GUIDELINES FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS AND INTERACTIVE CLASSES INVOLVING CHILDREN

To provide direction to catechism teachers, volunteers, and parents on virtual meetings involving children

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DOCUMENT CONTROL

Document Name	Guidelines for virtual meetings and interactive classes involving children
Document Owner	Department of Catechesis, Syro Malabar Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle, Melbourne.
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Approved Date	02/09/2021
Point of Contact	Principal of each Catechism Centres

DISTRIBUTION STATUS

Distributed To	Purpose	Date of Distribution
Syro Malabar Catechism centres across Australia and Oceania	To provide directions to catechism teachers, volunteers and parents on virtual meeting involving children.	07/09/2021

DOCUMENT HISTORY

Version	Date	Reviewed by	Description
Final V1	02/09/2021	Presy Tom (Principal, St Alphonsa Catechism Centre, Parramatta) Sherly Thomas, Anu Skaria, Sheeja Job, Beedha Joseph (teachers from NSW Dept of Education) Roney Raphael (IT consultant)	Edited as per the NSW Department of education's guidelines for virtual meetings

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Introduction

The purpose of this guideline is to provide direction on acceptable practices expected by catechism teachers, volunteers & parents/ guardians while involving children in virtual meetings and interactive sessions organized by the Department of Catechesis, Syro-Malabar Eparchy of St Thomas the Apostle, Melbourne for Australia and Oceania. These recommendations and guidelines around using the video conferencing platform 'Zoom' should be read by all Sunday school Principals, catechism teachers and parents/guardians as it provides instructions and best practices on how to manage video lessons as per child safety requirements.

Context

Department of Catechesis has formulated these guidelines as a response of hope recognizing the limitations posed by the current COVID-19 pandemic where churches and catechism centres remain closed and "in-person instruction and formation onsite with a community" become impossible. Department acknowledges that the nature of imparting Catholic catechism is never a mere process of passing on facts and intellectual skills as we right now experiment in the online classes or content sharing: rather, it aims to contribute to an individual's holistic formation in its various aspects such as intellectual, cultural, spiritual, liturgical and community life, in close contact with parish priests/chaplains, teachers, administrative and service personnel and the other students.

Definitions

- **Children:** Anyone under the age of 18 years.
- **Parents:** Biological/ adopted parent who has the parental responsibility for a child
- **Guardian:** A person who makes all legal and pertinent decisions about a child.
- **Catechism Teacher:** A staff member of Catechism department in a given parish/mission center who is formally appointed by Director/Parish Priest/ Chaplain and teaches the essentials of Christian faith and morals in a given curriculum. Catechist is the shortened word for a catechism teacher.
- **Volunteer:** A person who works for a parish/mission/ catechism center without being paid.
- **Virtual meeting:** A real-time interactions that take place over the Internet using integrated audio and video, chat tools, and application sharing to engage students in fully interactive, online learning experiences such as lectures, discussions, and tutoring.

- **Video conferencing platform:** Any cloud-based video conferencing service that the world uses to virtually meet with others - either by video or audio-only or both, all while conducting live chats - and it lets admin record those sessions to view later. This guideline acknowledges online the currently used video conferencing platforms such as Google classroom, Google meet, Microsoft teams, Skype WhatsApp and Zoom. However, this guideline recommends only the Zoom for catechism teachers' virtual interaction involving children unless otherwise advised by the department.

- **Zoom:** A cloud-based video conferencing service that the world uses to virtually meet with others - either by video or audio-only or both, all while conducting live chats - and it lets admin record those sessions to view later. This guideline provides instructions and best practices on how to manage video lessons while using Zoom as per child safety requirements.

- **WhatsApp:** WhatsApp Messenger is a cross-platform instant messaging application that allows users to exchange text, image, video, and audio messages for free. This guideline acknowledges that each catechism class is digitally organized as a WhatsApp group consisting of the parents of students and their teacher to facilitate communication between them through messages.

Delimitation:

Although the Department of Catechesis acknowledges different video conferencing platforms mentioned above, this guideline recommends only the Zoom for catechism teachers' virtual interaction involving children due security, traceability and child safety reasons.

The Department acknowledges the use of WhatsApp in the context of catechism parent teacher interaction; however, this guideline does not recommend WhatsApp for audio or video conferencing classes due to security, traceability and child safety reasons.

