



Physical Contact

WHAT IS APPROPRIATE TOUCH?

Within a church there are many interactions between people, some of which involve touch. What is important is that we are constantly thinking about the other person before we act.

So, what guidelines can help those in a **position of authority within a church** work out whether or not to touch someone?

The Code of Conduct sets out when touch is not permitted:

Therefore, you will not, among other things engage in or condone:

- *physical contact that is inappropriate to the situation or uncomfortable or confusing for the receiver, including kissing, hugging, touching, pinching, patting or aggressive physical contact,*
- *touching any sexual part of the body, including the “only kidding” or accidental occasions of sexual touch.*

The Code of Conduct uses words like “inappropriate” in relation to touch in these circumstances because every situation, just like every person, is different. Working on understanding the boundaries, learning to recognise the difference between the touch that most people would consider appropriate and touch that is inappropriate, is what the Code of Conduct is about.

Within the bounds of the Code of Conduct there is the ability for leaders to touch those under their care for pastoral, medical, instructional and safety reasons. Appropriate touch is something that leaders must learn.

BOUNDARIES

The key to understanding where the boundaries are is understanding the person on the receiving end of our good intentions. A touch can be good, bad, or confusing. A good touch makes the person feel good about who they are, affirmed, cared for and supported. A bad touch makes them feel harmed, disregarded, in pain or danger or threatened. A confusing touch makes them feel unsure of the relationship or uncomfortable. Similarly, what we say can be good, bad, or confusing.

Good intentions are not enough. Those in a **position of authority within the church** must ensure that appropriate boundaries are always maintained.

Sadly, some leaders within churches have heard the discussion about boundaries and have reacted by removing all touch. A better approach would be to learn about boundaries and modify behaviours to ensure that the bad and confusing touches are removed, and the good touch remains. After all, church is family and what is a family without touch?



SOME HINTS

We need to be other person-minded when we think about touch. Here are some hints to help you work out if touch in a specific situation is appropriate:

- Does it cross a boundary set out in the Code of Conduct? If it does, don't do it.
- Don't assume that because you feel okay about physical touch that the other person will feel the same. If in doubt, don't do it.
- Consider if the person is particularly sensitive to touch for some reason and modify your behaviour accordingly.
- Consider the person's cultural background and what may or may not be considered appropriate in that culture.
- If you need to comfort someone, a hand on the shoulder may be acceptable with their permission. If in doubt, ask. Seeking permission from someone before you touch then is the best way to work out if it is okay. For example, "I can see you are upset. Would you mind if I put my hand on your shoulder?"
- Make sure that you are setting a good example for others, If others are looking to you to learn about appropriate ministry practices, ensure that you are modelling clear boundaries.
- Think about what it may look like to an onlooker, could your actions be interpreted as overstepping boundaries? If so, don't do it.
- If you need to touch someone for medical, instructional or safety reasons, let them know beforehand.
- If a particular activity involves touch, for example at a youth group activity where a particular game or activity needs to be demonstrated, ask for a volunteer. Be explicit about where you will be touching, for example, linking arms.

When accidents happen, apologise immediately and make sure that someone in authority knows what happened so that your actions are visible and you are accountable.

PHYSICAL CONTACT & CHILDREN

There are some additional considerations when thinking about how boundaries and physical contact relates to children. Kids are often very free with how they interact physically with other people and may not feel 'uncomfortable' about touch in the same way adults might.

We want to be careful that we are not normalizing excessive touch with children. By teaching kids to expect that the leaders at church will not touch them inappropriately, they will be equipped to recognise if someone were to overstep that boundary.

Children's feelings should be respected, and they have the right to say "no" to an unwanted touch. Leaders should always be setting a good example of communicating what touch they are not okay with. For example, if a child is trying to sit on a leader's lap, the leader can gently tell the child that they can't sit on their lap but they can sit beside them. Similarly, if a leader wanted to give a child a sticker, they can ask the child where they would like the sticker put, rather than sticking it on their chest or hand without asking. These small interactions can help reinforce that touching someone else's body is something that requires permission, and that children and adults have the right to say "no" to being touched.



2023 EDITION

BREAKING THE SILENCE

INFORMATION SHEET

In critical situations, physical intervention may be required to ensure the safety of a child or those around them. For example, if a child were to run onto a busy road or if a child became violent towards other kids. Similarly, physical contact may be required to ensure the wellbeing of a child, such as moving a sick child or consoling a distraught child. In all these instances leaders should remain mindful of their contact and be open with the child and their parents / carers about the action taken. Clearly explain the reasons for the physical contact and assure them that in normal circumstances leaders will not touch them in that way. Remind them that they can talk to any of the leaders if they ever feel upset about an instance of touch.