

Social Media Policy Guide

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Aims

This document aims to ensure that your agency has an ethics-based procedure to follow in developing a social media policy. This will ensure that your agency's use of social media is safe (for the organisation, workers and clients), ethical, and effective in supporting your service delivery.

Procedure

In writing a policy and/or procedure around your service using social media, it is useful to ask the following questions of staff, managers and board:

- Why do we want to 'connect' with young people online?
- What risks are there in this engagement that are similar to our offline practice?
- What risks are there in this engagement that are different to our offline practice?
- Given these risks, what are reasonable ways to manage these?

Once you have answered the above questions, you will be in a position to confirm the boundaries of your organisation's social media use.

Ethics and Social Media

Social media is a reasonably recent phenomena that some services have found useful for engaging with young people. This online engagement has also been accompanied by much fear.

Fundamentally, we believe that many of the fears/risks surrounding social media use are similar to those encountered in everyday youth work, and can be overcome by applying the same ethical principles.

For a discussion of the Youth Work ethical principles guiding this Policy, see the section titled 'Social Media Policy Guide – Background Paper' at the end of this document.

Why do we want to connect with young people online?

In answering this question, there are a range of youth work reasons why we would engage young people online, all of which would produce different organisational outcomes and guidelines for social media use. Below are some examples of how this could look:



<i>Why do we want to 'connect' with young people online?</i>	<i>What this might look like online?</i>
To engage potential new clients	Organisational promotional presence with ability to initiate conversations
To continue and strengthen relationships already built in offline work	More individual presence, with much more exclusive privacy settings to protect content
Promote organisation's events and activities	Organisational presence with ability to communicate with large numbers of young people
To continue case work at distance	More individual presence, with much more exclusive privacy settings to protect content. Access to chat function.

The Risk Assessment

When putting this purpose into practice online, it is important to conduct a thorough risk assessment of the activity, with a specific focus on young people's needs from the interaction, and the potential for harm to young people.

What risks are there in this engagement that are similar to our offline practice?

In asking this question, risk abatement measures that have been applied to offline contexts (eg. case work, street work, drop in) can be applied to online scenarios. For example:

- if a perceived risk of online case management of an existing client is that your case manager will be operating without supervision, how is this managed offline? Can you enact a similar version of this measure for online?
- if a perceived risk of online engagement is young people becoming 'friends' (ie. crossing the organisational boundaries of your youth workers), how do you manage this offline? Can you enact a similar version of this measure for online?

What risks are there in this engagement that are different to offline practice?

In asking this question, the organisation can develop new risk abatement measures to new risks of online engagement. At all times, the ethical principles of the Youth Work Code of Ethics (contained in the discussion paper) should be adhered to.

Building a policy scenario and response:

You are the manager of ABC Youth Centre, A member of your staff comes to you and says that the centre should be on Facebook, as it's a great way to keep contact with the young people who use your service. Following the above procedure, you ask staff, young people and your board the questions outlined, and come up with the following answers:

Why do we want to connect with young people online?

To promote our youth centre's events, and to attract new users to the youth centre.



What risks are there in this engagement that are similar to offline practice?

Risk of youth worker 'hearing' things about young people – mainly through news feed; risk of young people feeling like youth worker is violating their privacy; and the risk of youth worker being 'on shift' with young people outside of work hours through Facebook.

What risks are there in this engagement that are different to offline practice?

This is a really difficult question to answer. At this early stage, it seems that most online situations would have an offline parallel that you could use to inform your response. If you have any examples of unique online risks, head over to our [blog](#) and let the world know!

Given these risks, what reasonable steps can we take to manage these?

Based on the above, you put a policy and procedure in place for your centre's use of Facebook to promote events and potentially attract new users. The risks identified above are managed in the following ways:

Risk of youth worker 'hearing' things about young people

Managed by having the following strict 'no trawling' item in the policy or procedure – "Staff members will not 'trawl through their news feed looking for information on young people, and will only deal with interactions on the youth centre page, or on the wall of their professional profiles."

