

GUIDELINES FOR PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE AGAINST STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

These guidelines are intended to be a complement to the Professional Boundary Training offered by APEI and other organizations and are aimed at assisting school employees in protecting students from sexual misconduct committed by other school employees. The problem of sexual abuse of students by school employees and others has become all too common in recent years. The principles identified in this handout and related training are based on what sex offender treatment providers tell us is the most effective way of protecting students from sexual abuse in the schools:

- Understanding how adult behaviors that violate professional boundaries may put children at risk
- Recognizing boundary violations when they occur
- Reporting such behaviors to school district administration, and
- Follow-up by administration.

The small number of school employees who sexually abuse students cause disproportionate harm to children, families, schools, and the public's perceptions of and confidence in public education. Much of this misconduct can be prevented. It is every educator's responsibility to understand basic information on how offenders engage in sexual misconduct in schools and to know what behaviors to report and to whom reports should be made.

PROFESSIONALISM IS THE BEST PROTECTION

The relationship between an educator and student is an uneven one. It is a relationship of trust where the educator has power over the student, making it inappropriate and unprofessional for the educator to try and meet his/her social needs through that relationship. While good relationships between teachers and students are very important for the education process, that does not mean that the educator may become personal friends with his/her students. As is described in this handout, failure to follow this basic principle of professionalism can result in an educator fitting the profile of someone attempting to engage in sexual misconduct with students, even if that is not the person's intent.

In an educator/student relationship, the educator is the adult and is responsible for establishing and maintaining professional boundaries. Even in small communities where

school employees may be related to some of their students, these principles of professional relationships with students apply whenever educators are on the job.

“GRABBERS” AND “GROOMERS”

Experts inform us that there are two types of sexual predators of children—“grabbers” and “groomers.”

“Grabbers”

- Seize an opportunity when it arises
- Typically victimize young children and usually perpetrate abuse against a single child only once, though they may abuse many children over time
- 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
- May victimize either young children or teenagers
- Represent the vast majority of school-related abusers.

What experts in sexual abuse prevention tell us about sexual grooming reveals that other educators are the key to stopping sexual misconduct against students by observing and reporting violations of professional boundaries. These guidelines and the associated training focus on helping educators identify boundary invasions and respond appropriately.

PATTERNS OF SEXUAL GROOMING

Sexual grooming is the process by which much of the sexual misconduct against children in schools occurs. In a typical grooming situation, an adult befriends a child, creating a connection or special relationship with the child and lowering the child’s natural inhibitions in order to eventually take advantage of the child sexually. Sexual grooming typically follows a pattern, with the initial steps often made in a public setting, within sight of others, followed by later steps requiring more privacy between the perpetrator and child.

- **Build trust:** Perpetrators cultivate a public image over a lifetime which causes people to dismiss odd or inappropriate behavior. This image can keep other adults from believing accusations, and deters kids from telling because of doubt they would be believed.

Some of the tactics a perpetrator may use to build trust can include giving the child extra attention, discussing their personal life, playing games, or providing access to things the child wants or needs.

- **Gain access:** The perpetrator works or spends time in environments that provide them with access to children. The school environment brings a new group of children each year.
- **Identify the vulnerable:** The perpetrator identifies vulnerable or at-risk children with voids in their life that the perpetrator can “fill”. Any child can be a victim of sexual abuse, but some children are more vulnerable than others. Abusers may target children who:
 - Have an unstable home life
 - Are estranged from their parent(s)
 - Experience isolation or neglect
 - Are shy or not assertive and likely to maintain silence
 - Have experienced trauma in their lives
 - Are disabled

The perpetrator is not only looking for a vulnerable child, but adults who will allow them to fill voids in the child’s life. These voids are often the result of adverse childhood experiences. Once needs are being met, the child, and even their family, may hesitate to give up the relationship. Adults are often too polite, shy, or anxious to say anything, or may be too impressed by power, status, or money to speak out against the perpetrator. Perpetrators will deliberately associate with these adults.

- **Isolate the child:** A perpetrator will seek opportunities to be with a child away from others, such as at after school activities, one-on-one tutoring, lunches in the classroom, rides in a car or on an ATV or snowmachine, and sleep overs.

Being alone with a child allows the perpetrator to identify a child’s unmet needs and start developing a personal relationship with the child. They also seek to isolate the child from other trusted adults, and may pit kids against parents, other school adults, and their friends. They present themselves to the child as a best friend and mentor or may tell the child, “You can trust me because no one understands you the way I do.”

