

Safeguarding checklist for online youth work

As the lockdown continues and we adapt to new ways of connecting, what are the key safety issues to focus on right now as more and more activities are delivered online?

Over the last few weeks, as we've all had to make massive adjustments, the pace of change has been truly exceptional – and to be honest quite exhausting! Many youth organisations have been busy adapting their regular activities and searching out which apps to use to keep young people connected. Lots of us are in new territory, finding creative ways of staying in touch.

Our safeguarding checklist is here to support you as you navigate safety in your digital youth work – a guide to help you think it through for yourself and your organisation.

“Our practice will be supported and enhanced through the effective use of digital technology and social media.” [Digitally Agile National Principles for CLD](#)

Safeguarding checklist

#1 Have you found the right app?

Finding the specific platform or app that works for the type of activity you're planning will help you create a safe place for your online activity.

Think about...

- **Which apps are young people already using?**
- **What devices do they have access to?**
- **Is the app age range appropriate for your group?**
- **What are your overall aims?** (for example – sustaining connectedness within the group of young people, providing a listening ear in a one-to-one setting)
- **Are there known safety risks or challenges and how can you deal with them?**

Some platforms are being used in ways that were never anticipated, which puts pressure on security aspects. If you are using Discord as a place for a youth group to meet or Zoom for an online counselling, understanding the privacy settings will help you to apply professional principles and create safe spaces.

Whether you are planning group work, one-to-one support or both, a key principle is for your online approach and policy to mirror what you would do offline.

- [Click here for information about app age ranges.](#)

“Make informed choices about the tools you are using, considering young people’s rights, safety, accessibility and enjoyment.” [European Guidelines for Digital Youth Work](#)

#2 Can you keep conversations secure?

Who knows why, but there are several high profile apps that are having their moment right now, as our lives have changed. Becoming familiar with privacy settings and discussions around security will help you protect young people and stay safe yourself.

Why has everyone just flocked to [Zoom](#) for every kind of online meeting and event? What is zoom-bombing and how can you avoid it? These and other zoom-related questions may be filling your head right now, including ‘Is this the right tool for our youth work?’

There are steps you can take to minimise the risk of intrusion which include using a unique meeting ID for each meeting and enabling a ‘waiting room’ feature so meeting hosts can add guests manually.

Find out more about privacy settings for Zoom:

- [To Zoom or not to Zoom, Alison Stone SCVO](#)
- [Harden your privacy settings, EFF](#)
- [Keep conversations secure, Wired blog](#)

There’s also plenty of discussion around [Houseparty](#) and how open and easy it is for other people to join an event. There are options to lock your party, making it more secure.

- [Is houseparty safe? Openview education](#)

Many of us use [WhatsApp](#) to stay in touch with groups of friends and the way we tend to use it involves individuals knowing each other's phone numbers. There are options in WhatsApp to set up a broadcast which means phone numbers are private from the group.

- [Using WhatsApp to broadcast, Interactive Schools](#)

For whatever tools you are using, think about...

- Are your conversations private to the group?
- Do you know your way around the privacy settings?
- Do you need to be able to moderate content?

[Find more about social media and how to use it well for youth work, YouthLink Scotland.](#)

#3 Are you creating a safe space?

In an offline setting a youth worker will naturally be thinking about how to set expectations, share ground rules and create a place where young people feel comfortable, valued and in control. The same skills are relevant in the online setting.

Think about...

- **What ground rules will you have?** For group work there might need to be ground rules around how people are dressed (such as, not pjs for a video meeting!) and how they interact (respectful to each other, no swearing)
- **How much do young people want to share?** Young people may not want to reveal the background of the home they live in, so providing advice about how to curate the background for a video meeting could help.
- **Are one-to-one meetings safe online?** Offline some organisations choose a public place for a one-to-one meeting to limit the risks for both the young person and the practitioner. Taking this online, it's important to think through both the risks and the potential benefits (see more about policy below).

- **Who will manage the group?** If you have at least two youth workers for a physical group meeting, would it make sense to have two leaders for an online event?
- **Is parental consent appropriate in your context?** Again, think about the policy you have for offline engagement to help you formulate the right approach.

