

Maintaining professional boundaries with students

Teaching and care professions are predicated on positive relationships and pre/schools are places where all staff can have significant influence in students' lives. The relationship of an adult staff member and student is characterised by differing roles and an imbalance of power based on a number of factors including age, authority and gender.

The staff member is responsible for maintaining a professional role with the student. This means establishing clear professional boundaries with students that serve to protect everyone from misunderstandings or a violation of the professional relationship.

The following examples will assist staff in establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Boundary	Example of violation
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inappropriate comments about a student's appearance including excessive flattering comments• Inappropriate conversation or enquiries of a sexual nature (eg questions about a student's sexuality)• Use of inappropriate pet names• Vilification or humiliation• Jokes or innuendo of a sexual nature• Obscene gestures and language• Facilitating access to pornographic or overtly sexual material• Failing to stop sexual harassment between students• Correspondence of a personal nature including letters, email, phone, SMS text (not including class postcards/ bereavement cards, etc)
Personal disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussing personal details of lifestyle of self or others. It may be appropriate and necessary at times, however, to draw on relevant personal life experiences when teaching• Sharing of personal information about other staff or students
Physical contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unwarranted, unwanted and/or inappropriate touching of a student personally or with objects (eg pencil or ruler)• Initiating or permitting inappropriate physical contact by a student, eg massage, tickling games

(continued)

Boundary	Example of violation
Place (without pre/school's authority)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inviting/allowing/encouraging students home • Attending students' homes or social gatherings for personal reasons • Being alone with a student outside of a staff member's responsibilities • Watching students in a change room when not in a supervisory role • Driving a student unaccompanied
Targeting individual students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutoring (outside education sectors' directives) • Personal gifts and special favours • Adopting a welfare role that is the responsibility of another staff member eg counsellor, or doing so without the knowledge of key staff members

Professional boundary violations by a staff member represent a breach of trust and a failure to meet a duty of care to students. When staff violate boundaries they risk:

- harmful consequences for the student
- seriously undermining the learning process
- seriously undermining the professional reputation of the staff member
- disciplinary action for the staff member.

Staff members may also fail to maintain professional boundaries by operating beyond the responsibilities of their role, and beyond their expertise. Students who raise significant personal problems with a staff member they trust need to be referred, preferably with their knowledge, to a person on staff with specialised skills, for example, a school counsellor or pastoral care co-ordinator. The staff member can continue to play a supportive role with the student in collaboration with specialist staff.

Staff must not, under any circumstances, engage in an intimate, overly familiar or sexual relationship with a student. Improper conduct of a sexual nature by a staff member against a student includes all forms of sexual activity, including kissing, and any other form of child abuse as well as but not limited to the following.

- Obscene language or gestures of a sexual nature.
- Suggestive remarks or actions.
- Jokes of a sexual nature.
- Unwarranted and inappropriate touching.
- Undressing in front of students.
- Correspondence (spoken or text) with students in respect of the staff member's sexual or personal feelings for the student.
- Deliberate exposure of students to sexual behaviour of others, other than in prescribed curriculum in which sexual and relationship themes are contextual.

Good practice in managing professional boundaries

The following self-assessment questions may assist staff members in assessing their application of professional boundaries:

- Am I dealing in a different manner with a particular student than with others under the same circumstances?
- Is my dress/availability/language different from the normal with a particular student?
- Would I do or say this if a colleague were present?
- Would I condone my conduct if I observed it in another adult?
- Are the consequences of my actions likely to have negative outcomes for students?
- If I were a parent would I want an adult behaving this way towards my own children?

Professional conduct and social networking websites

Staff in education and care settings are expected to model responsible and respectful conduct to the children and young people with whom they work. Most staff feel confident about their ability to do this in the work place and in the general community they may share with children, young people and parents.

However, staff in education and care environments also need to consider the electronic social environments they utilise. It is important they consider what information about them or images of them could be accessed by others and whether they believe these represent them in a light acceptable to their role in working with children and young people. Would they be happy for the children, young people, other staff and parents of the community in which they work to access that material? What judgements could be made about their suitability to have responsibility for children and young people? What misuse of the material could children or young people make?

Responding to inappropriate/sexual behaviour of staff towards students

Staff in pre/schools are mandated notifiers and are therefore required under the Children's Protection Act to report suspected child abuse to the Child Abuse Report Line (CARL) on 131478. A report to CARL must be made irrespective of who is implicated: a colleague, friend, senior staff member, volunteer, parent, visitor or other student. The report is made in consultation with the principal/director who signs the site's mandatory notification record and stores it securely. Working with the principal/director ensures that appropriate procedures can be followed within the pre/school. Such procedures are designed to ensure that students' wellbeing is safeguarded and that staff members' rights are respected.

If the principal/director is the subject of the suspicion, observation or allegation, staff must report to the principal's/director's line manager, employer or appropriate central office personnel.

The complexities of these situations are acknowledged. Nevertheless, staff must be supported in managing their sensitivities or discomforts because their duty of care to the student remains their paramount responsibility. Staff are encouraged to discuss these issues and procedures as part of their Responding to Abuse and Neglect Education and Care training.