- **Desensitize the child to touch:** This is done slowly over time, starting with small, apparently innocent, touches such as hugs or piggyback rides and increasing gradually in scope and duration. Perpetrators may make a point of excessive physical touch of children in front of adults and find times to touch kids inappropriately. Over time the encounters will last longer and become more intimate.
- **Introduce intimacy:** Intimacy is introduced as the perpetrator begins to move the conversation from professional to personal and from general to sexual. The perpetrator may share something personal about themselves of an intimate nature and ask the child for similar information. If the child shows shame or embarrassment, the perpetrator may apologize but tell child there’s nothing to be ashamed of, and then go on to share more information about their own sexual experiences.

- **Create complicity:** Complicity is created by making the child believe the abuse is their fault, and may be accomplished by having the child join them in breaking rules that are increasingly severe. Examples of rule breaking could be staying late at school; riding in the perpetrator's car; or using drugs, alcohol, or pornography together. If abuse occurs during the rule breaking, the child couldn't report the abuse without also disclosing their own wrongdoing.

The perpetrator may also twist the truth to redirect blame, such as, "I can't help myself when I'm with you," or, "You were asking for it with the way you dress." If the child believes these lies, it leaves them ashamed and less likely to disclose the abuse.

- **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.

The initial rules that are broken are usually things the perpetrator could easily talk their way out of if confronted. If confronted, they will remove that child from their list of potential victims. If not confronted, the boundary invasions will increase in significance. Every time a child keeps a secret, they are less likely to tell the next secret.

- **Maintain silence:** Assuring that the child maintains silence is absolutely necessary once a perpetrator commits abuse against a child. The foundation of silence is created through many of the previous steps of grooming, but once the perpetrator crosses the line and becomes abusive, they must actively enforce 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 a threat to harm someone the child cares about, or commit violence against the child. The threats are age specific and create enough fear that the child will maintain their silence.

In summary:

- The vast majority of educators who sexually molest students accomplish their molestations through the sexual grooming process.
- Sexual grooming of students begins with and is accomplished by a process of increasingly invasive inappropriate boundary invasions.



Therefore:

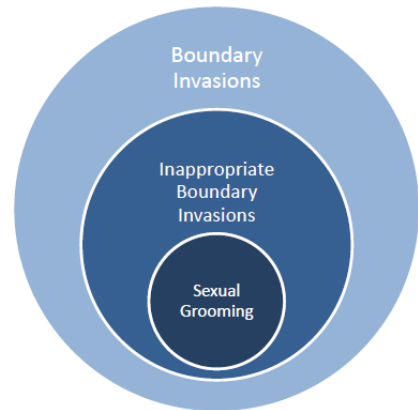
- If we stop inappropriate boundary invasions, we can prevent most molestations by educators.

DEFINITIONS

Inappropriate: “Inappropriate” in conjunction with “inappropriate boundary invasions” means conduct which under the totality of the circumstances does not have a bona fide educational, health, or safety reason.

Boundary invasions: “Boundary invasions” are situations where an educator does not respect the student’s personal physical and psychological boundaries.

Not all boundary invasions are inappropriate, and not all inappropriate boundary invasions result in sexual grooming. However, inappropriate boundary invasions are something which other adults may witness or become aware of. Since inappropriate boundary invasions are often the only clue whereby other adults can detect that an educator-student relationship may be headed towards abuse, it is important for educators to avoid inappropriate boundary invasions, report ones that they observe in others, and for administrators to address them promptly when they occur.



A checklist of inappropriate boundary invasions to watch for can be found in the appendix to this handout.

REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES AND GUIDELINES

All school staff has a responsibility to look out for and protect children. We also want staff to look out for one another. The best way to do this is to know how to report a concern about a potential boundary invasion to allow that concern to be addressed.

Many school staff, students, or family members may not be comfortable voicing their discomfort or concerns especially when friends, family, or close colleagues are involved, but speaking up is a way that all school community members are able to help protect kids. History has shown that when a case of school sexual abuse is found to have occurred, there was almost always a previous pattern of boundary invasions that were observed by other staff or community members, and not reported to or followed up on by administration.

Approach the situation as an opportunity to help a fellow educator to grow and learn how to be more effective in their role. Unintentional boundary violations are not always obvious or sexually motivated and may simply be the result of a lack of awareness or poor boundaries. When you speak up, you help an educator learn how their actions may be unintentionally perceived.

