

# Professional Boundaries in Residential Children's Homes

<b>Title</b>	<b>Professional Boundaries in Residential Children's Homes</b>
<b>Purpose/scope</b>	To give guidance and clarification to support carers who work in Shropshire Council's Children's Homes maintain their professional boundaries and best protect the children, young people and families they work with.
<b>Subject key words</b>	Professionalism; Boundaries; Behaviour; Safeguarding
<b>Council Priority</b>	n/a
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<b>Date Established</b>	21/09/2022
<b>Date of Next Review</b>	01/10/2023
<b>Service Improvement &amp; Efficiency Validation</b>	n/a
<b>Legal Sign Off</b>	n/a
<b>Finance Sign Off</b>	n/a
<b>Approver and date</b>	Authorisation by Dan Old, Operations Manager, Residential Services 8 <sup>th</sup> September 2022

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## Relevant Regulations:

Regulation 6: The Quality and Purpose of Care Standard

Regulation 7: The Children's Views, Wishes and Feelings Standard

Regulation 11: The Positive Relationships Standard

Regulation 12: The Protection of Children Standard

Regulation 13: The Leadership and Management Standard

Regulation 21: Privacy and Access

Regulation 32: Fitness of Workers

Regulation 33: Employment of Staff

Regulation 34: Policies for the Protection of Children

## **Policy Aim**

Children in residential child care should be loved, happy, healthy, safe from harm and able to develop, thrive and fulfil their potential. To do that Shropshire Council Residential Children's Homes aim to provide an environment for these aims to be met. Alongside this the quality of the relationship between the children and young people and the carers that support them is vital to this. Sometimes, however, this closeness can blur professional boundaries and create misunderstandings and difficulties for you and the young people you look after. Therefore, this policy should give guidance and clarification to support carers maintain their professional boundaries and best protect the children, young people and families they work with.

## **Additional Reading**

Shropshire Council HR Policies (these can be found under 'Policies and Guidance' and 'HR and Payroll' on the Intranet):

- *Bullying and Harassment Policy*
- *Code of Conduct*
- *Disciplinary Policy*
- *Gifts and Hospitality Policy*
- *Grievance Procedure*
- *Professional Negligence*
- *Smoking at Work Policy*
- *Whistleblowing policy*
- *Capability Procedure*

Shropshire Council Information Management Policies these can be found under 'Policies and Guidance' and 'HR and Payroll' on the Intranet):

- *Telephones - acceptable use*
- *Terms of use for social media*
- *Acceptable use of Information Systems Policy*
- *Data Protection Policy*

Shropshire Children's Services Policies (can be found by clicking on the following through the intranet: Policies and Guidance>Children's Social Care>Children's Social Care>Social Care for Children> The Children's Social Care Manual>Shropshire Practice Guidance>7. Children's Residential Homes)

- *Behaviour Management*
- *Protection of Children and Safeguarding Policy*
- *Regional Child Protection Procedures*

## **Contents**

1. Scope of Policy
2. Policy
  - a. Physical Contact
  - b. Sharing Personal Information
  - c. Communication
  - d. Usage of Social Media and Mobile Technology
  - e. Giving and Receiving Gifts
  - f. Lending Money and/or Personal Possessions
3. Actions to be taken

### **1. Scope of Policy**

This policy is relevant for all staff (including any agency carers) that work in Shropshire Council Children's Residential Homes. Throughout this policy, the term 'carer' will be used, but this encompasses everyone whose job role is relevant to working with children in a Shropshire Council Children's Residential Home.

This policy does not seek to replace any existing wider organisational policies, but to sit alongside them to provide more guidance for carers.

Throughout this policy, the term 'child' and 'children' will be used. This encompasses anyone who is under the age of 18, and whilst 'young person' may be more appropriate, child is used for clarity to include all ages under the age of 18.

### **2. Policy**

Professional Boundaries are very important when working with children. This policy gives guidance and clarification around certain areas that can cause confusion and misunderstandings for carers and children. If you require further clarification, please

speak to the Manager of the residential Children's Home that you work in, or your Line Manager. If you have concerns regarding your own conduct or anyone else's raise this as soon as possible.

This policy provides some common areas where professional boundaries may be crossed and aims to give guidance over these boundaries to best protect children and carers. However, this list is not exhaustive and there may be other areas where boundaries may be crossed which are not noted here.

