

# Safe & Effective Engagement with Social Network Sites for Youth Professionals

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The following draft overview/guidance document is based upon the Youth Work and Social Networking research available from <http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/>. It builds upon 'A Youth Work Perspective on Online Social Networking' from that document:

Social Network Sites (SNS) present young people with a wide range of opportunities and risks. Opportunities and risks go hand in hand. The opportunities and risks of most concern to young people (keeping in touch with friends and bullying respectively) are different from those most frequently highlighted in the mainstream media.

Young people need support to develop the appropriate resources and resilience to navigate risk and to make the most of opportunities on SNS, and peer groups need opportunities to negotiate and develop positive norms for their interaction on SNS.

Many of the reasons young people may encounter risks through SNS have roots outside of the technology, in issues of young people's personal and social development. The appropriate response to SNS risk may not involve technology.

Social networking sites can be made safer when youth workers, as professional and trusted adults, actively engage with them.

Youth work can engage with SNS as one or more of:

- an environment in which young people need support and guidance;
- a marketing tool for promoting youth work opportunities and activities;
- a communications tool for interacting with young people and groups of young people;
- a youth work tool for promoting young peoples creative expression, political engagement and wider personal and social development;
- a starting point to work from in helping young people develop their skills, interests and capacities across a range of issues and areas;
- a platform for new forms of online youth work;

Youth work methods have a particular contribution to make in encouraging and supporting young people to adopt safe and positive online behaviours.

The document is split into four sections, looking at: personal and professional SNS profiles for workers; different levels of SNS engagement for youth professionals; principles and guidance on creating safe settings; and how to respond to safety concerns.

## Social Network Site Profiles: Personal and professional

If you have your own personal Social Network Site (SNS) profile you should make sure that young people cannot access any content, media or information from that profile that (a) you are not happy for young people to have access to; and (b) which would undermine your position as a professional, trusted and responsible adult working with young people.

- You should consider **changing the privacy settings on your SNS profile** so that only people you have accepted as friends can see your content. Look for the 'Privacy' option under 'Settings' (Facebook, Bebo) or 'My Account' (MySpace) in the menu of your SNS.

- **Check your privacy settings carefully** and ask a colleague to help check your settings (by trying to access your profile when they are not logged into the network in question, or when they are logged in, but not set as your friend).
- Review who is on your 'friends list' on your personal SNS profile. ***In virtually all work contexts you should not accept friend requests from young people you work with to your personal profile.***
- Do not rely on 'security by obscurity' (hoping that the content you post won't be found because you've used a nick name for example) – as it will always be possible for the content you share publicly online to be found and linked back to you.

**As a basic rule:** If you are not happy for the young people you work with to see particular comments, media or information simply *do not* post it in a public forum online – and when you are posting content in a SNS space check carefully to make sure you know who can, and who can't, see content you post.

Of course – remember that you are still human. You do not have to disappear from the Internet – and there is, providing you are careful, nothing wrong with there being photos, videos or writing online that shows you are a real person who has friends, has fun and has interests outside your work.

### **How to use SNS? Different levels of youth professionals' engagement:**

You need to think carefully about the level of professional engagement with Social Network Sites (SNS) you will have, and to make sure you have agreed this engagement with your managers and within your organisation. If you are using SNS for work you should always have a professional profile separate from your personal sign-up and profile on a site.

You can engage with SNS on a number of levels - including:

- **Supporting young people with information and opportunities for reflection and group discussion about SNS and online behaviour.**  
You could facilitate a group discussion about identity expression online, you could point young people to positive activities and profiles on SNS, or you could run a workshop and skill-sharing session on managing privacy settings on SNS for young people.

Think about how key safer social networking messages can be woven into your day-to-day work. For example, encouraging groups of young people to discuss and agree whether or not they can share photos that they have taken on phones/cameras at events on their own SNS profiles and whether or not they need agreement from other people in the photo before sharing it online.

This does not necessarily involve you having your own SNS profile, or using technology directly in your work with young people. However, you will find it useful to make sure you have some direct experience of the SNS you are talking about. Take an hour to sign-up to the site in question, upload a profile or media, make a friend request to someone (a colleague...) and to explore the site. You can delete this test account straight afterwards.

- **Promoting your service and provision through SNS**

You can use pages, groups, media content, widgets and online advertising to promote your project, service or events to young people through SNS.

With most features on SNS such as pages, groups and events – you have the choice to allow, deny or moderate any comments or media that young people may wish to attach to them. You can treat SNS as a space for putting up a 'virtual poster' about your event, but you will get more out of it if you engage with the network in a social way – sharing news and media about your project or service, responding to questions, and encouraging discussions about the activities you want to promote.

- **Using SNS to enhance your face-to-face work with young people**

You can use the messaging features of SNS to keep in touch with young people you work with – either one-to-one messages (similar to e-mail) or by using groups and events features to easily keep a group up-to-date with activities. Creating a group on a SNS can also provide a way for young people you work with to carry on discussions between themselves.

Most profiles and groups on SNS allow you to control who can be associated with them (as a friend or a member) so you can limit access to only those young people you have existing contact with.

- **Using SNS for online outreach, participation and 'virtual detached' youth work**

You can use SNS to offer opportunities for young people who may not otherwise be in contact with your service to get involved, to input their views and to take part in online positive activities. It is important that you pay particular attention to creating a safe online setting for this to take place.

In the same way that detached youth work is a specific role with its own training, processes and procedures – so online detached youth work – using SNS to develop positive relationships with groups of young people who a worker may not otherwise have contact with is a specific role.

- **Supporting young people to carry out peer-to-peer work online**

One of the best ways for a service to engage with SNS is to work directly with young people in the design, development *and* delivery of the engagement.

