



# Guidelines for Child and Teen Safety and Abuse Protection: Online/Virtual Communication

April 9, 2020

This document has been created to provide YMCA Member Associations with a guide for online/virtual child and teen protection practices in these challenging and dynamic circumstances. This guide is intended to provide helpful advice for YMCAs and staff to maintain safe online/virtual practices when working with and communicating with children and teens. Specifically, this document will provide guidance when transitioning teen programs online or when teens are trying to connect with temporarily laid off child and youth workers.

**If you have any questions after reviewing this guide, please contact your Association's Child Safety and Protection Lead. If your Association Child Safety and Protection Lead is not currently available, please contact Ida Thomas, VP, Children, Teens and Young Adults.**

## Emerging Child/Teen Online Safety Risks

YMCAs provide spaces and environments for children and teens to build healthy relationships, develop new skills, learn, and thrive. While some YMCAs are continuing to offer in-person child and teen programming through this unprecedented time, many are moving youth programming online, and many have had to postpone programming and temporarily layoff vital child and youth workers as programs are closed to support physical distancing. Now more than ever, safe spaces and relationships for children and teens is needed; however, moving programs online and having vulnerable teens reaching out to temporarily laid off staff poses new risks to child/teen safety and protection.

The following are examples of emerging child/teen online safety risks:

**Blurred Boundaries:** Moving teen programs online or having to cancel these programs changes previously established boundaries between staff and participants. Participants of cancelled programs may attempt to reach out to temporarily laid off staff with questions or seeking support. Reviewing your Association's child safety and protection policies with staff and temporarily laid off staff may be required to avoid risks associated with these changing circumstances. Reviewing and setting appropriate boundaries helps prevent abuse and putting children and staff at risk.

**Decreased Supervision:** Online or cancelled programming increases the risk of interactions between staff and participants to move from a public platform to a private one. Parents, guardians, and colleagues may be less able to monitor these interactions.

**Unauthorized Access:** Unauthorized and predatory adults may gain access or attempt to access participants through technology platforms. Taking the necessary measures to prevent unauthorized access to online programming and participants is vital.

**Peer-to-Peer Abuse/Cyberbullying:** Increasing online communication platforms and online interactions creates a greater risk of peer-to-peer abuse, including cyberbullying. Being aware and being prepared for this will be important as programs begin to run again.

## Guidelines

The rest of this document sets out the recommended minimum requirements for digital communication with children and teens at the YMCA that should be followed by all YMCA Member Associations. This document can be adapted to reflect the procedures and practices of a Member Association and should take into consideration the new and emerging risks outlined above.

The safety and protection of children and teens remains a top priority at the YMCA and this commitment extends to all YMCA digital communications, including email, social media, and texts.

By setting these expectations, not only are we protecting children and teens in our care, we are also modelling good safety practices so they can protect themselves online. We can also protect ourselves from having our actions misinterpreted.

Below are acceptable and unacceptable forms of digital communication with minors, defined as children and teens under the legal age of majority\*.

### Acceptable forms of digital communication

Ensure you review the requirements to safely use these forms of communications with minors.

- **Emails** – can be exchanged with minors ONLY when the minor’s parent/guardian or a YMCA supervisor is copied and ONLY regarding YMCA-related matters. These messages must be sent and received from an official YMCA email address.
- **Text messages** – as a general practice, texting is not a recommended form of communication with minors as there can be limited to no ability to maintain a record of the communication, especially once deleted. If you decide to use texting, texts can be exchanged with minors ONLY when the minor’s parent/guardian or a YMCA supervisor (that is currently employed by the YMCA) is included and ONLY regarding YMCA-related matters. These messages must be sent and received from an official YMCA phone number and not a personal number.
- **Online groups & meetings** – set up a private group (e.g. Facebook group, Zoom call) that meets the following conditions:
  - All online groups and virtual meetings must be organized under an official YMCA account.
  - All online group members must meet the minimum age required by the platform to hold an account (e.g. you need to be at least 13 to set up a Facebook account).
  - There must be at least two staff members over the age of majority designated as administrators for the page, online group, or virtual meeting.
  - You must follow your YMCA’s privacy policy.
  - Online groups and virtual meetings should exist only for the duration of the program. When the program ends, the group or meeting should be closed/deleted.
  - Do not publicly share virtual meeting invitation links or meeting recordings. Ensure entry into virtual meetings is password protected.

\*As of November 2018, the age of majority is 18 years old in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. The age of majority is 19 years old in British Columbia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Nunavut, and Yukon.

## **Unacceptable forms of digital communication**

Connecting privately with minors on any online social media accounts or digital channels (other than online groups as indicated above), both personal and work-related, is strictly prohibited. During these difficult times, program participants may try and get in contact with temporarily laid off staff. It is especially important to communicate your YMCA's child/teen protection policies to temporarily laid off staff that may be experiencing confusion.

Other unacceptable forms of communication with minors include:

- Private messaging and emails
- Following or 'friending' children and teens
- Sharing details of your social media accounts and asking a minor to follow you
- Commenting on photos or any other content shared on a social media site, blog, etc.
- In-app communications that do not include a parent/guardian or another YMCA staff member
- Exchanging cell phone numbers, email addresses, or physical mailing addresses

## **Report communications, connections, or contact**

If you become aware of another staff member or volunteer communicating inappropriately or trying to initiate outside contact with a minor, report this immediately to your supervisor. Additional steps may be required regarding reporting to the local child protection authority.

If you already have an outside connection with a child or teen within the organization, or a child or teen tries to initiate an outside connection, report this to your supervisor immediately and discuss appropriate next steps (e.g. block the request, parent communication, or privatize account settings).

## **Saying no to requests to connect or communicate**

Should a child or teen initiate a request to communicate or connect, explain that there are policies that prohibit you from being able to do so.

## **Alternative ways to communicate**

There are many other ways to communicate with children, teens, and families. Consider using one of the following to share information:

- Public pages of your website or social media accounts.
- Phone calls with parents/guardians. These calls must be made from a YMCA phone number and not a personal phone number.
- Apps that facilitate communications with adults, such as Remind. There are many to choose from and they change frequently.

## **For more information:**

If you have any questions after reviewing this guide, please contact your Association's Child Safety and Protection Lead. If your Association Child Safety and Protection Lead is not currently available, please reach out to Ida Thomas, VP, Children, Teens and Young Adults at YMCA Canada.