Guidelines for Catechists

1. Any virtual meeting / real-time interactions involving children must be with the prior approval from the Director of the Department of Catechesis every year, and with the permission from the director/parish priest/chaplain and the concerned principal for that centre.

2. Professional learning for catechism teachers/volunteers in using the video conferencing platform 'Zoom' is to be provided by the Department of Catechesis to assist them in their delivery of learning using virtual media. This involves updating of these guidelines and policies from the side of Department where as acquisition of necessary technical skills from the side of catechism teacher.

3. Video/Audio sessions are only allowed for the entirety of a class or a group. Catechism teachers must ensure not to conduct 1:1 video, audio or chat session with any student

individually. In the unlikely case that a catechism teacher needs to have a private discussion with a student individually, ensure that there is a parent/carer and another teacher present.

4. No direct contact with the child is encouraged and all communications must be through the parents/ guardian's chosen media of contact

5. Catechism teachers must obtain consent from the parent/ guardian prior to inviting the child to the virtual meeting. If it is an ongoing meeting, the consent obtained at the beginning will remain in force.

6. Attach a copy of this guideline with the consent forms for parents/guardians to ensure the safety measures and expectations of the virtual meeting.

7. The planned virtual meeting should only commence if there is a catechism teacher and at least two student participants. It is recommended to consider organising another teacher/volunteer to present the lesson. This provides the opportunity for one catechism teacher to focus on delivering the lessons and the support catechism teacher to monitor and communicate and work collaboratly with the lead catechist.

8. The catechism teacher has to maintain control over the planned video meeting. All participants' interactions must be under the supervision of the teacher.

9. Catechism teacher should set up for the zoom call in a manner so that there is a blank wall behind them. Where this is not possible, catechism teachers are advised to set a static background by clicking 'Choose Virtual Background' in Zoom. Any virtual background used must be appropriate.

10. The catechism teachers, volunteers and guest speakers must not engage in any cyber bullying, which is a form of bullying or harassment using electronic means.

11. The catechism teacher, volunteers and guest speakers must wear appropriate clothing while attending the meeting.

12. The catechism teacher, volunteers and guest speakers must ensure the confidentiality and privacy of information about each child and must respect the privacy of information.

13. The catechism teacher, volunteers and guest speakers must not engage in the recording of voice, video, screen shots of the meeting activity. Live recordings are not permitted. This is for the privacy of the catechists/ volunteers as well as the privacy of the students while the live video lesson is happening.

14. The catechism teacher must ensure that any volunteer or guest faculty involved in delivering virtual lessons should be in hold of a valid WWCC/ Blue Card or an equivalent.

15. The catechism teacher must clearly define the age group of the participants for the meeting and ensure that the participants are from the specified age limits.

16. The catechism teacher must keep a log of all meetings including signed Consent forms, mode of meeting, duration, name and age of participants, volunteers, guest faculty, parent/ guardian present, feedback form, etc. Also include a brief description of what was covered and if any issues arose.

17. Staying in touch with parents via email or direct messaging in between meetings will be crucial to let them know about the future dates and times of the activity. Inform parents that, as the group leader, you wouldn't be having any direct contact with children outside of the virtual group meeting.

18. Due to privacy reasons and to avoid unnecessary pop ups such as advertisements, it is recommended to purchase personal zoom subscriptions as required for each catechism centre/parish/mission.

19. Ideally, the duration of each session must be limited to 60-90 minutes. Permission in advance is required from the director/parish priest/chaplain and the principal for any online session that exceeds the prescribed time limit. Such sessions have to be planned earlier and communicated to the parents well in advance.

20. If any unforeseen circumstances occur such as the interruption of a class by an unauthorized person who has gained access to the private zoom link, the session has to be immediately stopped by the teacher and the incident has to be reported to the parish safeguarding officer, parish priest and principal immediately. Communication regarding the interruption must be conveyed to parents through class WhatsApp groups following the incident.

Guidelines for Parents/ Guardians

1. **Parents should be aware of and supervise students' participation in Zoom meetings**

   - Parents will be notified of the time of a Zoom meeting via WhatsApp and are requested to provide supervision of children's participation. This addresses the risk of inappropriate behaviour, language or content being shared in a meeting/video conference.
   - Students should inform parents when they are about to join a conference and who the conference host is. This is a good habit to develop for all online interactions.

