

DIGITAL YOUTH WORK

Youth Work in an Online Setting during Covid-19



WHAT IS DIGITAL YOUTH WORK?

- Focuses on the digitalisation of the youth work sector and youth work practice
- Means proactively using and/or addressing digital media and technology in youth work practice as a tool, an activity and/or as content
- Includes a broad range of methods and approaches that can happen in face-to-face situations as well as in online settings
- Has the same aims and is underpinned by the same ethics, values and principles as youth work

Taking Youth Work Online During Covid-19

One aspect of digital youth work is youth work in an online setting. Taking youth work online takes many forms and varies depending on the organisation, the infrastructure, funding and resources. Most youth projects have had to physically close (excluding acute essential services), and many are moving elements of their work online during the Covid-19 restrictions.

It can be a daunting experience if you are not familiar with doing youth work in an online setting, however, there are resources and training available for the sector. Whether you are staying in touch, providing information and support or engaging interactively, this resource was developed by NYCI to support you to consider best practice in youth work in an online setting. We aim to inspire confidence to create online spaces for young people and youth workers to explore, to encounter and solve problems together in a safe environment where the risks have been considered and managed.

MOVING OFFLINE YOUTH WORK ONLINE - DIGITAL YOUTH WORK BEST PRACTICE

The following is a compilation of helpful hints and considerations when exploring moving youth work online, doing digital youth work and applying youth work ethics, principles and values to online settings.

Whole Organisational Approach

Approach: Handle your organisation's move online systematically

Strategy: Embed digital youth work into your organisation's strategy/ vision

Culture: Innovative and experimental- try new approaches, learn from failure and success.

Governance and Management: Integrate digital considerations into policies, ethical standards, processes and planning.

Maintain Professional Relationships and Boundaries

Avoid use of personal accounts, set up work accounts where possible. Some platforms won't allow work profiles, this is an important question to discuss within the organisation - what is acceptable to your organisation? Avoid providing personal contact details. Establish clear boundaries around communication times, methods and frequency/length- you can consider providing an emergency communication channel where necessary.

Make Informed Choices on Digital Platform/Tool Use

Consider young people's rights, safety, accessibility and enjoyment. There are lots of great resources and digital youth work champions from which to learn, you may find that within your organisation there is an opportunity to share best practice. See the [NYCI Digital Youth Work Padlet](#).

When selecting your digital platforms/ tools, compare the features and settings to determine what you can use effectively and safely. See [here](#) for support re: exploring digital options.

Explore Platform Settings

Get to know it! Before committing to a particular digital platform or tool, spend time learning what that platform can do, and familiarise yourself with the security and control features available- use them to maximise safety! Can you adjust the privacy settings on the software or platform? Most digital platforms have tutorials and supports.

Are you Conducting Group Work?

- What measures can you put in place for securing the group discussion on your platform? Check out the settings options of the digital platform and consider features such as waiting rooms for control over admitting participant to group; enabling/disabling private chat among participants; permissions to share screens; are young people able to control their environment (switch off cameras and microphones)?
- Consider what is a manageable/ constructive number for online groups?
- Consider age when exploring platforms to use – see **consent** for more info.
- Consider the mix of different age groups. How should they be delineated?

CONSENT

Digital Age of Consent in Ireland

The law provides protection around the use of children's personal data for marketing or to create online user profiles or accounts.

The digital age of consent refers to the age at which children may legally consent to services that process personal information, without needing the explicit approval of their parent or guardian. This includes signing up for digital and social media platforms (e.g. Facebook). **In Ireland, this is 16 years.**

This imposes an obligation on providers of online goods and services offered to children to seek to obtain the consent or authorisation of a child's parent or guardian where the child is under the age of 16 years.

Additionally, most companies set minimum ages, so look at the legal terms and conditions of the digital platform you are using! **Many provide that a person under the age of 13 is not allowed to set up an account, even if they have their parent's consent.**

Consider: what are the age groups you work with? You will not always be able to communicate with all age groups using the same platforms or methods.



Access

It is an unfortunate reality that many young people do not have digital access, or their access is extremely limited. Can your organisation do a digital capacity and skills audit with young people that you work with?

Consider: Are data costs an inhibiting factor? Can you possibly establish less data-exhaustive communication or check-in methods for these young people? Video communications can use a lot of bandwidth. Simple measures can improve connections: turning off other WIFI devices during calls, turning the camera off if needed, and trying lower bandwidth methods of communication can all assist.

Consider: How will you support those who aren't confident engaging online? Can you provide training or an intro session before you launch the group in an online setting? This is an opportunity to enhance media literacy skills for both youth workers and young people that you work with.

Moving youth work online can increase access to some isolated young people who find it easier to engage online.

Ratios Apply the same staff ratios and supervision principles as you would in face-to-face work.

Records Keep secure records/logs of participation.

Environment for Young Person Consider the new environment for the young person. Are young people in a private or shared space at home?

- Consider guidelines re: parental presence in the home while online with the young person.
- Conversely, remember that the young person may not have the privacy or freedom they usually do to discuss certain topics with you.

