



**ADDENDUM:
BEST PRACTICES FOR PREVENTING ABUSE AND MAINTAINING
SAFETY AND BOUNDARIES FOR THE DIGITAL CHURCH**

OVERVIEW AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- The Missouri Conference strongly recommends that all adult (digital and analog) hospitality volunteers be **Safe Gatherings certified**. **Safe Gatherings** is an online abuse prevention program that screens and educates staff and volunteers to help prevent abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults. When employees and volunteers are trained about best practices when working with vulnerable populations, know the behaviors of potential abusers, recognize the signs of abuse and know how to handle reporting, they are better equipped to prevent abuse. Safe Gatherings certification includes a specific training module about preventing abuse and maintaining boundaries in online ministry.
- The Missouri Conference is currently supplementing half the cost of the program through December 2023 (Regular price: \$45). The price per applicant for the individual church program available through the Conference is \$22.50. This includes:
 - Processing of two electronic references
 - National criminal background check
 - 7-year multi-county of residence background check
 - National and state of residence Sex Offender Registry check
 - Applicant tracking for church administrators
 - 1.5-hour online abuse prevention and boundary awareness training (this training includes specific boundary training for online engagement)
- There should be two certified leaders present for every in-person or online meeting. Two-deep leadership is still expected even in a virtual interaction with a child or youth. It is inappropriate to be alone with a child or youth other than your own when you are serving with your organization.
- **Missouri state law requires a mandated reporter to make a report** if he or she believes a reasonable person also would suspect abuse or neglect given the same circumstances. The reporter does not have to provide proof when making a report of abuse. Adult hospitality volunteers serving to connect with guests online are considered mandatory reporters.

BEST PRACTICES

Communication opportunities are expanding, but this makes the need for boundaries in virtual interaction even more crucial. Communicating virtually should be very similar to interacting in person, both in words and meaning. Leaders need to remember that in all communications, they are representing their church or organization. Nothing should be said or shown online that would not be said or shown in person.

General

- Leaders should be dressed appropriately and set guidelines for children and youth to also dress appropriately while attending virtual meetings.

- Leaders should be cognizant of their surroundings when conducting online meetings to make sure there are no inappropriate backgrounds or items in the room from which they are streaming. Some examples of inappropriate items might be alcohol, smoking materials, or adult-themed materials.
- Parents should be notified if inappropriate activity has occurred or if there are other concerns about online interactions. As you have learned previously, one guiding principle for contact with youth is transparency—communication should be visible to others or documented.

Virtual Worship

- Leaders should not take photos or post images or video of the online sessions without parental permission. Sample permission forms are available through the Missouri Conference Office.
- Virtual services that include “children’s time” or performances by a cherub choir or Sunday School class should consider the following recommendations:
 1. Do not to identify any children by first and last name; and
 2. Send a note to choir or Sunday School parents reminding them that videos shot in Sunday School or performances that are part of a streamed service will be shared publicly.
- Consider adding a statement on the church’s website or correspondence: “only those over the age of 18 should submit contact information.” Additionally, consider adding a statement into your welcome message: “We invite those over the age of 18 to register online through our connect card.” (See the section on Online Privacy for more information.)

Digital Communication

- Leaders should take care in their messaging, whether it is via group text or an online meeting. The ability to chat instantly often tempts people to make statements or initiate conduct that may be inappropriate, immoral, or potentially illegal because in many cases, the content “disappears” shortly after being typed or shown. Anyone can screen shot a message.
- Leaders should not use electronic communication to post or discuss sensitive topics, including those of a sexual nature.
- A youth or children’s ministry staff member or volunteer should not have one-on-one interaction with any child or youth, including text messages, online chats, or via other technology means.
- Leaders should watch out for behaviors or statements from other leaders that violate church policies or suggest abusive conduct. Parents should be included on online correspondence and invitations to remote activities for children and youth.
- If a leader receives inappropriate communication from a young person, they should tell their supervisor immediately and save the correspondence. Depending on the nature of the communication, church leaders may need to contact their county’s cybercrimes taskforce (Find your affiliate organization here: <https://www.moicac.org/affiliates/>).
- In mentoring situations, where the conversations may typically be one-on-one in an open area, the adult must find ways to encourage transparency in the virtual environment. Including another adult in the mentoring – even in digital communication – is a possible solution in this case.
- Other leaders in the organization should be encouraged to attend or drop in on virtual sessions taking place with children and youth.

Social Media

Social media pages are designed to be, well, social. But that does not mean that everything should be shared and public. Be careful when it comes to social media with these best practices:

- All communication through social media should be public. Private groups, such as one for a church youth group, should be monitored and can be closed but not “hidden.”
- To avoid becoming engaged in “private” Facebook Messenger chats with minors, churches should consider a 2-deep rule for any Facebook Messenger conversations regardless of age since age verification is difficult with unknown Facebook friends and followers.
- Have two certified administrators who continually monitor your organization’s social media. Set up a notification system so administrators can approve or report the post as soon as possible. It only takes a second for a person to take a screen shot of an inappropriate comment or post and share it with the public.
- Block users who post inappropriate content on the first instance.
- Review the terms of service for all social media sites in which you participate.
- For video-based sites such as YouTube, keep in mind that you can post public videos or set viewing restrictions. Also, you should disable YouTube’s “suggested videos,” as you do not have control over the videos the site suggests.
- Take care when commenting on other social media pages, as your words can be seen as a reflection of your organization.
- Adult leaders and volunteers should not submit friend requests or add followers to their personal social media or request this from young people.
- Adult leaders and volunteers should have written permission from a parent or guardian before posting pictures of minor children on the organization’s social media sites. Pictures should not be posted on an adult leader’s personal pages.

ONLINE PRIVACY

Online privacy is a major concern for everyone, but especially when it comes to young people. In 1998, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission enacted the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) to issue and enforce regulations concerning children’s online privacy. The primary goal is to place parents in control over what information is collected from their young children (under age 13) online.

Although COPPA does not generally apply to not-for-profit websites, the FTC strongly recommends that all church and faith-based organization websites comply with the requirements. COPPA FAQs can be found [here](#).

When collecting information for youth 13 and above, be sure to post a clear and obvious notice about how you will use the information. Meeting organizers should keep this information private. Consult with your organization’s attorney for more information about information privacy, the recording of virtual meetings, and other related items.

The FTC has free online security tips and resources that can be found [here](#).

IMPORTANCE OF POLICIES

The importance of up-to-date clear, concise, and accessible policies cannot be overstated. Be sure your policies are annually updated and reviewed by your organization's attorney, and widely distributed to anyone working with children or youth. Missouri churches and their governing boards should review their policies and procedures at the same time as preparation for charge conference paperwork.

Important policies related to virtual communication and instruction include:

- Comprehensive and up-to-date child protection policy. Your child protection policy should contain clear information about remote events, meetings, and instruction.
- Social media and internet use policies, including the recording of virtual ministry sessions.
- Privacy policy that takes COPPA into consideration.
- Photo policy, including permission/photo release to post or share photos/video of minors.