

Guidelines for Appropriate Physical Contact with Children and Young People

It is hard to conceive how you can be a nurturing, caring worker with children and young people without some physical contact happening at least occasionally! For example, if a child or young person is very distressed it is natural to put an arm round their shoulder. However, we must be conscious that what to most is an innocent touch may have another, more sinister meaning for children who have experienced abuse. We must also be aware that some people use the opportunity of physical contact with others not as a way of conveying love and support, but as a means of satisfying their own cravings.

The following guidelines are helpful when considering whether or not touch is appropriate in any given situation.

- For whose benefit is this taking place? Is it for the sake of the child or young person or is it for your own benefit? Touch should be in response to a child's needs and not related to the worker's needs. It should be age appropriate, welcome and generally initiated by the child, not the church worker.
- If you find yourself in a situation where no-one else is present, it is always advisable to avoid physical contact. General advice is to keep everything public. You should discourage people you support from sitting on your lap. You can offer to sit side by side.
- Use physical contact in a way that conveys appropriate concern but in a way that is least likely to be misconstrued. For example, an arm around the shoulder standing by the side of a child or young person may be more appropriate than a full 'hug'.
- Be mindful of your body position and always ask permission.
- A hug in the context of a group is very different from a hug behind closed doors. However, remember that not all people express friendship or affection in the same way and some people (children included) find any sort of touch an infringement of their personal space.
- If you find that the child or young person is cringing or responding in a negative way to being touched, then stop immediately and find an alternative, non-tactile way to convey your concern.
- Avoid any physical contact that is or could be construed as sexual and/or abusive/offensive. This includes taking great care not to engage in rough games involving physical contact between a worker and a child or sexually provocative games.



- Allow the child to determine the degree of physical contact with others except in exceptional circumstances (e.g. when they need medical attention).
- Workers should be prepared to be accountable to fellow workers for their use of touch and physical contact and should listen to the concerns of others if it is felt that boundaries are being crossed. They should be encouraged to challenge one another if necessary. Concerns about possible abuse or inappropriate behaviour should always be reported.