

Professional boundaries with children living in residential child care



First published: 20 March 2019

Last updated: 6 February 2025

This document was downloaded from socialcare.wales and may not be the latest version.

Go to <https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/improving-care-and-support/social-care-for-children-and-families/professional-boundaries-with-children-living-in-residential-child-care> for the latest version.

Find out more about professional boundaries between you and the children you're caring for

An introduction to professional boundaries in residential child care

The quality of your relationship with children and young people is very important. It is essential to create a warm, kind, homely and friendly environment. Sometimes, however, this closeness can blur professional boundaries and create misunderstandings and difficulties for you and the young people you look after. It's really important you work with your manager to understand your role, your limits and your employer's policies.

As a residential child care worker you aren't just working to your employer's policy; you have a professional duty under the Code of Professional Practice for Social Care (the Code).

[Code of Professional Practice for Social Care Workers](#)

PDF 73KB

The Code sets out what's expected of registered workers in their everyday practice. If your behaviour isn't in line with the Code, your employer may make a referral to us for investigation. This could affect your ability to work as a residential child care worker.

We also have Practice Guidance for Residential Child Care Workers, setting out what's expected in the role.

Physical contact

The children and young people you care for are probably still trying to make sense of appropriate physical contact. They will look to you for approval and may be testing out your responses to touch.

As always, you should follow your employer's policies but safe touch, such as doing 'high-fives' and giving a cuddle, does have many benefits for your relationship with the child.

When it's appropriate to give some physical contact and comfort, you should do it with safety and awareness:

- always make sure there are other colleagues around
- don't show favour to individuals
- don't touch a child or young person in surroundings or in a way that could be misinterpreted as being anything other than friendly, appropriate adult – child support.

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 staff.

Contact through social media and mobile technology

You must maintain professional boundaries on social media, for instance Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat. This means you must not become 'friends' with the children and young people you care for using your personal social media account. If you do this, you're breaking the Code and it could lead to a disciplinary issue with your employer

as well as a referral to, and investigation by us.

All contact with young people must be through work channels and not through anything related to you personally: your mobile phone, personal email, or social media accounts.

It's ok to use an agreed social media account set up by your employer to ensure safe contact between the home and the children and young people. This may be a Facebook page for the home or a contact hub and can help resolve issues around young people needing support or feeling rejected, without exposing staff members.

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 photos on your phone in front of a young person
- use inappropriate language to discuss young people in a work WhatsApp group
- share inappropriate photos or videos in a work WhatsApp group
- 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.

This list only covers some examples and you must always follow your employer's policy around social media and use of mobile phones.

A lot of this is about protecting yourself by making sure you're not in a position to have your behaviour challenged.

Finally, remember the golden rule for maintaining professional boundaries is to make sure all your actions with children, young people and their families are out in the open for discussion with your manager.

Giving gifts

It's important that children and young people are able to celebrate and enjoy special occasions such as birthdays, educational and sporting achievement and religious occasions (such as Christmas, Easter, Eid or Hanukkah) 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. Your organisation will have a policy on purchasing gifts and other ways of marking the occasion. This will include making sure all children and young people are treated equally and fairly.

This following is an example of what is what isn't acceptable:

Any gift that comes from the home is ok, for instance Easter eggs or birthday presents. But it's not ok to give the child you're caring for money from your own pocket, for instance to buy a burger, small change for the arcades or to top up their phone.

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

Again, this is about protecting yourself:

- giving one child your personal money might raise questions about favouritism and become a safeguarding issue.
- other children could feel they're not being treated equally.

Lending money and/or possessions

As a rule, you should never lend your own money to a child or young person in your care. For instance, if you're buying something for your young person and your staff purchasing card gets declined, you mustn't use your own money.

Similarly, you shouldn't lend your personal possessions, for instance lending them your personal phone if they have no credit on their own phone.

You shouldn't buy or sell anything for a young person, for example on eBay or another marketplace site.

What we're trying to highlight here is how easy it is to make mistakes out of kindness and break professional boundaries.

If a child or young person is short of money or other essential items, this needs to be raised with the appropriate colleague, for example, the child's key worker or your manager.

Similarly, you must never borrow money or possessions from a child or young person. You should not borrow money from your employer without their prior agreement.

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 or young person.

But be very careful about things that identify people and places, for instance:

- mentioning your home address or clues about where you live
- where you walk your dog
- what you're doing on your day off
- where your child goes to school.

Never take a young person to your home or leave them in a vehicle outside your home while you pick something up.

The children you're caring for may want to seek you out when you're not in work and could use information like the above to locate you. This could then become a safeguarding issue around contact outside work hours (see below).

You also need to be careful not to share other people's private information. You shouldn't share secrets, worries or 'off load' details of your personal life. If you share information, it should be solely to support the well-being of the child or young person. If in doubt, take advice from a senior colleague or manager and follow your organisation's policy.

You should never share information that identifies other children you are caring for now or in the past.

Contact outside work hours

It's really important that children and young people can get access to support when they need it. That's why there is a team of workers in the home and rotas are organised so children and young people know who to contact and when. It's part of your role to make sure they know the right contact details.

There shouldn't be any reason to give a young person your personal contact details. If they do contact you outside your work hours, make sure you safely direct them to the right support, and tell your manager or senior on duty that you have done so.

Useful resources

[Professional boundaries: A resource for managers](#)

PDF 7MB

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

Using social media responsibly: guidance for social care professionals registered with Social Care Wales (available soon)

[Relationship boundaries in residential child care: connection and safety in group care relationships](#)

[The residential child care worker - practice guidance](#)

PDF 204KB

We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).