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Online Contact & Communication with Children

When an adult communicates with children they must do so in an appropriate and safe manner whether that is in person, by phone or text, online or via a social networking/messaging website.

Wavepower provides guidance on how to react to a child if they disclose concerns or abuse to you in person. However, you may find a member uses other forms of communication to do so, even if you have followed Swim England guidance and not shared your phone, email address or social networking details with that person. Should that happen, we do not want you to stop that communication, but you should advise the Welfare Officer of the contact immediately and follow the guidance in Wavepower as to how to deal with any disclosure or concern raised.

Generally speaking, if you do not share your contact information with members, they will not find your phone number, email or social network site details. However, if this should happen and they are not disclosing concerns as outlined above, it is important you make them aware that you will not be communicating with them on this medium and inform the Welfare Officer immediately. The Welfare Officer will take action as required, ensuring contact by the member is not repeated.

Electronic messaging

Mobile phones, text messaging, email and other forms of electronic communication have become a regular feature of the sporting landscape and there is a need to define what is and what is not permissible when communication is required between adults and children.

Peers and those in a position of trust

The purpose of this guidance is to provide a recommendation of best practice, maintaining a professional standard for swimming, para-swimming, diving, high diving, artistic swimming, water polo and open water swimming teachers, coaches and those in a position of trust regarding:

- The use of mobile phones whilst having responsibility for the supervision and safety of children.
- Direct communication between coaches or teachers and children of the organisation via mobile phone, email and social media messaging.

The guidance on the use of social networking found on page 92 of Wavepower 2020-2023 applies to phones as well as tablets, laptops, desktop computers or other applicable devices.

Phoning, texting, emailing or messaging a child

Coaches and teachers should not personally hold the mobile phone numbers or email addresses belonging to children. This includes apps such as WhatsApp where a child's number is displayed and visible to a group. This is particularly important where any coach/teacher may hold a position of trust over a child.

Coaches can hold the phone numbers and email addresses of members' parents/guardians with their consent, in order to get messages to members. It is then the responsibility of the parent/guardian to inform the child.

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There are a number of team communication systems used by Swim England clubs (for example Team Unify), which allow a “non-position of trust” administrator(s) to ensure messages to children are copied in to parents/guardians, or are openly visible on a team feed, which allows instant messaging. They also include “push notifications” for immediate attention of a recipient. Systems such as this can prevent direct messaging from a person in a position of trust, preventing suggestions of misconduct.

In limited circumstances, it may be necessary for coaches, team managers or chaperones to have mobile phone contact details of the members, e.g. at an away camp for safeguarding reasons. In such circumstances, the individual holding the contact details must be Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked, have undertaken appropriate safeguarding training and have the consent of each member’s parent/guardian to temporarily hold that information for the purpose of the event. The members’ phone numbers should then be deleted after the event.

Organisations and/or coaches may wish to have the ability to contact members on a group basis. This may be required in order to inform members of changes to training or lesson times, for example. It is recommended that organisations develop a secure page on their website, or similar system for this purpose, which is open for members to view and is accessible through a variety of devices such as mobile phones, tablets and laptops. This page could be accessed by either the member themselves, or by their parent/guardian if preferred, as no direct one-to-one contact is available to individual members.

Coaches of elite athletes under 18 but over 16 may, with the consent of the athlete’s parent/guardian, use text messaging or email to communicate with the athlete for training and competition purposes only. It is recommended that such communications are also copied to a parent/guardian to safeguard the member and the coach, or a system as described above is used.

Apps or social media messaging which are not capable of storing messages, such as Snapchat is NOT recommended in order to communicate with children, as they have limited safety functionality. Nor indeed are platforms that reveal children’s numbers and online identities such as WhatsApp and Instagram.

Those adults not in a position of trust with children

Chairs, Club Secretaries, Membership Secretaries or those involved in other administrative roles are not deemed to be in a position of trust with children. As such, they generally have a lessened position of power and trust over a child, which is recognised under the DBS and Swim England’s interpretation of a position of trust.

It is recognised that there may be a necessity for individuals performing these roles to contact children, and they are best advised to use a platform such as Team Unify on the basis that any messaging is unlikely to be urgent. A system is recommended where any messaging to under 16s is copied to parents/guardians, and for 16-17-year olds it is also copied to parents/guardians. There are other systems available.

If the 16/17-year-old also has a club or employment role, such as teacher or lifeguard, then best practice would be to ensure any message is also copied to another adult club member such as Club Secretary or Membership Secretary.

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Use of a mobile phone by coaches and teachers

- Coaches and teachers should not take or make calls whilst supervising children in a teaching or training session. It is permissible for a coach to make or take a call during an event, providing they are not the sole supervisor of the members and are not actively engaged in supervising children at the time of the call.
- Coaches who have mobile phones with camera facilities must fulfil the obligations set out in Swim England Photography Guidance.
- Coaches and teachers should not be entering changing facilities with any mobile phone turned on.
- The publishing of a photograph of a member under 18 years should only be done with the parent's/guardian's consent and it should be noted that parents/guardians have the right to refuse to have their child photographed.

If a photograph is taken for publication, it should adhere to the guidance provided in Swim England Photography Guidance. Details that identify the individual in the photograph, such as full name, place of residence or school attended, should not be given alongside the photograph.

In the event of a member showing a teacher or coach a text message or image that is considered to be inappropriate for a child to have, the teacher/coach must advise the nominated person at the organisation, most likely the Welfare Officer.

Coaches aged 18 to 21

Swim England recognises that many young coaches aged 18 to 21 will have been members themselves before becoming a coach, and will be friends with their fellow members, some of whom will still be between the ages of 16 and 17. It is therefore plausible that they will have the personal contact details for those members. Swim England accepts it would be inappropriate to require young coaches to remove the details of those members from their contact lists.

Therefore, in such cases:

- If a coach aged 18 to 21 had phone and/or email details for members who were/are aged between 16 and 17 prior to undertaking the role of coach, Swim England does not expect them to remove those members from their contact list.
- However, the coach is advised to inform the Welfare Officer and the Head Coach.
- The Head Coach should make every effort to ensure the coach is not the primary coach for those children except on an occasional basis.