

# PROTECTIVE PRACTICES

for staff in their interactions with children and young people



Government of South Australia  
Department for Education

## What are the Protective Practices guidelines?

The guidelines articulate the expected standards of behaviour for maintaining professional boundaries with children and young people, ensuring education and care settings are always child safe.

## Why are they needed?

Children's and young people's safety and wellbeing must be safeguarded. Protective practices ensure that interactions are always safe and respectful and they clarify behaviours that are inappropriate.

## How can interactions be always respectful and safe for children and young people?

Interactions with children and young people must be undertaken following the guiding principles of:



### MAKE IT PUBLIC

- Other persons in the site community are aware and interactions are visible
- Activities should not be done in an isolated place
- The more visible, public and accessible the location, the better



### MAKE IT AUTHORISED

- Approved by the site leader or part of an official site activity and a legitimate part of your role
- Parents/carers should be informed and give consent as appropriate
- Only use site's authorised ICT equipment and digital platforms for approved activities such as communicating with children and young people and only use devices issued by the site or service for taking, sharing and storing their images or videos.



### MAKE IT TIMELY

- As far as possible, undertake activity or provide support within the site's or program's official hours of operation
- Ensure activities undertaken outside of official hours are preapproved and authorised by site leadership



### MAKE IT PURPOSEFUL

- The interaction should be linked to a learning activity or curriculum area, support plan or program that relates to a child's learning, safety, health or wellbeing

These principles provide a framework for safe and respectful interactions. They should be adapted to each specific context, recognising that situations vary, while always prioritising the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

# Professional boundaries and examples of breaches

The following outlines the professional boundaries in interactions with children and young people, including key principles and examples of breaches to avoid. This list is not exhaustive.



## Communication

Staff communication and interaction with children and young people are respectful, transparent and mainly related to the learning or wellbeing needs of children and young people.

### Examples of breaches

- Communication or correspondence of a personal nature using any medium (eg phone, text message, letters, email, social media, internet postings). This does not include class cards or bereavement cards.
- Discussing personal lifestyle details or opinions of self, other staff or children and young people unless directly relevant to the learning topic and with the individual's consent (eg details about personal or romantic relationships, personal problems, financial struggles, personal use of alcohol or substance abuse).
- Manipulation (including secrets, bribes, threats, jokes or innuendo of a sexual nature)
- Obscene gestures and/or language
- Flirtatious or suggestive gestures and comments
- Inappropriate conversations or enquiries of a sexual nature (eg questions about a child or young person's sexuality or their sexual relationship with others)
- Concealing and/or restricting access from the site leader, any communication or correspondence with children or young people that indicates a breach of professional boundaries.



## Physical

Any staff physical contact with children and young people must be appropriate – that is, has a valid context and purpose, is age appropriate and only allowed in certain circumstances.

### Examples of breaches

- Touching children and young people without a valid and authorised reason or context. Examples of valid reasons include responding to personal care needs such as nappy changing or feeding infants, removing a child or young person from danger where physical contact is the only way to protect the child or young person from imminent danger, consoling an upset child, or providing first aid.
- Unsafe, unwarranted or unwanted touching of a child or young person personally or with objects (eg pencil or ruler)
- Corporal punishment (eg physical discipline or smacking)
- Inappropriate use of physical restraint/restrictive practices – may constitute assault
- Using coercion, restraint or physical force to make a child comply to routine tasks such as taking a nap or rest especially in early years settings
- Initiating, permitting or requesting inappropriate or unnecessary physical contact with a child or young person (eg massage, kisses, tickling games) or facilitating situations that unnecessarily result in close physical contact with a child or young person
- Entering and/or using toilet facilities specifically allocated to children and young people
- Using change rooms set aside for children or young people without the site leader's authority, or entering change rooms set aside for children or young people when supervision is not required or necessary.



## Power

Staff exercise their position of authority to ensure that children and young people thrive in their learning and are supported in their wellbeing needs. Staff must not abuse this power to cause harm.

### Examples of breaches

- Tutoring or mentoring (outside education sector's directions or knowledge)
- Giving personal gifts or special favours
- Singling the same children and young people out for special duties or responsibilities (unless this is part of a negotiated adjustment with parents/carers and approved by a site leader in a documented plan)
- Offering, overnight/weekend/holiday care/before and after school care of children and young people as respite for parents or carers (unless a family day care educator, or employed by a respite organisation, and with the site leader's approval)
- Giving money and/or gifts to individual children or young people
- Rewarding, punishing, bribing or coercing a child or young person into silence about a staff member's inappropriate conduct
- Failing to intervene in sexual harassment of children and young people
- Adopting an ongoing welfare role that is beyond the scope of their position or that is the responsibility of another staff member (eg student wellbeing leader) or an external professional and that occurs without the permission of senior staff.



## Emotional

Staff engage in emotional self-regulation to model respectful behaviours in their interactions with children and young people.