Risk of young people feeling like youth worker is violating their privacy

Adherence to the strict 'no trawling' policy above, and making this clear to the young person in the formation of the online relationship. For example, when a new young person 'likes' your centre's page, or 'friends' one of your youth workers on their professional profile, a message is sent to them outlining the boundaries of the interaction. This should include something along the lines of "none of our youth workers will read anything about you that you don't want them to see – they won't trawl your profile for info, and they won't bring up anything that you've posted online, unless you want to talk to them about it. If you feel like anyone has violated this, you can email manager@abcyouthcentre.com.au, or 'de-friend' them whenever you want."

Risk of youth worker being 'on-shift' with young people outside of work hours

All permanent youth workers set up a profile which is clearly only for work purposes (eg. Dean Williamson ABC), and are only allowed to access this while on shift). Any young people who may approach the youth worker on their personal profile should be declined, and sent a polite message outlining why they have been declined, and directing them to the youth worker's work profile.



Example Policy

This policy outlines all expectations and responsibilities of ABC staff around the use of social media whilst in the employ of ABC.

Profiles

To engage with young people, each permanent staff member is allowed to set up an organisational profile with the name YourNameABC, with which to engage with young people.

Scope of Activity

Workers with work profiles are encouraged to:

- post on ABC's page, and on ABC's event pages (eg. "I had a great time today at the touch football comp – thanks guys");
- respond to any messages or communication on their wall that young people initiate, and continue an ethical dialogue, ensuring that all youth work ethical commitments and duty of care are upheld;
- accept 'friend' requests from users (or potential users) of the centre.

Ethical and Duty of Care Procedures

Workers with ABC Facebook profiles must:

- send a standard message to all new 'friends' outlining the terms of the relationship (boundaries, statement of youth worker conduct). This can be found on the ABC Server at G://Standard Communications/Facebook/Intro Message);
- keep a record of all communication with young people via Facebook, and add to individual files as per other forms of communication. This file should include a copy of every message sent either directly, or posted on a wall, and also all chat correspondence;
- not post anything even remotely personal on young people's 'walls', to protect their privacy;
- not 'trawl' news feeds or profiles looking for information on individual young people, or other similar behaviours.

Using Your Profile

Access to your ABC Facebook page will be only while you are on shift at ABC, unless there are extenuating circumstances (which must be reported as soon as possible and will be evaluated as a team at your next team meeting), or agreed prior with your manager.

Continuous Improvement

Using Facebook is still relatively new for ABC. We are committed to using online media as ethically and effectively as possible to offer great service provision to young people, and see them supported. As such, we will discuss particular challenges and instances of 'good practice' as a standard item at our team meetings, and continually add to our skill set and practice.



Social Media Policy Guide – Background Paper

The use of social media has received a rich variety of responses from the youth sector in NSW. We have seen some services and workers embrace the new technology, and jump straight into its use, while others have been more cautious in adopting it as a part of their practice and/or interaction with young people.

YAPA has produced a social media policy guide (above) to assist services in NSW to develop policy and procedure around their ethical use of social media. This background paper aims to explain more deeply the ethical thinking that underlies the policy guide, and act as some kind of guide for workers who choose to read it.

This background paper will look at the application of the Youth Work Code of Ethics to social media, and also examine some other interesting thoughts and ideas around how social media remains challenging and/or useful to youth sector workers.

It is intended that this document is a starting point, and will be added to as youth sector workers discuss and negotiate best practice in online spaces.

Basing a Model Policy on Ethics

In examining how social media can (or should be) used by services, it was extremely useful to have some kind of framework within which to frame the discussion. Sercombe (2010, p.57) outlines that the “core purpose of a code of ethics ... is to discipline practice in the interests of protecting the relationship that we have with young people and protecting young people within that relationship.” The Youth Work Code of Ethics (endorsed by YAPA in 2004) offers a clear framework to apply to issues of safety, relationships, boundaries, and risk, all of which are entangled in the use of social media by youth sector professionals.

Application of Ethical Principles to Social Media

Principle 1 - Primary Client

The primary client of the youth worker is the young person with whom they engage. Where conflict exists between obligations to one young person and another, it is resolved in ways that avoid harm and continue to support the person least advantaged by the resolution.