Ultimately, if there was an ulterior motive behind the behavior, we have the opportunity to prevent it from harming children. If a perpetrator knows they are being observed and are called out on their behavior, they are less likely to act on it. If there was no ulterior motive,

the educator engaging in the boundary invasion will likely correct their actions promptly after the situation is addressed with them by an administrator.

The type of reporting that is required depends on the information being reported:

- Concerning behaviors or inappropriate boundary invasions should be reported to school or district administration.
- Suspected physical or sexual abuse must be reported to Law Enforcement, the Office of Children’s Services (OCS), and the Professional Teaching Practices Council (PTPC) under state mandatory reporting requirements.
 - AS 47.17.020 Mandatory Reporters
 - 4 AAC 12.210 Reporting instances of prohibited sexual conduct

We recommend the following guidelines for reporting boundary invasions:

- Err on the side of caution, and when in doubt, report it out!
- Report concerns as soon as possible. It’s best to focus on what you *observed* rather than what you think the *intent* of the concerning behavior might be. Do not attempt to decide if all the clues fit together or try to determine whether the behavior you have observed has a plausible, innocent explanation. You may not be aware of or understand the entire situation, and allowing the conduct to continue could be harmful for both the staff member and students.
- Do not confront or discuss the matter with the adult you are reporting, and do not inform the person of your concern, unless it is a situation where immediate intervention is necessary to protect a child.
- **Maintain confidentiality.** Failure to do so may impede official investigations, foster untrue rumors, or violate privacy. You owe a legal duty of confidentiality to students and school staff on matters which a reasonable person would want to remain confidential.
- It is better to over-report than under-report: never assume that someone else has already raised the concern. Even if you believe that another staff member has or will raise the concern, you should do so as well. One report could be identified as a “one off” situation and not warrant as serious of a response. More than one report may indicate a pattern that needs to be addressed further
- Document your report in writing in an email, memo, or at least your personal notes summarizing the conversation. The documentation should include to whom, where, when, and what you reported. Written documentation created at the time of a report will ensure that you are later able to accurately recall information about the report.
- Escalate if necessary: If you have alerted a supervisor and the troubling conduct continues, alert the supervisor again. If you feel the supervisor does not take the matter seriously or the conduct continues or escalates, go to a higher level administrator or the Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC).

STRATEGIES FOR SPECIAL SITUATIONS

In-school guidelines: A key element of the physical safety of a school is the ability of school staff to be able to account for all the children and youth for which it is responsible. From this perspective, an important rule of thumb in protecting children and youth is visibility. School districts are encouraged to take actions within their means to design or adapt existing spaces to maximize visibility, and to establish policies and procedures for safe use of the space, including the following:

- Design or adapt school spaces so that they are open and visible to multiple people and that minimizes “blind spots” where behaviors cannot be observed.
- All doors, classrooms, or offices should have windows if possible. When rooms are in use, doors should be left open or ajar. This is especially important if a student comes to your class when no one else is there. If a child requests to close the door to speak quietly about a sensitive subject, look into an option to have another adult present or sit across the room from the open door where you can speak quietly but be observed from the hallway.

Exceptions, including bathrooms and bedrooms, should have clear policies and procedures regarding who is allowed behind the closed door and under what circumstances.

- Educators should not be meeting in private with students to “mentor” or “counsel” the student unless that is the educator’s official role in the school. If a student needs counseling, non-counselor educators should send the student to the counselor or person whose role it would be to help the child. If there is no such person, then the educator should consult with their school administration.
- When dealing with a child’s toileting accident, two adults should assist the child.
- When coaching sports, it is occasionally necessary for a coach to touch a player to demonstrate various positions or moves. Coaches should discuss this necessity with players and their parents at the beginning of the season, and explain that anyone uncomfortable with such touching should let him/her know privately, or inform another adult who can inform the coach. Students’ privacy should be protected. If possible, having two coaches at practices is desirable.

Small Communities: In small communities it is more likely that people working in the schools will already know students before they become students. Children in the community may be friends of the family or part of the educator’s extended family. The child may be the educator’s babysitter, someone who is hired to do chores, or someone often seen at community events. The educator may belong to the same community organizations as the child, be an elder, the child’s uncle, aunt, cousin, or friend’s parent.

These guidelines recognize the realities of small communities where everyone knows everyone and people who grew up in the community have close ties and blood relationships with a large segment of the community.

