



## Harvard Park Policies and Procedures:

### **Group Chat & Digital Communication Policy (including WhatsApp)**

## **63. Group Chat & Digital Communication Policy (including WhatsApp)**

### **Policy statement:**

Harvard Park is committed to ensuring that all staff are able to work in a safe, respectful, and professional environment both in person and through digital communication channels.

This policy sets out clear expectations for the use of group messaging platforms (including WhatsApp or similar services) to support safe, appropriate, and professional communication between staff.

This policy is designed in line with Ofsted safeguarding expectations, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, UK-GDPR, and relevant UK employment and safeguarding legislation.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of work-related group messaging is to:

- Support safe and effective communication between staff
- Share operational updates and professional practice information
- Support team coordination where appropriate
- Promote a positive and respectful workplace culture

Group messaging platforms must not replace formal safeguarding, HR, or operational reporting systems such as calling the respective work numbers to report absences.

This policy applies to:

- All employees, agency staff, students, volunteers, and contractors
- All digital group communication platforms used for work purposes, including WhatsApp or similar messaging services such as ParentMail
- All communication relating to Harvard Park, whether sent during or outside working hours

### **Procedures and Conduct**

- A WhatsApp agreement must be signed by all staff prior to being added to any form of group chat.
- Permission must be sought by the individual before being added to any form of group chat.

- Clear guidelines and etiquette expectations should be established either verbally, contractually or via message. This should include topics of conversation and expected behaviour.
- Group chat names should be named appropriately such as the name of the room of setting (i.e. *"Harvard Park Pre-School"* or *"Freedom Zone"*). Names, for example, *"The Pink Ladies"* or *"Harvard Gals"* are not acceptable.
- Discussion on sensitive topics surrounding work or individuals within the workplace will not be tolerated as outlined in the WhatsApp agreement.
- Confidentiality must be observed and adhered to at all times – at no point should children or their families be discussed.
- Any breach of confidentiality will result in disciplinary action.
- While we understand that moral and team cohesion can foster a supportive workforce, boundaries must be established and staff must feel they are able to speak up and out of the group if something makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Workplace group chats must not be seen as a replacement for passing on messages to each other or managerial staff. For example, if you are notifying your team that you will be absent today – you must still contact Harvard Park to inform us, you must not rely on your colleagues to pass on that information.

### **Safeguarding Principles**

Harvard Park recognises that safeguarding children is our highest priority. In line with Ofsted expectations:

- No information relating to children, families, or safeguarding concerns must ever be shared via group messaging platforms
- Safeguarding concerns must be reported immediately through the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) or deputy DSL using approved safeguarding procedures
- Group chats must never be used for discussing individual children, families, or sensitive incidents
- Any safeguarding disclosure made in a group chat must be immediately escalated and removed from further discussion

Failure to comply with safeguarding requirements may result in disciplinary action and referral to external safeguarding authorities where appropriate.

### **Consent and Participation**

- Staff will only be added to group chats with their informed consent
- All staff will be asked to sign a WhatsApp agreement which will be kept on file for the duration of their employment
- Participation is voluntary, and refusal to join will not result in disadvantage or exclusion
- Staff may request removal from group chats at any time
- Alternative communication methods will always be provided for staff who do not participate

### **Acceptable Use**

Staff must ensure all communication is:

- Professional and respectful at all times
- Clear and appropriate in tone and content
- Relevant to operational or professional matters only
- Free from discrimination, harassment, or bullying

Appropriate use includes:

- Operational updates (e.g. staffing changes, rotas where appropriate)
- Professional sharing of good practice
- General team coordination messages

### **Prohibited Use**

The following are strictly prohibited:

- Inappropriate, offensive, discriminatory, or derogatory language and/or comments
- Inappropriate group chat names
- Jokes which may be perceived to be offensive
- Bullying, harassment, or intimidation in any form
- Sharing images of children, families, or staff without explicit permission and lawful basis. This includes photos shared on social media platforms.
- Sharing confidential or sensitive workplace information
- Personal disputes or workplace grievances conducted in group chats
- Spreading rumours, gossip, or defamatory comments about the setting or individuals
- Promotion of personal business or external commercial activity
- Sharing content that could reasonably cause distress, offence, or misinterpretation
- Screenshots of chats must not be sent to anyone outside of the group chat – this is a breach of privacy and trust.

### **Professional Conduct & Boundaries**

Staff are expected to maintain professional boundaries at all times.