It is important to provide training and support to any young people who are managing SNS engagement with, or for, your organisation or project. Where young people are directly using their profiles for outreach to new young people they should follow the guidance for workers about having a separate professional/work profile.

## **Creating a positive environment & safe setting**

When you are engaging with Social Network Sites (SNS) you need to create a positive environment and safe setting for young people. By modelling good practice in your own engagement with SNS you can support young people to be safe, and to engage positively, across all their involvement with SNS.

**If you have a professional/work profile on a SNS** make sure the profile clearly explains who you are, who you work for, how young people can verify your identity, and offers links

to accessible summaries of any relevant policies and information young people should be aware of (such as who to contact if they have any concerns/complaints about your activities on the site). You should also be honest about any limits to your engagement with the SNS (e.g. 'I can't offer one-to-one advice here, but you can contact XYZ if you want someone to talk to.').

**If you accept friend requests from young people**, make sure you have informed consent from young people for the consequences of this. You may wish to send a standard message to the young people you accept a friend request from explaining that the friend connection means you can see their profile and the things they post to it, explaining that you are a professional worker, and explaining they they can remove the connection at any time if they wish. You could send a reminder to all your friends every so often (perhaps yearly) to remind them of this – and to remind them to review their friends lists to check they still want all the connections that they have.

**If you create a group, host discussions or encourage media-sharing** then think about the moderation policy and the guidelines or rules for young people engaging with this. You may find it useful to create a group agreement and the sorts of language and discussions allowed – and the media sharing allowed. Make sure these guidelines are created with young people, and are accessible (e.g. you might create a short video that explains them and post this to your group).

When it comes to moderation policies – choose carefully. If you can choose 'pre-moderation' (you check each message before it appears) in many SNS spaces, this may lead to discussions stagnating – and the benefits of engaging through SNS being lost. If you choose 'post-moderation' then be ready to check the space regularly, remove any unsuitable messages, and to challenge any unsuitable language or behaviour. Think about how your existing professional skill set for working with groups of young people (setting ground rules, challenging oppressive behaviour etc.) can be applied in the online space.

**If you create a profile, group or other space within SNS for your project**, make it welcoming and fun. Use different media, including photos and videos to communicate. Involve young people in creating the space – being clear in the process about what you want to achieve through the space.

**If you work with a group face-to-face and online**, think about how you can use blended facilitation – linking the online and offline conversations together. For example, printing out a summary of online discussions to use in face-to-face sessions, and feeding photos of flip-charts and the results of face-to-face discussions into the SNS space.

**Remember that SNS are global**, so if you are talking in a public area of SNS about a local area – mention which region and country it is in – and make sure there is clear information about whether or not you can respond to enquiries or engagement from outside your area of work.

**Keep a record** of your activities on SNS. Apply the same level of recording and record keeping to your online activities as you would in face-to-face work.




**Whatever your engagement with SNS**, apply good youth work principles of 'starting where young people are at, and going beyond'. That might mean helping young people to reflect upon their existing use of SNS and to be safer in the way they use SNS. It might

involve helping young people who are hanging out on SNS to find new positive online and offline spaces to hang-out in, or to pursue their interests through. It might involve inviting a young person who is creating great art works or music to join an online community where they can explore that interest more deeply. It might involve supporting young people who want to campaign on a local or national issue to use their SNS profiles and wider features of SNS as part of their campaign.

## **Responding to child protection concerns**

You are, in general, no more or less likely to encounter situations online which give rise to child protection concerns than you are to encounter such situations in comparable face-to-face work with young people.

Should you encounter situations which give you cause for concern you should base your response on your existing established professional practice. However, there are a number of organisations and routes established specifically to respond to concerns about young people's safety or conduct online.

 <b>Emergency Call</b>	 <b>CEOP</b>	 <b>IWF</b>	<b>Report Abuse</b> <b>Network Provider</b>
<p>If you suspect a young person is in immediate danger or you need an immediate response you should phone 999.</p>	<p>The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) are a police agency with powers to investigate concerns about grooming or sexual abuse of young people online.</p> <p>Professionals and young people can report concerns to CEOP via the 'Report Abuse' button on their website.</p> <p><a href="http://www.ceop.gov.uk">http://www.ceop.gov.uk</a></p>	<p>The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) respond to reports of obscene and illegal content on the internet.</p> <p>You can report content to the IWF and they will work with Internet Service Providers to ensure the content is removed or access to it is blocked.</p> <p><a href="http://www.iwf.org.uk">http://www.iwf.org.uk</a></p>	<p>Responsible website providers will have clear processes for dealing with reports of abuse including inappropriate content or bullying. For concerns which do not involve illegal content or conduct, look for the 'report abuse' feature on the website in question.</p> <p>Most social network sites only check content when alerted to it by users.</p>
<b>Record it, talk to your manager &amp; know your policies</b>			
<p>You should raise any other concerns with your senior manager or the appropriate child protection/e-safety co-ordinator within your organisation.</p> <p>Whatever actions you take you should make a record of them, and you should discuss them with your manager.</p> <p>Make sure you are aware of the general child protection and reporting guidelines for your organisation. These will apply for online work with young people as well as for face-to-face work. Your organisation may also have a specific e-safety policy which you should make sure you are familiar with.</p>			

ENDS.

**This is a working document:** Discussion around this document and updated versions will be available through the Youth Work Online community: <http://www.youthworkonline.org.uk>. This draft is by Practical Participation. We offer training and consultancy in the use of social media in the public and not-for-profit sector, specialising in work with young people. Contact [tim@practicalparticipation.co.uk](mailto:tim@practicalparticipation.co.uk) for details.