Additional guidance for educators working in small communities is:

- Even if the child is a relative, professional boundaries are to be observed at school or when the educator is on the job.
- Social contact between educators and children should be generated via the relationship the educator has with the child's parents or other community adults
- Educators should politely avoid discussing matters relating to the school or students' learning or social progress other than at times specifically set aside for that purpose. Being prepared to respond to inquiries or comments by individuals from outside the school will allow you to tactfully direct conversation away from sensitive subjects. For example, if in a social setting a parent asks how their child is doing in class, say, "I'd be happy to discuss that with you. Let's set up a time for us to meet at the school or talk during the school day."

Home visits: In small communities, in particular, children may ask or expect to visit teachers at their homes. Each school or school district should develop appropriate rules and expectations regarding students visiting teachers and other staff in their homes. We recognize that the expectations may vary among communities, but it is always important to maintain professional boundaries.

Ideally, students would never visit teachers in their homes, and all meetings between students and teachers would occur at school or another community location. If your district elects to permit such home visits, rules regarding such visits should be established and communicated to all school staff, parents, and students. These rules should include requirements that:

- Visits by students to a teacher's home have a stated health, safety, or educational purpose
- Parents and/or school administrators are aware that visits are happening
- No students may visit a teacher's home alone
- Visits should be preplanned and have a defined timeframe.

If students ask to visit, explain your and the district's expectations and rules regarding such visits, and insist that those rules be followed.

If a child arrives at your home unexpectedly and there appears to be an emergency situation, call the appropriate person (police, medical, school administrator, parent, etc) to seek assistance.

There may be situations where it is appropriate or desirable for teachers to visit students' homes. These visits should have a bona fide health, educational, or safety reason, and should generally be arranged in advance. The purpose of the visit should be to visit the parent or the whole family, not just the student. If you arrive at the family's home at the agreed upon time and only the child is at home, don't stay to visit or to wait for the family to come home. Explain that you will contact the family to arrange another time to visit.

Educators should make home visits in groups of two or more staff whenever practical.

Social Media and “Electronic Candy”: Electronic and social media have become a significant part of everyday life – especially for children and youth. The skills learned in social networking – cooperation, collaboration, the management of information, organization, communication, etc. – are key skills for children and teens as they prepare for the world they not only experience now, but will also have to navigate in the future. Nevertheless, social media can be misused and employed to facilitate communication among youth, and between adults and youth, in ways that are inappropriate, violate boundaries, and do not reflect district standards of visibility or accountability. In addition, access to the internet and video games can be very appealing to children, some of whom may not have such access at their home.

School districts should adopt and enforce policies regarding access to electronic devices in the school setting, and use of social media and other forms of electronic communications between educators and students.

Student access to school computers or similar electronics should have a bona fide educational reason and the activity should be approved by the school administration. Access should be at a specific time and place, and available to a group of students, not just one.

Electronic communications: Educators should establish guidelines at the start of a school year regarding how they will use electronic communications such as email or texting with students and families, and explain those guidelines to parents and students. This should include information on how parents can contact the educator for urgent issues, and times of the day and week during which you will contact families and be available to respond to such messages. Early morning, late night, or weekend texts may not be appreciated by colleagues, students, and their parents – if a text has to be sent after hours, explain why: “This message is being sent after hours due to...”.

Interaction between students and educators on social media should be limited to posts that are visible by other users, including parents or other school staff, and done using district-provided electronic platforms, never through your personal email or personal social media accounts. If somehow you receive a message on your personal email from a student or parent, respond using your work email and explain, “I received your email on my personal email. I’m responding with my school email and ask this address be used in the future to reach me.”

Physical Contact: School staff members must not encourage students to initiate physical contact with them, and should establish and explain physical boundaries with students at the start of each school year so expectations are clear and to prevent misunderstandings.

It is recognized that, in certain circumstances, students may initiate contact with a staff member without any encouragement by the staff member – for example, young children who climb onto a teacher’s lap or reach out to hold the teacher’s hand. The way in which the physical contact may be viewed depends on the nature and context of the physical

contact, and the age, maturity, and developmental level of the child. The context will determine the action the staff member should take.

