Electronic/Online safety considerations

In addition to ensuring compliance with RI policy and applicable Youth Exchange certification requirements, it is the responsibility of those who administer virtual activities to understand local laws related to data privacy and internet use involving minors, and to see that volunteers and program participants abide by them. If you are considering developing virtual exchanges or using technology to engage young people in other ways, we encourage you to consult with local youth-serving organizations and legal experts to confirm the standard level of care needed in your area to undertake these types of activities. Also consider these additional general safety guidelines:

Establish boundaries and expectations. Ensure your district has a comprehensive youth protection policy that outlines appropriate standards specifically for electronic communication/social media usage between volunteers and youth, as well as between youth program participants themselves. Your policy (and any consequences for violating it) should be communicated clearly to volunteers, youth, and their families, so that everyone is aware of the expectations before activities begin. Determine how to incorporate the following into your district policy:

Communication:

- To ensure communication is appropriate and transparent between volunteers (including peer mentors) and youth participant(s), consider requiring that all communications (e.g. email, text message, etc.) have a second adult copied, whether it be a vetted volunteer or the student's parent. This helps decrease the risk for misunderstandings or inappropriate interactions.
- Outline specific times for when communication can be sent between volunteers and youth (e.g. during the day only). If communication occurs outside of the designated timeframe, that could serve as a warning that interactions between volunteers and/or participants should be monitored more closely.
- Adults (or peer mentors) should not maintain private social media connections with a youth program participant and should only use social media to communicate to a closed page/group of several participants.

Sharing or re-sharing participant content:

- Photos or personal information about a youth program participant should never be shared without the express permission and knowledge of their parent or legal guardian.
- Stories about and images of youth program participants should not be shared or posted until they have completed their program or activity, and only with the participant's and their parents' consent.
- Never tag a minor or share their username or handle online. This could threaten their safety by revealing their interests or the locations they visit often.

Educate everyone on how to exhibit appropriate behavior and to keep young people safe. When it comes to keeping students protected in a digital age, one of the most important things to do is to educate volunteers, students and their families about online threats and what they can do to keep themselves and others safe. In addition to ensuring you have a comprehensive youth protection policy that requires participants and volunteers are properly screened and trained, below are some key elements to incorporate into your conversations and training materials related specifically to online safety.

Understand common threats to online student safety:

- **Online grooming** – Predators can be anyone – both adults and young people alike – and will befriend young people online in order to take advantage of them. Once they've gained their trust, they may encourage students to engage in inappropriate behavior, including sharing inappropriate images and videos, or persuading them to meet in person.
- **Cyberbullying** – Bullying that happens online can be just as devastating to a young person (or worse) because the internet enables individuals to say or do things they wouldn't normally do face-to-face.
- **Reputational risks** – What is shared online can stay around indefinitely - even if it's a "temporary" post or message. Remind students that they should only post or share things online that they would be comfortable sharing with their family, teachers or a future employer.
- **Peer pressure** – Peers have an enormous influence on each other and can persuade each other to act in certain ways, or engage in behaviors, that can be harmful – including risky online games, sending inappropriate photos, or bullying.

Before students participate in any online activity, remind students to:

- **Avoid emotional posting.** Before engaging in any communication, students should make sure they are not upset or angry, and that they are prepared to make smart decisions about what they send, share or post - and with whom.
- **Be respectful of others**. Talk with students about the consequences of their actions, and to always treat others as they would want to be treated.
- **Remain as anonymous as possible**. Students should never share:
  - Their full name or even the names of their family members (including pets!)
  - Specific locations they are currently visiting /often visit (and be sure to turn off GPS apps or other mobile location settings that may already be built in)
  - Home or school address, or the addresses of any of your friends or family
- **Keep personal information private**. Ensure that privacy settings are activated on social media sites and/or mobile apps and remind students to only connect with people they know. They should also be careful when creating email addresses, screen names, social media handles, to ensure that any aliases they may be using do not include any personal information about them.
- **Think before sharing photos/images of themselves or others.** What students share may remain online forever, so remind students of the risks of sharing information or pictures of themselves or others – including the consequences of others using their photos without their consent.
- **Speak up!** Students should feel empowered and encouraged to report anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, for any reason, including the treatment of others online or receiving inappropriate messages or images from someone.

Volunteers and parents must be prepared to support students as they navigate online activities. To do this, it is essential that they:

- **Understand the warning signs of cyber abuse**. Monitor students and look out for "red flags" that could indicate a student is being bullied or abused, such as changes in their behavior or attitude (see Rotary's Youth Protection Guide). Check in often to let them know you care about their emotional well-being.
- **Empower students.** Help students feel empowered to advocate for their own safety and feel comfortable making their personal boundaries known. Work with them to develop ways to deal with difficult situations and to speak up when they notice something wrong.
- **Invite students to be part of the conversation**. Students may know more about current threats to their safety than adults. They should be involved in discussions about how to keep themselves, and fellow participants, safe. And, by creating an open line of communication, students may feel more comfortable speaking up if something happens.

- **Engage students in productive, structured, and meaningful activities**. When students have a specific goal to focus on, or a cause to contribute to or that they are passionate about, they are less likely to engage in destructive or inappropriate behavior.

Below are some examples of appropriate and inappropriate interactions that you can use to illustrate productive behaviors and establish boundaries between adults and youth, as well as between youth participants themselves.

Verbal/written interactions. Keeping verbal interactions between adults and youth appropriate is just as important as maintaining appropriate physical boundaries.

Acceptable verbal/written interactions	Unacceptable verbal/written interactions
- Positive reinforcement - Jokes in general - Encouragement - Praise - Administrative information or notifications about the activity	- Calling someone names - Adults discussing sexual encounters or their personal problems with youth participants - Adults asking youth to keep secrets of any kind - Cursing - Discriminatory or sexual jokes - Shaming or belittling someone - Harsh language that may frighten, threaten, or humiliate youths - Making negative remarks about a participant or their family, culture, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or background - Commenting on or complimenting a person's body or body development

Electronic and online interactions. Communicating with participants by text message, email, social media, or personal phone presents new challenges to keeping participants safe.

Guidelines for electronic communication	What to avoid in electronic communication
- Copy or include another volunteer or the participant's parent or guardian - Communicate with multiple participants in a closed group, or use a website or social media page that are not visible to the public - Counselors, advisers, and host parents might be allowed to exchange messages with a participant without supervision if they have the prior approval of program leadership and parents	- Harsh, coercive, threatening, intimidating, derogatory, or humiliating comments - Sexual conversations or images - Private messages between a volunteer and a youth without prior approval - Posting pictures of youth participants on social media sites without parental consent - Posting inappropriate comments on pictures

Thank you for the support you provide to Rotary's young people, and for your efforts to help create safe, meaningful, and engaging experiences for our youth. Questions? Email youthprotection@rotary.org.