



Text Messaging – Safeguarding Guidelines

This is one of a series of documents intended to set the standard for behaviour within Rowing. It refers to care of all Children and Young People, under the age of 18 years, within Irish Rowing.

Text messaging: benefits and risks

Many NGBs, and other sports organisations are keen to utilise text messaging systems to help to improve the success of programmes. This may be by helping to remind young people about the sport and activity sessions that they have signed up to, and by promoting additional activities. The significant benefit of text messaging is that it is not only cheap, but it is one of the most direct forms of communication as most young people have mobile phones with them at all times.

It is therefore hoped that text messages will help to:

- attract more young people to the sessions, activities and clubs
- improve retention rates
- effectively signpost young people to other high quality, accredited activities and sports clubs at the end of particular programmes.

For children and young people the safeguarding risks associated with texting include:

- inappropriate access to, use or sharing of personal details (e.g. names, mobile phone numbers)
- unwanted contact with children/young people by adults with poor intent; text bullying by peers
- being sent offensive or otherwise inappropriate materials
- grooming for sexual abuse
- direct contact and actual abuse

For adults involved risks include:

- misinterpretation of their communication with young people
- potential investigation (internal or by statutory agencies)
- potential disciplinary action

Due to these risks, the CPSU has produced this guidance, which NGBs, and clubs should follow when using text messages to communicate with young people. These guidelines will help to ensure that effective safeguarding measures are put in place to protect children and young people and to minimise risk.

Bulk or Bundled Text Messages

These guidelines primarily relate to the use of bulk (or bundled) texts i.e. the same text message being sent to several young people involved with a particular activity or programme. Bulk (or bundled) texting presents fewer opportunities for misuse and abuse than personal, one-to-one texting arrangements between coaches/volunteers and children which should be strongly discouraged. Although clubs and other sports organisations may develop and operate their own texting systems, there are also commercial organisations that offer bulk/bundle texting services, so practical arrangements will vary.

Guidelines for using Bulk (or Bundled) Text Messaging

1. Only staff that have been through relevant safeguarding checks (e.g. enhanced level checks and references) should use and have access to the text messaging system. Ideally these staff should also have undertaken a recognised safeguarding training (e.g. 'Safeguarding & Protecting Children' workshop or an equivalent).
2. The numbers of staff with access to the system, particularly data relating to young people, should be kept to a practical minimum, and their details recorded and maintained by the organisation's lead child protection officer. A record should be made of the mobile phone number/s which will be used to send the texts – ideally this should be a single number used consistently. Some systems involve a commercial bulk/bundle texts provider actually issuing the text messages, but in other cases this may be undertaken by a member of staff.
3. Consent must be obtained prior to sending the young people text messages. For young people aged 15 or under, specific consent must be obtained from their parents, for example via an amended Sport Unlimited registration form or similar. Parents of younger children should be offered the option to be copied into any texts their child will be sent. Although parental consent is not required for young people aged 16 and over, written consent must be obtained from these individuals themselves. Please note that for the over 16's (who are children as defined by the Children Act 1989) it is still recommended that their parents are also informed of the intention to send their children text messages, the reason for this, and that the organisation has taken steps to ensure their child's safety in this respect.
4. The young people's mobile phone numbers should be stored in either a locked secure cabinet, or on an electronic system which is password protected, with access only available to the staff identified in point 1 above. The mobile phone numbers should not be shared with anyone else, and should only be used for the purposes of the text messaging system.
5. All text messages must be sent via a bundle to a group of young people i.e. the same standard text message being sent to every member of the group. The text messaging system should never be used to send text messages on an individual basis (i.e. to just one person), or to less than 5 people.
6. All text messages sent must make it clear to the young people receiving it which organisation has sent the message, rather than simply giving the mobile phone number that the system uses to send the message.
7. Young people should not be given the opportunity to text back to the system. It should only be used as a one-way communication channel.
8. The text messages which are sent must never contain any offensive, abusive or inappropriate language.
9. When this guidance is being provided in relation to the a club programme, all of the text messages sent must be directly related to the programmes/sessions. The text messaging system may be used to signpost young people already on the programme to alternative sport and physical activity opportunities. However, the text messaging system and mobile phone numbers must never be used for any other reason or in any other way.

