

Guide to Good Practice

Maintaining Professional Boundaries With Learners



INTRODUCTION

As an EWC registrant, you hold a unique position of trust, care, responsibility and influence with learners. This leads to a natural imbalance in authority and control between educators and learners. Maintaining clear professional boundaries in your relationships with learners safeguards them and protects you. However, some methods of engaging learners 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 relation to managing your professional relationships with learners. It cannot address all possible circumstances you might find yourself in so is not intended to be an exhaustive list of unacceptable or unwise behaviour but is rather provided to raise awareness of issues and situations which can arise.

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 guidance should be read in conjunction with the Code.

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

1. Personal and Professional Responsibility

Registrants:

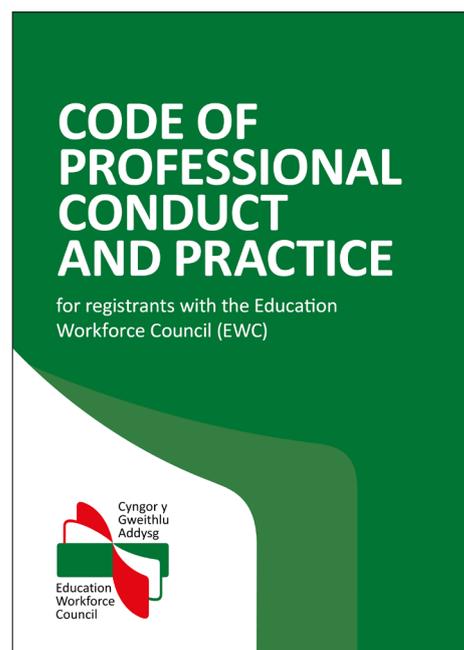
- 1.1 recognise their personal responsibility as a role model and public figure, to uphold public trust and confidence in the education professions, both in and out of the workplace;
- 1.2 conduct relationships with learners professionally by:
 - communicating with learners respectfully, in a way which 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; and
 - maintaining professional boundaries.
- 1.4 have a duty of care for learners' safety, physical, social, moral and educational well-being:
 - acting on anything which might put a learner's safety or welfare at risk

2. Professional Integrity

Registrants:

- 2.1 are accountable for their conduct and professional competence.

The Code is available to download from our [website](#).



PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

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

When interacting with learners think carefully about the implications and potential consequences. For example, where a registrant may become a confidante or counsellor of a learner (where it is not part of their role) a relationship is created which can blur the registrant–learner relationship and the roles are less defined.

Sometimes, learners can intentionally or unintentionally cross boundaries with registrants, such as in the way they speak or by initiating inappropriate contact, perhaps via social media. In such circumstances it is important for the registrant to remove themselves from any inappropriate contact or conversation.

Outside of the workplace a registrant may have to manage a private or professional relationship with a learner, such as in extra-curricular activities or as a sports coach. You are always in a position of trust and authority with learners and your conduct should remain professional, no matter what the setting.

RAISING YOUR AWARENESS

The way you relate to learners 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.

TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES	EXAMPLES OF BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES
<p>Emotional boundaries – involves using appropriate levels of emotion when interacting with learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving preferential treatment to a particular learner without a legitimate reason • Using subtle forms of control so that a learner develops an emotional dependency on the registrant • Acting as a ‘friend’ or ‘personal counsellor’ (when it is not part of their role)
<p>Relationship boundaries – Relationships between practitioner and learner are strictly professional relationships.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in intimate, romantic or sexual relationships with a learner • Engaging in flirtatious behaviour with a learner • Touching or gesturing intimately, e.g. hugging a learner (this is different from the types of touching a registrant working with younger children might engage in which is usual in their role) • Giving a learner a gift privately • Expressing romantic feelings towards a learner – maybe verbally or in writing (including social media) • Meeting a learner alone outside of the education environment without a valid context and without appropriate permission • Taking a learner for an unauthorised outing, e.g. coffee, the cinema or other social events • Favouring a particular learner, with no educational or valid purpose • Gaining the trust of a learner’s family and friends as a way of further integrating themselves in the learner’s life

<p>Communication boundaries – a practitioner’s communication with learners should focus on their educational needs. Problems in maintaining boundaries often relate to issues of self-disclosure by practitioners to learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking or joking with a learner about personal matters or sexually inappropriate matters • Using inappropriate language • Making inappropriate comments about a learner’s appearance, including excessively flattering comments • Vilifying or humiliating a learner • Using pet names for learners • Engaging in communication of a personal nature with learners • Using social media to interact with a learner without a valid educational context and appropriate safeguards • Offering advice on personal matters to a learner where it is not done in an authorised situation, such as designated pastoral care • Breaching the confidentiality of others with a learner
<p>Authority and / or control boundaries – practitioners are in a unique position of power and authority over learners and must ensure they do not abuse that position.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the registrant’s authority to harm or threaten to harm a learner • Withholding information from a learner to manipulate them e.g. to be alone with them • Rewarding or punishing a learner based on an inappropriate relationship • Using a learner to gain a personal benefit
<p>Physical boundaries – appropriate touching, handling and restraint of learners is important when necessary and proportionate. See our ‘Guide to good practice with ‘appropriate touch’, handling and restraint.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touching a learner without a valid/authorised reason or context (e.g. physically removing a learner from danger, consoling an upset child or providing first aid) • Touching a learner, personally or with an object that is unwarranted, unwanted and/or inappropriate • Initiating or permitting inappropriate physical contact by or on a learner, e.g. massage or tickling games • Allowing learners to make inappropriate contact such as moving too close to a practitioner • Being present when learners dress or undress, when not in an appropriate role

ASK YOURSELF

- Would I change my behaviour with a learner if a colleague were present or made aware of it?
- Would I judge my conduct negatively if I saw a colleague behaving in this way?
- Would the public think my behaviour is inappropriate given my role as a professional?

If you would answer ‘yes’ to any of the above then there is a potential risk that professional boundaries may be crossed.

CONSEQUENCES

The examples below are some of the cases referred to the EWC for investigation about registrants (from all the registrant sectors) who have not maintained appropriate boundaries with learners and have been subject to EWC disciplinary proceedings as a result.

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 learner 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 learners by making inappropriate comments about them including relating to gender, race and 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.

HOW WE CAN SUPPORT YOU FURTHER

The EWC offer presentations which focus on fitness to practise. If you or your employer would like to arrange one in the workplace, please contact information@ewc.wales.

The EWC's Code of Professional Conduct and Practice for Registrants with the Education Workforce Council, and information about the EWC's fitness to practise work can be found on our [website](#).

Any queries should be referred to the Fitness to Practise team at fitnesstopractise@ewc.wales.