How This Relates to Social Media: The ethical principle of ‘primary client’ suggests that we consider the needs of the young person first and foremost, above all other considerations in our professional practice. This implies that we work with young people in the ways that are useful for, or wanted by, them. Applying this principle, we can see that as a sector we have an ethical imperative to engage with young people on their terms, and in the places that suit them. This means that we likely have an ethical imperative to be online,



unless young people tell us that they don't want us there. A physical parallel of this concept is street-based or outreach youth work, which engages with young people on their terms, and in their spaces. In this way, engaging through social media can be seen as an extension of the 'primary client' principle.

Obviously, if youth workers are ethically empowered to engage with young people online in a youth work capacity (and not strictly a youth development capacity), there is a significant amount of discussion/negotiation to be undertaken at the service level. Some of these discussions may include:

- What kind of youth work outcomes do we strive to achieve? Can we achieve these through online engagement?
- Do we have enough knowledge (see below) to undertake this work?
- Is there a significant difference in the work that we can do online and offline?

Principle 2 - Ecology

Youth workers recognise the impact of ecological and structural forces on young people. Their work is not limited to facilitating change within the individual young person, but extends to the social context in which the young person lives.

How This Relates to Social Media: From this ethical viewpoint, the online world can be seen as an ecological force that impacts on young people, and in turn is impacted by them.

It could be argued that young people have more ability to shape the structural forces of social media than they do in their wider social sphere. This agency and ability to exercise some control over online forces can foreseeably be in both positive (eg. increasing socialisation, expression, content generation, 'connection' amongst dispersed young people, ability to influence a range of forces, including advertising) and negative ways (eg. anonymity, harassment, public disclosure).

The question then stands, if a youth worker is to help shape the social context that impacts on young people, *how does a youth worker facilitate systemic change in online spaces for the betterment of young people?*

This means that whilst online, we should be actively looking for ways to systemically better the social media space for young people.

Principle 3 - Non-Discrimination

Youth workers' practice will be equitable.

How This Relates to Social Media: This particular ethical principle raises some interesting questions for youth work. Under traditional funding arrangements, youth workers have had a responsibility to be equitable within a certain set of parameters (eg. a suburb, neighbourhood). However, online engagement raises the questions of 'who is my client?',



and ‘how would I know if this person is in my client group?’, ‘Is it equitable to extend service to some young people and not others?’

Depending on the purpose of online engagement, it is also useful to ask ‘who am I not engaging?’, and ‘for what reasons?’ For example, one common assumption made is that all young people have access to the internet in some way. Is this true for all of your clients? Are there some groups that have better access than others? Is it ok to trawl certain spaces to make sure that you are engaging with a wide range of young people?

It can be seen that online engagement can significantly contribute to the equity of practice (eg. allowing many young people whom you have never met to have contact with your service). However, with improper application or consideration, it may also contribute very little to your service’s access and equity practices.

Principle 4 - Empowerment

The youth worker seeks to enhance the power of the young person by making power relations open and clear; by holding power-holders accountable; by facilitating their disengagement from the youth work relationship; and by supporting the young person in the pursuit of their legitimate claims. Youth workers presume that young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests.

How This Relates to Social Media: Youth workers ethically commit to believing that young people have the rights and ability to navigate the online world safely and with aptitude, or to collect or seek the information to allow them to do so.

If requested, youth workers will assist in facilitating this or any other reasonable process, but facilitating safe online practice should not be the sole focus of online engagement or youth work.

Principle 5 - Non-Corruption

Youth workers and youth agencies will not advance themselves at the expense of young people.

How This Relates to Social Media: This would resemble practice offline.

Principle 6 - Transparency

The contract established with the young person, and the resulting relationship, will be open and truthful. The interests of other stakeholders will not be hidden from them.

How This Relates to Social Media: This means that all communication with young people online will be honest and open (note: not public), as it would be in the offline space. It should also mean that any notes/conversations can be accessed for viewing by the young person at any time.



This also means that young people should be clear about the nature of the relationship, of the boundaries that protect it, and the limits of principles such as confidentiality etc.

Principle 7 - Confidentiality

Information provided by young people will not be used against them, nor will it be shared with others who may use it against them. Young people should be made aware of the contextual limits to confidentiality, and their permission sought for disclosure. Until this happens, the presumption of confidentiality must apply.