10. All of the text messages sent should include a sentence at the bottom which provides the young people with the opportunity to unsubscribe from receiving any further text messages.
11. All text messages sent to young people should also be sent to an external moderator – preferably someone with designated safeguarding responsibility in the organisation. Hence, it is essential that the moderator's mobile phone number is included in every 'communication group' that is set up, and in every text messaging bundle that is sent out. The moderator's role will be to ensure that the text system is being used appropriately, and to respond to any concerns arising.
12. Consideration will be given to initiating the organisation's child protection and disciplinary procedures should any breaches of this protocol arise, including consultation with or referral to statutory agencies if indications of illegal activity (e.g. grooming for abuse) come to light.

Guidelines for Texting Individual Young People

The use of text messaging to communicate with individual young participants increases the vulnerability of both the young person and (typically) the coach - see 'benefits and risks' above. However, there may be exceptional circumstances in which it is justified, subject to appropriate safeguarding considerations. For example the coach of an elite athlete who is not part of a group of participants may need to pass on information about practical training arrangements or feedback on competition results. In these circumstances the following guidelines will apply:

1. The coach should have been through relevant safeguarding checks (e.g. enhanced level checks and references), and have undertaken a recognised safeguarding training (e.g. 'Safeguarding & Protecting Children' workshop or an equivalent).
2. The decision to use text messaging should not be made by a coach in isolation, and should be discussed and agreed with the organisation's designated safeguarding officer. This will ensure that the organisation's safeguarding expectations and requirements can be clarified, and an undertaking given by the coach to comply with them.
3. In circumstances where this guidance is being developed and applied retrospectively, clubs/organisations should take steps to identify where texting is already being used by staff to communicate with young athletes, and to ensure that these guidelines are both effectively communicated to and agreed with all parties.
4. The details of coaches using text messaging should be recorded and maintained by the organisation's lead child protection officer. A record should be made of the mobile phone number/s which will be used to send the texts – ideally this should be a single number used consistently.
5. Consent must be obtained prior to sending the young people text messages. For young people aged 15 or under, specific consent must be obtained from their parents. Parents should be offered the option to be copied into any texts their child will be sent.

6. Although parental consent is not required for young people aged 16 and over, written consent must be obtained from these individuals themselves. Please note that for the over 16's (who are children as defined by the Children Act 1989) it is still recommended that their parents are also informed of the intention to send their children text messages, the reason for this, and that the organisation has taken steps to ensure their child's safety in this respect.
7. Information to young athletes and parents should include details of how any concerns arising from the use of text messaging can be reported in line with the organisation's safeguarding policies and procedures.
8. The young people's mobile phone numbers should be stored in either a locked secure cabinet, or on an electronic system which is password protected, with access only available to the staff identified in point 1 above. The mobile phone numbers should not be shared with anyone else, and should only be used for the purposes of the specific sports programme.
9. The content should relate solely to sports activity. Messages should reflect the professional relationship between coach and athlete, and the coach's position of trust. Text messages and mobile phones must never be used for any other reason or in any other way.
10. The text messages which are sent must never contain any offensive, abusive or inappropriate language, and care must be taken to avoid over-familiarity or language that could be misinterpreted or misconstrued.
11. All text messages sent to young people should also be sent either to a parent or to an external moderator – preferably someone with designated safeguarding responsibility in the organisation. The moderator's role will be to ensure that text messaging is being used appropriately in line with the organisation's procedures, and to respond to any concerns arising.
12. Consideration will be given to initiating the organisation's child protection and disciplinary procedures should any breaches of this protocol arise, including consultation with or referral to statutory agencies if indications of illegal activity (e.g. grooming for abuse) come to light.
13. Young people should not be encouraged to text back; ideally it should only be used as a one-way communication channel. Young people should be made aware that if or when they choose or need to text the coach (for example to confirm attendance or advise on a travel delay), they should ensure that the content of messages relates only to matters relevant to the sports activity, and that they are (like the coach) required to copy in either a parent or the identified moderator (e.g. club welfare officer) to all communications.
14. All young people and parents should be given the opportunity to withdraw from receiving any further text messages.