It is important to remember that we are duty bound to place the welfare of the child as paramount (Principle 1 of Children Act 1989) and that as carers you are in a 'position of trust'. This is a legal term that describes an adult who is in a caring role for a child and it is recognised that the child has some element of dependency on the adult involved, often combined with an element of vulnerability. This therefore requires the adult who is in a 'position of trust' to recognise the vulnerability in the child and the potential power imbalance between the child and themselves.

#### a. Physical Contact

We all have very different attitudes towards what levels of physical contact is ok for ourselves. Children are no different, but because of their age and experiences in life they are likely to be still trying to make sense of what is appropriate physical contact. They will look to you for approval and may be testing out your responses to touch.

Whilst there is a need to strike the right balance between working as a professional and being a human being and caring enough to be able to work positively for the child, it is important these boundaries do not blur regarding physical contact.

Safe touch, such as doing 'high-fives' and giving a cuddle, does have many benefits for your relationship with the child.

It is not possible to be specific about the appropriateness of each physical contact, since an action that is appropriate with one child, in one set of circumstances, may be inappropriate in another, or with a different child. However, some good guidance is the following:

- Consent should be sought from the child when any touch is initiated by a carer and ideally touch should be initiated by the child
- Physical contact should never be secretive, or for the benefit or gratification of the carer
- If possible, try to make sure there are other carers around, to protect yourself and the child. This will also give confidence to you and the child that this is an appropriate level of touch that can be done in a social space
- Contact (for examples hugs) should never be used to show favour, or be seen to show favouritism to individuals

- Consider alternatives, where it is anticipated that a child might misinterpret or be uncomfortable with physical contact
- You shouldn't engage in activities like play-fighting or tickling with the young people you support. There is a risk that this contact can be seen as inappropriate by the young person and other carers

Some of these aspects are overridden if the challenging situation and behaviour requires the young person to be held using Team Teach approved positive behaviour management strategies. This should only happen as a last resort to prevent harm to themselves, others, or serious damage to property but never as a punishment. With any use of positive handling carers are only to employ force that is reasonable, proportionate and necessary under the circumstances and any restraint used would be for the shortest period possible. These physical intervention techniques should only be used by carers who hold a certification through Team Teach.

#### b. Sharing personal information

It can be a tricky balance to know how much personal information to share about your own life with the children and young people in your care. It may be ok to talk generally about your family and perhaps your own children if it helps you build a relationship with the child. But be aware of the impact this may have on the child – for example it may cause feelings of jealousy or sadness as your children may be getting opportunities in their life that the child didn't or doesn't have.

Usually talking and engaging about your skills, knowledge and interests is a better way to build a relationship than your personal life.

You may also need to recognise that anything that you have shared about yourself, may be used in an insulting or negative way in the future as way to hurt or get a reaction from you.

Remember that your personal experiences are your own, and what you have done or what you may do in your own home life may be very different to the life experiences or opportunities the young people you work with. You should not share worries or 'off load' details of your personal life, or generally talk about things that are of no benefit to the child. Sharing of information or the relationship you have with the young person should always be to support the well-being of the child or young person and should not be of benefit to yourself.

If a young person asks a question, you are uncomfortable about answering, ask yourself why they would need to know that information and if they need to know it. If this is not the case and it is something you aren't comfortable talking about it, try to divert the focus back to the "here and now" – the relationship with the young person and you as their carer.

You shouldn't share information to a child that identifies other children you are caring for now or in the past.

You also need to be careful not to share other people's private information – such as your colleagues. This is important to always think about when in your role – and can often be an accident if you are not aware where a child is or if they are listening. It is important to be aware about the type of conversation you are having, where you are and who could overhear.

Be careful about things that identify people and places, for instance:

- mentioning your home address or clues about where you live (or information about your colleagues' homes)
- What you are doing in your spare time. For example, where you walk your dog
- where your child or other people's children go to school
- Never take a young person to your home or leave them in a vehicle outside your home while you pick something up

### c. Communication

Communication plays a vital role in building relationships with the children you work with.

Communication is the imparting or exchange of information through any medium, such as speaking, writing, gestures, body language, images and many others. It is really important that you ensure the other person(s) understands your communication, and this builds trust and helps to prevent further misunderstanding or confusion.

