

Good practice guide: Maintaining professional boundaries with learners and young people

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Introduction

As an EWC registrant, you hold a unique position of trust, responsibility, and influence with learners and young people. This leads to a natural imbalance in authority and control between you. This is why maintaining clear professional boundaries in your relationships with learners and young people safeguards them, and protects you.

However, some teaching and training methods used to engage learners and young people may lead to more relaxed, informal behaviours that can, perhaps unknowingly, blur those boundaries.

This guide aims to help raise your awareness and understanding in this complex area of professional life.

This is not regulatory or mandatory guidance. Scenarios have been included to help you think about and explore some of the issues which might arise, and how our advice might apply. We have also included examples of unacceptable practices where professional boundaries have clearly been crossed.

The Code

All Education Workforce Council (EWC) registrants are subject to the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice (the Code), which sets out the key principles of good conduct and practice for registrants. This guide should be read in conjunction with the Code.

The principles and expectations in the Code which refer to professional boundaries with learners and young people are:

1. Personal and Professional Responsibility

Registrants:

- 1.1 recognise their personal responsibility as a role model and public figure, to uphold public trust and confidence in the education professions, both in and out of the workplace
- 1.2 conduct relationships with learners and young people professionally by:
 - communicating with learners and young people respectfully, in a way which is appropriate for them
 - using all forms of communication appropriately and responsibly, particularly social media
 - ensuring any physical contact is necessary, reasonable, and proportionate
 - contributing to the creation of a fair and inclusive learning environment by addressing discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying
 - maintaining professional boundaries

2. Professional Integrity

Registrants:

- 2.1 are accountable for their conduct and professional competence

The Code is an important point of reference. Think about the five key principles and the expectations they place upon you. The Code will help you make the right decisions when faced with the challenges covered in this guide.

[The Code is available on our website.](#)

Professional boundaries

Professional boundaries are breached when a registrant misuses their authority or control in their relationship with a learner or young person. Conduct that breaches those boundaries is often easily recognisable. However, there may be some more subtle behaviours where the boundary breach is less obvious. But in all situations, it is your responsibility to establish and maintain professional boundaries with those in your charge.

When interacting with learners and young people, think carefully about the implications of your behaviour with, and towards them, and the potential consequences. For example, even where it is not your specific role, think about how easily you might unwittingly become a confidante or counsellor to a learner or young person, even where the behaviour is professionally motivated and well-intended. Nonetheless, a relationship is still created which can blur the registrant–learner/young person relationship as the professional role becomes less defined.

Recognise as well that sometimes, learners and young people can intentionally or unintentionally cross boundaries with you in the way they speak, or by initiating inappropriate contact, perhaps via social media. In such circumstances, it is important for you to remove yourself from any inappropriate contact or conversation at the earliest sign of a boundary breach and also report the event to the relevant safeguarding lead. You must do this not only to protect yourself, but also the learner or young person involved.

Even outside of the workplace, you may have to manage a private or professional relationship with a learner or young person, such as in extra-curricular activities or as a sports coach. Remember – you are always in a position of trust and authority with learners and young people, and your conduct should remain professional, no matter what the setting.

Raising your awareness

The way you relate to learners and young people should involve a careful balance of professional engagement and professional distance. The following are examples of breaches of professional boundaries. They are not mutually exclusive and breaches may span a number of them.

Emotional boundary

Ensuring appropriate and measured levels of emotion is used when interacting with learners and young people.

Examples of breaches of the professional boundary are where a registrant:

- gives preferential treatment to specific individuals with no legitimate context or educational purpose
- uses subtle forms of control so learners or young people develop an emotional dependency on them
- behaves like as a friend or counsellor, when it is not part of their role

Relationship boundary

Ensuring the relationships between a registrant and learner or young person are strictly professional.