Recording Online Sessions You will need to fully consider and manage the practice of recording. If you have assessed there is a need to record (or live-stream etc.), ensure all young people and their parents/ guardians are fully informed and consent to this before participating. Keep records of consent.



Parent/ Guardian/ Young Person Consent

Do not confuse the digital age of consent with your organisation's consent. Your organisation should have written parent/guardian consent, and young person consent for your digital youth work. Explore the online form options that are available, email communications with all stakeholders to complement your prior permission arrangements. It should clarify exactly what your online communications will be. Consider:

- Can a code of behaviour/group contract with the young person or group be incorporated into this?
- Support parents/guardians to better understand their children's online lives, and to engage in the process of supporting them to be safe online. Opening up a conversation about online safety and agreeing on boundaries can make all the difference. See [here](#) for dedicated resources for parents and online safety.



Media Literacy and Online Safety

Children and young people are spending more time online due to social distancing. Assist young people to take control of their relationship with digitalisation, digital media and technology through education and critical thinking. The best safeguard against online dangers is to be informed and internet-aware. You can use these [resources](#) to educate and support young people with being safe online. Talk to them regularly about the benefits and risks of the online world and give them space to ask questions and talk about what worries them. Now is an opportunity to enhance media literacy among youth workers and young people.

The youth work sector manages risk in a face-to-face setting, it can manage risk in an online setting through good practice and putting policy and procedures in place to ensure the supervision and safety of the digital youth work your organisation provides. It is important to understand some of the risks that exist for children online:

- Loss of privacy: Sharing information in public that should be kept private (once posted online, it is outside their control). Some platforms require young person or parent/guardian to create an account, others can be accessed with a link without young people or parent/guardian needing to give the platform their data.
- Inappropriate content: Adult material, hate speech or materials, violence, dangerous dares or challenges, dangerous advice (e.g. eating disorders)
- Illegal Content: Some websites show illegal or criminal content. Others that are legal might have unregulated advice or are meant for adults only
- Cyberbullying: Bullying in the form of abusive and threatening texts or emails, messages on social media/ chat rooms, or the posting of photos or video clips
- Child Abuse Images and Online Grooming: Individuals targeting children through sexual coercion or extortion, often on social media or gaming platforms.

 Escalate any incidents or child protection and welfare concerns immediately, in line with your policies and procedures. See [here](#) for NYCI's Child Protection during Covid-19 resource.

GETTING STARTED

Covid-19 has caused many youth organisations to undergo a digital transformation, without warning and varied experience. While it might feel easier to respond to requests and situations as they happen, it is best (and much more manageable) to approach this systematically, and by taking some steps to develop a strategy and guidelines. Some ideas for starting out:

Collaboration

Talk within your organisation! Be open about where you're at; what you know and what you don't know. Curiosity is a strength. Gather ideas and insights from the different people in your organisation about moving online. Share best practice within your organisation and the sector. Collaborate.

Needs, Capacity and Risk Assessment

- Conduct a digital skills audit within your organisation and with the young people you work with.
- Conduct a Risk Assessment.
- NYCI's [Child Protection During Covid-19](#) provides support with how to go about the risk assessment process.

Develop and Update Existing Policy and Guidelines

Apply the same principles online as you do offline. All staff should refresh knowledge of existing policies and procedures such as Confidentiality and Data Protection; Codes of Behaviour for Staff/ Volunteers and for Young People; Child Protection Policy/ Procedures and Child Safeguarding Statements; Acceptable Usage Policy; Use of Media Policy and Procedures; and Supervision of Staff Policy and Procedures

Each organisation's policies and procedures are different, tailored to your individual needs and practices. You should look to similarly apply this lens in your online work. Consider updating policies OR make a simple, straightforward guidance, procedure or appendix to complement your existing policies, that specifically addresses the current circumstances. This [Tusla](#) guide can help with guiding principles for some relevant policies.

If in your review of your existing policies and procedures your organisation has identified a need to create a specific online working policy, the following are good starting points when considering how to formulate one:

Do you already have an Acceptable Usage Policy (AUP) which governs the use of internet in your service? Many of the elements of an AUP assist in developing an online working policy. See [here](#) for AUP resources, including the [webwise.ie](#) AUP generator. While aimed at schools, it is a great starting point for adaptation.

If you do not have an AUP that is OK, you might not normally use the internet with young people in your project. Do you have a code of behaviour for staff/ volunteers and for young people? This serves as an excellent guide for some of the main considerations when setting parameters for digital youth work. Ultimately, you want to clarify what is deemed acceptable use, behaviour and guidelines online for all users.

[NYCI Support and Resources during Covid-19](#)
[NYCI STEAM and Digital Youth Work](#)
[NYCI Child Protection Programme](#)



Digital youth work is an ongoing process; you will adapt as you learn and as the circumstances change. All the links to further resources from this document are in **one padlet**, under relevant headings. This is a 'living list' that can be updated and added to: we encourage you to share any relevant, appropriate resources to the existing headings.