



Protocols for Safeguarding Children and Teens in Online Communications

As youth-serving organizations temporarily move their programming online in response to the Coronavirus, many have wisely asked what measures should be implemented to safeguard children from maltreatment in virtual settings. Below we share factors to consider and suggested protocols for mitigating risk in online communications and programming.

As a general rule for youth-serving organizations, interactions between adults (or older youths, like homework buddies) and children should be *observable* and *interruptible*. In person, this is best accomplished by two-deep leadership (more than one adult is present) or by utilizing open layouts, glass walls, and windows in doors, as well as inviting other adults to drop by. The same principle applies to virtual communications as well.

Two-Deep Leadership

Two-deep leadership in virtual communications means that texts, emails, WhatsApp messages, and all other social media communications copy another adult (e.g., administrator or parent). It also means that two staff members are present for video meetings, or in the case of private tutoring, a parent is present. The great thing about online meetings is that two-deep leadership can more easily be introduced without significantly inconveniencing the second adult. For example, in the case of a class meeting, administrators can open the virtual meeting in a small window from their remote office. In the case of b'nei mitzvah lessons or homework buddies, parents can set up a laptop in the kitchen, dining room, or other living space.

When having two adults in the virtual program or class is impractical, ensure that the interaction is observable and interruptible, much as you would for in-person interactions. To this end, consider how you schedule, communicate and document to allow for these requirements to be met.

Scheduling

Schedule online events on a shared or public calendar, including a link to the meeting, so that other adults know where and when it will be held and have the option to drop in. Ideally, the calendar should be shared with an organization's staff, parents, and children, which should be possible for schools moving regularly scheduled classes online. This becomes harder for tutoring or mentoring sessions, such as when a synagogue schedules b'nei mitzvah lessons, and in these situations sharing the calendar events with parents and other administrators/ colleagues is sufficient. In all cases, adults should not spontaneously call, text, or communicate via social media with children; all meetings should be scheduled in advance in accordance with the guidelines stated here.

Communication Channels

Class meetings, online programs, and tutoring sessions should be scheduled and held on professional, rather than personal, accounts. This means emailing only from organizational email addresses and hosting video meetings via the organization's video conferencing account. If your organization doesn't have professional email addresses or video conferencing, consider investing in these; the change does not have to be costly and may even be free. Whenever possible, this rule should apply to social media as well: staff who plan to communicate with children on social media should have a professional social media account separate from their personal account. In addition, communications on social media should occur in official groups (e.g., Facebook group or WhatsApp group chat) that are monitored by administrators and closed to the public.

Documentation

Online communications should be documented (much the same way in-person attendance is taken), including the date, start time, end time, agenda, names of participating adults and names of participating children. Recording video meetings increases their observability, but only retroactively. Even so, recording may be a useful safeguarding tool for organizations with limited supervisory capacity, in that supervisors can explain that they will review (or "spot check") a subset of the recordings or, if concerns emerge, a specific recording.

Professionalizing Participation

Participants should join video calls dressed and not in pajamas (unless the day has officially been designated as Pajama Day!). The background of participants' computer screens -- whether child or adult -- should be professional (e.g., home office) or neutral (e.g., blank wall), rather than intimate (e.g., bedroom). However, given the constraints of apartment living, or having numerous family members at home at the same time, participants may need to take video meetings from their bedrooms. In these instances, participants can sit on a chair or the floor in front of the wall, rather than lounging on their beds. Alternatively, some video conferencing options, like Zoom, offer the ability to add a virtual background or wallpaper, which replaces the actual background. When this option is available, staff can upload an image of a familiar and professional setting (e.g., students' classroom or a teacher's desk) and/or all participants can select exotic or interesting wallpaper. Implementing this safeguard need not be burdensome; it can be fun!

Whatever protocols you choose to implement now, consider how you might formalize them into an official policy for all online communications, not just while regular programming has been interrupted. Finally, whether protocol or official policy, the safeguards you choose can only be effective if they are widely communicated, understood, and enforced.

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