**PDHPE: A touchy subject**

This article is designed to help you to establish and maintain good practice in relation to touch within your faculty and classes.

**Appropriate touch within the context of PDHPE**

Teachers have hundreds of interactions with students in their classes every day. Some of them include touch.

* What parameters can help you to determine whether or not to touch a student?
* What does the Department expect of you?
* What are the rights of young people to be touched or not touched?
* What is appropriate touch?
* How do you manage the supervision of change rooms, excursions and after-school coaching sessions?

Child protection procedures are in place to ensure that the children and young people in our schools are protected from harm. While they ask teachers to reflect on current practices, they are not intended to make more difficult the work of committed teachers going about their day-to-day business.

Child protection education involves teaching students how to recognise the difference between the touch that most people would consider appropriate and touch that is inappropriate. That is, in PDHPE we are teaching students that an important aspect of managing their own lives is to be able to say “no” to unwanted touch.

This explicit teaching should be counterbalanced by two needs:

* the need for negotiation to allow teachers to touch students for medical, instructional and safety reasons
* the need for students to accept responsibility not to infringe the personal rights of others.

Agreements can be negotiated, based upon these needs, to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of students and to reduce the risk of teachers being accused of inappropriate behaviour.

Appropriate touch will be part of a teacher’s repertoire of behaviours for managing students. A “hands-off” approach is out of the question for PDHPE teachers because of the physical education component of teaching PDHPE and the associated responsibilities with sport. Such an approach would contradict your duty of care.

**Expectations**

It is part of teaching physical education that teachers may be required to touch students in situations such as spotting in gymnastics and demonstrating a range of dance and games skills. This is an important and necessary aspect of safe and effective physical education teaching.

The expectation is that the teaching of all these areas of the PDHPE syllabus will continue in the professional manner in which they have always been taught by the vast majority of teachers.

It is suggested that you discuss these issues as a faculty and develop agreed guidelines about touch in teaching PDHPE. Your school may already have done some work in this area.

A clear framework should be developed within the guidelines for the physical contact necessary for the procedures which are consistent with a teacher’s duty of care. In this way, your faculty can provide a supportive environment for students and staff which is consistent and well understood and which models appropriate contact and behaviour.

**What could your guidelines look like?**

Agreed guidelines should be explicit, with concrete examples. They should also cover two main aspects:

* seeking permission from the student before performing a particular demonstration or lesson which requires touching
* clarifying the nature of “in-school” and “after- school” management of students.

### Seeking permission

In physical education, the physical handling of a student to demonstrate a particular action, such as throwing a javelin or a ball, may seem quite reasonable, but we cannot assume that the student wants to be touched to be shown this particular action. What can you do?

* Let students know why there is a need to demonstrate, using a hands-on method.
* Explain what the touching will be and ask for volunteers or ask students if they mind you demonstrating with them using a hands-on approach.
* At the beginning of a unit, such as gymnastics, explain that the teaching of it will involve spotting by yourself and peers.
* Be explicit about where you will be touching, for example, around the waist or hips.
* Be explicit about the fact that if students need “catching” for safety reasons, you may have to touch them in a way that would normally be inappropriate, to ensure their safety.
* Give the students verbal instructions at first. If they have difficulty, ask them if they would like you to show them how to do it. If they say no, listen to them and don’t do it. It is their choice.
* Minimise the need for touching. Ask yourself if touching is necessary.

### Clarifying in-school and after-school management of students

You are required to be with students out of the classroom, in change rooms and at after-school commitments. There are some basic rules to follow which could be included in your faculty guidelines. Common sense about student management will always be the most important guiding principle.

#### Travelling

* Always get parents’ written permission to drive students anywhere.
* When you seek approval, inform parents in writing about how you are travelling and who will be with you.
* Never drive an individual student home. Help the student to find an alternative way of getting there.

#### Coaching after hours

* Inform parents and keep to the exact times stated.
* If parents are late picking up students, get on with your own packing up, but with the student still in your sight while you work.
* Ask a parent to help you with the coaching as support.
* Avoid working in the storeroom with an individual student.
* Avoid staying in your staff room with an individual student.

#### Supervision of change rooms

* Develop and give explicit rules about behaviour in the change room.
* Set a routine for going into change rooms and keep to it.
* Let students know when you are coming in to give them the opportunity to cover up if they want to.
* Don’t stand in change rooms. Students have a right to their privacy.
* You still do have a duty of care, which means you must supervise change rooms and not ignore them. Work out explicit instructions and keep to your own rules.

#### Supervision of change rooms by male teachers

While the issue of a teacher of either sex supervising the change rooms of both sexes poses some difficulties, there are particular community sensitivities about male teachers supervising female students in change rooms. Some suggestions for dealing with this situation include:

* Give explicit rules about what is expected of students’ behaviour in the change rooms.
* Make sure that students know that if there is an emergency you will need to enter the change room.
* Choose two student representatives to report to you about any problems in the change rooms.
* Call all the girls out if there is any disturbance.
* If they won’t come, seek a female teacher to go into the change room.
* If there is an emergency, let them know you are coming in and give a warning to cover up before going in.

## Summary

Discuss and decide as a faculty on the parameters to help you in determining whether or not to touch a student when teaching PDHPE.

The Department expects you to teach in the professional manner that has always characterised good PDHPE teaching.

Ask first before touching students.

Students have the right to refuse to be touched, but do not have the right to opt out of an activity.

Set explicit rules about behaviour in change rooms.

There will be little need in professional relationships between students and staff for physical touching. A good question to ask in deciding whether the touch is appropriate is: “Is it serving the needs of the student?”

Appropriate touch can enrich human interaction. Inappropriate touch can destroy it.

Your good practice guidelines can lead to informed decisions that protect everybody’s rights. With this approach you will have support from the Department.

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