How This Relates to Social Media: All private communication between a youth worker and a young person should be private and confidential, unless stated otherwise. This also means that all steps should be taken to ensure that conversations are held within the appropriate level of protection and privacy, and that security of this data is a major consideration.

Principle 8 - Cooperation

Youth workers will recognise the limits of their role. Youth workers, in consultation with young people, seek to cooperate with others in order to secure the best possible outcomes for young people.

How This Relates to Social Media: Just as cooperation offline would resemble reasonable information sharing and referral, so would online engagement and discussion enter the frame of reasonable information sharing and case notes. In an online space, it may be even easier to refer to an online service (eg. including links in correspondence).

Principle 9 - Knowledge

Youth workers have a responsibility to keep up to date with the information, resources, knowledge and practices needed to meet their obligations to young people.

How This Relates to Social Media: This would obviously include knowledge of how to keep themselves, the young person, and their relationship safe online, as well as all other reasonable knowledge/skills that a youth worker could be expected to have.

Principle 10 - Self-Awareness

Youth workers are conscious of their own values and interests, and approach difference in those with whom they work with respect.

How This Relates to Social Media: Many youth workers hold particular values about the online world, its impacts on young people and society, and the ability of young people to navigate this world safely. It is important that youth workers understand these personal values, and respect other views. As discussed under 'primary client', regardless of views on social media, there may be an ethical imperative for youth workers to **be** online.



Principle 11 - Boundaries

The youth work relationship is a professional relationship, intentionally limited to protect the young person. Youth workers will maintain the integrity of these limits, especially with respect to sexuality. Youth workers will not sexualise their clients.

How This Relates to Social Media: This principle is often the ‘deal-breaker’ for services around social media/networking. While youth workers must maintain their negotiated personal boundaries online, it is important to remember that these boundaries are established to protect both the client and the youth worker.

Questions such as ‘when can social media be used?’, ‘how do we want our youth workers to be seen online?’, ‘what is the purpose of our online engagement?’ must be answered by individual services.

As discussed above in ‘primary client’, there is an ethical case for youth workers operating professionally online, **within boundaries that protect both parties**. The mechanics of this must be negotiated individually by services, but there would seem to be an argument that this **can** happen safely, and actually benefit young people through its occurrence.

There are some examples of how to manage this risk in the Policy Guide (above).

Principle 12 - Self-Care

Ethical youth work practice is consistent with preserving the health of youth workers.

How This Relates to Social Media: As with boundaries, it is important that the negotiated boundaries of youth workers are taken into account. A professional youth worker in negotiation with their organisation should be capable of deciding the limits of their job role, and (like in everyday practice) the ways that this job role is carried out.

Other Principles that Impact the Policy

Offline Practice

Inherently, there is an underlying comparison between online and offline practice. For example, throughout the writing process, some questions that were particularly useful were:

- *Are there any examples of youth work in the past that would have seemed risky and/or unethical? How were these overcome?*

Sample answer: Street work (ie. leaving the building to engage with some of our most marginalised and excluded young people) had its significant risks overcome by good risk management and assessment, and is now a valued and accepted component of the youth sector;



- *If there is a concern about social media use by youth sector professionals, does this apply offline as well? How is it overcome offline? Can this be transposed?*
Sample answer: Boundaries for youth workers who have mobile phones. Should they be on for young people in crisis to contact all of the time? How do we balance duty of care and worker boundaries? Overcome by service negotiating its terms of service provision, and applying this through policy and procedure to frontline workers.

This comparison process served to identify that online practice is not significantly different to offline practice, provided that the usual risk assessment procedure is adhered to, and ethical commitments kept at the front of mind whilst making decisions.

Ongoing Conversations and Best Practice

As much as possible, these ethical principles have been carried into the Social Media Policy Guide. There may be points that seem contradictory, or that you may have questions about. YAPA would love to hear your feedback and thoughts! You can contact us at info@yapa.org.au, or read comments and post in our **Youth Workers on Social Media** blog, at www.youthworkersonsocialmedia.blogspot.com.

