



Establishing & Maintaining Boundaries

SUPPORT NOTES FROM THE AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION IN REGARDS TO CHILD PROTECTION

There are a range of practices that will assist those working with children to feel confident about meeting their responsibilities and to establish positive, respectful and safe relationships with children. These practices are basically common sense and many are probably already undertaken. It is important, however, to be reminded of these practices so that they become second nature and embedded in all interactions with children in sport.

One of the key practices is to establish and maintain clear professional boundaries with children.

Establishing Boundaries

Communication boundaries

- Be aware of your communication style and how what you say and do may be interpreted. Not all children will understand an action, request or behaviour in the same manner. One child may see an action as usual or acceptable behaviour while another may find it unacceptable. A child's interpretation of an action may also be influenced by cultural and religious differences, disability, gender and prior experiences.
- Explain in front of all children (and parents, if possible) your method of instruction and when and where you will need to touch them, if at all.
- Use positive and age-appropriate language when talking to and in the presence of children.
- Ensure feedback is linked to performance and is not of a personal nature.

Physical contact boundaries

- Ensure any physical contact with children is relevant and appropriate to the development of the skills required for the activity.
- Seek permission to touch when doing the above.
- Be careful about which part of your body and how much of it is in contact with a child's body.
- Do not engage in any intimate, over-familiar or sexual relationships with people under the age of 18 years.

Location boundaries

- Avoid unaccompanied and unobserved activities (i.e. being alone with a child).
- Avoid entering change rooms. If you must enter, knock or announce that you will be coming in and try to have at least one other adult with you. Do not isolate yourself and a child from others in the change room.
- Avoid driving a child unaccompanied.
- Do not invite or encourage children to your home.
- **Knowledge boundaries**
- Understand and comply with all relevant policies.

- Understand and comply with the child protection legislation in your state/territory.
- Seek out opportunities to enhance your knowledge on child protection.
- Keep coaching skills and accreditation up to date.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions and to seek advice.

Leadership boundaries

- Do not engage in or let others engage in:
- Abusive initiation or team bonding activities;
- Rough physically hurtful or sexually provocative games; or
- Regular scapegoating, ridiculing or taking the 'mickey out' on a child.

Maintaining and Managing Boundaries

The relationship between a coach (or other adults in sport) and a child is characterised by an imbalance of power based on a number of factors including age, authority, experience and gender. It is important that this power is not exploited and that clear professional boundaries, such as outlined above, are established and maintained with children.

The following self-assessment questions may assist in determining whether professional boundaries are being applied and may help to clarify whether a behaviour or action is appropriate or not.

- Am I dealing in a different manner with a particular child than with others under the same circumstances?
- Is my dress/availability/language different from the usual with a particular child?
- Would I do or say this if a colleague were present?
- Would I condone my conduct if I observed it in another adult?
- Are the consequences of my actions likely to have negative outcomes for the participants?
- If I were a parent would I want an adult behaving this way towards my own children?

There may be times when a child actively seeks an inappropriate relationship with a coach or other adult in sport. The person concerned (e.g. coach) should advise their sporting organisation. If necessary, they should also seek advice from Family Services about how to manage the situation in a way that provides support for them and respects the emotional wellbeing of the child. Examples of behaviours that may be of concern are inappropriate social invitations, correspondence that suggests or invites an inappropriate relationship and flirtatious gestures and comments.

There may also be times when it is necessary to coach a child on a one-to-one situation. In these circumstances it is important that it occurs as an 'authorised' sporting activity and that parental consent/knowledge is obtained and that the location is preferably a visible, public and busy one. In some circumstances a coach may need to discourage children from unnecessary reliance on touching such as holding hands or wanting to have hugs or cuddles. This should be done gently and without embarrassment or offence to the child.

Coaching children with special needs

Coaching or working with children with special needs may require more frequent physical contact and touch as a means of meeting the duty of care to them. Touch may be an agreed form of communication between a child, their parent and coach where the child has a communication disability. A coach and others may need to be more vigilant and thoughtful in their physical interactions and different approaches may be required.

However, the basic practices and information outlined previously remain applicable to all children. Sporting organisations, coaches and others have a duty of care to protect children from physical and emotional harm and, while the ways of meeting this duty may differ for different groups, the duty itself remains unqualified. Everyone expected to meet this duty should do so in a manner that respects the dignity of all children as well as their vulnerabilities. For more information on coaching children with special needs visit www.ausport.gov.au/dsu/index.asp.

Cultural considerations

Different cultures have different attitudes and traditions surrounding the concept of appropriate touch. It is important that coaches and others appreciate culturally specific expectations regarding touch so that embarrassment or offence can be avoided for everyone. Where children (and families) are known or suspected to have escaped traumatic circumstances, considerable diplomacy, care and effort in early interactions will need to be taken. Many culturally based community organisations are very keen to address other groups, including sporting groups, about the values of their culture and to establish understanding and respect. It may help to invite or seek their advice so that sport personnel become more familiar with the values of the cultural groups of the children participating in their sport.

SOURCE: http://www.ausport.gov.au/supporting/ethics/ethical_issues/child_protection