

HUMAN RESOURCE POLICIES  
**ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION WITH CLIENTS POLICY**

**Approval Date:** September 30, 2019

**Approved by:** President & CEO

**Revision Dates:**

**CCA Accreditation Standards:** ORG-SYS-4.1, ORG-SYS-4.2

**Cross Reference:** *Client Privacy & Confidentiality Policy, Client Records Policy, Electronic Communication Form, Internet & Email Policy, Protection, Secure Transfer & Retention of Client Records Policy, Social Media Policy,*

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**POLICY**

The majority of Boost CYAC employees' direct professional work with clients is accomplished through telephone and/or face-to-face meetings. Boost CYAC appreciates that at times and for various reasons, emailing or texting ("electronic communication") is a preferred method of communication. While electronic communication is not secure, Boost CYAC recognizes that in some situations, it is the only method of engaging with some clients.

Boost CYAC has put the following policy and procedures in place to minimize risk to staff and clients, increase clients' understanding of the risks associated with electronic communication and to establish the process that is to be followed if electronic communication is to be used.

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**RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION**

Although Boost CYAC has protections in place to increase the privacy of electronic communications, it remains possible that:

- electronic communications may be sent but not received;
- messages are filtered as "spam" or "junk"; or that
- confidentiality may be breached (e.g., the communication is intercepted by a party not intended to receive it or there is an error in entering the address/telephone number).

Additionally, electronic communications that disclose the potential for harm to self or others or suspected child abuse may not viewed or responded to in a timely manner if email or text messages are not monitored regularly throughout the workday or are received outside of regular working hours.

If electronic communication is preferred, clients must read and sign the *Consent to Electronic Communication Form*. In this document, the client acknowledges their understanding that email and text messages are not secure methods of communication and that Boost CYAC cannot be held responsible for any incorrect use or disclosure of information shared in this way. The form also notes that exceptions to confidentiality, including instances in which the employee has a duty to report to a child protection agency, apply to all communications and will be reviewed with the client before beginning electronic communication.

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## APPROPRIATE USE OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS WITH CLIENTS

When communicating electronically with clients, staff may only use their Boost CYAC email address and phone number. The use of a personal email address or phone number is not permitted.

### Type of Information Shared

Staff will most often engage in electronic communication for purpose of meeting reminders and following up on missed appointments. Emails and text messages are not typically used to check in around a child/youth's mental health. When using email or text messaging to communicate with clients, staff should, as much as possible, limit the information shared and request that the client follow up for more detailed discussions via telephone or a scheduled meeting, when possible.

The client's full name or details such as date of birth, address or clinical information should not be sent via email or text message.

### Language

When sending texts and emails to clients, staff should carefully consider the language they use (words and phrases) as there is no intonation in electronic communication and a client's interpretation of the message cannot be predicted. Additionally, staff is expected to maintain the same level of professionalism used in other forms of communication with clients (written or verbal) as all texts and emails form part of that child/youth's record at Boost CYAC and may be included in any disclosure of our records. For the same reasons, emoticons/emojis are not to be used by staff when communicating electronically with clients.

### Monitoring Communications

When working regular hours, staff is expected to monitor their email and text messages throughout the day and to respond to messages from clients in a timely manner. If a staff member is away from the office or unable to monitor their messages (e.g., vacation, lengthy training session), "out of office" auto-responses are to be enabled on both their email account and text messaging system.

### Video Calls

At their earliest opportunity, staff must consult with their supervisor when video calls are being used to communicate with a client in order to discuss why they believe a video call is necessary, how it would be would be beneficial for the client, and any potential issues that may contradict the use of video messaging. Prior to engaging in video calls with a client, employees must engage their client in a discussion around safety, security and confidentiality while using video calls. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that, as with other forms of electronic communication, video chatting is not secure. It is possible that a call could be intercepted or that the conversation could be overheard by unauthorized third parties. Staff is required to book a private room at the CYAC to conduct the video call and must ensure that all agency wide and program specific policies and procedure related to meeting with clients are followed.

### Limits to Confidentiality

**If information relating to alleged, witnessed or suspected abuse of a child is received electronically, staff, volunteers, and students must adhere to the procedures outlined in the *Reporting Suspicions of Child Abuse Policy*.**

Boost CYAC reserves the right to cease the use of email and/or text communication if it is deemed inappropriate or unsafe to continue.

### Safe Words

A "safe word" is a word serving as a prearranged and clear signal to end electronic communication with a client immediately. When working with high risk clients, staff may choose to determine a safe word in advance of any electronic communication. This word can be used by the client to cease communication if they are in a situation

that does not afford them the privacy or safety to engage in electronic communication.

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## RETENTION OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

All electronic communication sent to and received from a client will form part of that child/youth's record at Boost CYAC. All information in client files is confidential and is maintained by Boost CYAC in a safe and secure manner. Access to confidential information is limited to Boost CYAC staff and consultants who require it to perform their duties, or to those individuals for whom consent is provided. If Boost CYAC receives a subpoena for a client record, all electronic communication is included in the record. Once all communication is stored in the client's record and the file is closed, all emails and text messages must be deleted from the employee's cell phone.

