

# Physical Contact

Creating a child safe environment does not mean there should be no physical contact with children and young people. When working with children and young people, appropriate and non-intrusive physical contact may occur.

While it is not possible to describe all instances of appropriate and inappropriate physical contact, the following principles may help to define contact that is appropriate.

Clergy, employees and volunteers may:

- Engage in physical contact that is non-intrusive (e.g. give a high five, fist bump or pat on the shoulder, hold a young child's hand to cross the road, place an arm around the shoulder of a distressed young person, hold a crying toddler, hold hands during a prayer activity).
- Initiate contact in response to the needs of the child or young person consistent with the boundaries of the activity or program (e.g. pick up a child who has fallen over, provide first aid when a child is hurt, comfort a child, adjust sporting equipment).

When engaging in physical contact, clergy, employees and volunteers should:

- Explain to the child or young person why they are engaging in physical contact and seek their permission prior to any contact occurring e.g. 'As part of this prayer activity, I would like to hold your hand. Would that be OK?'
- Listen to children and young people's preferences in relation to physical contact (e.g. "I don't like holding hands").
- Respect signs that a child is uncomfortable with physical contact (e.g. a child moving away, averting their eyes or showing distress).
- Respect cultural sensitivities specific to children and young people from diverse cultures (see examples below).
- Respect the capabilities of children and young people with a disability (e.g. respect the independence of a young person by waiting to be asked for assistance rather than stepping in and doing something for the person that they can do for themselves).

## Examples of cultural practices in relation to physical interaction

The avoidance of eye contact in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is customarily a gesture of respect.

Touching a child or young person's head or pointing your feet in the direction of another person may be considered disrespectful in some Asian cultures.

It is culturally appropriate in Sudanese culture to pass objects with both hands.

Direct eye contact is rude in Sudanese culture.

In Samoan culture, there is usually no touching in formal relationships.

In Indian culture, touching of any kind between unrelated men and women can be interpreted as flirting.

# Physical Contact

Clergy, employees and volunteers are to avoid any physical contact:

- to the mouth, groin, genitals, buttocks and breasts other than in medical emergency situations (e.g. when using a defibrillator, giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation)
- that occurs in private
- that is initiated by the employee or volunteer to meet their own needs (e.g. a volunteer who constantly hugs children or encourages them to sit on her lap because she feels lonely)
- that would appear to a reasonable observer to be sexual in nature
- intended to cause a child or young person distress or harm
- that involves roughhousing, wrestling, horseplay or tickling
- that is against a child or young person's wishes
- that undermines the privacy and independence of a child or young person in relation to personal care (e.g. providing assistance with toileting, dressing, showering when assistance is not required).

Depending on the age and stage of development of the children and young people attending parish, agency and entity programs, activities and events, it may be helpful to communicate guidelines about physical contact at the commencement of the program, activity or event with children and young people (and their families).



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