



Maintaining appropriate boundaries

Working with children can be enjoyable, rewarding, challenging, frustrating and entertaining - as it should be. It also needs to occur in a positive, respectful and safe environment where children aren't put at risk and adults are protected from accusations of abuse.

As an adult, it is your responsibility to establish and maintain clear professional boundaries with children and young people in sport.

Step 1: Establishing boundaries

a) Communication

- Be aware of what you say and how it might be interpreted.
- Tell children and their parents about your coaching style and explain if/when you're likely to touch children.
- Use age appropriate language in the presence of children.
- Always give feedback that relates to the child's performance, not their personality or appearance.

b) Physical contact boundaries

- Only touch children if:
 - the contact is relevant to the skill being developed
 - you've asked their permission to do so.
- Minimise contact as much as possible (i.e. don't press against a child or have your whole body against a player; be aware of which parts of your body are in contact with the player).
- Don't have intimate relationships with people under the age of 18.

c) Location boundaries

- Make sure you're never alone with a child (e.g. in a car, changing room etc.).
- Avoid entering change rooms. If you have to do so, always knock and announce that you're coming in. Try and have another adult with you.

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- Don't invite children to your home or encourage them to visit.

You can reinforce your ability to create a safe, positive environment by:

- complying with your club's policies and procedures for dealing with children;
- complying with your state or territory's child protection legislation;
- keeping your coaching skills up to date;
- seeking advice if you're ever in doubt about a situation or you're concerned about a player's behaviour; and
- showing leadership and addressing instances of inappropriate behaviour when they occur: e.g.,
 - stopping team bonding activities that involve abuse, humiliation or risk taking;
 - prohibiting hurtful or sexually provocative games;
 - forbidding bullying, ridiculing, scapegoating etc.

Step 2: Maintaining and managing boundaries

Boundaries aren't always easy to maintain, particularly if there's only a few years difference between you and the young people you're coaching. Yet a very real power imbalance exists that can't be overlooked. You're in a position of authority. You have more experience. And you're older than the children/young people in your care. And, because they are in your care, you need to make sure you don't overstep professional boundaries.

The following questions will help you decide if you're maintaining those boundaries:

- a) Am I treating all children/young people in a similar manner or do I act differently towards one particular child?
- b) Do I talk, dress or act differently when I'm with a particular child?
- c) Would I behave this way if other adults were present?
- d) Would I feel comfortable if I observed this behaviour in another adult?
- e) Could my actions have negative consequences?
- f) If I were a parent, would I want an adult behaving this way towards my own children?

Occasionally a child or young person may attempt to initiate an inappropriate relationship with you (e.g., by asking you out, sending you flirtatious messages, behaving provocatively). If this happens, there are a number of options available that you may consider taking including:

- a) contacting your child protection authority or an appropriate agency for advice;
- b) advising a relevant club/association administrator about the problem and requesting that they speak to the child's parents/guardians; or
- c) transferring the young person to another team/coach.

If children want to touch you – by holding hands, hugging you, wanting cuddles etc – you need to gently dissuade them from doing so.

One on one coaching

If you need to conduct one-on-one coaching, make sure it's with the parents' knowledge and consent and preferably that it occurs in a public and visible location.

Coaching children with special needs

If you're coaching a child with special needs you may need to have more frequent physical contact with them. Talk to the child and their parents about how you can meet your duty of care obligations in a safe, supportive manner.

Basically, however, you still need to adhere to the boundaries outlined above e.g., don't touch the child more than is necessary; when you do so make sure it's in a public place and that there are other people around who can see you etc.

For more information on coaching children with special needs visit www.ausport.gov.au/dsu/index.asp

Cultural considerations

Different cultures have different attitudes and traditions around touch – being aware of those traditions will help you avoid causing embarrassment and offence. If you know that a child's family have escaped traumatic circumstances, you'll need to use diplomacy, tact and care in your relationship with the child.