



Six Golden Rules to Guide Positive Behaviour

What is appropriate physical contact with the children and young people in our care?

1. Remember your professional boundaries

Professional boundaries are a set of rules which guide how we expect you to engage with a client. The key characteristics are:

- There is a defined focus of the relationship
- There are clear expectations for all parties
- It is an approach which limits personal disclosure
- There is a beginning and end point to the relationship.

2. Use your professional judgement

Every situation will differ according to contextual factors, such as who, how old, and how developed is the child or young person, who else is present, their history, and many more. Where you are faced with a situation that may be outside of the guidelines it is important to engage ethical decision making and employ the following principles:

- Have strategies that help the parent's and child's understanding of your expected boundaries
- Stay on top of updates or changes to guidelines and boundaries
- Accept that there will be complex 'on the spot' decisions as part of your work. We need to remain alert and vigilant of our behaviour
- Involve or ask advice of managers where relevant
- Pay attention to any uneasy feelings, doubts or confusion – do not ignore them.

3. Avoid common misconceptions

There are some common misconceptions that are held by professionals when interacting with children at work which must be avoided, these include:

- What happens outside of work has nothing to do with a professional relationship
- Engaging with a child attending your service is the same as engaging with a child who isn't attending your service
- Our understanding of engagement is the same as the child's understanding
- Engagement that's helpful for one child will also be helpful for another
- If we don't see an issue with our behaviour, then others won't think there's an issue either
- There is no such thing as being too trusted or too close to a child.

4. You can use physical contact as a form of acknowledgement

It's okay to acknowledge or congratulate a child using physical contact, if it is reasonable and aligned with supporting their wellbeing.

Some examples of appropriate physical contact include:

- Fist bumps, high five, shake hands, hand on shoulders, sideways hug

If a child wants to acknowledge you physically they should undertake the same behaviour as you. If it's contact you'd expect with friends and family (e.g. cuddling, kissing, stroking, giving massages, sitting on your knee), then it is up to the professional (i.e. you) to help the child

Source:

Barnes, H. 2015, 'Guidance for appropriate behaviour for YVic', PowerPoint presentation, The Australian Childhood Foundation, Melbourne, viewed 3 December 2015.



understand what are appropriate physical interactions with you. Some suggestions for managing this may include;

- Okay to initially accept but then can tactfully end the behaviour (e.g. move them from on your knee to next to you).
- Undertake further strategies to help children and families understand the types of physical acknowledgments appropriate at YMCA Victoria.

5. Consider what different cultures consider appropriate physical behaviour

Different traditions and attitudes to physical behaviour exist. Understanding cultural physical behavioural expectations is important for the child's wellbeing. It can:

- Minimise the potential for embarrassment or offence
- Encourages parents and children to feel safe with you.

How can this be dealt with?

- Personnel can become familiar with the key cultural groups and practices of children in their service
- Have a strategy for certain cultural behaviours, such as greetings with a kiss, contact between men and women.

6. Keep a clear head when faced with a difficult decision

If a situation doesn't feel black-and-white, the following ethical decision making lens may help:

Why: Is the physical contact for the health and wellbeing of the child?

Remember, these include: helping with a task in your program, acknowledging the child, supporting them if they're hurt or distressed.

If NO, the contact may be inappropriate.

If YES, consider the following:

How: Are there non-physical alternatives or others who can assist?

What: What is age and stage appropriate interaction for the child or young person?

Who: Are other children and adults, parents, staff aware of the contact?

When: Is this type of behaviour once-off as-needed, or is it a habitual, assumed need of the child?

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