

Chapter 11: Good practices for online safety

Aim of the chapter

This guidance provides the basis for **good practice** for Joymount Presbyterian Church when engaging with social media and other forms of electronic communication.

It outlines good practice guidance in keeping children, young people and adults who may be at risk safe online, and how to respond to some key concerns.

This guidance applies only to the use of social media and online resources approved by Joymount Kirk Session.

Joymount Presbyterian Church recognises that technology is a positive tool, when well used, especially in youth ministry.

Our aim is to promote the use of technology as a tool in ministry and these guidelines are to support the use of technology. We aim to promote best practices when using technology to keep everyone as safe as possible.

Legal frameworks

This guidance has been drawn up with consideration of legislation, policy and guidance that seeks to protect children and adults at risk of harm across Northern Ireland. Key documents include:

- Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995
- *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland*, October 2024, Department of Health
- SBNI <https://onlinesafetyhub.safeguardingni.org/>

"Young people use e-technologies extensively from an early age. While it is clear that technology offers children unprecedented opportunities to learn, communicate, create, discover and be entertained in a virtual environment, there are some inherent risks. While most children and young people's confidence and competence in using technologies is high, their knowledge and understanding of the risks associated with its use may be low.

"Organisations that engage with children and young people using e-technology should have a specific e-safety policy in place that has been made available to parents and young people. This should outline how the organisation mitigates against risk of harm and helps to ensure as far as possible that children and young people engaging with the organisation online are kept safe when doing so. All staff and volunteers who have contact with children should promote the safe and responsible use of technology in its many forms. All staff and volunteers should know how to respond if a child directly divulges an e-safety incident and how to escalate it appropriately."

Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, October 2024, Department of Health

It is mandatory that a risk assessment must be completed to identify whether a child or young person could be harmed while using online services via our ministries.

The child safeguarding policy of Joymount Presbyterian Church outlines the procedures in place to manage those risks identified.

Purpose of the guidelines

This guidance has been developed to support Joymount Kirk Session to know how to manage issues relating to the internet and social media.

- It is to protect all children, young people and adults at risk who are involved in our ministries and who make use of technology while under our care
- It is to provide staff/volunteers with procedures to respond to any concerns, and to educate and inform staff/volunteers regarding online safety
- It is to ensure that our congregation is operating both in line with our denomination's ethos and within the relevant legislation as to behaviour online

It is the responsibility of everyone in society to keep children and young people safe from harm. This includes keeping children safe from harm online.

Standards

As Joymount Presbyterian Church we will:

- Ensure that we keep to relevant legislation and good practice guidance when using social media and online platforms
- Stay aware of how our children, young people and adults at risk are using social media and online platforms
- Signpost to training when necessary for any relevant staff/volunteers
- Regularly review our safeguarding policy and procedures to ensure that online safeguarding is central
- Make sure that all concerns, disclosures and abuse that occurs online are reported as per our usual procedure

Common sense, openness and transparency

Joymount Presbyterian Church has its own online policy. These procedures align and support this policy.

Joymount Presbyterian Church adopts a common-sense approach and acknowledges that these procedures nuanced e.g. when people are related, or when a young person turns 18.

Joymount Presbyterian Church: Procedures for Safeguarding Children

Openness and transparency are always required in safeguarding children, young adults and adults at risk of harm. It is central to our use of technology and social media.

The online world is rapidly developing and deepening; there is a wide suite of resources available in the community held by those who understand this often better than we do. We as the Church need to apply the principle 'if we don't know we must ask'.

Joymount Presbyterian Church presence on social media and websites

We operate our own social media account and website.

The following is good safeguarding practice which Joymount Presbyterian Church apply:

