



# Professional Boundaries for Alaskan School Staff

Barbara Thurston, Executive Director  
Alaska Public Entity Insurance



# Background

Alaska Public Entity Insurance (APEI) was originally created by the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) to provide property insurance to Alaskan schools. Today, APEI provides school districts throughout the State of Alaska with property, liability, and workers' compensation coverage.

Through our work in relation to school district liability coverage, APEI recognized a need to help school districts protect their students from sexual abuse.

APEI has worked with AASB, attorney Don Austin, and a number of Alaskan experts to develop policies and training to help all school districts recognize the warning signs of potential abuse and respond appropriately to a report of alleged abuse.

# Training for Alaska

In developing this presentation, we have attempted to reflect the unique cultures of our Alaskan communities. Our goals are:

- To support the existing strength of each community.
- To assist school districts in forming a partnership with their communities to protect children in a way that respects the culture and meets the obligations of the school to keep children safe.





# Types of Sexual Predators

- “Grabbers”
  - Seize an opportunity when it arises
  - Grabbers represent only a small portion of child sex abusers, though these are often the abusers that people think of first
- “Groomers”
  - Take the time to develop a relationship with a child and desensitize them to gradually increasing violations of personal boundaries
  - This represents the vast majority of school-related abusers
  - Sexual Grooming is the focus of the training today

# Goals



**Recognize:** Professional boundaries and violations of those boundaries



**Understand:** How boundary violations have the potential to lead to sexual abuse, and how adhering to professional boundaries can help prevent sexual abuse in schools



**Report:** How and when to report boundary invasions that you become aware of





# Personal vs. Professional Boundaries

- Everyone's personal experience will affect their personal views on boundaries.
- Communities and cultures have values and customs that vary throughout the state.
- Appropriate professional boundaries for school staff may vary from, or seem to conflict with, the local community customs. Today's discussion will focus on guidelines for school personnel while interacting with children in and out of school.
- Within each community and school district, conversations should take place to reconcile community norms with appropriate professional boundaries for use in a school setting.

# Understanding Boundary Invasions

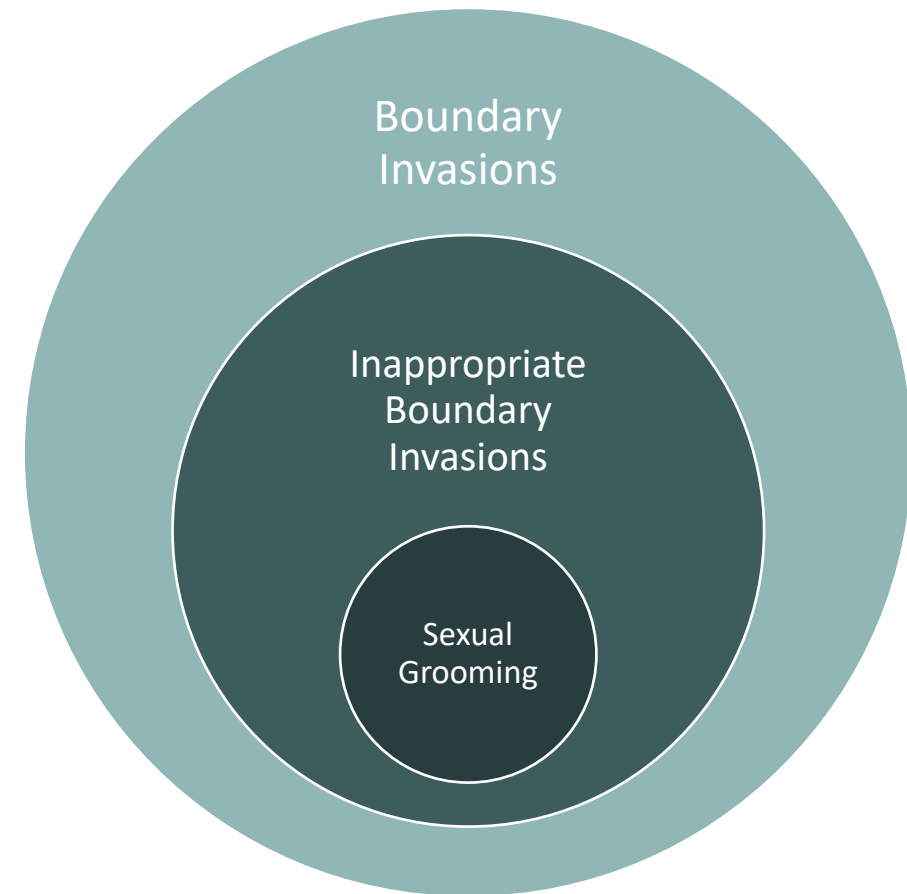


Boundary Invasion: *“An act or series of behaviors by a school employee that encroaches into a student’s personal physical and psychological boundaries, and has the potential to violate the duty of care that school personnel have for students.”*

