

Camp Safety: Social Media and Mobile Phone Use

For many children, camp is a time for wonderful memories. But how do you make sure that all children have a positive and safe camp experience?

Part of ensuring a safe camp environment for all is keeping social media interactions and mobile phone usage appropriate.

Seventy-six percent of teens use social media—and many younger children are on social networks, too. A typical teen sends and receives around 30 texts a day. This kind of social interaction can be good; children may be communicating more openly with their parents and guardians and fostering close relationships with their peers. At camp, it provides an easy way to stay in touch with home.

However, not all social media interaction is beneficial. Forty-three percent of boys and 57 percent of girls report having been cyberbullied, or having received threatening or otherwise upsetting texts or messages while they were online.

Set Some Guidelines

You can help to prevent cyberbullying, sexual abuse, and other negative experiences from occurring by setting guidelines for mobile phone and social media use.

Adriana Dominguez, Account Manager with the Religious Services team for Praesidium Inc., the company with which the Church Pension Group (CPG) collaborated to develop its *Safeguarding God's Children* program, says, “We wouldn’t necessarily dissuade an organization from prohibiting campers from bringing their phones to camp; children are there to enjoy themselves, after all! If an organization does prohibit cell phones, however, we would recommend measures be put into place so that campers can contact their parents if needed.”

Ross Mitchell, Safety Analyst for Praesidium, adds, “Because camps vary so much in their scope, it is difficult to set an absolute rule such as ‘no cell phones.’ As with any other environment, camps need to utilize best practices.

“Camp leadership must determine what, if any, level of social media interaction is appropriate between staff and campers. Once that decision is made, leadership must determine what guidelines best achieve their goal and communicate that to staff, campers, and parents.”

Adriana says to keep the “yes, but” rule in mind. What that means is that you may say “yes” to a certain behavior – like mobile phone usage during camp hours – “but” that you add safety measures, such as restricting the hours of use or the places where phones may be used (i.e., prohibiting the use of phones in locker rooms).

Communicating with Participants

As Adriana explains, there are two views around electronic communication with camp participants: “Some organizations say staff, employees, and volunteers can’t contact participants directly; they must contact the parents. Others say that isn’t realistic and that some direct contact with participants is necessary.”

She suggests transparency: “If you communicate through social media pages that belong to an activity, program, or organization, make those pages available to parents. And, have more than one adult or supervisor monitor the page. You want others to know what is happening.”

That translates to any kind of electronic communication a camp might have with its participants. She says, “Use group pages, group chats, group texts. That way, kids won’t be communicating with a private number, but with a group.”

Transparency is Key

According to Ross, transparency heads off inappropriate relationships at the pass. “Offenders need three things: Access, Privacy, and Control. Electronic messaging provides various aspects of all three.

“For that reason, it is troubling any time an adult can individually message a child. There are many apps and practices that help staff stay in contact with campers about legitimate camp issues without allowing one-on-one communication.”

Avoid Sharing Personal Contact Info

Camp employees should avoid sharing personal contact information with campers, Adriana notes. “If you do get a private message, redirect the camper to make the conversation occur in person. Make sure that conversation happens in an open, public space, and that others are aware of it.”

Ross adds that camps should have certain policies in place. “As with electronic media, camp leadership needs to decide and communicate which topics of conversation are appropriate with campers and which are not,” he says.

Keep Kids and their Guardians Informed

“Safety is never the responsibility of children, but we can give them tools to help themselves and their peers,” Adriana says. She suggests creating a code of conduct for participants (“so they know what is expected of them”) that is also shared with parents.

“Notify parents of expectations,” says Ross. “That way your organization has another set of eyes to monitor for inappropriate behavior. There have been cases where inappropriate relationships between adults and youth are uncovered because a vigilant parent notices behavior that violates the rules provided to them by the organization.”

Make Rules Consistent

As Ross says, “Everyone is so involved with social media that it’s difficult to reign in its use – but you have to make decisions about what you’re going to allow and stick with it.”

He suggests that camp leaders make rules consistent for all employees. “Like programs should operate alike. For that reason, everyone who is working at the camp should be under the same rules and guidelines—unless there is a programmatic reason to operate differently. Having this level of operational consistency makes it easier to spot behavior that deviates from the norm.

“Prior to camp beginning, determine what will happen if violations occur, and make sure employees and volunteers know those expectations.”

Making and sticking to social media guidelines may be challenging, but because of social media's prevalence in most children's everyday lives, it is necessary. Camp leaders can also take the *SafeguardingOnline* module, *Social Media Safety*, to learn more about how to protect youths when using social media.

Praesidium also has resources to help churches navigate some of these issues. Praesidium has model policies, training resources, and other products that may be available to your church through CPG.

For more information, contact **Paul Stephens** at pstephens@cpg.org.

All statistics in this article come from the SafeguardingOnline module, Social Media Safety.