Some tips on communication are as follows:

- Be conscious that your moods and feelings affect communication – particularly body language and eye-contact which can affect interactions with young people. Learn to recognise when personal issues affect your mood when working directly with a young person. Use supervision, team meetings and other support to help with this and to help maintain boundaries between your personal and professional life
- Be positive, this is essential to building self-esteem. Children and young people thrive with words of encouragement and praise, active listening boosts their self-esteem and enables them to feel worthy and loved
- Discuss problems or issues with your colleagues or team in a private space, rather than in front of young people. For example, a disagreement about the

rota shouldn't be in front of a child. It is important to promote and show unity and consistency and not undermine other carers

- Be thoughtful about the language you use. Remember you are not a young person's "friend". Similarly, avoid using words such as "unit", in place of "home", or "service users". Seek more support from your line manager about appropriate terminology in the home, as this can change over time

#### d. Usage of social media and mobile technology

It is recognised that having a mobile phone with you whilst you are at work may be necessary, however using your mobile phone for personal reasons should be kept to a minimum and children should not be visible to it. Should further guidance be required about when it can be used, please speak to your line manager.

Contact with children via electronic devices and social media should be via work devices and platforms only and not via your personal mobile phone, email account or social media accounts, whether relating to a personal or work matter, to avoid blurring the lines.

You must maintain professional boundaries on social media, for instance Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat and other social media sites. This means you should not become 'friends' with the children and young people you care for using your personal social media account.

The Council does not seek to dictate how employees conduct themselves in their personal lives outside of work. However, employees need to be aware that conduct which may impact young people or jeopardise the Council's reputation may supersede this. Comments made on any social media (including messaging services such as WhatsApp) or emails mean that we abandon any rights to have their comments treated as private and therefore can abandon any right to freedom of expression and to have their comments treated as private under the European Convention on Human Rights.

A lot of this is about protecting yourself by making sure you're not in a position to have your behaviour challenged. It may be advisable to protect yourself, by locking or restricting access to any social media sites you use.

The following are some of the things you must not do on social media:

- contact a young person or their relatives or friends
- view inappropriate content including photos or videos on electronic devices when around children or in the children's home
- use inappropriate language to discuss young people in a work WhatsApp group or via any other medium
- share inappropriate photos or videos in a work WhatsApp group or any other medium



- make, share or 'like' information which could be seen as racist, homophobic, or promoting extreme views
- posting personal details or images of the children you care for

#### e. Giving and Receiving Gifts

It's important that children and young people can celebrate and enjoy special occasions such as birthdays, educational and sporting achievement and religious occasions relevant to them. This can help them feel valued, equal to their friends and to know their identity, achievements, culture and beliefs are respected.

A key part of your role is to know significant dates and events for the children and young people you support, and these should be celebrated or signified in some way in an appropriate fashion. However, purchasing of gifts should go through official channels, and approved within your home. This will include making sure all children and young people are treated equally and fairly.

It doesn't matter how small the item is in value, it must be bought by the home and not from your personal funds.

This is also applicable to receiving gifts. Children and young people giving any gifts to carers should be generally discouraged. However, if the child feels strongly that they want to give a gift, it is best to encourage gifts that require no purchasing such as handmade cards, cakes or drawings. If any gifts are received by a carer from a child, young person or their family member, the home's Manager must be informed to decide whether it is small enough to be able to be accepted. Any large gifts should be politely declined.

Again, this is about protecting yourself:

- Giving or Receiving money or a gift bought using personal money might raise questions about favouritism and/or become a safeguarding issue
- other children could feel they're not being treated equally

#### f. Lending Money and/or Personal Possessions

Whilst it might be easy to make mistakes out of kindness, lending anything to the young people you care for may break professional boundaries.

Without approval from your line manager:

- You shouldn't lend your own money or personal possessions to a child or young person in your care
- You shouldn't buy things from or sell things to a child or young person



- You shouldn't buy or sell anything for a young person, for example on eBay or another marketplace site
- Similarly, you must never borrow money or possessions from a child or young person
- You should not borrow money from the home

### **3. Actions to be taken**

This guidance is designed to keep both carers and young people safe. Your manager will meet with you regularly as part of supervisions and give day to day feedback, however you can raise concerns and ask questions for clarity at any point. Shropshire Council have policies in place to ensure that support is in place for employees, but also to deal with issues concerning conduct and behaviour and to keep children safe. For further information on these policies and procedures, such as the Capability Policy, Grievance Policy or Disciplinary Policy or other policies listed at the top of the page, please visit the intranet.