

13 Maintaining Proper Professional Boundaries

13.1 General Principles

All adults (whether volunteers or employees) must maintain clear and appropriate professional boundaries with the minors they serve. A proper professional relationship between adults and minors will always remain focused on the specific role in which the adult is serving the minor.

13.2 Responsibility of Adults Working With Minors

Adults bear the responsibility to ensure that:

- a. their relationship with minors is clearly professional in nature,
- b. proper boundaries are maintained at all times,
- c. minors are made aware of these boundaries,
- d. any minor who breaches these boundaries is counseled as to proper behavior, and
- e. breaches of boundaries are reported to a supervisor.

13.3 Guidelines for Maintaining Proper Professional Boundaries

The following are guidelines for proper professional boundaries in working with minors:

- a. Excessive familiarity or intimacy between adults and minors is not permitted.
- b. Adults should not relate to minors as if they were peers or friends.
- c. Adults should not take on a role of a "confidant" to a minor, beyond the proper context of a professional counseling relationship (e.g., school guidance counselors or pastoral counselors).
- d. Adults should not show undue interest in the private lives of minors (particularly in such areas as relationships, dating, or sexual activity), beyond the proper context of a professional counseling relationship (e.g., school guidance counselors or pastoral counselors).
- e. Adults should not share information about their own private lives with minors (particularly in such areas as relationships, dating, or sexual activity).
- f. Adults should not engage in private correspondence with minors.
- g. Adults must take special care to observe boundaries when they are dealing with minors who are especially vulnerable (e.g., children who have experienced abuse).
- h. Adults may not give undue attention or favorable treatment to a minor, such that there is the appearance that there is a "special" relationship with the adult, or that a minor is a "favorite" of the adult.
- i. Adults should not offer or accept excessive or inappropriate compliments, remarks or gestures that focus on physical appearance.
- j. Adults must always be with another adult or be in the proximity of another adult when working with minors in unsupervised settings.
- k. Adults may not engage in purely social relations with minors in non-school or private settings, except in special circumstances (e.g., graduation parties).

13.4 Physical Contact with Minors

Physical contact between adults and minors must be approached with a high degree of caution. It should be rare, and under no circumstances can it be regular or routine behavior.

Adults must use extreme caution to ensure that any kind of physical contact with a minor cannot be misconstrued by an observer or by the minor, and that they do not violate appropriate professional boundaries.

Physical contact with a minor is only permissible if:

- a. it is fully appropriate to the situation;
- b. it is appropriate to the age of the minor;
- c. it is entirely and unambiguously nonsexual;
- d. the minor consents to the contact and is fully comfortable with it;
- e. it cannot be misconstrued by the minor or others; and
- f. it does not constitute an abuse of the adult's position of power or trust.

The following are guidelines to determine whether physical contact with minors is appropriate:

- a. Physical contact with minors may never take place in private.
- b. Physical contact in the context of any kind of counseling may never take place.
- c. Physical contact with minors may never be routine behavior for an adult.
- d. Otherwise unacceptable behavior does not become acceptable if it is initiated by a minor. The adult has an obligation to counsel the minor as to proper behavior. The adult should also report any such incident to their supervisor.
- e. Cultural customs, or the ordinary behavior of minors towards their peers, do not justify otherwise inappropriate physical contact with an adult.

Some examples of inappropriate physical contact with minors include:

- a. any contact with the areas of the body that are ordinarily covered by a bathing suit;
- b. kissing on the mouth or prolonged hugs;
- c. routine greeting/departure hugs or social kisses to the cheek;
- d. holding hands (other than briefly holding the hand of a young child in public for their safety, for example while crossing the street);
- e. placing and leaving one's arm around a minor's shoulder, back or waist for a prolonged period;
- f. patting a child on the backside (even during a sporting event);
- g. repeatedly touching on the arm, back or legs;
- h. touching on any part of the body in a way that may be construed as a caress;
- i. tickling or wrestling;
- j. placing and leaving hands on the shoulders of a child sitting at a desk;
- k. placing and leaving hands on the legs of a minor who is seated alongside;
- l. sitting with one's legs crossed with the legs of another.

Some examples physical contact with minors that may be appropriate under the circumstances might include:

- a. briefly shaking hands as a social greeting;
- b. very brief public social contact in connection with a special event or circumstance (e.g. such as a public greeting hug, an arm placed around the shoulder for a moment, or a short pat on the back, to congratulate a student at graduation);
- c. lightly and briefly tapping on the arm or shoulder to get their attention;
- d. a "high five" or "fist bump", for instance during a sporting event;
- e. an arm briefly placed around the shoulder of an upset or injured minor in public.