

## Guidance and Policy on the Use Of Safe Touch

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## **Introduction**

Children need to learn who they are and how they fit into the world. The quality of the child's relationships with significant adults is key to their healthy development and emotional health and wellbeing.

## **Why is touch an important part of our work?**

Research shows clearly that healthy pro-social brain development requires access to safe touch as one of the means of calming, soothing and containing distress for a frightened, sad or angry child.

It is essential for all children to learn the difference between safe and unsafe touch and to experience having their strongest emotions contained, validated, accepted and soothed by a significant adult.

If children are behaving in unacceptable, threatening, dangerous, aggressive or out of control ways, they have not yet learned how their strongest emotional reactions can be contained, channelled and communicated safely.

In recognition of this, under agreed and supervised conditions, specially trained staff will consider using safe touch as one of the means available to them for:

- Calming a distressed child
- Contain an angry child
- Affirm or encourage an anxious child or a child with low self-esteem.

## **To whom does the policy apply?**

All staff and children working across the Trust.

## **Why have a policy on safe touch?**

Wave is adopting an informed, evidence based decision to allow safe touch in special cases as a developmentally appropriate intervention that will aid healthy growth and learning.

Safe touch used to calm, soothe and regulate a child's emotions is a needed developmental experience. The brain does not develop self-soothing neuronal pathways until this safe emotional regulation has been experienced.

Where children have had insufficient experience of safe touch and calming regulation this may be a priority to help the brain to develop access to thinking, judging and evaluating mechanisms. Safe touch is one of the key ways of regulating children's emotions but it is a strategy that fully trained staff will use only under supervision and in line with a whole school Policy on Touch.

Other means of calming, soothing and containing children's strong emotions include:

- slowing one's pace
- lowering the voice
- breathing more deeply
- initially matching the pitch and volume of the child's emotional display and then regulating it down talking slowly, firmly and quietly in an unhurried and unflustered way
- providing clear predictable consistently held boundaries

## **What is Safe Touch?**

The developmentally appropriate and therapeutic use of safe touch is defined by situations in which abstinence would actually be inhumane, unkind and potentially psychologically or neuro-biologically damaging. Examples include the empirically backed beneficial use of touch in the comforting of a child who is in an acute state of distress and/or out of control. Not to reach out to the child in such circumstances could be re-traumatising and damaging, confirming or inviting anti-social behaviour patterns.

Abstinence in the face of intense grief, stress and/or rage reactions can lead to a state of hyper arousal in which toxic levels of stress chemicals are released in the body and brain. The severely damaging long term effects of this state have been intensively researched worldwide and are well documented.

In addition, gentle safe holding in line with the school policy on Positive Handling (Team Teach) is appropriate if a child:

- is hurting him/herself or others, or is likely to hurt him/herself or others
- is damaging property
- is incensed and out of control, so that all verbal attempts to engage him/her have failed

Such necessary interventions are fully in line with guidelines set out in the Government Document 'Use of reasonable force – advice for headteachers, staff and governing bodies'.

All members of Wave have been thoroughly trained in the safest and gentlest means of holding a child (Team Teach) which is designed to enable the child to feel safe and soothed whilst bringing them down from uncontrolled states of hyper arousal. Without this intervention, the child can be left at risk of actual physical or psychological harm.

## **Appropriate and Inappropriate Touch**

Our policy rests on the belief that each staff member must appreciate the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch and will need to demonstrate a clear understanding of the difference, acknowledging both the damaging and unnecessary uses of touch in an educational context. Touch is not to be used as an ill thought out or impulsive act of futile reassurance or as a means to ensure compliance.

All staff should ensure the following guidelines are adhered to:

- Parents/Carers should be informed of the school policy around touch at induction meeting. Discussion with parents and pupils about how comfortable their child is with safe touch should be held at this meeting. For some pupils, safe touch will not be comfortable for them and should be communicated to staff.
- Parents/Carers should provide written consent for their child to be part of Wave and subject to our policies on Positive Handling and Safe Touch.
- Staff members should agree the use of safe touch in discussion with the SMT and its use regularly reviewed.
- 2 Adult rule. No adult should use touch when alone with a child.
- Use brief, gentle contact on open or clothed parts of the body: hands, arms, shoulders, head, hair.

## **Unsafe Touch**

At no point and under no circumstances should staff members use touch to satisfy their own need for physical contact or reassurance. Staff need to show awareness of touch that is invasive or which could be confusing, traumatising or experienced as eroticising in any way what so ever.

Staff must always be particularly sensitive to pupils who are demonstrating that they are not comfortable with touch even if it appears to be appropriate to the member of staff. It is vital for a member of staff to think about what they represent to a particular child. A child's history may also influence who represents a 'safe' adult to them. Additionally, some children may be used to experiencing different levels or types of touch as part of their cultural upbringing.

Should any such touch be used it would be deemed as the most serious breach of the Code of Ethics warranting the highest level of disciplinary action.