- If a staff member feels uncomfortable, or it is clear that the contact is inappropriate, the staff member should redirect the student without causing unnecessary distress or embarrassment to the student. For example, a teacher with a young child on his or her lap may gently remove and distract the child without commenting on the reason for doing so. With older students it may be appropriate that in addition to redirecting the student, the staff member also provide an explanation to the student without judging, shaming or otherwise making the student feel wrong for initiating the contact. Give kids a choice of a greeting, so they will feel they have some control. Ask, “Can I give you a high-five?” or “Can we shake on this?”
- For kids who frequently try to hug, be prepared to reiterate the boundaries you have established and offer options of another type of greeting. If a student initiates a frontal hug, turn your hip at the last moment to create a sideways arm-around-the-shoulder hug.

CONCLUSION

The vast majority of teachers, paraeducators, administrators, coaches, volunteers, and other employees in our schools are dedicated, caring people who do a great job helping students develop their talents and skills. However, some individuals who are sexually attracted to children or teens choose to work in schools and other youth organizations because it gives them “cover” as they carefully identify students they believe will be easy targets for sexual abuse. Other individuals may not have specific intentions to sexually abuse, but find themselves violating certain boundaries in their interactions with students that can lead to sexual misconduct and abuse. A school culture that allows staff to violate boundaries opens the opportunity for a perpetrator to hide in plain sight. If it’s acceptable for all teachers to give gifts, give hugs, have kids over to their house, etc., it gives an abuser the chance to blend in.

We don’t have to wait for sexual abuse to occur before we stop it. When school personnel, students, and parents are aware of behaviors that violate the appropriate boundaries between adults and students, they can take action to report violations before they can ever escalate to sexual abuse. That places individuals on notice that their behavior is inappropriate, unacceptable, and must be corrected. It provides an opportunity for school administrators to guide personnel in their professional development, without having to make judgements about whether their actions were sexually motivated or simply the result of a lack of awareness about poor boundaries.

Being made aware of boundary-violating behaviors lets students know they never have to accept any behaviors from others that make them feel uncomfortable, even from adults in positions of power or who are well-liked or popular. It lets parents know how to support their schools as safe havens where their children can learn and grow without the threat of sexual abuse.

LINKS TO RESOURCES WITH MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska Office of Children's Services (OCS):

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/default.aspx>

The Alaska Professional Teaching Practice Commission

<https://education.alaska.gov/ptpc>

NAEYC information on professional boundaries in Early Childhood education:

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/dec2020/professional-boundaries>

Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

<https://andvsa.org/>

Overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences in Alaska

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/abada/ace-ak/Pages/default.aspx>

APPENDIX

LIST OF INAPPROPRIATE BOUNDARY INVASIONS

The following are professional boundary violations that, if observed or reported by a third party, should be reported to school district administration. While most of these items do not necessarily indicate that sexual grooming exists, they all have the potential to lead to grooming and are inappropriate for educators to be participating in. This list is, of course, not exhaustive, and other behaviors could also be considered violations of professional boundaries and should be reported.

PHYSICAL BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

- Touching students for no educational, health, or safety reason
- Allowing or encouraging children, other than very young children, to sit on your lap
- Being alone with a student behind closed doors
- Taking a particular student on personal outings or giving the student rides in the educator's personal vehicle
- Roughhousing, wrestling, giving piggy-back rides to students, or playing with children in ways that require significant touching
- Invading a student's physical privacy (e.g., walking in on the student in the bathroom or locker room)

SOCIAL / EMOTIONAL BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

- Having a "special relationship" with a particular student
- Favoring certain students by giving them special privileges or allowing them to get away with inappropriate behavior
- Inviting students to the educator's home
- Addressing students, or permitting students to address staff members, with personalized terms of endearment or pet names
- Privately giving gifts or money to a student
- Sharing personal stories about the educator's adult relationship, marriage, or sex life with students
- Socializing in a setting where students are consuming alcohol, drugs, or tobacco.
- Gossiping with students about others
- Asking a student to keep certain things secret from his/her parents

TECHNOLOGY BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

- Engaging in one-to-one communication via social media, telephone, texting, or email with a particular student
- Discussing personal topics with students via social media or another electronic medium
- “Friending”, “following”, or otherwise creating a relationship with a student on a social media platform

SEXUAL OR ROMANTIC BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

- Making comments about a student's body or physical attributes to them or to others
- Asking a student about their romantic life or relationships
- Talking with a student about sexual topics that are not related to a specific curriculum
- Engaging in sex talk with students (including flirtatious comments, sexual innuendo, sexual banter, or sexual jokes)
- Showing pornography to a student
- Hugging, kissing, touching, or having other lingering physical contact with a student
- Engaging in any sexual or romantic relationship with a student, irrespective of the student’s age