



Australian
Childhood
Foundation

Social Media

Practice Guide for Personnel

Version 1, November 2020

Purpose of this guide

Social media can be a powerful and valuable tool for communication, engagement and promotion, offering convenience and communication opportunities in many instances. But social media can also raise questions around the safety and ethical implications of its use in communities serving young people.

Drawing on the practical experience of the Safeguarding Children Services team at the Australian Childhood Foundation and contemporary academic research, this guide aims to support personnel and young people by exploring social media use from policy through to practice. It helps to:

- Understand the scope of social media and the most common forms used in organisational settings
- Examine the safety and ethical considerations behind social media use, particularly from a safeguarding perspective
- Reflect on social media use within an organisational setting to explore gaps and opportunities that make social media use as safe as possible, particularly for children and young people
- Apply checklists and other tools to guide best practice.

Background: social media use for young people

Social media are technologies which enable communication between individuals or groups, often in new ways (for example, through music sharing or gaming) and always digitally. There are many categories of social media and these are often overlapping. Social networking technologies are the most common category – examples include Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp – and these often hold multiple purposes such as communication, collaboration and content sharing¹.

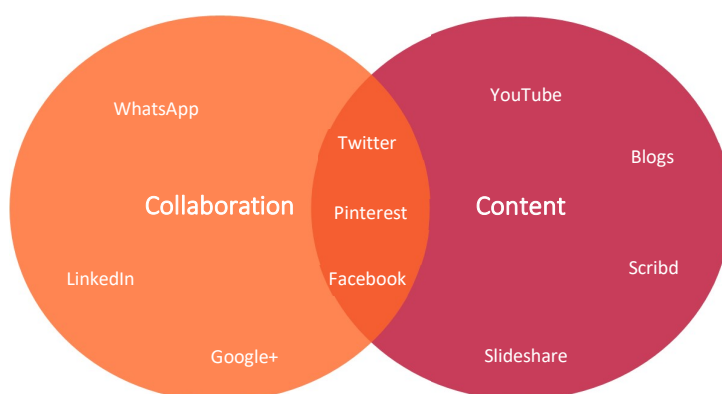


Figure 1: Examples of social media and their communication uses

¹ Fox, A. & Bird, T. (2017). The challenge to professionals of using social media. *Education and Information Technologies*. 22, 647-675.

Since social media present new ways of communicating that we are still learning to navigate, it is not surprising that our understanding and uses are constantly changing. One of the greatest challenges of social media is the way that they blur professional and personal identities. Determining best practice in an organisational setting – and navigating the layers of identity that different stakeholders hold – can be difficult. But it is essential, in order to prioritise the safety and welfare of young people and to provide personnel and caregivers with clear guidelines for use.

Social media can be a powerful and positive force in the classroom – there is evidence of tools like Facebook being used to facilitate learning and enrich collaboration². Outside of organisational settings, personnel and young people use social media in many ways, with teenagers accessing five separate social media services on average³. But there is also research demonstrating the challenges for personnel and young people in navigating the implications of social media use in personal and organisational settings⁴. Many organisations have responded to this through Social Media Policies and Safeguarding Policies. But translating policy into practice in a way that is accessible and relevant for personnel and young people alike requires ongoing reflection.

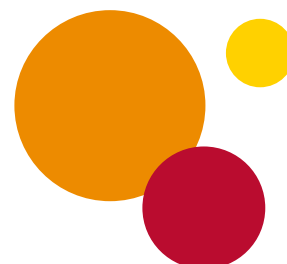
Practice reflections

- How does your organisation use social media?
- What purpose does it serve? How has it helped or hindered communication within the organisation's community?
- Have there been unintended consequences in the use of social media in your organisation?

² Ratneswary, V. (2014). Transformative Higher Education Teaching and Learning. *Procedia*. 123, 369-379.

³ Office of the eSafety Commissioner. (2018). Young and eSafe. Retrieved from: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>

⁴ Wang, Y. (2013). Social media in schools. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*. 16(1), 56-64.