- Group chats must not be used as a substitute for formal reporting channels
- Staff absence, safeguarding issues, or urgent matters must be reported through official setting procedures
- Staff should avoid sending non-urgent messages outside contracted working hours
- Urgent operational messages may be sent where necessary, but staff are not expected to respond outside their working hours unless on duty

### **Confidentiality & Data Protection (UK GDPR)**

All staff must comply with UK GDPR and confidentiality requirements.

- No personal data relating to children, families, or staff may be shared via messaging platforms
- Screenshots, forwarding, or redistribution of group messages outside the approved group is strictly prohibited
- Any breach of confidentiality will be treated as a serious disciplinary matter

- Staff must ensure no sensitive information is stored or retained on personal devices longer than necessary for work purposes

### **Monitoring and Use of Evidence**

- The setting does not routinely monitor private messaging platforms
- However, where safeguarding concerns, misconduct, or disciplinary investigations arise, staff may be asked to provide relevant messages or screenshots
- Messaging records may be used as evidence in internal investigations and, where appropriate, shared with external safeguarding bodies or HR advisors

### **Group Chat Standards**

To maintain professionalism and clarity:

- Group chat names must be appropriate and clearly identify the setting or team
- Excessive use of capital letters should be avoided
- Emojis should be used cautiously and only where they cannot reasonably be misinterpreted
- Messages should be clear, respectful, and not open to ambiguity
- Respect must be maintained for differing communication styles and sensitivities
- Where possible, work-life balance must be maintained. Workplace discussions should not take place outside of working hours nor on weekends.
- Sending messages at inappropriate hours must be avoided.

### **Bullying, Harassment & Legal Framework**

Harvard Park Early Years Setting has zero tolerance for bullying or harassment in any form, including digital communication.

Harassment is defined in line with the **Equality Act 2010** as unwanted conduct related to protected characteristics that violates dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

This policy also aligns with:

- **Protection from Harassment Act 1997**
- **Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 8 – right to private life and correspondence)**
- **UK GDPR**

Harvard Park will not accept any form of harassment or bullying via digital communication platforms. Harassment is legally defined as unwanted, uninvited, and repeated conduct that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. It can be intentional or unintentional and may manifest physically, verbally, or digitally through stalking, abusive messaging, or threats.

**Protection from Harassment Act 1997:** Makes it a crime for someone to pursue a course of conduct that causes another person alarm or distress.

**Equality Act 2010:** Outlaws harassment in the workplace and public life when it is related to "protected characteristics," such as age, disability, race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation.

**Human Rights Act (Article 8):** Guarantees the right to respect for private and family life, and your correspondence.

UK-GDPR must be always observed, and privacy should be maintained by all parties involved. Respecting boundaries, observing timings and reporting any misconduct is important to keep group chats from becoming toxic and un-constructive.

Further guidance on how harassment claims are handled can be found in the Employee Handbook.

### **Reporting Concerns**

Staff are encouraged to report any concerns relating to group chat behaviour, including:

- Inappropriate messages
- Bullying or harassment
- Safeguarding concerns
- Breaches of confidentiality

Reports may be made to:

- Room Manager
- Deputy Manager
- Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)
- Managing Directors
- HR representative

All concerns will be taken seriously, recorded, and investigated in line with the setting's disciplinary and safeguarding procedures. Where required, external agencies may be contacted.

Any form of inappropriateness or instances which have made you feel uncomfortable, you should feel confident to report this both inside and outside of the group chat. Reports can be made anonymously or in person with those who you are comfortable with. This could be a deputy, manager, director or other colleague. Colleagues may feel they need to report disclosures to higher management, and all reports will be taken seriously and investigated internally. Where we feel the need to inform HR, we are within our rights to do so and investigations may begin both internally and externally. Where there may be a case for dismissal, this will be communicated to all relevant parties, and dismissal procedures will be followed according to our Employee Handbook.

### **Leavers and Removal from Groups**

Upon leaving employment:

- Staff will be removed from all work-related group chats
- Staff must not retain or distribute confidential group messages
- Any work-related content containing sensitive information must be deleted from personal devices where reasonably practicable

### **Breach of Policy**

Breaches of this policy may result in:

- Informal or formal disciplinary action

- Safeguarding referral where applicable
- Referral to external regulatory bodies where required
- Dismissal in cases of serious misconduct

### **Policy Review**

This policy will be reviewed regularly to ensure it remains compliant with safeguarding requirements, employment law, and Ofsted expectations.

This policy was adjusted by Harvard Park.

Date meeting was held on 18/06/2026

Signed on behalf of the Directors and Proprietors

**Nicki Saunders and Tracey Milstead**