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Before You Send a Young Person a “Friend Request”

Are you on a social networking site? Do you text? If there are older children or teens in your life, you can bet that their answer to both of these questions is a scoffing, eye-rolling “Like, who doesn’t?” And if you are an interested, modern parent or caring adult, you may be using social networking or texting to stay in touch with the young people in your life. After all, prevailing wisdom tells us to use kids’ own media choices to reach them; it is likely that no vigilant adult would allow a teen to operate a social network site without friend access.

Yet, these tools have their risks. What about the attendant risks for responsible, well-intentioned adults? Just as adults who work with children must be cautious and thoughtful with how they interact with kids in person, so too must adults watch their online communications with young people. Not only must you protect yourself from allegations of inappropriateness, you must teach kids what to expect from adults online. Additionally, employees and volunteers should be aware of an organization’s policies regarding such communication. Read on for a simple standard for making sure that your online communications are exemplary and without reproach.

We have before applied the “PAN” standard for appropriate touch in real-life physical settings. If an adult touches a child in any way, it must be **P**ublic, **A**ppropriate, and **N**on-sexual. The “PAN” standard is a useful way to think about “virtual” touch, as well.

Public. Your communications with children online should be as public as possible. In a text message, whenever feasible, copy another adult on the communications. Similarly, comments on social network sites should be made on their public “wall” or other open portion of the site rather than as a personal message. Not only is it more difficult to misconstrue a message not shrouded in secrecy, its public nature will hold you more accountable to what I’ll term as “adult professionalism.”

Appropriate. Make sure that your communication with kids is for a good reason, that the communication is warranted by some other activity or event. No matter how good your intentions, it raises red flags when an adult texts a child out of the blue with something like, “So what’s up?”

Non-sexual. It may seem obvious that any online communication with a young person must be non-sexual. What you may not appreciate is just how high the standard is. Beware of physical compliments (“You looked great at the meeting last night”) or signs

of affection (“Your message made me feel so good”) that, even if innocently intended, could be construed as sexual.

In addition to these standards, remember that in any communication between an adult and a child, the adult bears the responsibility for keeping things on the straight and narrow. Be wary of the teen who wants to chat via text or is suggestive or provocative in his or her messages.

Similarly, make sure that you have an idea of the conversation you are joining and the online party you are joining. Being the “friend” of a young person who is circulating inappropriate material is problematic in and of itself—even if your conduct is just fine.

Working with young people carries the responsibility to *always* model the manner of behavior kids should expect from adults. As communications become increasingly virtual, you must be aware of what you are doing—and how you are doing it—online, as well.

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