Ethical and practical considerations

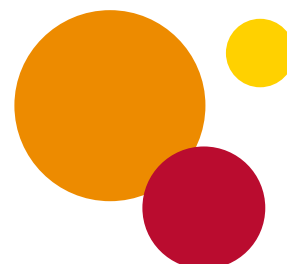
Historically, new communication channels have often prompted ethical debates about the new methods of engagement and ideas that emerge through the technologies. For example, the expansion of literature in the 17th and 18th centuries was seen by many elites as sensationalising and anti-authoritarian; while in the 1940s, comic books were considered weird, violent and addictive tools of communication which could lead to juvenile delinquency⁵. These new communication channels have grown to become an everyday part of society, causing both desired and less desired impacts, depending on an individual perspective.

So how can we practically assess the risks and challenges presented by new forms of communication, such as social media – particularly when new tools and versions are frequently becoming available? While there may be many examples of social media platforms, and social networking tools specifically, a framework can be applied to consider the risks they present on a case-by-case or generalised basis.



Figure 2: Risks posed by social media (adapted from [Childnet International](#))

⁵ Mueller, M. (2019). Challenging the social media moral panic. *Policy Analysis*. 876.



As well as identifying the different types of risks that could affect organisations and young people through social media use, it is also important to consider the skills that all stakeholders need to participate in safe and positive social media use. Australia's eSafety Commissioner, a government agency solely committed to keeping citizens safer online, identifies the core skills of respect, resilience, responsibility and reasoning⁶. Learning, modelling and practicing these skills in online settings helps to ensure that risks are mitigated, and social media are used intentionally and carefully.

- **Respect** – not only should social media users treat others with respect, they need to respect themselves and understand that their digital footprint should always be a positive and realistic reflection of themselves.
- **Responsibility** – responsible online behaviour means understanding and applying their rights and obligations, such as their right to privacy and the obligation to stay within the law.
- **Digital resilience** – the online world can be challenging, and we all need resilience to navigate and bounce back from stressful situations.
- **Critical reasoning** – as machine learning technologies continue to advance, it will become more difficult for children, young people, and adults to discern what is real and what is not, and understand how to apply offline values and ethics to the online world.

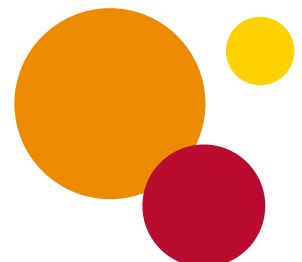
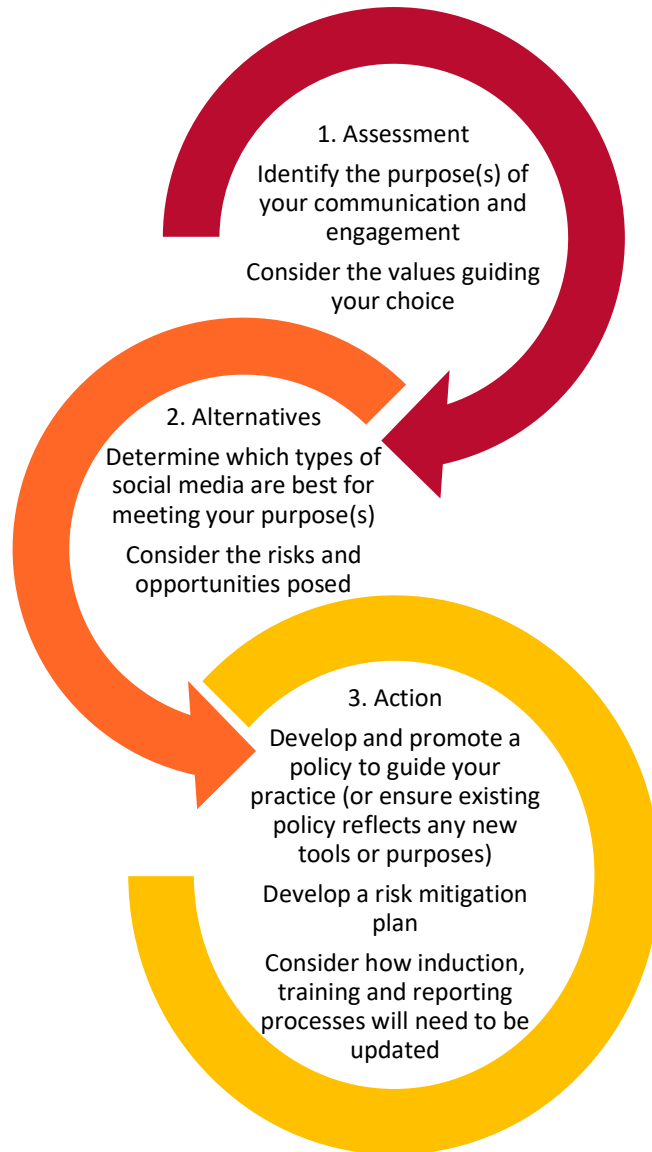
Practice reflections

