THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Safeguarding: Guidance for Communicating with Young People via WhatsApp

This guidance sets out best practice for parish churches when using WhatsApp to communicate with young people. It aims to ensure that all communication is safe, appropriate, and compliant with safeguarding and data protection requirements. The principles outlined here apply to all staff, volunteers, and leaders involved in youth ministry. They should be read alongside the church's safeguarding policies and GDPR obligations. The goal is to protect young people, maintain clear boundaries, and provide practical steps for secure and respectful communication.

Key principles

- Groups must be monitored by approved leaders.
- No private messaging between leaders and under-18s except in safeguarding emergencies, and such messages must be logged.
- A clear code of conduct and instructions on how to report concerns should be pinned in every group.
- Using WhatsApp communities is considered best practice for communicating with young people via WhatsApp

Personal numbers of Staff/Volunteers

- Under-18s must not have personal numbers of staff or volunteers.
- Where staff do not have work phones, use WhatsApp community or broadcast list features for communication.
- Young people must not be able to message staff directly on personal numbers.

Use of community/broadcast features

- Communities allow communication without sharing numbers between participants.
- These should be set up so that only admins can post and approve new members.

Safeguarding principles for WhatsApp communication

Safeguarding is paramount when communicating with young people. All digital communication must uphold the same standards as face-to-face interaction.

1. Monitoring and Oversight
   - All WhatsApp groups involving under-18s must be actively monitored, where possible, by at least two approved leaders.
   - Monitoring should be regular and documented (e.g., weekly checks or daily during events).
   - Leaders must address inappropriate content immediately and record actions taken.

2. Boundaries for Communication
   - No private messaging between leaders and under-18s unless:
     - It is unavoidable for safeguarding or logistical reasons.
     - The message is logged and reported to the Parish Safeguarding Officer.
   - Leaders should never engage in personal conversations with young people via WhatsApp.

3. Reporting and Escalation
Reporting Safeguarding Concerns and Allegations | The Church of England

4. Group Composition
   - All adults in a group with under-18s must:
   - Hold a DBS check if they have any leadership or helper role.
   - Complete safeguarding training before joining the group.
   - Young people who turn 18 may remain as participants (not leaders) until they leave the group or turn 19, provided the group is monitored.

5. Young Leaders
   - Under-18s acting as helpers must:
   - Be supervised by an adult leader.
   - Follow the same communication boundaries as other young people.

6. Content Standards
   - No sharing of inappropriate images, videos, or language.
   - Media shared in groups must have prior consent from parents and young people.
   - Leaders should set clear expectations for respectful communication.

7. Emergencies
   - If a safeguarding disclosure occurs via WhatsApp:
   - Respond calmly and do not promise confidentiality.
   - Save the message and report immediately.
   - Follow the church's safeguarding procedure.

GDPR compliance for WhatsApp communication

Adhere to Church of England data protection guidance at all times: Data Protection: Parishes and GDPR - Parish ResourcesParish Resources

Group chats organized by leaders

There will be occasions where it is appropriate for a youth leader/church to create a WhatsApp chat for young people, for example for a youth group that is running.

- Adhere to safeguarding and GDPR principles, including consent.
- Pin a code of conduct and reporting instructions.
- Leaders must monitor messages and address concerns.
- Admin settings: Only leaders as admins; only admins can admit new members.

Group chats not organized by leaders

- Peer-created groups are the responsibility of parents, not the church.
- If leaders join, follow leader-organised group guidance, or leave the group.
- If aware, advise young people on safety, respect, and reporting suspicious activity.

Over 18s and under 18s

- Over 18s in groups with under-18s must have DBS checks if acting in leadership/helper roles.
- Exception: Young person turning 18 may remain as a participant until they stop attending or turn 19, provided group is monitored.

Parents/Young people – cannot see each other's numbers

- For mixed communication, do not use group chats unless written consent from all parties.
- Use WhatsApp community feature to maintain GDPR compliance.

How to pin a message in a WhatsApp group

1. Open the group chat in WhatsApp.
2. Find the message you want to pin (e.g., code of conduct).
3. Long press the message:
4. Android: Tap and hold.
5. iPhone: Press and hold.
6. Select "Pin" from the menu.
7. Confirm – the message will appear at the top of the chat.
8. Unpin if needed: Long press and choose Unpin.

How to set security settings in a WhatsApp group

1. Open the group chat and tap the group name at the top.
2. Scroll to Group Settings.
3. Set Admin Controls:
4. Tap Group Settings → Edit Group Info → Select Admins Only.

5. Tap Send Messages → Select Admins Only (optional for announcements).
6. Manage Participants:
7. Tap Group Settings → Approve New Participants → Enable Admins Only.
8. Check Admin List:
9. Ensure only approved leaders are admins.
10. Enable Two-Step Verification (for your account):
11. Go to Settings → Account → Two-step verification → Enable.

How to set up a WhatsApp community (with security settings)

1. Open WhatsApp and go to the Communities tab (icon with three people).
2. Tap Start a Community and enter a name and description (e.g., "Youth Group Updates").
3. Add Groups:
4. Create new groups or link existing ones.
5. Example: "Youth Events" or "Parents Updates."
6. Set Admin Controls:
7. Only approved leaders should be Community Admins.
8. Tap Community Settings → Manage Admins to review.
9. Control Who Can Add Members:
10. Go to Community Settings → Approve New Participants → Admins Only.
11. Privacy:
12. Members cannot see each other's phone numbers in a Community.
13. Use Announcements Group for one-way communication (admins only).
14. Enable Two-Step Verification for your account:
15. Settings → Account → Two-step verification → Enable.

Further information, guidance & reporting

Church of England resources:

- Safeguarding e-manual National safeguarding training portal
- How to use WhatsApp Communities for church news | The Church of England

