



The use of social media and electronic communication in the delivery of youth protection services to young people in difficulty and their families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

of the abridged ETMI report

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ISSUE

Social media (SM) and electronic communication (EC) have become a component of contemporary practice and are here to stay (Breyette and Hill, 2015; Mishna *et al.*, 2012). Their professional use involves both individual and institutional responsibilities. Managers' attitudes and organizational culture are believed to have an impact on the use of SM and EC in a professional context (Cooner *et al.*, 2020). The field of youth protection (YP) represents a particular challenge, as it involves a minor clientele under the protection of the State. In this field, the use of SM and EC may represent a mix of risks and benefits (Stott *et al.*, 2016). Communication technology can facilitate the client's access to the practitioner and to information through the use of text messages, emails and cell phones (Tregeagle and Darcy, 2008). It also increases user engagement in follow-up (Fairclough, 2003).

However, there are ethical challenges associated with the use of SM and EC, in particular with respect to confidentiality and the use of information found on SM (Cooner *et al.*, 2020). These practices can also pose risks to practitioners in terms of occupational health and safety (harassment, threats, damage to reputation and credibility) (Byrne *et al.*, 2019). It is recommended that institutions provide guidance and develop a policy on the use of SM and EC for YP workers (Sage and Sage, 2016; Stott *et al.*, 2016), in particular with a view to reducing the risks associated with their use (Sage and Sage, 2016). Furthermore, practitioners will need education and training on the ethical use of these technologies in their practice (Breyette and Hill, 2015).

CONTEXT

In Quebec, as elsewhere, SM and EC use is ubiquitous and has become essential in the delivery of services by YP practitioners. SM and EC are sometimes the only way they can connect with clients, both young people and parents alike. They also facilitate collaboration between practitioners and their collaborators in both the public and the community sectors. The current use of SM and EC in the delivery of YP services is very diverse and includes simple communications (e.g., to confirm an appointment, request documents), interactions with clients, surveillance, evidence gathering, connecting with runaway youth, checking who young people are mixing with and prevention in relation to sexual exploitation. However, while these practices have benefits, they also raise a number of significant challenges and issues. While the online behaviour of some practitioners may be regulated by their respective professional orders, some YP practitioners are not affiliated with any professional order.

It is in this context that the *Direction de la protection de la jeunesse* and the *Direction du programme jeunesse* mandated the *Unité de l'évaluation des technologies et des modes d'intervention en santé et en services sociaux* of the *CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale* to document how SM (more specifically public social networks such as Facebook and Instagram) and EC (cell phones, text messages and emails) are used to gather information and communicate with clients who are receiving YP services. The aspects discussed will include their use in practice, benefits, risks, issues and guidelines and recommendations to regulate their use in the delivery of YP services to clients.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this abridged ETMISSS is to answer the question: “What practices should be recommended to guide the use of social media and electronic communication by practitioners in the delivery of youth protection services to clients (young people in difficulty and their families)?” Based on the results, the *Direction de la protection de la jeunesse* and the *Direction du programme jeunesse* wish to develop and deploy guidelines and support tools on SM and EC use for their staff members.

For more information, see the report at: <https://www.ciusss-capitalenationale.gouv.qc.ca/a-propos/publications/utilisation-des-medias-sociaux-et-des-moyens-de-communication>

METHODOLOGY

Three sources of data were used: (1) scientific literature (the CINAHL [EBSCO], PsycINFO [OVID] and Social Care Online databases) and grey literature); (2) experiential data collected through a survey, focus groups and individual interviews with practitioners and managers; (3) contextual data from an Ethics Opinion of the Clinical Ethics and Education Committee of the CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale as well as documentation on the legal aspect.

RESULTS

Twelve primary studies, six narrative reviews and 13 grey literature documents were retained. The survey was conducted on 219 practitioners and 16 managers (45% participation rate). A focus group involving six managers as well as individual interviews with two practitioners were held, with 45% and 10% participation rates, respectively.

Triangulation of data from these various sources was used to answer the three following assessment questions.

Question 1: How do practitioners use social media and electronic communication in the delivery of youth protection services to clients?

SM are considered work tools by YP practitioners. They use them to search for information on clients, monitor risk factors or share information. These tools also seem to be particularly useful in reaching clientele that would otherwise be hard to reach.

With respect to EC, emails are used primarily for administrative purposes (e.g., communication between colleagues), while text messages tend to be used for short communications with clients (e.g., to confirm an appointment).

