



Everyone is Doing It!

Managing social media in the early childhood ecosystem

by Fran Simon

Everyone's doing it: Tweeting, 'friending,' blogging, linking, texting, and otherwise zipping around all over the social media landscape. Social media has become more than just a pastime. It is officially now another important communication medium early childhood educators use to establish and enhance meaningful relationships with parents, colleagues, staff members, policymakers, and funders. We're also asking some very big questions:

- What does all of this social media activity mean for early childhood education?
- How can the adult members of the early childhood ecosystem use social media to achieve their goals and still ensure the privacy, integrity, and safety of children and families?

- How can managers and leaders help staff members use social media with purpose and balance computer time with other practical responsibilities?

As social media use becomes more prevalent in early childhood, we are all searching for balance and thinking about how to establish boundaries. It's time to begin planning dynamic and responsive social media policies that reflect the culture of our organizations within the context of best practice and ethical conduct.

This article frames the factors to consider as you develop policies and procedures for your setting. Since social media platforms change every day, this piece will suggest processes for social media policy development and offer an outline of important elements to consider, rather than providing specific instructions on how to use social media. This piece also references the *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment* and other common standards of best practice to govern our explorations.

Social Media in ECE

In early childhood we are just beginning to wrangle the big questions about how



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in her administrative toolkit, so she set out to learn more and do more to connect early childhood educators to technology. Fran used those skills in her positions at Teaching Strategies, Inc., the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), and as Vice President of the Technology and Young Children Interest Forum of NAEYC. A frequent presenter at national conferences, Fran is now the Chief Engagement Officer of Engagement Strategies, LLC, and the founder of Early Childhood Investigations Webinars, an ongoing series of free webinars for early education professionals.

to manage electronic communications and relationship development within the parameters of what is best for children and families. Wrangling social media is first about considering your program's goals and the people who use (or may use) social media. In assessing your program's current and future use of social networks, here are a few critical questions to ask yourself about your organization:

- Are our stakeholders using social media to connect with one another professionally? Do we want them to engage with others virtually?
- How much do we know about best practice for using social media for professional purposes? What do we need to know first?
- Do the people who are using social media in our organization have established goals for using it professionally, especially as it relates to professional communication and representation of our program? Is there a social media strategy?
- Do we have any established rules of engagement or social media guidelines in place?
- Do the members of our community know how, when, and what to communicate as official representatives of our program? Do they know how to separate personal communication from professional communication?
- Are the relationships meaningful, positive, professional, and productive that have been fostered and/or established through social media?
- Is use of social media in our organization distracting or destructive, or is it effective and productive?
- Can we identify social media evangelists and/or experts who can help lead the way to best practice?
- What resources do we already have in place to support social media implementation?
- Do our organizational climate and our existing policies make social media engagement possible?

First, Become Informed

Most people in your program's ecosystem probably know what Facebook is, and many may already use it for personal purposes. But how much do people in your organization know about using social media for professional purposes? The stakes get higher when you factor in the special concerns associated with communication with families and staff members about children. It makes sense to consult a social media professional who not only knows how to use it for professional engagement, but also knows something about your field. I do not recommend retaining a professional to *implement* your social networking activities on a day-to-day basis, but do recommend professional training and technical assistance before you begin.

The chicken or the egg: Policy before strategy, or strategy before policy?

Unless people in your organization have already begun using social media, it probably makes sense to develop the strategies before you put together the rules of engagement. You will want to explore best practice in social media implementation and select the social media sites and tactics that will fit your organization best before you plan how to govern the use of the sites. Again, consulting a professional would be a good place to start.

Recommendations for social media policy development

1) Develop a Social Media Policy coalition.

We know it takes a village to do almost everything good for children. Our field is highly collaborative. Why should the process of developing your social media policy be any different? A comprehensive social media policy should anticipate the real-life applica-

tion of everyone who will be impacted by its implementation. I recommend putting together a team that includes a representative from every segment in your program's ecosystem: parents, staff, board members, community members, and other representatives. But don't get carried away! Keep the group size to 4-8 people who are well informed about the objectives of the group and goals for the policy. There are at least two great reasons for this collaboration:

There are those who believe policies are best written by the people at the top of the organization or by their boards. There are at least two great reasons to collaborate with representatives within your organization on your policies:

- **Buy-in:** Getting opinions from around the organization will help ensure that you have evangelists who will help bring the policy to life within the organization. A few happy people will go a long way to ensure smooth implementation and adherence to the policies.
- **Perspective:** It's difficult to anticipate how all of this engagement will impact the various stakeholders in your organization. Who better to learn from than the folks who will be impacted?

2) Keep the policy (and the process to develop it) simple and brief.

While collaboration is important, developing a social media policy is not rocket-science. It should not take months and consume a lot of energy. Make it your objective to develop a working draft in the first meeting, and hold no more than two meetings overall. Try to achieve a final version with fewer than four drafts. Then make a final decision, and call it a day . . . for now. (See #6 for more about revisions.)

We know the more text there is to read in a policy, the less likely the policy will be read or implemented. Keep your policy to no more than eight pages, fewer if possible. Use concise, memorable 'sound-bite worthy' phrases to introduce the key points. For example, the phrase "First, do no harm" is memorable. Follow the key phrases with more detail, but keep the details simple. Good policies are readable, make sense, are easy to implement, and enforceable.

