



## Communicating Through Distance: How to Navigate the Communication Process as a Volunteer

Social media, texting, and video meetings have created a new world of engagement options for how people communicate with one another. It can be a challenge to know how to provide everyone with opportunities to learn, explore the world, socialize with friends, and create new connections using the wide range of technology options available. Still, the benefits can be substantial as it can lead to instant communication between people and enhance the communication lines from volunteer to program participants and vice versa. However, it is important to understand the impacts of using any online or distance means of communication and to carefully consider how to keep everyone safe.

### Best Practices to Consider Around Communicating with Program Participants

- When possible, communicate with groups rather than individual members.
- A minimum of two Kansas 4-H Volunteers and/or Extension employees must be present online to ensure a safe learning environment. If online participants are moved to virtual breakout rooms, an adult should not be alone with a young person.
- The Kansas 4-H Code of Conduct (youth, volunteer, parent/guardian) extends to online environments.
- Do not use social media or other communication tools, such as Snapchat, that purposely do not maintain a record of communication.
- 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.
- 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.
- If a program participant reaches out directly, loop the parent/guardian into your response.

### 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:
  - What will youth see on my social media account?
  - What might I see or learn about the youth if I become friends with them on social media?
  - What is the intent or purpose for me wanting to be connected to them on social media?
  - What are the implications or unintended consequences that might occur from being connected on social media?
- **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 your group is 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.

### **Expectations for Social Media**

- Volunteers are expected to have open communication with K-State 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 K-State Extension staff via email, face-to-face conversations, or phone calls, instead of sharing these challenges on social media sites.



- 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. K-State 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 camp, group, club, council, etc., notify your local K-State 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.

### **Strategies to Engage as a Virtual Group**

- Set clear expectations for the session like being courteous to all and everyone contributes.
- If you have a large club, hosting an online meeting will be a challenge. To make that more manageable, divide your club into smaller groups (project interest areas, ages, officer team, committees, randomly sorted into groups of 10-15) and then meet virtually.
- Create planning groups – fair booth ideas, service projects, fundraisers, future meeting themes.
- Use your tech-savvy teens. Let them coordinate online meetings, upload information for members, record a project demo.
- Create a plan before the meeting and assign members opportunities to lead activities or tasks.

Resources: Adapted from Michigan State University Extension guide on Social Media Texting Expectations

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