- All social media accounts/websites should be password protected and at least two leaders appointed by Joymount Kirk Session should have access to the accounts and the passwords, one of whom should ideally be an Elder
- The accounts/websites should be regularly monitored by at least two leaders appointed by Joymount Kirk Session to ensure that content is appropriate
- All online activity should be consistent with the ethos of Joymount Presbyterian Church, in line with our Christian witness and responsibility. Kirk Session-appointed leaders should also approve all those who can post on social media in the name of our congregation
- It is important to be aware that 'likes' and 'shares' are a method of communication widely used that also require discernment. For example, someone may use a church account to 'like' an external organisational page/post that may not be in keeping with the congregation's ethos
- Those members designated leaders responsible for the account/website should ensure that their own safeguarding training is up to date
- Parental permission must be obtained before using any pictures of a child/group of children on any online platform
- It is safer to use group photographs rather than photos of individual children, but consent must still be gained
- The congregation, including the children and young people, should be aware of who is appointed by the Joymount Kirk Session to manage the account/website and who they should contact if they are concerned about something that has happened online
- The leaders designated by Joymount Kirk Session will remove any inappropriate posts by children or adults, explaining why this decision has been made, and informing anyone who may have been affected, including the child/young persons' parent/guardian, or a representative next of kin for an adult at risk

Joymount Presbyterian Church: Procedures for Safeguarding Children

- No identifying details of any general member of the congregation should be posted on online platforms; this includes addresses, schools and contact numbers.
For leaders in charge of organisations and in church leadership roles, contact details posted should be done with the individual's consent and only when necessary
- Leaders should be aware that by advertising dates and times of events online, there is the possibility that other people, who would not have otherwise heard of an event, may target the event and turn up without warning. Preparation for this should be planned
- All concerns reported through social media platforms/websites should be managed in the same way as a face-to-face disclosure, according to the congregation's usual child/adult protection reporting procedures, and the Designated Person involved as appropriate (see section 0.11)

WhatsApp and messaging forums

- Messaging forums include a wide group of functions, apps and add-ons to other apps/gaming; it would be impossible to capture them all. Joymount Presbyterian Church should be clear what messaging forums they are using to communicate with their members.
- Joymount Kirk Session can only be responsible for the messaging forums used by its leaders to communicate.
- When setting up any messaging group on any platform, the purpose, parameters and rules of that messaging group should be explicit and clear when people sign up. Their signing up should be an indication that they accept those.
- Mixed adult/children's messaging forums are not good practice, with the sole exception of platforms designed for one-way communication where users' identity is protected and parental consent is given, e.g., 'bcc' email lists, mass text messages or WhatsApp community announcements.
- Messaging forums with children under the age of 16 is not good practice; children under this age, although usually very active online, do not fully understand the nuances of messaging. Congregations should communicate with those children as they always have done.
- Any personal mobile number (child or adult without consent) should never be shared by any staff/volunteer.
- It is essential to get parental consent for 16- and 17-year-olds (anyone under 18) to participate in group messaging forums with leaders.
- It is good practice to get 16- and 17-year-olds (anyone under 18) to sign their understanding of the purpose of the group messaging forum.
- Only the named and vetted leaders of a group should participate in group messaging forums with 16- and 17-year-old participants. If the group is for adults at risk of harm, again, only the leaders of the group should be involved.

Joymount Presbyterian Church: Procedures for Safeguarding Children

- All messages should be used for communicating information (e.g., reminders of event times or kit to bring). Messaging forums are not for engaging in conversations.
- Pictures and images of anyone involved in or outside the group should never be shared.
- Joymount Kirk Session should remain mindful that it cannot insist that leaders engage in group messaging forums; to do so usually releases an individual's personal mobile number to the group, and all have the right to protect this information.

It is also not appropriate to then leave someone out of information if they have chosen not to participate (or do not have consent to do so). You must ensure that all members of the group including any member not in the messaging forum is getting the same information in the same timescales.
- For accountability reasons at least two leaders should be involved in the group; no group messaging forum should have only one leader involved.
- Steps for managing a misinterpretation of communication:
 - stop replying or end the conversation
 - suggest discussing the subject at the next meeting
 - inform the Designated Person in the interests of transparency
 - if concerned about the child/adult then consult the Designated Person or appropriate member of Kirk Session for safeguarding advice and follow all usual safeguarding procedures

Online streaming and video recordings

- Joymount Kirk Session should make it clear to everyone in advance of special events (for example, children's day) that personal videos must not be taken
- Sunday services are recorded/livestreamed in many congregations; if children are visible at the front of the church at any point, it would be wise if the videographer zooms in on the speaker only
- If children/adults who lack capacity are engaging in the services, Joymount Kirk Session should ensure that written consent is obtained from next of kin prior to sharing any recordings
- Please note the following scenario: a congregation livestreams and invites children to the front to celebrate a week of birthdays, allowing them to pick a gift out of a 'birthday bucket'

In that moment we have shared an image of a child alongside their name, their place of worship and a birth date.