- Some invasions of students’ personal boundaries may be required for health, safety, or educational reasons
- Other invasions are inappropriate, because they have no legitimate health, safety, or educational reason, but are not necessarily abusive
- Some inappropriate boundary invasions, however, are the result of a perpetrator intentionally grooming a child for future abuse

# Understanding Boundary Invasions

Not all boundary invasions are inappropriate and not all inappropriate boundary invasions involve sexual grooming, but preventing boundary invasions can prevent grooming and thus abuse.





# How Boundary Training Differs from Mandatory Reporting Training



## Mandatory Reporting

- Reactive
- Intended to respond to abuse
- Focused on people
- Crisis response
- Required by Alaska law  
AS 47.17.020

## Boundary Training

- Proactive
- Intended to prevent abuse
- Focused on behaviors
- Creating a culture of professionalism
- Creating a feeling of safety in schools

# How awareness of professional boundaries protects students



## Stop abuse before it starts!

According to child abuse experts, the most effective way to protect students and prevent abuse is to:

- Recognize that boundary invasions may put children at risk
- Report observed boundary invasions
- Follow up by administration on reports of boundary invasions



# How awareness of Professional Boundaries Protects Staff

- Helps individuals become aware of behaviors that violate professional boundaries
- Provides opportunities for administrators to guide staff without judgement about their intentions
- Protects educators from the appearance of impropriety
- Helps other employees avoid accusations of complacency or a failure to protect children



## Case Example: Washington School District

**The following case from Washington occurred in 1997 and the resulting lawsuit against the school went to trial in 2002.**

- Female 6th grade teacher had a **special connection** with one of her 12-year-old male students.
- The student once went on a **family vacation** with the teacher, had **dinner at her house** with her husband and family **on numerous occasions**, and **stayed overnight** at her house.
- Student **babysat** for the teacher's children.

# Case Example: Washington School District



What others witnessed:

- Teacher and student caught by custodian in a restroom with the lights out
- Student seen driving the teacher's van
- Student and teacher took art classes together
- Student and teacher spent recess together
- Student stayed in the teacher's classroom as late as 10 PM
- Teacher seen acting like a child, skipping and playing with children
- Student seen patting teacher on the bottom
- Student and teacher slow danced together at a school Valentine party
- Police found them together in the teacher's van at 2:00 AM with what looked like a bed made up in the back

***None of these incidents were reported to administration***

# Case Example: Washington School District



- Eventually, a school counselor informed the principal, the principal called police, and Mary Kay Letourneau was arrested
- Teacher was convicted of child sexual abuse and went to jail
- Student's family filed liability lawsuit alleging abuse, which went to trial in 2002
  - The School District prevailed: the jury determined that the district's standard of care was met.
  - **But**, standard of care has since changed:
    - The Letourneau abuse happened in 1996 - 1997
    - In today's environment, it is likely that the verdict would go the other way and find the school district to be negligent







# Healthy Relationships: Students and Educators

Educator/Student relationship is not equal:

- The educator is the adult and is responsible for setting, maintaining, and communicating appropriate boundaries.
- Educators must not rely upon students to meet their own social needs.
- Even when educators and students may be very familiar with each other or even related, professional relationships with students should be maintained whenever educators are on the job.
- Refer to the *State of Alaska Code of Ethics of the Education Profession (20 AAC 10.020)*.

# Sexual Grooming Defined



Actions deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and *establishing an emotional connection* with a child, in order to lower the child's inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with the child.



# Adults are Groomed, too

Often an abuser becomes known as someone:

- Who *deeply cares* about students so that focusing on a student seems not unusual.
- Who *makes extra-special efforts* to help kids so that being with a student at odd hours seems less odd.
- Who would *never be suspected* of misconduct so that access to students is freely given.
- Who is *just a “touchy,” “hugging” kind of person* so that rumors of touching may be discounted.

