

SoA GUIDANCE NOTE 2023



Communicating with minors

Guidance notes can give only a brief, generalised overview and the SoA cannot give legal advice. Members are always welcome to consult the SoA for bespoke advice. We try to keep the guides up to date but if you spot errors or omissions, please let us know by emailing info@societyofauthors.org marked 'Guides feedback'.

1 Your responsibility

A minor is anyone under the age of 18.

It is the responsibility of every adult to safeguard the wellbeing of minors. There is a world of difference between public conversations at a school visit or a festival, and private contact or messaging. When it comes to private messaging, it is vital that you protect both yourself and the minor.

Minors are now so familiar with social media that they may not think twice about conversing with you - by email, Facebook, Instagram, direct messaging, twitter, video-call... even snail-mail.

2 Sources of information

We consulted the members of our Children's Writers & Illustrators Group Committee who give this wise advice. In addition you might like to see these two useful links:

2(a) Material in magazines and newspapers

The Independent Press Standards Organisation has a Code of Practice. Go to <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice> and see in particular points 6 and 7.

2(b) Data protection

The Information Commissioner's Office has a Guide to the UK's Data Protection Law. Go to <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/> and search for 'Children and the UK GDPR'. See also the SoA's guidance on *Data Protection*.

3 Communicating with minors

"For me it's simple. If you're under 18 and I don't know you personally, I won't correspond with you."

As a general rule, never engage privately with minors – in any way, on social media or otherwise – if you don't know them personally. It's OK to respond to teachers, parents, guardians etc, but not to a communication that has come directly from a minor.

If you are contacted by a minor asking questions for (say) a school project, you may be happy to respond if (and only if) it is explicitly clear that the minor is messaging with an appropriate adult involved. Generally a parent's (or guardian's) involvement will be flagged up immediately by that person. If it is not clear, you either have to ignore the message, or apologise and explain that responding more fully is not possible until there is an appropriate adult present.

On your website:

Some authors have a note clarifying that they will not reply to minors, that messages must be sent via an adult, or (with their agent's consent) directing minors to the author's agent. But the general view is that being mindful of child safety should be a 'given' and not to give any such warning on your site – unless you are being deluged by requests from minors.

4 Events

When working with schools, a handle of your own name can look like an invitation to enter into a personal correspondence. Consider using a hashtag which is subject-related instead.

5 Newsletters

Be mindful of who might be subscribing to your newsletter. The appropriate age limit will depend on the content of the newsletter. For more information, see the ICO guide listed at point 2.

On your website:

On the site, include something along the following lines:

The information [in this newsletter] is aimed primarily at [parents / educators / retailers]. You must be over the age of [18] to subscribe. Please tick this box [...] to confirm that you are aged 18] or over.

6 If a teacher may unintentionally be part of the problem

"I did an event with a teacher who must have given my personal email address to her pupils, without my permission, because one of them emailed me. I happened to be on holiday so the girl received an 'I'm away' auto-reply and she excitedly promptly replied, 'thank you for your super-fast reply.' I emailed the teacher to request that she email me on behalf of her pupils."

Sometimes teachers set students a project which leads the entire class, individually, to ask you a list of questions (which can be a major headache in itself, in addition to the safeguarding considerations).

If you need to contact the teacher directly, feel free to quote the advice in this Guide, clarifying that it comes from the SoA.

On your website:

You might want to include an 'information note for teachers' in your terms & conditions for school visits (live or online), based on the information given at point 3 of this Guide.

7 If you are concerned about the minor

If a minor is asking questions you feel are too personal or are otherwise inappropriate, or if they are contacting you in a way which seems odd, such as using a school email account late at night, consider contacting the school, sending screenshots and explaining that the child in question needs a conversation about appropriate online behaviour and keeping themselves safe online.