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## SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION WITH CLIENTS

Boost CYAC staff is not permitted to contact or communicate with any current clients through their personal social media accounts (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). If current clients are interested in keeping informed about Boost CYAC activities, they are encouraged to follow Boost CYAC's official accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn (@boostforkids).

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## PROCEDURES FOR ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS WITH CLIENTS

1. Direct service staff must set the following automatic response on their text messaging application and in their email signature: *Boost CYAC is not an emergency crisis service. In the case of an emergency call 911 or go to your local hospital.*
2. Instructions to set up automatic responses on iPhones and to edit email signatures in Outlook can be found in *Common Directory>Office Administration>IT Support.*
3. If the employee determines that text messaging or email is the preferred method of communication with a client, the employee will discuss the risks and benefits of this form of communication, identify the need for informed consent and review the components of the consent form with the client.
4. Exceptions to confidentiality, including instances in which the employee has a duty to report to a child protection agency, apply to all communication. This will be reviewed with the client before beginning electronic communication.
5. The *Consent to Electronic Communication Form* (Appendix A) is signed by the client and filed in their record before electronic communication begins.
6. Clients will be advised that electronic communication is not to be for after hours or emergency support; a list of local emergency services will be provided.
7. Clients will be advised that they may withdraw consent with a verbal, written or email request at any time, and the transmission of email and texts will cease immediately.
8. If deemed appropriate, staff will determine a safe word to use with the client in the event that they are not able to engage in electronic communication due to privacy or safety concerns.
9. The first email and text message from Boost CYAC staff to a client is to be a test message to ensure that the email address and/or telephone number in record is correct.
10. Copies of all emails and text messages sent to and received by a client will be printed and filed and will form part of the client's official record.

11. Once all communications are stored in the client's record, staff will delete all emails and text messages from their cell phone.

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## **APPROPRIATE USE OF EMAIL COMMUNICATION WITH THIRD PARTIES OR OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS**

With informed consent, Boost CYAC staff may communicate electronically with third parties and service providers involved with clients for the purpose of setting appointments or clarifying specific information. If personal health information about a client is being sent by email, Boost CYAC asks third parties and service providers to password protect the document and provide the password over the phone. All emails to and from third parties and service providers will be printed, filed and for form part of the client's record.

If information is received beyond the scope or intent of Boost CYAC services or contains information that is not relevant, then the sender will be informed that the information cannot be accepted and Boost CYAC will delete the information. A note in the file will be placed that an email communication was received by a provider and it was denied by Boost CYAC.

## CONSENT TO ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION FORM

I \_\_\_\_\_ request that electronic communication  
(Name(s))

occur with my Boost CYAC worker \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name)

on behalf of \_\_\_\_\_  
(Client's name)

I understand that:

1. The security of this form of communication cannot be guaranteed. I understand that I should make all efforts to protect the privacy of my communications, including but not limited to, not sharing email accounts and passwords, not leaving email accounts open and taking extra precautions when using public computers and public networks
2. Personal or crisis counselling will not be conducted by e-mail or text. Electronic communication can be used for purposes such as providing resources and confirming or changing meetings and celebrating successes in my life. If my worker feels that I am using this form of communication for counselling and advice, they will make me aware of this and schedule a meeting for this discussion.
3. If I send messages that contains information that is of a serious nature (i.e. potential harm to self or others or suspected abuse) my worker has a professional obligation to report this to the proper authorities such as the Children's Aid Society if I are under 16, or to a parent, significant other or police service if I am over 16. My worker will provide me with a list of emergency services that I can contact in the event of a crisis or emergency situation.
4. If I send messages from any address or phone number, I am giving permission for my worker to reply to me at that address/phone number unless otherwise stated in the body of the message.
5. My worker's e-mail address is not to be included on mailing lists. If this occurs I understand that I will be asked to remove my worker's name from that list and if it occurs a second time I will not be allowed to continue e-mail communication with my worker.
6. I cannot send attachments with my e-mail due to the risk of viruses. If an attachment is received it will be deleted unopened. The use of inappropriate language may also cause the e-mail to be caught in a filter and deleted. I understand I will be asked to discontinue use of this language.
7. My worker will check email or text messages during agency business hours (8:30am to 4:30pm). Emails and/or text messages that are sent after hours, will only be accessed and responded to on the next business day.
8. Electronic communication sent and received by my worker will be printed and form part of my client file at Boost CYAC. All information in my file is confidential and is maintained by Boost CYAC in a safe and secure manner. Access to my information is limited to Boost CYAC staff and consultants who require it to perform their duties or to those individuals for whom I provide written consent. I understand that if Boost

CYAC receives a subpoena for my client records, this also applies to electronic communication.

- 9. Once this consent is signed, my worker will respond to my electronic messages.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The risk/benefits of using electronic communication have been explained to me/us. I understand the implications and wish to use this form of communication.

I understand that my/our consent to the use of electronic communication may be withdrawn by a verbal or written request at any time and will not affect my service. This consent is valid for one year from the date it is signed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Client's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Family Member's Signature (if applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Worker's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date