game or chat to meet the requirements of OPCYP. Ideally, the parents would have given permission for their child to participate in this game with you or your parish leaders. In addition, you may not use the “NO-IP setting.” You **MUST** be collecting the IP addresses. If this is not possible, then gaming is not permitted.