This is enough information for any perpetrator to engage with a child and secure trust.

Do not share too much information, for example, celebrate 'December birthdays' and share only the child's first name

Joymount Presbyterian Church: Procedures for Safeguarding Children

- If an online meeting of a group is occurring that involves children, parents should also be present
- Parents need to ensure that if their child is participating in an online meeting, the child should be seated and online in a family room or shared space, not a bedroom
- Any activities being delivered via video conferencing platforms should be supported by at least two leaders (even if one is not doing any delivery of the activity), to ensure transparency

Staff and adult volunteers must not:

- 'Friend' or 'follow' any child or young person's personal accounts. Additionally, staff and volunteers should protect their own accounts
- Attempt to communicate with children via personal accounts
- Communicate formally with parents via social media/messaging for General Announcements; instead, use face to face, email or letters or other formally approved means such as church Instagram or WhatsApp communities specifically for parents
- Communicate via the congregational platforms/messaging outside of the hours identified in the congregation's social media policy (10am to 12 midnight)
- Engage in 'sexting' or send pictures to anyone that would be considered inappropriate

Staff and adult volunteers must:

- Ensure that, if your own social media accounts are public, you are keeping in line with the ethos of your congregation; children, young people and other adults may look you up
- Remain professional in tone when communicating online. Care must be taken when using emojis, kisses (xx), slang or abbreviations
- Undertake all online safeguarding training being offered, and keep their knowledge up to date on the online platforms available and on how they are being used
- Always work with openness and transparency and report any concerns to the Designated Person/a representative of Kirk Session immediately

Parents and guardians must:

- Be aware of the congregation's online ethos as communicated by Kirk Session, and agree to this if their child/young person is engaging in the online forums.
- Expect Kirk Session, usually through the leaders of organisations, to keep them informed of updates and changes with regard to the use of technology and expectations in the church ministry.

- Protect their child's privacy online at all times and be careful about the content they post on to the congregation's social media/website.
- Ensure that their behaviour on the congregation's websites/social media platforms is consistent with the congregational ethos as a place of Christian worship.
Appropriate communication is positive, encouraging and faith building.
Racist/sexist, hateful or exclusive language from members of the church, volunteers or staff is never appropriate.
Using 'banter' should be avoided as it can be misconstrued.
- All pages/ groups and social media will be monitored and the church reserves the right to moderate and take action when it deems necessary.

Use of mobile phones during congregational activities

Joymount Presbyterian Church has a social media policy, and these procedures align to the content of our policy.

There is no 'one size fits all' for this guidance; for some activities it may not be appropriate to allow mobile phones at all and in others this may not be an issue about which to be concerned.

Some youth organisations have used 'contracts' to support young people to manage their mobile use when engaged in church activities.

It is appropriate to have a ban on mobile phones in bedrooms during youth residential.

Online gaming

Online gaming is not permitted within organisations operating in Joymount Presbyterian Church.

Responding to abuse online

What is online abuse?

Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the internet, using technology like computers, tablets, mobile phones, games consoles and other internet-enabled devices.

Children, young people and adults at risk of harm may experience several types of abuse online, including:

- bullying or cyberbullying
- emotional abuse (including emotional blackmail)
- harassment, stalking or other threatening behaviour
- pressure or coercion to send sexual images

- sexual abuse
- sexual exploitation

Some people may also be exposed to online harms, such as inappropriate behaviours or content online.

How online abuse happens

Online abuse can happen anywhere that allows digital communication, such as:

- social media
- text messages and messaging apps
- email and private messaging
- online chats
- comments on video or livestreaming sites
- chat in games, including voice chat
- immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality

Perpetrators exploit digital technology to initiate, maintain and escalate abuse. They may also groom people online, using online platforms to build a trusting relationship with the intention of abusing.

Perpetrators will often try to engage with people across a variety of online platforms. They may also encourage people to move conversations to platforms that use end-to-end encryption (NSPCC, 2021). This means that only the sender and recipient can see the content of messages, which makes it harder to identify threats to safety.

