The following are guidelines, not policies, and are under development, pending final approval by University of Illinois Extension Administration and Legal Counsel. This information is being provided as guidelines and best practices to assist staff and volunteers in working through individual situations related to social media and its impact on the Illinois 4-H Youth Development program.

Illinois 4-H Social Media Guidelines

Purpose of this Document

Social Media is technology used to connect people with others. It is utilized by the majority of youth, with applications that include Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, and many more. Many views exist on how a social media presence by a 4-H staff person and volunteers should be handled.

These guidelines apply to University of Illinois 4-H staff members and volunteers who allow youth to access their online content. These guidelines are intended to take a moderate, “real world” approach, to help ensure that the youth-adult interaction which occurs through social media is a safe, appropriate, and positive experience for all concerned.

Expectations of 4-H Staff and Volunteers

Unlike many other career and volunteer roles, your actions outside of work impact your ability to function as a trusted, responsible member of the 4-H youth development community. Your offline and online actions are viewed by 4-H youth and parents within the capacity of your 4-H role, speaking to your credibility, and reflecting on Illinois 4-H as a whole. For these reasons, the following expectations are in place for staff members and volunteers who allow 4-H youth to view their online content in social media settings.

- You are a human being. It is perfectly acceptable to have online content that shows you are a real person who has friends, has fun and has a life outside of your 4-H role.
- All expectations of your offline conduct while representing 4-H apply to your online conduct too. Social media is part of the “real world.”
- Your social media presence should not contain any content, media, or information by yourself or others that (1) undermines your position as a trusted, responsible youth professional or volunteer, (2) does not properly represent the values and standards of Illinois 4-H, or (3) damages the image of 4-H and/or University of Illinois. This includes content (posted by yourself or others on your site) that:
  - Contains gossip, innuendo or unflattering references towards others, false and defamatory statements;
  - Reveal confidential information about the University, staff, volunteers, 4-H youth participants, etc.;
  - Is not consistent with that of a professional or volunteer who values their colleagues, stakeholders and those they serve;
  - Conflicts with the University’s non-discrimination statement.
- If your social media presence conflicts with any of the above bullets, you should make the necessary adjustments to your content, ask the owner of offending content to “un-link” you
from that content on their site, or establish a separate “personal” account that 4-H youth cannot access.

- Do not rely on privacy settings to protect inappropriate content. These settings and their conditions can change by the website at any time, and anything posted online will likely stay online well into the future.

**Recommended Practices**

The following are general guidelines to follow when working with social media as a staff member or volunteer of the 4-H youth development profession:

- Use your own best professional judgment. The items below are only guidelines.
- **Have big eyes and ears and a small mouth** – Avoid responding to every youth post or injecting yourself into every conversation.
  - *Think of an aunt/uncle or other adult whom you adored as a teenager. Did you invite them to go with you on dates, or take them whenever you went to hang out with your friends?* Be a safe presence in their online world, but understand that “less is more.”
  - Intervene if you assess a potentially dangerous situation, but understand the appropriateness of language or conversation topics between youth is usually a matter better left to their parental guidance. What would your authority be if you saw that young person chatting with their friends at a local mall or other public place?
    - Exception: When the content could reflect negatively on 4-H or impact an area of your professional or volunteer responsibility.
- Maintain contact with youth on Extension organization/club “pages” and not personal pages.
- Take advantage of opportunities to share guidelines for appropriate use of social media as part of a program offered to all members. Include possible outcomes and consequences of posting appropriate and inappropriate information.
- **Be a bright light, but not a spotlight** – In activities such as photo tagging, you should not identify youth.
  - Most youth tag themselves and others with great frequency, but be aware of those rare ones who don’t. There may be good reasons. Err on the conservative side – if you don’t have permission from that person, then don’t do it.
  - Unless a young person tags themselves frequently, in photos that are available to your networks, it is a better practice not to tag at all. Instead tag yourself so that your “friends” will be notified, and let them finish the tagging themselves if they so desire.
- **Be somewhat exclusive** – Use privacy settings to limit who can view all content you post. For example, allowing your photos to be viewed by “friends of friends” is usually appropriate, and preferred because it’s part of the fun of a social network, but do not make them “available to everyone.”
- Remember to maintain an appropriate level of professionalism throughout your social media interactions. Is your post something that you would want your boss/employer; family; or neighbors to see?
- Have fun, as you leverage your skills and experience to be effective!