- Parents should support their child in attending the meeting/activity at the specified time and mode and ensure a quiet place is available for the child to attend the meeting.
- Child should only participate in a 'live' Zoom meeting from a location where the child can be visible to other members of the house and with the door open. Ideally this might be at a kitchen or dining room table.
- Child should position himself or herself such that there is a blank wall backdrop that will retain privacy and reduce distractions to others. Child cannot and should not engage in any Zoom calls from his/her bedroom.
- Parents should provide consent for their child to attend the meeting/activity after thoroughly learning about the purpose and details of the meeting/activity.
- Parents must ensure that children are wearing appropriate clothing while attending the meeting /activity

2. **The Zoom Meeting is a classroom and the same school behaviour expectations apply**

- Students are to be aware that all interactions, messaging, gestures and language used during a Zoom Meeting are "Sunday school appropriate" even if the students are not on Sunday school grounds.
- Students participating in Zoom meetings are expected to follow the Sunday school and class rules. This includes following catechism teacher's instruction, listening when others are speaking and not making any inappropriate comments or gestures.
- While using Zoom, students must demonstrate the Sunday school values of respect, responsibility and cooperation. Any student acting inappropriately will be removed from the meeting.

3. **Screen sharing and chat functions should only be used by instruction from the catechism teacher**

- catechism teacher will limit the use of screen sharing and chat functions.
- Where chat is enabled, participants must not post links to the chat board or click on links posted on the chat board. Students are only allowed to chat publicly and not to send private messages.

4. **Do not share Zoom meeting IDs, Links, Invites or Passwords**

- Zoom meeting IDs, invites, links and passwords will be shared by the class catechism teacher with the parents of the class via WhatsApp.
- Parents and students are strictly prohibited from sharing Zoom meeting IDs, invites, links and passwords, even with other members of the class. This is to ensure the safety and privacy of the students participating in Zoom meetings.
- Parents should understand and cooperate with catechism teachers if any unforeseen interruptions such as technical issues or unauthorized external interventions cause a session to end abruptly

5. **Parents (and other household members) are not permitted to participate in Sunday school/class Zoom meetings**

- Parents may assist with helping their child set up the technology; however, they are requested not to join any group/class Zoom Meetings being moderated by the catechism teacher. This includes being visible in the background.
- Parents or other members of the household must not participate or appear in any Zoom meeting with students unless they have been authorised to attend by the catechism teacher prior to the class. All invited guest adult speakers must have a Working with Children Check (WWCC)/ Blue Card or an equivalent before being admitted into an online room.
- Ideally, students should set up so there is a blank wall behind them. Where this is not possible, students are encouraged to set a static background by clicking 'Choose Virtual Background' in Zoom. Any virtual background used must be appropriate.

6. **Parents must encourage children to report any concerns about the facilitators or meeting immediately, to escalate to the Principal.**
   - Ensure to raise your constructive feedbacks, suggestions and concerns if any, to support the catechism teacher to improve the program.

Sample Consent Form

The consent form for parent/guardian regarding virtual meetings must include all of the below points:

- Heading: Parish name – Parent consent form for virtual meeting/ interactive class for children under 18
- Name of the Program: (e.g. Catechism Classes for High School Students or Most Solemn Communion and Confirmation Training)
- Venue: Virtual meeting /Interactive class on Zoom
- Date: (e.g. Ongoing every Saturday from 5:00 pm to 6:30 pm or every Sunday from – to – hours)
- Full Name (Parent/ Guardian)
- E mail of Parent /Guardian)
- Relationship to Child
- Phone Number
- Statement: I give permission for my son/daughter _____ to take part in the above -mentioned program organized by Name of the catechism centre and parish with place.

- By accepting this consent form, I am aware that I consent my child to participate in the below virtual meeting/ interactive class using Zoom
- Attached is the Guidelines for virtual meeting/interactive classes with children under 18 years (Attach the guideline here)
- As a parent/Guardian I abide by the above-mentioned guidelines of (specify the parish name and place) and give my consent.

References
- Vatican's Instruction - [Instruction on the Use of Distance Learning in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties](#)
- [NSW Department of Education Guidelines](#)