### Examples of breaches

- Inappropriate comments about a child or young person's appearance, including excessive flattering comments
- Use of inappropriate nicknames
- Vilification or humiliation
- Disrespectful or discriminatory treatment of, or manner towards, young people based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation
- Showing preferential treatment to certain children or young people without legitimate reason
- Grooming behaviour.



## Relationships

Staff relationships with children and young people are strictly professional for the purpose of supporting their learning and wellbeing needs. Staff must not act as 'friends' or 'peers' of children and young people in the same way other children and young people are.

### Examples of breaches

- Engaging in intimate, romantic, or sexual relationships with a child or young person (current or former student)
- Transporting a child or young person unaccompanied unless authorised to do so with an approved plan of action and parent/carer consent
- Inviting/allowing/encouraging children and young people to attend the staff member's home or any other private location
- Attending children and young people's homes or their social gatherings
- Being alone with a child or young person outside of a staff member's responsibilities
- Meeting children or young people alone outside of the site or service without a legitimate reason.

Note: Staff may occasionally interact with a child or young person outside their role, such as at community or cultural events. Please refer to the Protective Practices document for guidance.



## Technology/digital space

Activities that require the use of technology must only use the site's official equipment and/or digital platform and must be related to the educational and wellbeing needs of children and young people.

### Examples of breaches

- Using personal rather than site or service issued device unless authorised by the site leader under exceptional circumstances such as during emergency
- Using personal rather than site or service issued devices when taking images or videos of children for approved activities
- Possession of personal mobile devices when working with children in centre-based early childhood settings (ie long daycare and preschools) without the site leader's written approval
- Corresponding or communicating using a personal device rather than school equipment (via any medium eg phone, letter, SMS, social media etc) to or from children and young people
- Photographing, filming or audio recordings of children and young people without site leader approval and required parental/carer consent
- Taking any photos of children that do not uphold their privacy, right and dignity (such as those that may be deemed sexualised, during toileting, nappy change or in a state of undress, when distressed or dysregulated or injured and first aid has not yet been administered)
- Still/moving images or audio recordings of children and young people kept or stored in personal devices including in mobile phones, laptops, hard drives, SD cards, tablets, USBs, cloud storage or personal locations such as car or home
- Using personal email, social media, internet postings to interact with children and young people
- Uploading or publishing still/moving images or audio recordings of children and young people to any location, without parental/carer and site leader's consent
- Communication related to the role but carried out via private personal devices
- Allowing children and young people access to a staff member's personal internet locations (eg social networking sites)
- Creating or using private or other online chat rooms to communicate with children and young people
- Facilitating or permitting access to sexually explicit material that is not part of an endorsed curriculum
- Facilitating or permitting access to pornographic material or adult sites
- Requesting and/or adding children and young people as friends or contacts on social media platforms
- Accepting friend requests and/or follow requests from children and/or young people on social media platforms.

## Frequently asked questions

### Are the guidelines mandatory?

**Yes.** They apply to all employees, service providers, volunteers, third party providers, contractors, tertiary students on placements and any other adults who work with children and young people in all Government, Catholic or Independent education and care settings.

### Do the protective practices ban touching children and young people?

**No** they do not ban touching. Any physical contact with children and young people must be appropriate – that is, has a valid context and purpose, is age appropriate and only allowed in certain circumstances. The Protective practices describe what is appropriate physical contact. (See QR code at the end to access the document.)

### Do the protective practices prohibit developing relationships with children and young people?

**No.** Developing positive relationships with children and young people are always encouraged, with the understanding that these relationships must remain professional and respectful. It is essential to maintain appropriate professional boundaries to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

### What guidance is there about discussing personal lifestyle?

Discussing personal lifestyle specifics or details, whether about oneself or others, can blur the boundaries in the student-teacher (or staff) relationship. This may lead to confusion about the nature of the relationship and potentially undermine a teacher's authority and the respect students have for them. Additionally, privacy concerns may arise, making students feel uncomfortable or pressured to share personal details in return.

The focus should be on maintaining a professional and respectful learning environment. Conversations about general topics like sports teams, pets, special events, or weekend activities are not considered breaches. Positive and respectful relationships with students, with clear boundaries, are always encouraged.

### What happens if there is a breach of professional boundaries?

Anyone breaching professional boundaries may be subject to disciplinary action, including termination of employment or potentially, criminal charges.



[www.education.sa.gov.au/protectivepractices](http://www.education.sa.gov.au/protectivepractices)

## For further information, contact:

### Department for Education

Phone: (08) 8226 1000

Email: [education.engagementandwellbeing@sa.gov.au](mailto:education.engagementandwellbeing@sa.gov.au)

### Catholic Education South Australia

Phone: (08) 8301 6600

Email: [info@cesa.catholic.edu.au](mailto:info@cesa.catholic.edu.au)

### Association of Independent Schools of South Australia

Phone: (08) 8179 1400

Email: [office@ais.sa.edu.au](mailto:office@ais.sa.edu.au)

