

OPERATING IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Advice from the Office of Professional Standards and Safeguarding on Safe Virtual Engagement

We are so fortunate to have access to great online resources during this time of social distancing, allowing us to continue contact and outreach with our community.

However, for many in our Diocese this is a new world to navigate, and as such it brings with it its own challenges. Some have raised questions with us about ensuring protection for children and vulnerable adults in the online world. The following provides some guidance on ensuring the protection of children, young people, and vulnerable adults as well as the safeguarding of personnel when using virtual mediums of engagement:

Types of Virtual Engagement

There are multiple avenues for virtual engagement, including but not limited to:

- Email;
- Social media;
- Livestreaming (Zoom, Skype and similar apps)
- Phones – calls and text

Benefits of Virtual Engagement

The use of virtual engagement during this time allows us to continue to foster relationships, and continue to provide a type of ‘face-to-face’ ministry or service where this cannot occur in the usual fashion. Virtual engagement provides access to another form of communication, with flow on mental health and wellbeing benefits which come from personal interactions.

Challenges of Virtual Engagement

1. Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Boundaries online are the same as those in the physical world. In using online forums it is easy for boundaries to be blurred, as people are used to using these resources with their family and friends. Online communication is one step removed from being with a person and makes it easier for us to forget the effect of our words on the other person. As such it is important that you are consistently maintaining good boundaries.

Remember:

- In a position of leadership there is always a power imbalance (can be real or perceived)

- Those who we deliver ministry or service to may have certain expectations of us *but* it is up to us to articulate what our role is and to stay within the boundaries of our role.
- Boundaries cover a range of things from the way we dress, to what language we use, conversations we hold, and our work practices. In an online environment we should be conscious of maintaining the same practices in these areas as we would in the physical world.

Appropriate boundaries *enhance* a caring role, *encourage healthy independence*, are *uplifting*, are *ethical* and *safe*.

In carrying out your ministry and work in an online context it is important to continue two main things:

1. Ensure that you assess the risk associated with activities - and ensure that you put in place appropriate measures to mitigate this risk.
2. That you continue to make good decisions.

2. Engaging with Children and Young People in the Virtual World

Engagement with children and young people should occur in accordance with Standard 8 of the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards. Standard 8 – Safe and physical online environments – states that “physical and online environments promote safety and contain appropriate safeguards to minimise the opportunity for children to be harmed”. The information contained in this document, and particularly in this section, seeks to assist Church personnel in engaging with children and young people online in accordance with the principles of Child Safe Standard 8. For more information on this standard and the other National Child Safe Standards, please refer to <https://www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au/child-safe-organisations/training-and-resources/child-safe-standards>.

Engagement with children and young people is different to engagement with adults. For the purposes of this document, and in line with relevant legislation, a child is a person under 16 years of age, and a young person is someone aged 16 and above (up to the age of 18).

Children and young people are vulnerable by virtue of their age. As such, engagement with children and young people should be specific to their level of maturity and need. The way you would usually safeguard yourself when interacting with children and young people should also be done in the virtual world.

This engagement, including the setting of professional boundaries, is *your responsibility*, not the child or young person. A child or young person’s sense of boundaries, church, childhood, teachers, priests, adults, etc., is often not the same as yours. Children and young people will test and push boundaries (some more than others) and it is the responsibility of the adult to establish, maintain and reinforce behaviours that reflect appropriate professional boundaries.

In relation to children and young people, part of maintaining professional boundaries online means that you should not be friends with or engage with youth participants via social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) outside the bounds of your professional role. Be sure that you are conscious of what you upload to social media platforms and ensure you have the appropriate consent to release information or images about people into the virtual space. Remember, once

something is on the internet, it is considered to be in the public domain and generally cannot be retracted completely.

3. Self-care

Where online tools allow us to connect with others, it is important to ensure that you are not available online or over the phone all hours of the day and night. You should only be communicating with others through virtual means during normal working hours.

This is both about practising professional boundaries, but also ensuring that you are looking after yourself. In the same way that you are not expected to work 24 hours a day when working from your usual place of work, when working from home you are not expected to be communicating within your role 24 hours a day.

Self-care does not mean that you are expected to do everything on your own. There are multiple places, resources, and people to contact when you need to ask for further help or support.

- The Office of Professional Standards and Safeguarding on 4222 2428 or at safeguarding@dow.org.au
- Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Further resources can be found here: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/national-help-lines-and-websites>

Useful Tools and Resources

1. Risk Assessments

A risk assessment is an essential tool for you to use during this time to help identify and mitigate potential risk. A risk assessment should be undertaken for virtual activities and events just as it would for physical activities and events. It is important that when undertaking your risk assessment, you:

- a) Identify risks and the corresponding appropriate mitigations strategies
- b) Outline the appropriate complaints management structures and reporting lines and share these with the relevant personnel,
- c) And ensure the protection of all through documentation of the risk assessment, and relevant responsibilities.

If you require assistance with conducting the risk assessment, the Office of Professional Standards and Safeguarding can assist you in this process.

2. The 3Rs

The 3Rs are a tool that you should use after someone has made a disclosure to you. *Disclosures in the virtual world should be managed in the same way as disclosures in the physical world.* The 3Rs should be applied regardless of how a disclosure is made (i.e. whether it is made face-to-face, by email, on a messenger chat, as part of an online discussion group, etc.). The following steps should be undertaken:

1. **Reassure** the person that:
 - They did the right thing by telling you
 - they are not in trouble
 - you will tell someone who can help them
 - they have a right to feel safe and protected.

2. **Record**
 - As soon as reasonably possible and appropriate record anything that you are told or observe (this should be objective, meaning it should be a record of the facts, comments of the person and any general impressions)
 - The time, date and parties involved
 - Sign the record
3. **Report** to your Parish Priest (and Parish Priests should report to the Office of Professional Standards and Safeguarding)
 - Children/young person regarded as being currently at risk of harm
 - any form of abuse
 - sexual misconduct in the workplace
 - violence in the workplace

You do not need to consider whether you think the information is worth reporting, if you are concerned about a child or young person, you must report it.

Online Resources

- For assistance maintaining safety online (eSafety Commissioner): <https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/>
- For access to wellbeing information and resources: <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>
- Education from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre: <https://www.thinkuknow.org.au/>
- The CEDoW Social Media Policy: <https://www.dow.catholic.edu.au/about-us/policies/social-media-policy/>

If you have any questions, or would like specific advice please contact OPSS on (02) 4222 2428 or at safeguarding@dow.org.au – We are here to support you through this time.