

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Technology Related Communication between Adults and Students

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Introduction

Recently, there have been increasing requests for information regarding guidelines for smart and safe social networking, instant messaging, texting, and phone interactions between caring adults (volunteers, clergy, etc.) and young people. In other words, expanded applications for what could be referred to as “healthy boundaries.” Just yesterday, before I began a presentation at a school district institute day in southern Illinois, the superintendent asked about the implementation of guidelines for technology-related contact between staff members and students. Apparently, developing guidelines for technology related communication between adults and students is a hot topic!



Today, many teachers provide students with their personal email addresses, and/or other social networking information so students can effectively communicate with them. There is justifiable cause for concern when a student has such unfettered access to their teachers' “private” behavior. School administrators worry, among other issues, whether the personal details on a teacher's personal social networking page will upset or confuse both a student and their parents.

In my work throughout the United States, I have found that the kneejerk reaction on this issue for a school district or a religious entity is often a complete disconnect by prohibiting any type of electronic communication between adults and young people. In fact, a new state law necessitates all Louisiana school districts to implement policies requiring documentation of all electronic interactions that occur between teachers and students through a nonschool-issued device, such as a personal cell phone or email account. Louisiana parents also have the option of forbidding any communication between teachers and their child through personal electronic devices

As a former Catholic high school history teacher and a parent, I find this notion troubling because it can stifle communication between adults and today's technology-motivated child. In fact, on a personal note I have found that my own three children respond more frequently to text messages rather than the telephone calls I make to their cell phones.

The key is to find the proper balance between staying connected to young people, while at the same time remaining professional. So what is one to do?

Many school districts today provide students, parents, and staff with copies of their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) related to Internet safety, sexual harassment, bullying, and the use of their technology resources. The AUP often provides guidelines for the teacher supervision of student computer use, parental consent for student Internet use, and specific auditing procedures to determine whether education technology is being used for the purpose of accessing sexually explicit or other types of objectionable material. In addition, several AUPs prohibit unprofessional social relationships with minors.

Electronic Communication between Adults and Students

Today, social networking sites and other means are frequently used as an easy way to communicate between friends. It is important for teachers and caring adults to remember to always keep these methods of communication professional when using them with students or young people or when it is possible that students can access them. This helps avoid potential problems that might arise when boundaries are blurred between a teacher and a young person.

A teacher or adult must keep the language in posts and other electronic communication formal and always think before sending or posting. This should involve re-reading the language to make sure it cannot be mistaken for being suggestive or inappropriate. An effective technique to maintain professionalism between students and teachers is to confine topics conveyed via electronic communication to school activities, class topics, or information that may clarify an assignment. Adults should never use electronic communication to gossip or discuss personal issues with young people.

In order to address the issue of electronic communication between adults and young people, a school district or other entity should implement specific guidelines. These guidelines, including the consequences of misuse, should apply to faculty, staff, other adults, and students equally.

It is not the intent of the guidelines to interfere with private communications between individuals—nor is it the intent of the guidelines to deny access to recognized student organizations that wish to announce upcoming events that may be of interest to members of the school or community. The goal is to provide guidance on how and where boundaries should be drawn with regard to technology related communication between adults and young people.

A *Technology Contact between Adults and Students Policy* should be developed and should inform teachers and caring adults that:

- They should only use email accounts that are provided by their district or entity to communicate electronically with young people.
- They should only communicate with students and parents using a blog platform, system, or cell phone that is provided by the district or entity.
- They must decline or disregard invitations from young people to interact one-on-one through instant messaging, texting, and social networking sites.
- They should not use a personally owned device such as a cell phone or smart phone to communicate with a student or young person.
- They should not use a web cam or Internet type of phone to communicate with a student or young person.
- Anytime there is electronic or telephone communication to a student or young person involving schedule changes, cancelation of practice, weather cancelations, etc., the parent or guardian must also be notified.
- Anytime a teacher or caring adult uploads a file to student or young person, one's supervisor must also be copied along with the file that was uploaded.
- Adults in the organization are forbidden from knowingly participating in any type of online games with students or young people.
- In the case of an emergency, if an adult uses a personal communications device or email account to contact an individual student, the date, time, and nature of the contact must be reported in writing to one's supervisor on the next school day.
- Adults must acknowledge that they are aware that technology auditing software is being used by the district or entity in order to protect not only students, but also the adults.

The electronic communication policy should also identify a specific contact person who can be notified if a violation of the policy occurs and the potential penalty for violating the policy.

Conclusion

Everyone is aware of the rapid advances occurring in electronic communication and technology. As a result the *Technology Contact between Adults and Students Policy* must be updated or modified as soon as changes occur. Being proactive and distributing the policy to students, parents, and adults may go a long way in preventing confrontations as well as possible litigation. In-service training covering these and other electronic communication issues should be a part of on-going professional development as well as being mandatory for new-teacher or new-employee orientation sessions.