3) 3 P's: Make it positive, plausible, and possible.

As early childhood educators, we know stating our expectations positively and clearly more often results in the desired behaviors: We say "Use your inside voice" not "Stop yelling!" Well, the same principle applies to policies we outline for adults. Encourage appropriate use of social media tools. Positive guidelines set the boundaries without being punitive. For example, if you want to include a policy about setting up classroom 'Pages' on Facebook that ensure confidentiality and privacy, say, "It's a great idea to set up classroom pages on Facebook. To ensure the confidentiality of the children is protected, you must:

- Set the privacy settings for your page so that only the parents in your classroom (or those to whom they grant permission) can see the page.
- Obtain permission from parents if you plan to share photographs.
- Use initials instead of children's full names."

Keep it real. Your program isn't going to use social media as its only method of communication. Keeping your policies and procedures plausible and possible means thinking like your stakeholders think and being realistic.

4) Align with the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) first published *The Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment* in 1989 (and revised it in 2005). NAEYC recently added a Supplement for Administrators, and reaffirmed the 2005 version. The Code provides a framework for your social media policy. Here are a few of the principles that relate to social media (p. 9):

- *Never harm children.* Clearly, social media is ripe with potential for child exploitation. It is imperative that children's confidentiality be protected at all costs. And children should not engage on social networking sites designed for adults. Your policy will need to outline how to engage using photographs, video, and other media while still maintaining safety and security for the children in your organization. For example, your policy should include a statement like, "Social networking sites intended for adults are only to be used by the adults in your program. Avoid sharing the names and confidential details about children on social media sites."
- *Ensure that programs for young children are based on current knowledge and research of child development and early childhood education.* The appropriate use of social media empowers educators to learn more and collaborate more effectively than ever before. Your policy needs to ensure access to the essential tools, and training and technical assistance to provide the necessary tools. In 2011 and beyond, social media is as essential for professional development as books, journals, and direct training.

- *Respect and support families in their task of nurturing children.* It's important to offer an array of methods of engaging with parents whenever and however it works for them. Parents are on social networks. Your policy will need to outline how to best use social media to support and educate parents along with all of the traditional methods of supporting families.
- *Serve as an advocate for children, their families, and their teachers in community and society.* As evidenced by recent natural disasters, social media offers incredible power for advocacy and outreach. Because it is so impactful, our policies have to clearly delineate and define representation of personal views versus those views which represent the organization. However, policies must encourage, rather than discourage everyone in the organization to advocate on behalf of children and families. Your policy might include statements like, "We encourage you to use social media to inform parents and the community at large about developmentally appropriate practice. From time to time, we may provide you with links to information that you should share with your networks."

5) Allocate resources to support your social media policy implementation.

Using social media effectively is not a one-time event. It takes ongoing, regular activity. Your teams will need resources to support their work: access to the Internet, professional development, and ongoing coaching and mentoring. You will need to adjust your budgets and staffing plans accordingly. Your policy will need to outline the details of how, when, and where teachers and other staff members will have access to the equipment, training, and ongoing support they need to use social media effectively. It may even stipulate the

amount of money allocated to each classroom to support professional development related to social media implementation, and the specific times during the day that staff members will have access to equipment.

6) 3 R's: Roll it out, revisit, and revise.

Let's assume you reach the end of your social media policy journey. You've collaborated, drafted, revised, and gathered support. Now it's time to introduce the new policies. Staff and family meetings, newsletters, email blasts, and your usual methods of communicating policies will be just the beginning of the roll-out. You'll also need to model appropriate use and ask your evangelists and social media adopters to model and encourage implementation of the policy.

Follow up and monitor along the way. Don't forget about ongoing professional development and ongoing technical assistance! To make this all work, you will need to join the same social media sites and engage with staff members and families. You will not only be in a position to model best practice, you will also be able to monitor your program's online activities.

Just when you think you have reached the end of your journey, you will need to examine your policies in light of new developments: technologies, your stakeholders, and cultural changes. Good policies are living, breathing documents that evolve over time. Be prepared to update your policy at least once a year.

While the task of setting off as a social media pioneer seems daunting, paving the way with forward-thinking social media policies should not be overwhelming. If you surround yourself with a strong social media planning team, you will be able to share resources and great thinking. Soon you'll be 'doing it,' too!

Looking for more concrete examples from which to draw? Start with this outstanding database of example social media policies: Social Media Employee Policy Examples from Over 100 Organizations From Social Media Today (<http://ow.ly/5CLUd>).

Social Media Policy Resources

- 10 Must-Haves for Your Social Media Policy: Mashable
- Wild Apricot Blog Article
- Social Media Governance: Online Database of Social Media Policies
- Advice and samples from NonProfit-Marketing Guide
- Tips for Writing Your First Social Media Policy: NTEN
- *Got Social Media? Policy Tool* by Beth Kanter

References

NAEYC. (2005). *Code of ethical conduct and statement of commitment*. [Online] Available at www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSETH05.pdf

NAEYC. (2006). *Code of ethical conduct. Supplement for program administrators*. [Online] Available at www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSETH05_supp.pdf

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