Communication Policy

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The aim of the communication policy is to give guidance on conveying messages and information safely and securely to intended recipients without exposing children to risk of harm at time or in the future (by allowing access to their personal details by unauthorised persons). It is also the Swim Ireland policy to ensure that children have the means to communicate with adults without the need to utilise technology or to seek help from others in doing so.

General Policy Considerations

Communication is valuable tool and the types of communication available today are wide and varied, with technology allowing us to send easy, cost effective mass communications. Adults must, however, understand the possible effect and the power of communication between children and adults. Communication with children must be in an open environment, and any one to one adult/child conversations should take place in public surroundings. Group meetings may take place in a separate room; such meetings should be arranged in advance with the parents/guardians and children should feel comfortable with the environment.

Communication tools can be valuable in helping keep children safe, this is often the reason quoted for a child to have a mobile phone.

Clubs should consider the most effective means of communication between members ensuring that everyone has access to the chosen method; it may be that the use of several methods is the most effective. Any communication occurring between two individuals is open to exploitation and misinterpretation which can cross the personal boundary between an adult and a child and may cause harm to young people.

Children should be able and encouraged to tell a parent/guardian or Club Children's Officer if any communication makes them feel uncomfortable –the Club Children's Officers should ensure this is highlighted in squad/team meetings.

Children should be aware of being careful who they give their phone number and/or e-mail too
Parents should be aware of the communications taking place and have given permission for the storage their child's mobile number, email and other contact information.

A phone number or e-mail should be changed if child is receiving bullying communications or harassment. Remember that expressions used in verbal communication do not always translate well into the written word, either in an e-mail or in a text message. Also 'texting' language can be very different from usual words. Adults should take care with their expressions and the nature of the language used to avoid any misinterpretation.

Example of suitable text for Club information or handbook:
This Club has a communication policy that includes sending general information via text messaging and/or email. Any information sent by e-mail to members under 18 will be copied to a parent/guardian. Any text message will be sent to the general list. Adults should not reply to individual members under 18, save to acknowledge the receipt of a message. Children are encouraged to say if any communication is upsetting. Any use of inappropriate language or incidents will be investigated through the disciplinary process.

Communication with people under 18

Adults should take care with communications with young people and any such contact should be direct, open and honest. The voice and written word can be interpreted in a variety of ways by different people and therefore any individual communication should be at the request of or in response to a child. General information can be sent as a mass communication to groups of children. Where more specific individual information is required this should be copied openly to another responsible person, usually a parent/guardian.

For professional individuals (doctors, psychologists etc.) such communication will be in accordance with their professional codes of conduct consistent with their qualifications. For example a doctor may see/communicate with a 16/17 year old individually within their professional code of ethics, whereas this is not permitted for leaders in Swim Ireland.

It is important to remember that any individual communication should be instigated by the child and/or in response to their needs.

Types of Communication available to Clubs and Members

Noticeboards
Post
Email
Phone/Mobile phone including the use of text
Internet and Websites

Notice boards

All Clubs should have a noticeboard in the facility where the majority of sessions take place. A noticeboard is accessible to every member and, Clubs should note, to members of the public. A child can access the information on a noticeboard without the need to ask or use some form of technology. If Clubs use more than one facility check to make sure every child has the opportunity to view the noticeboard; in some case this may require a noticeboard in each facility.

Information that should be on the noticeboard includes:
- Name and contact details of the Club Children's Officers and Designated Person: a Swim Ireland poster is provided for these details
- Supervision rota: for all sessions with parent name clearly indicated
- Squad selection criteria: for parents and children
- Qualifying and event information: often in the form of a calendar with qualifying information posted when it becomes available
- Committee members: detailing the name and role (contact details of the Secretary should be included, it is optional for the other roles)
- Club ethos and logo: the squad members should be proud of the Club ethos and the logo
- Latest newsletter: good way to pass on information in a one page format

Post

The use of the post provides a direct line of communication with an individual. Letters should be addressed to the parents of a child or where the letter is sent directly to a child the parents must receive a letter informing them of this together with a copy of the letter their child/children is to receive. It is important for children to receive good information concerning them directly, i.e. obtaining a place on a squad, an achievement of a personal best, etc.; remember to copy their parent/guardian on all correspondence.

The disadvantages of the postal system are: it is possible for a letter to be lost in the system and each individual communication costs a set fee.

