

## Maintaining professional boundaries



Safeguarding children and young people, and protecting yourself from the risk of allegation, is a key professional priority. Personal and professional boundary setting should seamlessly flow through all interaction and intervention within children and young people.

We know that children and young people can often arrive at our coaching sessions from a range of backgrounds. They may have experienced differing and complex home lives, varying styles of parenting, and often differing, and sometimes-confused social expectations, norms and inconsistent boundary-setting. This inevitably brings professional challenges.

This does not mean that your relationships should be cold and detached. You can and should offer authentic warmth to support and build professional relationships with children and young people, and their families, without placing them or yourself at risk. Below, we have drawn together some key areas of boundary-setting that coaches should be sensitive to.

### **Duty of Care**

The Education Act 2002 imposes clear duties to provide acceptable levels of care and to protect children and young people from all reasonably foreseeable risk of harm or injury. Duty of Care refers to the responsibility of those individuals employed within a position of trust, to provide children and young people with adequate levels of protection against harm and to safeguard their welfare at all times. What constitutes “reasonable and acceptable care” in any given case will be determined objectively by the court and will depend upon the circumstances of each case.

### **Shared and agreed boundaries**

The coach/young person relationship is not equal. Coaches are in a unique position of trust, care, responsibility, authority and influence with the young people they train. This means that there is always an inherent power imbalance within the coach/young person dynamic. With this in mind, you may wish to explore the following suggestions openly and reflectively. The examples are given as a guide, and are by no means exhaustive. You may wish to add to the listings provided.

### **Appropriate language**

You can and should develop good strong trusting relationships with the children and young people that you coach, but you are not “friends” with them. On this basis always be thoughtful about the language that you might be using. Sensitive thought and challenge should be explored in relation to inappropriate language or terms. Examples to avoid include:

- Use of inappropriate names or terms of endearment.
- Inappropriate conversation or enquiries of a sexual nature.
- Inappropriate comments about a child’s appearance, including excessive flattering or personal criticism.
- Disrespectful or discriminatory treatment of, or manner towards, young people based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation.
- Humiliation, profanity or vilification.
- Suggestive humour, “banter”, jokes or innuendo of a sexual nature.
- Obscene or inappropriate gestures and language.
- Names such as buddy, mate, pal, friend and so on may give confusing messages.

## **Information-sharing**

Avoid sharing personal information. Your online boundary-setting is equally as important. Remember that social media is just that – social. Examples to avoid:

- Discussing personal lifestyle details of self, other coaches or children and young people unless directly relevant to the learning topic and with the individual's consent.
- Correspondence of a personal nature via any medium (phone, text, letters, email etc) that is unrelated to your role. This does not include class birthday cards and the general acknowledgement of other celebrations – warmth and thoughtful modelling remains important.
- Adopting an on-going support or welfare role, beyond the scope of your position, or a role that is the responsibility of the safeguarding lead officer or external professional
- Photographing, audio recording or filming children and young people via any medium without authorisation or parental consent.
- Facilitating or permitting access to pornographic or sexually explicit material.
- Failing to intervene in sexual harassment of children and young people.
- Still/moving images or audio recordings of children and young people on personal equipment or kept in personal locations such as car or home that have not been authorised.
- Uploading or publishing still/moving images or audio recordings of children and young people to any location without parental consent.

## **Personal space**

Respect the personal space and privacy of all children and young people. Remember that children can read different interpretations into our actions. It is also very easy for these situations to escalate if we are not sensitively, proactively and dynamically challenging and managing boundaries. The exception to this will always be related to safeguarding and the safe management of risk. Examples to avoid:

- Unwarranted or unwanted touching of a child or young person personally or with objects
- Physical discipline, pushing, shoving, smacking
- Initiating, permitting or requesting inappropriate or unnecessary physical contact with a child or young person (hugs, kisses, tickling, play fighting) or facilitating situations which unnecessarily result in close physical contact.

## **Work and home**

Work and home or the personal and the professional should be held separately. Remaining “in role” at all times minimises the likelihood of false, or unfounded allegation and ensures that professional codes of conduct are adhered to. Examples to avoid:

- Inviting, allowing or encouraging children and young people to attend your home.
- Allowing children and young people to access your personal internet locations and your personal social networking
- Attending children and young people's homes or their social gatherings.
- Being alone with a child or young person outside of your responsibilities unless agreed by a parent/carer
- Entering toilets occupied by children and young people when supervision is not required or appropriate or using toilet facilities allocated to children and young people. Undressing using facilities set aside for children and young people, or in their presence.
- Transporting a child or young person unaccompanied without prior permission.
- One-to-one tutoring, mentoring or coaching of children and young people without the prior agreement of the parent/carer.

- Giving personal gifts or special favours. Singling the same children and young people out for special duties or responsibilities.

### **Collusion**

Be careful not to collude with children and young people. Be aware that children and young people can draw adults into conversations and situations. We should always remain within the boundaries of our professional role.

### **Modelling behaviour**

Challenge anti-discriminatory language/jokes. We are role models to the children and young people that we work with, and it is important that we promote and respect difference. We also have a responsibility to challenge negative ideas, assumptions, behaviour and language whenever it occurs. This is how children will learn new ways of thinking about themselves and others.

### **Confidentiality**

Avoid discussing information regarding other children and young people. Be aware of being overheard while on the telephone or your mobile phone.

### **Gifts, loaning and borrowing**

Avoid giving children and young people gifts and lending or borrowing items. There are issues of power, control and equality involved in these areas. Children and young people should be discouraged from offering gifts to you.

### **Personal appearance**

Maintain high levels of appearance and personal self-care. We are professionals at work and as such represent equestrianism. You are modelling self-respect, core values, expectations and consistent approaches.

### **Non-verbal communication**

Our moods and feelings affect our thinking and most importantly our communication. This is also true of our non-verbal communication; body language, eye contact and facial expressions. This can have a huge impact on our interactions with children and young people and colleagues alike.

We are all human and we may have things going on in our lives at work or at home that will affect our mood, attitude, judgement, emotional presentation and possibly our demeanour. As professionals we must learn to separate these issues when we are working directly with children and young people.

Our personal issues are not problems for children and young people to be party to, and they should be protected from unhelpful exposure to our personal or professional challenges or emotional difficulties.