- Does your organisation recognise that use of social media use involves safeguarding risks? What current policies do you have and are they sufficient to guide your evolving social media use?
- What is acceptable language, behaviour and conduct on your online platforms by all personnel, volunteers and those who you engage with?
- How does your organisation manage consent and share information, images and videos of your community, especially children and young people?
- Do all personnel know how to respond when communicating with children through any form of online communication (i.e. social media, video calls, livestreaming or calls) if they suspect or are told that a child could be harmed in some way?
- How do you keep both young people and personnel safe and monitored in their online communications?
- What consequences could individuals or groups face for contributing to your communication materials? Are the potential risks greater for certain groups or individuals that you work with? Do existing procedures help mitigate these risks?

⁶ Office of the eSafety Commissioner. (2020). eSafety Young People. Retrieved from: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>

Translating ideas and values into practice

After considering the risks of using social media, and the skills needed to mitigate these risks, it is useful to explore what tools will be used and how they'll be managed. It is important to consider these within the organisation's context, and with input from personnel and young people.



Case study: WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a private messaging application owned by Facebook. It is an increasingly popular social networking tool, and as more people use WhatsApp in their private lives, some organisations may consider the tool in professional contexts thanks to its pervasiveness and convenience.

Applying the framework above, how might a school assess the use of a new tool such as WhatsApp?

1. Assessment

What is the purpose of the communication?

Teachers are struggling to reach students with all the updates and information they need to share about homework, events and reminders. They want a convenient and accessible tool that students and parents will actually check.

What are the values guiding the choice?

The school's Social Media Policy prohibits use of personal devices for teachers. It addresses the importance of gaining consent for sharing any information or images about individuals and acknowledges the risks of cyberbullying.

2. Analysis

Which types of social media are best for meeting the purpose?

Facebook seems like an obvious option, but many parents and students fail to check the school's page. Students have access to Teams through their school accounts, but teachers are concerned messages there aren't being checked. WhatsApp seems like a convenient and simple tool since so many stakeholders already use it personally.

What are the risks?

The school does some research to explore the options and identifies the following risks and considerations:

From a **Contact** perspective, WhatsApp presents the risk that contact will be between students and teachers only – consent must be sought by students and parents, and at least two staff members must be present in the Group as Administrators. Since the teacher will need to access all students' personal mobile numbers to set up the Group, the school should consider providing a device for teachers so that contact and content can be monitored more easily, and the teacher is not exposing themselves to the risk of students contacting them directly or privately on a personal phone number.

From a **Content** perspective, the staff and students must agree what content is considered relevant and appropriate. There must also be clear rules of engagement that explain what will happen if or when inappropriate content is shared, and the hours that staff are expected to moderate the discussion.

From a **Conduct** perspective, WhatsApp is limited to users over the age of 16, so the school must exclude or remove any users younger than this. For these students, and those whose parents do not grant permission for their child/ren to use WhatsApp, an appropriate alternative communication channel must be identified.

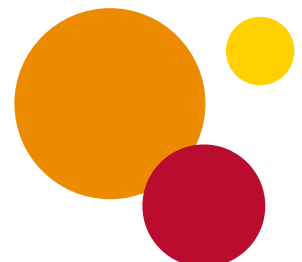
Through this process, the proposed social media tool – WhatsApp – presents safeguarding risks that are unable to be mitigated, so the school is re-considering alternative channels of communication.

