Appendix D: Best Practices for Online Communication Platforms and Digital Interaction

Purpose

FIRST® programs increasingly rely on digital platforms to support collaboration, learning, and connection. This appendix provides best practices for safe, respectful, and transparent online communication involving youth participants, consistent with the *FIRST* Youth Protection Program and ***FIRST*** Code of Conduct.

These guidelines apply to all *FIRST*-related online interactions, whether conducted through *FIRST*-hosted platforms or third-party tools selected by teams, Program Delivery Partners, or event organizers.

These best practices apply to:

- Coaches, mentors, volunteers, and employees.
- Youth participants and youth mentors.
- Program Delivery Partners.
- Parents and guardians supporting team activities.

This appendix supplements, but does not replace the ***FIRST*** Code of Conduct, *FIRST* YPP requirements, hosting organization requirements and applicable local, state/provincial, and national laws.

FIRST ONLINE PLATFORMS AND THIRD-PARTY TOOLS

FIRST provides and supports a variety of online platforms to enable teams to connect, collaborate, and participate in programs and events. Teams may also use third-party tools (e.g., messaging platforms, learning environments, collaboration software) to support team activities.

Participants should:

- Use online platforms only for *FIRST*-related purposes.
- Avoid sharing unnecessary personal information about themselves or others.
- Follow any age, role, or access restrictions established by the platform or by *FIRST*.

FIRST does not monitor or moderate third-party platforms. Teams are responsible for establishing expectations, supervision practices, and reporting pathways when using these tools.

ADULT RESPONSIBILITIES FOR ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Adults working with youth in *FIRST* programs play a critical role in maintaining safe digital environments. Best practices include:

1. Supervision and Oversight

- Assign at least one youth protection trained and screened adult to actively oversee team communication channels.
- Ensure online interactions remain observable and interruptible.
- Avoid moving conversations from group platforms to private channels without transparency.



2. Transparency

- Avoid private, one-on-one electronic communication between adults and youth when possible.
- Use group channels or include another adult, parent, or guardian to maintain transparency.
- Avoid the use of disappearing messages or platforms that limit visibility of communication.

3. Appropriate Use

- Communicate with youth only about *FIRST*-related activities, educational matters, or logistics.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in tone, content, and frequency of communication.
- Parents or guardians should be included in electronic communications with youth participants whenever practical and age appropriate.

4. Remote Meetings

- Apply the same expectations used for in-person activities to virtual meetings.
- All remote meetings should include at least two adults when adults are interacting with youth.
- Consider additional oversight for breakout rooms or small-group virtual sessions.

5. Boundary Management

- If a youth participant raises personal or sensitive issues, adults should maintain appropriate boundaries and seek guidance from a Lead coach/Mentor, hosting organization or *FIRST* Youth Protection when needed.

6. Social Media Use

- Social media can be a positive way to celebrate team achievements and share the *FIRST* experience. When used improperly, it can also create safety and privacy risks.

All participants are expected to:

- Follow the *FIRST* Code of Conduct online as they would in person.
- Refrain from sharing content that could cause harm, distress, or embarrassment.
- Avoid posting confidential, proprietary, or internal *FIRST* information.
- Refrain from posting defamatory content.
- Refrain from discussing topics that are for mature audiences only, such as content of a sexual nature, or content celebrating alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes, vaping, or controlled substances or gambling.

When engaging in *FIRST*-related social media activity:

- Do not represent yourself as speaking on behalf of *FIRST* unless expressly authorized.
- Follow *FIRST* trademark and branding requirements.
- Obtain appropriate consent before posting photos or videos of youth participants.
- Do not engage in harassment, bullying, intimidation, retaliatory, or discriminatory behavior.

FIRST reserves the right to remove content on *FIRST*-hosted platforms that is inconsistent with its values or *FIRST* Code of Conduct. Inappropriate online behavior may also be cause for removal from participation in *FIRST*.

REPORTING INAPPROPRIATE ONLINE BEHAVIOR

Teams should clearly communicate how concerns related to online behavior can be reported.

Participants are encouraged to:

- Use built-in reporting tools available on the platform being used and, where appropriate, report concerning interactions, content, or conduct to platform moderators or administrators for review.
- Report concerns to a trusted adult, Lead coach/Mentor, hosting organization, or *FIRST* Youth Protection

Common platform reporting resources include:

- **Discord:** Use in app reporting or the Trust and Safety form.
- **Slack:** Report to Workspace Admins/Owners or escalate to Slack via Report to Slack.
- **Google Workspace:** Use Google's Abuse reporting and workspace admin tools.

Teams should establish processes for determining who has access to these team platforms and removing access after their affiliation with the team ends.

GUIDANCE FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Youth participants are encouraged to follow these digital safety practices:

- Discuss online expectations with parents/guardians and team mentors.
- Keep personal information private.
- Never agree to meet someone offline whom you only know online.
- Trust your instincts, if something feels uncomfortable, stop engaging.
- Report concerns to a parent/guardian, trusted adult, or *FIRST* Youth Protection.
- Avoid cyberbullying, harassment, sexting, or sharing inappropriate content.
- Use privacy settings and follow platform terms of service.

ROLE OF PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Parents and guardians play an essential role in supporting youth digital safety. *FIRST* encourages families to:

- Stay informed about platforms used by teams.
- Review online safety expectations with youth participants.
- Use available resources to support healthy digital behavior.

Disclaimer

FIRST does not monitor or moderate third-party platforms such as Discord, Slack, Google Workspace, or community forums not hosted by *FIRST*. Teams and Program Delivery Partners are responsible for setting expectations, providing supervision, and responding to concerns related to online communications used for *FIRST*-related activities.