Examples of breaches of the professional boundary are where a registrant:

- engages in flirtatious behaviour with, and/or expresses romantic feelings for a learner or young person, either in person, or by other means (for example, social media)
- intimately touches or gestures to a learner or young person, for example, hugging (this is different from the types of touching a practitioner working with younger children might engage in which is acceptable/usual in their role)
- gives gifts or rewards in a private setting
- meets, or invites a learner or young person to meet outside of the educational setting without a valid reason, context, or permission
- favours a particular learner or young person, with no educational or valid reason
- deliberately aims to establish the trust of a learner's or young person's family and friends as a way of integrating themselves in the learner's home life

Communication boundary

Ensuring a registrant's communication with learners and young people focuses on their educational needs. Problems in maintaining boundaries often relate to registrants sharing personal information, or being too informal.

Examples of breaches of the professional boundary are where a registrant:

- talks or jokes with a learner or young person about personal matters or sexually inappropriate matters
- uses inappropriate language, including swearing
- makes inappropriate comments about a learner's or young person's appearance, including making excessively flattering comments
- vilifies or deliberately humiliates
- uses pet names
- uses social media to engage in communication of a personal nature without a valid educational context and/or appropriate safeguards
- offers advice or counsel to a learner or young person about personal issues where it is not part of their professional role to do so

- breaches the confidentiality of others by sharing information with a learner or young person

Authority/control boundary

Registrants do not abuse the unique position of power and authority they have over learners and young people.

Examples of breaches of the professional boundary are where a registrant:

- uses their position of authority to harm, or threaten to harm a learner or young person
- uses information, or withholds it from a learner or young person in order to manipulate them, for example, to persuade them to meet alone
- rewards or punishes a learner or young person during an inappropriate relationship with them
- uses a learner or young person to gain a personal benefit

Physical boundary

Registrants fully understands when it is necessary and proportionate to make physical contact with a learner or young person. See our 'Good practice guide: appropriate physical contact with learners and young people'.

Examples of breaches of the professional boundary are where a registrant:

- touches a learner or young person without a proportionate or necessary reason for doing so
- does not stop or report a learner or young person who tries to initiate inappropriate contact, such as moving too close to a registrant
- being present when learners dress or undress, when not in an appropriate role
- physically harms or injures

Breaches of the Code

The examples below are illustrative of cases where registrants (from all the registrant categories), have been subject to EWC disciplinary proceedings as a result of not maintaining appropriate boundaries with learners or young people.

In all cases, there has been a clear breach of the Code and the registrants received a range of disciplinary sanctions including, in some cases, being prohibited from practicing in the education workforce in the future.

A registrant:

- bombarded a learner with personal texts, calls, and picture messages which included sexualised and inappropriate comments
- acted as a 'confidant' to a learner aged under 16 and, once emotional dependency was established, they began a sexual relationship
- shared personal information with a learner and discussed other learners as well as colleagues whilst conducting a sexual relationship, often in the registrant's own home

- purchased alcohol for learners and exchanged a large number of inappropriate messages with them via a range of social media applications, telling them always to delete them
- visited a young person and their parents at their home on a number of occasions without any legitimate reason or authority. This was in order to gain their trust and a way of being able to develop a relationship with the learner
- socialised with learners (in a learner's bedroom) and drank alcohol with them during an educational trip
- systematically bullied, harassed, and physically assaulted a child in a special school setting
- shouted at and mishandled nursery age children on a number of occasions, causing bruising and fear for the learners
- regularly humiliated young people by making inappropriate comments about them including relating to gender, race and physical size. This was accompanied by a range of derogatory 'nicknames' used instead of their actual names
- restrained a child inappropriately by tying them to a piece of furniture and taping their hands together and their mouth shut

Further support

We offer presentations which focus on fitness to practise and the Code. If you or your employer would like to arrange one in the workplace, please contact us.

The [Code, and information about the EWC's fitness to practise work](#) are on our website.

If you require any of our publications in an alternative format, please contact us.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh and English.

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