3. Action

The school must develop a Social Media Policy to guide use of social media; or ensure that any current policy addresses the values and risks identified by any new tool.

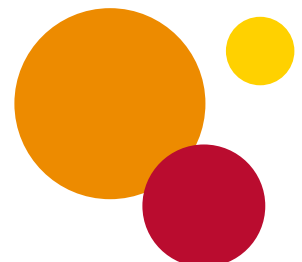
The school must conduct a risk assessment for each new social media tool that includes a risk mitigation plan, and consider how induction, training and reporting processes will need to be updated as part of this. This could include training on the '4 R's' – the digital skills identified by the eSafety Commissioner for online safety for young people.

The school should ensure that any new policy or policy changes are communicated throughout the school community so that staff, students and parents or caregivers understand the purpose, risks and responsibilities of users.



Practice reflections

- Are your organisation's policies and procedures well-understood and implemented by personnel involved at different stages of the communications process? Are existing procedures being followed consistently?
- What risks do current processes for storing and filing images and information pose to your organisation or contributors, including children?
- What role do partners or other third parties have in your communications process? Do they have the knowledge, capacity and experience to implement any relevant policies or procedures?
- What are the potential reputational risks created by your communications materials?
- Has your organisation had complaints or issues with its communications materials in the past that you can learn from?



Checklist for safe and positive social media use



Explore the platforms and services your organisation wants to use and how they will enhance the work of your organisation, as well as the reporting mechanisms that must sit alongside these.



Establish guidelines including how your organisation will use social media and communicate appropriately and safely to your audiences. Communicate these guidelines clearly and widely. Consider developing rules of engagement with children and young people.



Set clear policies for personal use of accounts and devices and particularly for interacting with children and young people. Establish a clear process for obtaining consent from children and young people, as well as their parents, when sharing content on social media.



Share content involving children and young people safely and appropriately. Be mindful of age restrictions on platforms if you are trying to engage younger audiences. Most social media services are only for those 13+, with WhatsApp being 16+.

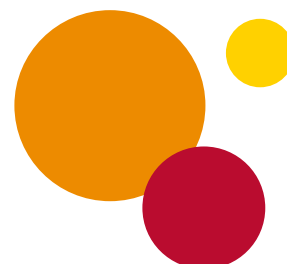


Review and check the security and settings of the platforms you use. Do a regular check of passwords and plan how you will store and share safely.

Case study: Code of Conduct example

With the consent of the child or young person's parent/guardian, Personnel may communicate digitally with children and young people using Organisation equipment or, where necessary or appropriate, personal devices (e.g. cameras or mobile phones), for the purpose of Organisation activities. In doing so, Personnel must comply with the Organisation's Privacy Policy, ICT Use Policy and Child Protection Policy and Child Risk Management Strategy and must ensure that:

- Parental and child consent has been gained and all stakeholders have been informed of the purposes and risks of any platforms being used by the Organisation;
- At least two Personnel are present and involved in any digital communication, and any - private or direct communications initiated by a child or young person must be reported immediately;



- The content of communication is relevant to the Organisation’s activity and does not contain any inappropriate or offensive comments or images. In particular, do not communicate anything that a reasonable observer could view as being of a sexual nature;
- A plan for moderating and removing any inappropriate or offensive content has been developed and documented;
- All users are educated that what they share is on a public platform and can be seen and screenshotted by people unknown to them. All users are educated in identifying and reporting harmful or inappropriate content.
- No unnecessary identifying details about or images of individuals are shared – this includes adjusting settings to turn off location sharing and online status updates;
- Only engage through organisational or approved accounts, not personal or unapproved ones;
- Any usage is within the restrictions and rules imposed by the application itself (such as age limitations).

Contact us

Contact the Safeguarding Children Services team at the Australian Childhood Foundation to discuss your needs so we can share tailored recommendations to help you to realise your organisation’s objectives.



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