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Safeguarding Our Children

Protocols for Safeguarding Children and Teens in Online Programming

As numerous organizations temporarily move their programming online in response to the Coronavirus, several have reached out inquiring as to what measures should be implemented to safeguard children from maltreatment in these virtual settings. Taking time to consider what, if any, new risks are introduced when programming or daily operations change, is a smart move. Below we share some factors to consider and suggested protocols for mitigating risk in online communications and programming.

As a general rule for youth-serving organizations, interactions between adults and children should be observable and interruptible. In person, this is best accomplished by two-deep leadership (more than one adult is present) or by utilizing open layouts, glass walls, windows in doors, and inviting other adults to drop by when two-deep leadership is not possible. The same principle applies to virtual communications as well.

Two-Deep Leadership

Two-deep leadership in virtual communications with children and teens means that texts, emails, WhatsApp messages, and other social media communications should copy another adult (e.g., administrator or parent). It also means that two staff members are present for video meetings, or in the case of private tutoring, a parent is present. The great thing about online meetings, is that it is actually more convenient to introduce two-deep leadership to the program without adding significant inconvenience to the second adult. In the case of a class meeting, administrators can open the virtual meeting in a small window from their remote office. In the case of b'nei mitzvah lessons, parents can set up a laptop in the kitchen, dining room, or other living space.

When having two adults in the virtual program or class is not practical, ensure that the interaction is observable and interruptible, much as you would for in-person interactions. To this end, consider how you schedule, communicate and document.

Scheduling

Schedule online events on a shared or public calendar that includes a link to the meeting so that other adults know where you will be and when you will be there, and have the option to drop in. Ideally the calendar should be shared with staff, parents, and children, a practice that should be possible for schools moving regularly scheduled classes online. This becomes harder for tutoring or mentoring sessions, such as when a synagogue schedules b'nei mitzvah lessons, and in these situations sharing the calendar events with parents and other administrators/colleagues is sufficient. In all cases, adults should not spontaneously call, text, or communicate via social media

with children, without planning the meeting in advance in accordance with the guidelines stated here.

Communication Channels

Class meetings, online programs, and private tutoring sessions should be scheduled and held on professional, rather than personal accounts. This means emailing only from organizational emails and hosting video meetings via the organization's video conferencing account. If your organization doesn't have professional emails or video conferencing technology, consider investing in some; the change does not have to be costly, and may even be free. Whenever possible, this rule should apply to social media as well: staff who plan to communicate with children on social media should have a professional social media account that is separate from their personal one. In addition, communications on social media should occur in official groups (e.g., Facebook group or WhatsApp group chat) that are monitored by administrators and closed to the public.

Documentation

Online communications should be documented (much the same way in-person attendance is taken), including the date, start time, end time, agenda, names of participating adults and names of participating children. Recording video meetings increases their observability, but only retroactively. Even so, recording may be a useful safeguarding tool for organizations with limited supervisory capacity, in that supervisors can make known that they will review (or "spot check") a subset of the recordings, or a specific recording if concerns emerge.

Whatever protocols you choose to implement now, consider how you might formalize them into an official policy for all online communications, not just while regular programming has been interrupted. Finally, whether protocol or official policy, the safeguards you choose can only be effective if they are widely communicated, understood, and enforced.

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