Social Media and Texting Expectations for Michigan State University Extension Volunteers

Background

Social media and texting have created a whole new world for how people communicate with one another, providing everyone with opportunities to learn, explore the world, socialize with friends, and create new connections. It can lead to instant communication between people. It can be a convenient tool to enhance the communication lines from volunteer to program participants and vice versa. However, it is important to understand the impacts of using social media and texting as a means of communication and to carefully consider how to keep everyone safe.

Best Practices to Consider around Social Media

- Friending/Following Youth Participants
  › When making decisions about social networking platforms, there is a lot to consider. Most platforms have the potential to display significant personal information, as well as personal photos and opinions. It is important to remember the relationships that you have with individuals, especially youth, when deciding if you would like to engage with them on social networking websites. Even though the decision to participate in social networking and at what level is 100% personal, it is important to think about what you might see on someone else's social media account and what social media friends see on your online presence.
  › Specifically, some may ask, "Should volunteers be connected to youth on social media platforms?" To answer that question, adult volunteers should ask themselves the following questions:
    o What will youth see on my social media account?
    o What might I see or learn about the youth if I become friends with them on social media?
    o What is the intent or purpose for me wanting to be connected to them on social media?
    o What are the implications or unintended consequences that might occur from being connected on social media?

- Friending Other Volunteers or Parents
  › There is also a lot to consider when friending other volunteers or parents. Think about the way they want to interact with other volunteers and parents. Consider if friending a volunteer or parent could change how you interact with one another.

- Sharing Information on Social Media
  › Social media has lasting impacts and nothing is ever completely erased from the Internet. Be careful when making blanket statements or posting negatively in a moment of frustration. Social media is rarely the appropriate place to vent frustrations.

› As a volunteer, if you choose to share information about what you are doing through posts, photos or tagging others, ensure that those involved (potentially youth) and individuals connected to those involved (their parents) are aware and comfortable with the content.

› Ask participants if they are comfortable with photos being shared. Photos should only be shared with participants' permission and if they have a signed media release on file.

› Information shared online is permanent. Even if you delete it, other people could have already seen the information and shared it. Deleted pieces of information can often be recovered.

› Posted information can get out of control fast, so consider the consequences before posting. If you wouldn't say something face-to-face, don't write it online. When in doubt, leave it out.

- Unfriending or Not Following
  › There is not a notification that is sent when someone decides to unfriend or unfollow another person, but sometimes people will question what happened.
  › Start a social media relationship with strong and consistent boundaries and if needed, explain that "my social media presence is only used for X purpose" (ie. personal business, professional networking, etc.).

Expectations for Social Media

- Volunteers are expected to have open communication with MSU Extension staff when program concerns, questions and frustrations occur. Discussions with staff will provide a quicker explanation and solution to challenges than posting about it on social media. When volunteers have concerns and frustrations they should talk with MSU Extension staff via email, face-to-face conversations, or phone calls, instead of sharing these challenges on social media sites.
- If a volunteer sees on social media that a youth (or anyone) is in danger of harming themselves or others, it should immediately be reported to the proper authorities. Call 911 and then send a follow-up email to local staff.
- If a volunteer notices concerning behavior online, they are encouraged to inform the youth's parent or guardian.
- If you are sharing photos of youth in your programs, please make sure there are signed media releases on file. MSU Extension staff can help you confirm who has media releases in your program.
- When sharing information, avoid sharing any identifying information about youth participants, This includes last names, ages, schools and their specific location. Do not directly tagging them in your post. However, volunteers are not responsible if someone else tags a youth participant in their post.
- If you decide to create a social media presence for your class, camp, group, club, council, etc., notify your local MSU Extension program staff member as they may request that you also add them to your group presence. For Facebook specifically, it is recommended that you create your presence as a closed group that only approved members can access.

Best Practices to Consider around Communicating with Program Participants

- Texting and direct messaging through social media may be the preferred communication method of youth, but can lead to unintended consequences if just between an adult and youth. It is best to utilize group texts or group direct messaging on social media.
- Consider setting up and using a reminder type app to share information, a Google group email chain, Facebook group chat, and/or a text message group that all program participants can use.
- All program participants might not have the type of social media you are trying to communicate through. Create a communication plan that includes all participants.
- Text messaging could cost some participants money as not everyone has unlimited texting. Ask program participants and their parents/guardians if texting is allowable and if that is an acceptable/preferred method of communication.
- Remind youth that they do not have to share everything in the group chat if they are not comfortable. They are welcome to have a face-to-face or personal telephone conversation.
- Remind youth to be kind with their comments on social media and in group communication channels. Sometimes comments are made through text, chat or messages that would not be said in a face-to-face conversation. This is because individuals do not actually have to look at the person when the comment is made and see the hurt they may have caused.

Expectations for Communicating with Program Participants

- Volunteers should not communicate privately with youth. Instead, use group texts, messages or other communications, and include parents when communicating with youth.
- If a volunteer finds out a youth (or anyone) is in danger of harming themselves or others, it should be immediately reported to the proper authorities. Call 911 and then send a follow-up email to local staff.
- When a program participant reaches out directly, loop the parent/guardian into your response.
- When chaperoning program participants on trips/events, create a group text of everyone who in attendance (including chaperones) and share all information through the group text. When youth have questions or need to check in, let them know the group text is the preferred communication mode. Remind youth that if they have something they are not comfortable sharing with others in the group text, they can have a face-to-face conversation or phone call with the chaperone.