E-mail

E-mails are another individual method of communication with a person and can be used for very personal communication especially if access to the email account is password protected. E-mails tend to be a cheap form of disseminating information to a large number of people.

Any e-mails sent to children should be done as part of a group or in response to a direct communication received by a child.

Where it may be necessary to e-mail an individual child the-mail must be copied to another responsible person, thus creating a safe communication for a child.

Phone/ mobile phones

The use of a phone or mobile phone to communicate is very much a personal interaction. Phone calls with children should be at the instigation of the child and preferably with a parent/guardian present. It is not possible unless on a conference type call or on speaker phone to have a third party present to monitor the conversation between an adult and a child. Mobile phones can also be used to text individuals and groups with short written messages. The use of group text reduces the risk of an individual message causing upset and misinterpretation.

Mobile phones are often given to children for security, enabling parents to keep in touch and to make sure their children are safe. Young people value their phones highly as it offers them a sense of independence. In addition mobile phones allow quick and easy contact, which can make a safe and efficient way to carry out club business. However mobile phones are individual, and therefore can be used for very personal communications

Mobile phones should not be used at unsuitable times or in certain locations, e.g. changing rooms or where camera (if fitted) use is unauthorised.

Swim Ireland recommend that camera phones should not be allowed in changing room areas due to the possible inappropriate use that may cause upset or offence to another person. Clubs should decide on appropriate use of mobile phones and ensure that any sanction involving the restriction of use is clearly communicated to parents/guardians and children. For example it may be necessary to remove mobile phones from a group where they are being used inappropriately late at night; such a sanction must be a clear possibility in any pre-planning information.

Safe sending and replying of text and e-mail

To reduce the risk to everyone using either text messaging on mobile phones or e-mails for contact, these guidelines should be followed by any adult within Swim Ireland:

Sending messages

Obtain the agreement of the parent/guardian and young person – this can be included in Club information, handbook or agreement at registration

Word/phrase messages using appropriate language without use of endearments

Send messages by group communication method

Copy any individual message to either a parent/guardian and/or coach (as applicable)

Replying to messages

Reply to a text message in response to one sent by an individual child; e.g. a child sends a text to a coach to say they will be late for a training session; coach should reply acknowledging the message, this is in response to the child.

Use appropriate language without the use of endearments in the reply

Copy e-mail replies to the parent/guardian, coach or other responsible adult.

Issues or difficulties should be dealt with verbally with the child (the parent/guardian should always be included).

Web/Internet based social media communications

There are a number of options to communicate with individuals through web based/internet facilities using social networking sites where individuals have their own page/account and information can be posted to this page. These pages can be viewed privately or can be open to the general public. Other available forms of interaction are chat rooms or forums and web-based noticeboards where conversations or information is posted and replies added.

The information posted to any of these types of sites can be public and viewed by anyone. This should encourage individuals to only post information they are comfortable with sharing with strangers. However often young people do not recognise the dangers of this and will treat the site as a means of personal interaction where they expose detailed information about themselves.

Children must be encouraged to be careful with the type of information they post to such sites. Where a site is public it should be used to transmit very general information only and not to become a personal conversation. Clubs should encourage the safe use of social media sites especially where the Club uses such a site.

Any information posted to social media sites should not contain any personal facts or details and positive in nature. Even networking sites viewed by invitation only can be infiltrated by potential abusers; parents should understand the need for monitoring content and any public interactions involving children to be moderated. Young people must be actively discouraged from entering into private exchanges with unknown individuals. Leaders in Swim Ireland should not interact with an U18 in any inappropriate manner.

Who to turn to

Children should always know who to talk to in the event that any communication is a concern or makes them feel uncomfortable. Children should firstly be fully aware of the types of communications the Club uses and how they may be contacted. They should also know who to talk to – their parents, the Club Children's Officer, their coach, their Team Captain or another trusted adult. Any information received from a child regarding inappropriate communication must be treated seriously. In many instances the matter can be dealt with informally by the Club Children's Officer. However if the matter is more serious or intentional concerning a Swim Ireland member this can be dealt with as a breach of the code of conduct.

All Club Children's Officers have copies of safe use of the internet publications from the Office of Internet Safety.

Further information on the safe use of the internet, email and social media sites can be found on their website: www.internetsafety.ie