“Digital youth work should still take the same approach to youth work in a physical setting. It is about taking what you do offline and moving it into an online context, this might mean doing things differently, but fundamentally, it is still youth work.” [Social Media, the basics for youth work](#)

- [A health example of an e-checklist for 1-2-1 meetings \(See the Consent column in the padlet\)](#)

#4 Are you talking to young people about safety issues?

Timely reminders will help young people think about the impact of your planned activity for them personally. We may think about young people as digital natives, more familiar with the territory than we are, but in reality, knowledge, experience and risk-awareness will vary hugely from young person to young person.

From cyberbullying and sexting to grooming and pornography, the safety risks connected with being online are always there. The increased time that young people are spending online because of lockdown only increases the opportunities for unhealthy and predatory behaviour from criminals.

The informal education that happens in a youth work setting can help young people to apply safety knowledge to their own lives. They may well know that hacking happens, but will they recognise it if it happens to them? Do they know how to protect their passwords and where to find anti-virus software? One of the key strategies of keeping young people safe online is talking regularly with them about their online experiences in a non-judgemental way. Right now could be a great opportunity to open some new conversations.

Think about...

- Do young people understand what personal information they are sharing and who with?
- Have they thought about the long term consequences of their online behaviours?
- What role can you have in helping young people stay aware?

Some useful resoures:

- [Supporting young people online, Childnet](#)
- [Helping young people understand their digital rights, Young Scot](#)
- [Thinkuknow from CEOP](#)
- [Online safety activities you can do from home, Childnet](#)
- [Safe, Secure & Empowered - Cyber Resilience Guidance for CLD, YouthLink Scotland](#)
- [Online bullying resource, respectme](#)
- [Safer Internet Day 2020 resources](#)

#5 Have you thought through personal and professional boundaries?

The rapid changes that are taking place right now are having an impact on the relationship between life and work. We might suddenly find ourselves using different online channels for work related activities and this throws up lots of questions.

Think about...

- Do you and your team have access to the professional resources (for example a work phone or work laptop) you need to keep work and personal life separate?
- Are there clear procedures for creating and using work accounts, rather than personal accounts?
- If you are working with volunteers, do you have policies and a code of conduct that helps volunteers to think through appropriate boundaries?
- Are you applying your organisation's policy in relation to digital and safeguarding (see more below)?

- If you or your team are involved in counselling young people, are there adequate support networks?

Some useful resources:

- [Cyber Security and working from home, National Centre of Cyber Security](#)
- [Digitally agile national principles](#)
- [CLD Code of Ethics](#)
- [Ethics in Digital Youth Work Workshop plan and resources, YouthLink Scotland](#)

#6 Have you applied your existing safeguarding policy to the online setting?

Whether you are creating a new policy, or applying child protection guidelines to new work, a useful starting place for any new digital safety policies will be your organisation's existing policies and thinking around safeguarding.

Here are some questions that may help you explore the changed working setting and develop new guidance:

- Which of our general safeguarding principles are relevant and how do we apply these in a digital setting?
- Are there new risks to assess online?
- For group work how can we create a safe, positive, inclusive online space?
- Is 1-2-1 work possible within existing guidelines?
- What kind of record-keeping will be appropriate and GDPR compliant?
- What is the setting for the youth work (for example if the youth work takes place in the context of a school, then the school's digital policy and decisions will be relevant).

Some useful resources:

- [How has the situation changed for obtaining PVGs during Covid-19?, Volunteer Scotland](#)
- [Hints, tips, template policy and template code of practice, Youth Scotland](#)

#7 Have you assessed the risks alongside the benefits?

Wrapping this up, it's vital to stop and think about the safety concerns and risks of online youth work and we hope these questions help you to take valuable youth work activities online – rapidly and effectively.

With the boot on the other foot, clearly there are also risks in not taking services online right now. Helping young people stay connected, use their unexpected home time in a positive and enriching way, and find support through times of anxiety and loneliness make these online safety issues mission critical at the moment.

- [Risk Assessment for not implementing digital youth work](#)

More information

Over the last few weeks we've been gathering [relevant resources for online youth work during Covid-19](#)

Training events

- [What on earth is digital youth work?](#)
- [Short webinar sessions on specific platforms, including Zoom, Houseparty, WhatsApp and Discord.](#)

Get in touch

Hilary Phillips

Hilary is an independent practitioner, currently supporting YouthLink Scotland on digital youth work. Contact her on hilary@cygnus-extra.co.uk.