

## Use Email with Care and Wisdom

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit [www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org).

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*Kidpower's vision is to work together to build cultures of caring, respect, and safety for everyone. The purpose of this article is to share some of the practices that our organization has found helpful in ensuring that email communications build positive relationships rather than turning into misunderstandings that can be devastating.*

Where would we be without email, text messaging, tweets, and other forms of instant communication? Twenty years ago when Kidpower started, we didn't have the Internet and it took a lot longer to get things done. For me, email is like a magical Superhero of Communication, making it possible to leap across continents and time zones, reaching many people all at once, and potentially being preserved forever, with the simple push of a button.

In our organization, we teach our staff that email is an extremely useful tool that needs to be used with care and wisdom in order to stay effective and safe. Here are some of the guidelines we have developed over the years in order to prevent problems and build community:



1. **Always put a subject line specific to the topic and the person.** A lack of subject or an inaccurate subject can come across as very depersonalized, not to mention increasing the likelihood of the message getting stuck in a junk filter or thrown out. If you choose to store lots of information in email, keep in mind that it can be hard to find back what you are looking for when the subject is unclear. Instead of just hitting "Reply" automatically to a message, think about the purpose of your message and what you want the person receiving it to know.
2. **Remember that although email is incredibly convenient, it is sometimes unreliable.** A certain percentage of messages don't get through. Some get lost in the huge pile of someone's inbox. Some get stuck in junk filters. Some just disappear. It is a big mistake to assume that someone got your message or that you got this person's reply. Instead of giving up on someone, worrying

about being a bother, or getting annoyed, double check. Send your message again. Call if it's important. We are big believers in making follow-up calls unless we have received firm confirmation that the other person has received the information we've sent.

3. **Don't use email when you are upset or to deliver upsetting information to others.** The immediacy of email makes it possible to say things that get set in stone because the communication lacks interaction and tone of voice. A friend of mine who is a therapist says that much of her practice now comes from email messages that have led to people getting really upset with each other. In our workshops, we sometimes tell our students to imagine that they are about to email or text message someone when they are angry. We ask whether sending messages when you are upset will make your relationship with another person better or worse. Invariably, our students say, "Worse!" We then coach them to use their Hands Down Power and take their hands away from the technology.

Our Assistant Director of Community Education, Erika Leonard has a terrific People Safety Podcast Episode about this issue called, [Danger Ahead: Emailing While Angry](#).

4. **Before you hit Send, be at peace with the possibility that lots of people might see it.** Whether it is through email or any other form of communication, be careful with whom you share personal information. Anyone who uses email or text messages for personal communications about problems and other issues needs to be prepared for their messages to be seen by others by accident or on purpose.
5. **Make sure your style is appropriate for your purpose.** At Kidpower, we tell our staff to make sure that their writing on email uses good grammar, proper spelling, and has a warm professional tone. Just as in conversation, how you speak between friends can be very different from how you speak with people at work. Think about the person you are writing to and the kind of impression you want to make. Cutesy language, misspellings, and abbreviations can come across as informal and friendly to some recipients and as flaky to others.
6. **Be transparent in how you use email.** Email can make it easy to be anonymous and to not take responsibility for your message. It can be distancing to get messages from a group with no person's name attached. Sign your messages with at least your first name. It can damage trust to use the Blind Copy (BCC) function to hide the fact that you are sharing a message with someone else, especially if these people are in relationship with each other. Unless there is a good reason not to, show the fact that you are copying your messages to others.

One of our goals at Kidpower is to support people in building strong positive relationships. We've learned through our experiences in our very diverse, geographically disbursed organization that email, while a marvelous tool, can create big breakdowns in communication. The above simple practices have worked well for us in ensuring that our email use improves relationships rather than damaging them.