

## **Rough notes only: hope they are helpful**

### Positive Reasons for giving and making available physical contact to students

- Many students display emotional, physiological, cognitive and communicative behaviours associated with very early levels of development.
- For people who are at an early level of development touch is likely to be the most fundamental, tangible, foundational form of communication; - to some extent establishing a foundation for further communication development.
- Many students have impairments relating to, for example, sight or hearing. This emphasises the necessity to use available channels of communication in order to ensure rich social experiences.
- Physical contact is a deep, fundamental form of communication for all human beings, and can be particularly effective for ensuring the transmission of profound messages about self worth and respect, particularly (but not only) when speech communication is not available.
- Appropriate touching may make the recognition of negative inappropriate touch more likely, and thus may be a proactive measure against inappropriate touch and/or the effects of the experience of inappropriate touch.
- Inappropriate response to touch cannot be prevented by not touching. Good experiences of positive, appropriate touching may make the recognition of negative inappropriate touch more likely
- Some people do not like to be touched (e.g. some people with autism); as a result we can see that they lack knowledge of a huge area of human experience and thus we should sensitively address and ameliorate the problem if possible.
- Touch is normal interaction for the affirmation of relationships and giving of emotional and physiological support (even when cultural attitudes to touch vary enormously).
- Experiments with other mammal species assure us that physical contact informs all aspects of development.
- During physical care, students should have the experience of quality touch not just brisk, efficient touch.

- Our practice can involve frequent, routine use of physical prompting. Again, we should ensure that these are also warm and communicative touches.
- To protect.
- Therapy (e.g. massage).
- Medication/treatment: to offer support after seizures/ injury.

### **What does this mean in practice?**

Members of staff routinely touch students in order to:

- Reinforce other communication, for example, by placing a hand on the student's shoulder whilst speaking.
- Give physical support and guidance.
- Give reassurance: communicate security and comfort
- Physically intervene and manage negative behaviours.
- Play, romp and interact.
- Role model positive use of touch.
- Respond non-verbally.
- Direct or physically prompt.
- Give personal care.
- Give physical cues for participation or understanding.
- Aid protection in hazardous situations.
- Give therapy (e.g. massage, physiotherapy).
- As the main form of communication.
- Respond to students use of physical contact for communication and making social connections.
- Reward and affirm.
- Give them the opportunity of choice to lead the communication.
- Communicate affection, warmth, a sense of mutuality and enable the student to learn understanding of these things and the ability to communicate them.
- Deliberately teach some students who do not want or like touch, the enjoyment and benefit of physical contact.
- Give graphic experience of the tempo of life and physical activity enjoyed by another person, for example: a member of staff communicates calm and stillness through physical contact.

**What this means in practice is that physical contact can be routine in staff technique. However all staff must observe these potential hazards**

- With students at or beyond puberty, members of staff must operate maximum sensitivity to physical contact being misunderstood or misconstrued and triggering sexual arousal.
- As far as is possible, giving maximum regard to the student's right to give consent to physical contact (there are exceptions to this in our practice).
- Members of staff must also be aware student's sexual behaviour towards staff being misunderstood by members of staff and interpreted as purely socially communicative and friendly by staff and vice-versa.
- Students may sometimes indulge in touches to intimate areas of a member of staff's body when there is no sexual intent or understanding. It is legitimate and advisable for the member of staff to withdraw from or cease to touch, but not advisable to make huge issue of the incident at that moment as this may be reinforcing.
- Students can sometimes become sexually aroused during personal care.

**Some possible reasons for occasionally withholding non-routine physical contact**

- May, in the short term, contribute to sexual arousal.
- There is a history of sexual or physical abuse.
- Distress is caused or results.
- The member of staff is not feeling tactile at that moment.
- The member of staff, at that moment, feels that the circumstances may leave them vulnerable to allegations of improper conduct.
- The pupils use of touch is presently too extreme for the comfort of the member of staff.

**Good reading:**

Montague, A., (1986) Touching: The Human significance of the skin. New York, Harper & Rowe..

Field, T., (2003) Touch. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

## **Guidelines for safeguards on use of physical contact**

- **Know why you do it:**

Be knowledgeable on the purposes of using physical contact by discussion, thought and by reading the pertinent psychological and developmental literature.
- **Have consent from the person:**

Obey the usual conventions concerning making physical contact with another person. If you rarely get consent to touch, then go back a few stages and work toward obtaining willingly given consent. At the very least, physical contact may be necessary to carry out basic care.
- **Be prepared to discuss and explain your practices:**

First and foremost by being knowledgeable, as above.
- **Ensure the document is acknowledged in the school curriculum document or workplace brochure:**

The culture and working practices of the school or other workplace are acknowledged in the curriculum document or workplace brochure, and this will include explication of the use of physical contact and the purposes of it.
- **Ensure the document is acknowledged in any individual programme for the person:**

Be assertive. If you are certain that use of physical content is fulfilling the person's needs, educationally or developmentally, then state this in the documentation drawn up to support work with that person.
- **Have good teamwork: both organisational and emotional:**

Team working practices should literally facilitate staff working together in teams so that staff or students are rarely alone. The teamwork ethos should also include good discussions among staff concerning the emotional aspects of the work including, crucially, orientations toward the issue of use of physical contact.
- **Use of physical contact should be discussed openly and regularly:**

There should be no sense of furtiveness or 'hidden curriculum'. This important aspect of teaching technique should tangibly be a matter of open discussion and study.
- **Have others present where possible:**

The most basic safeguard for staff and students is to have other staff present in the room when in situations where physical contact is likely to be used.