Although the use of SM and EC has been adopted by many, a minority of practitioners do not use them at work, either due to a lack of skills or for moral reasons. However, approval from superiors appears to be mixed, that is, practices vary and some prefer that practitioners on their team do not use them.

The use of SM for private purposes, by practitioners and users alike, can have an impact on professional practices. Content published online by practitioners and clients can be used in a professional context, when making a report or as evidence in court. Practitioners may monitor client accounts and vice versa, while both practitioners and clients may monitor the accounts of other clients, highlighting the importance of educating users about the potential impact of using SM for private purposes.

HOW SM AND EC ARE USED

Organizations

- Collaboration, networking and support for foster families

Professionals

Work-related use

- Practitioners use SM for professional purposes
- Used for various purposes: to share information and resources, for surveillance, to search for information, for risk assessment
- Tools to reach hard-to-reach clientele “where they’re at”
- Personal accounts and false accounts are used in some situations
- Online/remote services: counselling by email or messaging, etc.
- Emails are used to communicate with clients
- Text messages are used for short communications
- Some practitioners prefer not to use these tools due to a lack of skills or for moral reasons

Personal use

- Online presence may have an impact on clients, the professional, their employer and the profession in general

Users

Young people

- Used to maintain contact between children in foster care and biological families
- Text messages to report abuse

Adults

- Used in the adoption and placement of children
- Surveillance of practitioners and other clients

Question 2: What are the benefits, issues and risks associated with the use of social media and electronic communication in the delivery of youth protection services to clients from the practitioner’s perspective?

There are many benefits to using SM and EC. These technologies make it possible to reach a clientele that is sometimes hard to reach otherwise. For practitioners, these tools make it easier to communicate with clients and plan meetings, increase client response rates, reduce the number of missed appointments and allow them to keep in touch with clients. Some clients also prefer to use these tools because of their flexibility and to offset time and distance constraints.

The most common risk associated with the use of SM and EC is the difficulty in maintaining the boundaries between the professional and personal spheres, a risk that is heightened when the practitioner uses a personal telephone or account. Other risks reported are breaches of confidentiality and misinterpretations due to the lack of body language. These risks raise ethical issues that are further amplified because these technologies were not originally designed to be used in practice by YP practitioners.

The ethical issues are related to privacy, confidentiality, security and informed consent. Some practices, such as searching for information in clients’ private accounts also create dilemmas for practitioners, who are caught between protecting the child and respecting clients’ privacy.

OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES

Benefits and opportunities

- More effective tools (in terms of speed and accessibility), especially for hard-to-reach clienteles
- Potential for innovation in practices
- Potential complement to traditional practices
- Some clients are more comfortable with technology
- Platforms for sharing ideas, knowledge and promoting the profession

Challenges, risks and issues

For organizations

- Need to continuously adjust in terms of security and skills

For professionals

- Several ethical issues highlighted: privacy, confidentiality and security; concerns about highly sensitive information
- Difficulty maintaining professional boundaries
- Difficulty meeting the conditions for informed consent and verifying the client’s identity
- Unrealistic expectations of a response from the practitioner 24/7
- Impact on the relationship with clients
- Misinterpretations, in particular due to the lack of non-verbal language
- Risk of breaches of confidentiality
- Searching for information on the client: dilemma between respect for privacy and protection of the child
- Validity of the information found; questions regarding the use of evidence found online in court
- Fear of generating unexpected negative consequences
- Technology failure beyond the control of the professional and the client
- Risk of undesirable contacts for children in foster care
- Lack of site regulations
- Adoption: use of social networks for family finding regardless of initial agreements

Question 3: What guidelines should be put in place to regulate the use of social media and electronic communication in the delivery of youth protection services to clients from the practitioner’s perspective?

The sources consulted agree on the need for professionals to have clear guidelines, the absence of which gives rise to personal and divergent interpretations of what is an acceptable practice. Guidance may be issued by professional orders or associations or employers and may take various forms, such as policies, procedures, guidelines or other tool (e.g., ethical decision-making tool). It also appears that guidance alone is not enough and that other support measures, such as training and advice, are useful for establishing a culture of appropriate, ethical and safe SM and EC use.

When developing guidelines, the responsibilities of organizations as employers, practitioners and users should be addressed separately. Organizations have responsibilities to users, employees, volunteers and the general public. They also have responsibilities with respect to the application of existing laws and regulations and accountability.

Whether intended for organizations or professionals, guidelines should be articulated around ethical principles. In this regard, the notion of intent is central to decision making and ethical considerations such as confidentiality, commitment to clients, boundaries between professional and client, integrity, security and informed consent, should be addressed accordingly.