# Stages of Grooming



# Stages of Grooming

## 1. Build trust

Perpetrators build an image over a lifetime which causes people to dismiss odd or inappropriate behavior.

## 2. Gain access

The perpetrator works in environments in which there is a “well populated hunting ground”. The school environment brings a new class of children each year.

## 3. Identify the vulnerable

The perpetrator identifies vulnerable or at-risk children with voids in their life that the perpetrator can “fill”.

## Stages of Grooming (cont.)

### 4. Isolate the child

Perpetrator will seek opportunities to be with a child away from others, such as after school activities, one-on-one tutoring, lunches in the classroom, rides, and sleep overs.

### 5. Desensitize the child to touch

This is done slowly over time, starting with small touches that seem innocent and may be seen by others early on, such as piggy-back rides, hugs, light touching, and increased gradually.

***Each of these first five steps may be observed by outsiders and creates an opportunity for others to recognize the potential danger and to intervene.***



# Stages of Grooming (cont.)

## 6. Introduce intimacy

Intimacy is introduced as the perpetrator begins to move the conversation from professional to personal and from general to sexual.

## 7. Create complicity

- Complicity is created by making the child believe the abuse is their fault.
- The perpetrator accomplishes this by having the child join them in breaking rules that are increasingly severe. If abuse occurs during the rule breaking, the child couldn't report the abuse without also disclosing their own wrongdoing.

## Stages of Grooming (cont.)

### 8. Test ability to keep secrets

This is done to ensure the child will keep secrets before the perpetrator actually “crosses the line” into abuse. The perpetrator will break rules and cross boundaries that are initially insignificant and gradually increase.

### 9. Maintain silence

The perpetrator may appeal to the child’s emotions by saying, “If you tell I’ll get in trouble.” But often threats are issued, such as potential harm someone else the child cares about or through violence against the child.

***These last four steps will not be as visible to others but may occur privately between the perpetrator and the child***

# Examples of Boundary Invasions



- Showing undue interest in a particular child
- Giving students rides in educator's personal vehicle, especially alone
- Giving gifts or money to a student
- Talking with a student about the educator's or the student's personal problems
- Inviting students to the educator's home
- Using electronic communications (texting, social media) to discuss personal topics or interests with students
- Engaging in sex talk (innuendo, banter, or sexual jokes) with students

# Case Example #2: Rural Alaskan School District



This is a story you may recognize. You may know some of the employees, the name of the school, some of the families, some of the victims, and the perpetrator. It is an important story to share to prevent it from happening again.

- *We have permission to share this story from the attorney representing the families.*
- *Confidentiality still applies to the specific students.*
- ***Anything that would identify a specific child is therefore not a topic for discussion.***

## Case Example #2: (cont.)

- Took place in a small community in rural Alaska
- Abuser was a paraeducator
- Grew up in the village
- Graduated from the school
- Blood relation to many in the community

## Case Example #2 (cont.)

### *Boundary invasions which may have appeared to be innocent...*

- Kids came to his apartment to watch videos
- Kids came to his classroom after school to access the internet or play video games
- Touching which other adults saw may have appeared innocent:
  - Giving children “backpack” or “piggy-back” rides,
  - Twirling them,
  - Roughhousing, etc.



## Case Example #2 (cont.)

*...Led to sexual abuse of more than a dozen children in the community*

- Sexual touching occurred both in the perpetrator's home and at the school
- Abuse came to light when a child reported the touching to a family member who reported it to the school and then police.
- Abuser was convicted and is in jail
- Substantial financial settlement against the school district in favor of the children

## Case Example #2: (cont.)

### *Investigation afterwards revealed*

- School rules were not enforced
  - Perpetrator frequently had students in his classroom with the door closed and blinds down
  - Perpetrator often had kids in his classroom in the evening
- The Perpetrator would buy presents and candy for students at the store in town
- Perpetrator was seen patting students' bottoms and stroking a girl's neck and hair

*Teachers and students reported these behaviors to administrators, but it is unclear if any action was taken.*

## Case Example #2 (cont.)

### *In Summary*

- Perpetrator had relationships outside of school with many parents and children
- Perpetrator had a long-standing good reputation in the community
- Lots of touching which appeared innocent
- Some behavior might be considered normal conduct for a close relative
- No one ever suspected he would abuse a child
- Professional boundaries were being ignored



# The Importance of Speaking Up

Some school staff, students, or family members may not be comfortable voicing their discomfort or concerns, but...