Online abuse may:

- be part of abuse that's also happening face-to-face such as bullying or an abusive relationship
- happen only online
- start online then develop into contact abuse

People can be at risk of online abuse from people they know offline, or from people they have only known online. Often there is a false sense of safety online, which means that they're more likely to talk to strangers. Perpetrators may also create anonymous profiles or pretend to be someone else, like another child.

This means that we may not realise to whom we are speaking.

People can also experience further abuse, or be re-victimised, if abusive content is recorded, uploaded or shared by others online – whether the original abuse happened online or offline.

Recognise/respond/report

As with any concern regarding abuse, we must know how to recognise it, how we should respond and when to report.

Recognise

It's not always easy to recognise the signs that someone is experiencing online abuse. You might see a change in behaviour, or you might notice that someone has become more isolated. Being alert to changes in behaviour is key to helping spot when something might be wrong.

Things to look out for:

- Behaviour or emotional changes; for example, a person may become angry or irritable, or they might seem low or anxious
- Changes in their eating or sleeping habits
- Inappropriate language being used for an individual's age
- Becoming secretive about their devices and to whom they are talking
- Becoming isolated and withdrawn, or suddenly mentioning new friends
- Spending more time online

Other factors to consider that increase vulnerability to online abuse:

- age
- gender
- being LGBTQ+
- loneliness or social isolation
- living in care
- special educational needs or disability
- mental health problems
- previous experiences of abuse

Respond

- If a child or adult is in immediate danger contact 999 without delay. You can also report to the Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre (CEOP)
- If you have concerns, speak immediately to your Leader in Charge and/or Designated Person for our congregation
- They can advise you regarding next steps – either contacting statutory services or contacting PCI Safeguarding Lead for advice and support
- Never hesitate to access help and support – you should not wait for the next opportunity to contact someone if you have concerns, but act immediately

- If your concern is about online sexual abuse, you should alert PSNI immediately

Reporting online child abuse images

It is against the law to produce or share images of child abuse even if the image was self-created. This includes sharing images and videos over social media.

If you see a child abuse image or video online, including self-generated nude or semi-nude images, you should report to the PSNI/Garda immediately and make the Designated Person and PCI Safeguarding Lead aware of the situation by the next working day by completing the Reporting a Concern form.

In the absence of PCI Safeguarding Lead, speak with a PCI Safeguarding Officer or the director of the Council for Social Witness.

Don't comment, like or share the video or image, as this will distribute it further. Some images and videos may appear old but it's still important to report them – you may be able to help prevent the video being shared further.

Do NOT take a picture of any image with your own device, even as evidence, as this will then incriminate you for having that image on your device.

Informing Parents or Carers

Unless it would put the child at risk of further harm, you should inform their parents or carers about incidents of online abuse.

Pastoral support

Recognising and reporting online abuse is difficult and can be distressing.

Reassure the individual that they have done the right thing in raising the issue.

It is important that Joymount Kirk Session carefully follow up with any individual who has reported a concern about online abuse, advising them, when they can within confidentiality, that steps are being taken to address the issues.

Children under the care of local authorities/adoptive children/adults at risk

Always be careful of identifying any child who may be under the protective care of a local authority (fostered children, children residing in a children's home, kinship foster care arrangements, children leaving care services).

It may be critical to the ongoing safety of such children that they are not identified, and that their location is not given away. It is devastating to children in care to be moved around placements, and we should remain mindful of this and ensure that we are not putting any child at risk.

Additionally, some children who have been adopted need to continue to have their location protected; always discuss the issue with any adoptive parent.

Please also consider an adult or family at risk; often in cases of domestic violence a parent and children relocate.

It is therefore critical that it is clearly announced when live videoing/recording is taking place.

There are usually areas of a church in which to sit comfortably that would not generally appear on camera.

References and resources

- <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/online-safety/social-media-online-communities-safeguarding>
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) (2021) *Revised regional core child protection policies and procedures for Northern Ireland*
- [Online Safety Hub - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#)
- **Thrive Academy** (Local and up to date advice and support regarding digital resilience, training opportunities and church talks)
- [CEOP Safety Centre](#) *The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre has numerous resources for parents, carers and children using the internet*
- www.watchyourspace.ie
- *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, October 2024, Department of Health*

CHAPTER END