Consistency between new guidelines and existing guidelines seems to be an important element as does user involvement. In this regard, advice on the legalities and with respect to human resources would be helpful in preventing potential conflicts between the interests of organizations, employees and users.

Finally, it is suggested that employers evaluate the policy (during and after development) against criteria such as effectiveness, feasibility (political, administrative and technical), fairness, flexibility and social acceptability.

GUIDELINES

- Practitioners would like to see guidelines put in place
- Importance of guidelines stressed by professional orders and associations

Factors to consider:

Organizations

- Importance of guidelines to counter personal interpretations of what is an acceptable practice
- Establishing guidelines is not enough; training and advice are needed
- Approaches that inspire practitioners to maintain the highest levels of values and ethics and that are consistent with the organization’s values and missions
- Guidelines should be aligned with existing policies and strategies, in particular those of professional orders and associations
- Legal advice should be sought when developing guidelines in order to effectively manage potential conflicts between the interests of the organization, professionals and clients
- The policy should be assessed during and after development

Professionals

- Guidelines should be articulated around ethical principles
- The focus should be on the best interests of the child
- The approach adopted should promote professional autonomy
- Clear directives and definition of what constitutes good and bad use
- Clarification of elements such as boundaries, commitment to clients, privacy and confidentiality, integrity, informed consent, competence (technical, regulatory, practice and clinical)
- Clarification of professional and personal representation
- Clarification of the use of material obtained via SM in court as evidence
- Details on the skills required for digital professionalism (e-professionalism)
- Guidelines should include the behaviour expected of users

FINDINGS

1.1 > General

- › All the data collected from the different sources point in the same direction with respect to SM and EC use, the benefits and issues as well as the needs associated with their use by YP practitioners.
- › Information collected from a variety of sources highlights the need for clear policies, guidelines and directives on the use of SM and EC in YP and the need for training for practitioners.

1.2 > Organizational

- › A “technological shift” in practice is unavoidable, since SM and EC have become work tools for YP practitioners.
- › Investments in technology infrastructure and access to electronic equipment are critical to ensuring the appropriate and safe use of SM and EC.
- › Access to and investments in training and support regarding the use of SM and EC could prevent problems related to confidentiality and data security.
- › Guidelines that are aligned with the orientations of professional orders are necessary to ensure the effective and safe use of SM and EC.
- › Users (professionals and managers), human resources and legal advisors should be involved in developing the guidelines.

1.3 > Professional

- › The main advantages of using SM and EC are their speed and effectiveness in reaching clients “where they’re at” and their normalizing effect for young people.
- › The main issues associated with the use of SM and EC in the delivery of YP services are maintaining boundaries between the professional and personal spheres for practitioners, confidentiality, information security and the relationship between the professional and the client.
- › Risk management when using SM and EC must be considered when developing guidelines.
- › Ethical principles and the notion of intent are central to SM and EC use.
- › The absence of guidelines leads to variations in practice depending on the setting and the practitioner.
- › The practitioner has a role in educating and supporting young people in their use of SM and EC.

1.4 > Personal/private

- › Using SM and EC for surveillance and to search for information is bidirectional, that is, practitioners vis-à-vis clients, but also clients vis-à-vis practitioners.
- › Concerns have been raised about the intrusion into practitioners’ private life: they are on the same social networks as clients. In addition, emails, text messages and other forms of cyber communication contribute to the perception that practitioners are available 24/7.
- › Caution, education and awareness raising are needed regarding practitioners’ personal use of their own SM (adjustment of privacy settings, reflection on the “image” projected, etc.).
- › A “user” component should be included in the guidelines, since users have rights and responsibilities, in particular with respect to protecting practitioners from intrusions into their private life and online harassment.

CONCLUSION

The great strength of this abridged ETMISSS lies in the nature and quantity of the data sources consulted and triangulated (literature, experiential and contextual data), which provide a range of perspectives on the issue. Another strength is the fact that all the data collected converge in the same direction. Although SM and EC have many benefits and advantages and also afford opportunities for innovation, they are not without risks and challenges. Developing and implementing guidelines that are aligned with the ethical and legal aspects as well as with the professional orders is imperative for organizations. It would appear, however, that guidelines alone are not enough to manage the dilemmas faced on a daily basis and that other strategies must be used to promote the ethical use of SM and EC, such as training and access to advisors as well as other tools, such as ethical decision-making tools. Finally, it follows that organizations should be vigilant and proactive with respect to the new communication technologies that will be required in practice so that they will be able to adjust quickly.

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