- **Unintentional Boundary Violations** are not always obvious or sexually motivated and may simply be the result of a lack of awareness or poor boundaries.
- **Behaviors can be corrected** with guidance and support; appropriate feedback provides opportunities for an employee to be more effective in his or her role.
- When you speak up, you help **protect kids**



# Your Reporting Responsibilities

1. Report concerning behaviors or *inappropriate boundary invasions* to administration
2. Report *suspected abuse* to Law Enforcement, OCS, and the PTPC
  - AS 47.17.020 Mandatory Reporters
  - 4 AAC 12.210 Reporting instances of prohibited sexual conduct

# Reporting Guidelines



- **Err on the side of caution, and **when in doubt, report it out!**** Reports of suspected boundary invasions should be made to the site administrator or supervisor.
- **Better to over-report than under-report:** Never assume that someone else has already raised the concern.
- **Do not confront or discuss the matter with the adult you are reporting.**
- **Documentation:** Document your report in writing in an email, memo, or at least your personal notes summarizing the conversation.
- **Maintain Confidentiality:** Failure to do so may impede investigations.
- **Escalate if necessary:** If you have alerted a supervisor and the troubling conduct continues, alert the supervisor again.

# What would making a report of boundary violations look like?



- Who do I make a report to?
- How do I make a report?
- How are reports handled?
- What will happen to someone if I report that they are engaged in boundary invasions?



# Strategies on how to respond to specific situations

- Next, we will discuss strategies that you can utilize when faced with situations that may make it difficult to avoid boundary violations





## Strategies: In-school Guidelines

- Keep windows uncovered and doors open when with students
- Refer students who need emotional or other support to appropriately trained staff such as counselors or school psychologists



## Strategies: **Small Communities and Familial Relationships**

Staff working in small communities face additional challenges in managing professional boundaries.

- More likely to have social relationships with the parents of the children with whom they work
- Social contact with children should be generated via the relationship the teacher has with the parents or other community adults
- Educators who are related to children in their care must adhere to the same professional boundaries when interacting with these children in the school setting as they do for other unrelated children.

## Strategies: Home Visits

- If students ask to visit your home, be clear about your expectations for the visit
- If you allow students to visit, make parents aware of the visit and your rules for the visit
- Never be alone with a student in your home – always have another adult or student with you
- If children visit the educator's home on more than an occasional basis, the educator should inform the principal/site administrator and explain the circumstances



## Strategies: Gifts, Treats, and “Electronic Candy”

- Candy and similar small treats
- Food or groceries
- Clothing
- Personal gifts
- Electronic entertainment



# Strategies: Physical Contact

- Establish and explain physical boundaries with students when school begins so expectations are clear and prevent misunderstandings
- Teacher should always ask for consent from student before initiating any physical contact
- If a child initiates physical contact, the staff member should redirect the student without causing unnecessary distress or embarrassment to the student



## Strategies: **Avoid being alone with a student**

Always ask another person to accompany you for:

- After hours and off-site activities
- Home Visits
- School Rides and Field Trips
- Assisting children in toileting
- Health emergencies

# Strategies: **Electronic communications**



- Email, texting, chatting on social media
  - Interaction with students should be limited to mediums (group texts, public social media posts) that are visible to other users
  - Use school-district email or social media account, not your personal one
  - Limit communications to daytime or early evening hours when possible
- Electronic gaming
  - Educators should avoid allowing a situation to arise where they are developing an online/gaming relationship with a student.
  - Ideally, educators would avoid all online gaming with their students

# Conclusion

- Protecting children requires that all the adults around them be aware of professional boundaries
- Recognizing boundary invasions brings everyone one step closer to protecting children
- School staff should be aware of professional boundaries and how to make sure they are adhering to them
- Reporting any observations or behaviors that appear to be a boundary invasion allows concerns to be addressed before they escalate



# Toolkit

- **Model Board Policy:** BP 5141.42 *Professional Boundaries of Staff with Students*
- **Model Administrative Regulation:** AR 5141.42 *Professional Boundaries of Staff with Students*
- **School Employee Professional Boundaries Training Handout**



# Further Training Opportunities

- **Professional Boundaries for Educators**
  - Training offered by APEI staff, in person and via Zoom
  - Soon will be available as a recording
- **Professional Boundaries: Administrator Response**
  - Training targeted to administrators – outlining their responsibilities and the appropriate way to respond to a report
- **Vector Solutions**
  - All APEI members have access