

# MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES POLICY



LAUNCESTON  
CHRISTIAN  
SCHOOL

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## **Introduction**

LCS staff hold a unique position of influence, authority, trust, and power concerning students at the School. As such, it is their duty, at all times, to maintain professional boundaries with children and young people.

LCS is committed to providing safe environments where all of our children and young people are respected and treated with dignity in an appropriate professional and caring manner where the risk of child abuse or grooming is minimised, and a safe and supportive child safe environment is maintained.

The following policy and guidelines are designed to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and some strategies to minimise the risk of boundary violations.

The practice of protective behaviours at all times will also reduce the possibility of vexatious claims being brought against staff.

## **Scope**

This policy applies to all teaching staff, non-teaching staff, LCS Board members, Volunteers, Third Party Contractors, and External Education Providers, together, known as "staff" for this policy only.

## **Policy**

It is our policy that:

- staff exercise their responsibilities in a way that recognises professional boundaries concerning their relationships with children and young people at all times;
- staff identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a child or young person;
- staff interaction with children and young people is professional at all times, including inside and outside of school hours;
- conflict of interest issues must be reported to the Principal as soon as practicable;
- equal learning opportunities are given to each child and young person without discrimination; and
- appropriate consequences will be applied to staff who breach professional boundaries.

## **Professional Boundaries**

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a child or young person) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a staff member), in circumstances where a power imbalance exists.

The fact that School staff are in a unique position of trust, care, authority, and influence with students means that there is always an inherent power imbalance that exists between them. It also means that professional boundaries must be established, maintained, and respected at all times.

In most cases this power imbalance is clear, however, sometimes it may be more difficult to recognise especially for younger staff members who may only be a few years older than the children and young people under their care.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive, and given that sometimes “grey areas” may occur, it is expected that all staff (no matter their age or experience) use their good judgment, think very carefully about the implications and potential consequences of engaging in certain behaviours with children and young people, and always err on the side of caution.

When unsure about whether professional boundaries are being, or have been, breached, ask yourself:

- Would I modify my behaviour if a colleague was present?
- How would I feel about explaining my actions at a staff meeting?
- Am I sharing information for the child or young person's benefit, or my benefit?
- Am I dealing with this student differently from others in similar circumstances?
- Is my language or demeanour different from normal when dealing with this particular child or young person?

### **Intimate Relationships**

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any child or young person that is or can be misinterpreted as having a romantic or sexual, rather than professional basis. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual, or condoned by parents/guardians.

Such relationships have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of children and young people and colleagues and may carry a serious reputational risk for the staff member and, in turn, the School.

The professional relationship of staff and children and young people may be breached by:

- flirtatious behaviour or dating;
- development of an intimate personal relationship;
- sexual relations;
- the use of sexual innuendo, inappropriate language, and/or material with children and young people;
- unwarranted and/or inappropriate touching;
- unwarranted and/or inappropriate filming or photography;
- deliberate exposure to sexual behaviour of others (e.g. pornography);
- having intimate contact without a valid context via written or electronic means (e.g. email, letters, telephone, text messages, social media sites, or chatrooms);
- going out, whether alone or in company, to social events such as the movies or dinner; and
- exchanging gifts of a personal nature that encourages the formation of an intimate relationship.

Staff should also be aware that developing or encouraging romantic or sexual relationships with recent former students (over 18 years of age) may violate professional boundaries and are strongly discouraged from doing so. It is the School's strong recommendation that staff are not to add former students on social media or accept requests from students on social media, for at least two years after the student has graduated Year 12 or equivalent.

The imbalance of power and authority that exists in the staff/child or young person relationship does not suddenly disappear after the child or young person finishes their schooling. Staff should not assume that they will be protected from disciplinary action by claiming that a relationship began only after the child or young person left the School as there may be a reasonable belief that the emotional intimacy of the relationship developed while the staff/child or young person relationship existed.

### **Personal Relationships**

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any child or young person that is, or can be, perceived or misinterpreted as having a personal rather than professional element. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual, or condoned by parents or guardians.

It is the child or young person's perception of staff behaviour and not the intention of the staff member that is important.

An established and expected professional relationship between staff and children and young people may be compromised by a staff member:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised School events (without parental/guardian permission);
- sharing personal details about their private lives with children and young people; or
- meeting with children and young people outside of school hours without permission from the School.

Staff must recognise at all times that their role is not to be a “friend” or “parent” to a child or young person.

### **Fair Learning Opportunities**

The main focus of teaching is effective student learning and as such, teachers are expected to support children and young people with their professional expertise to offer them the best education in their individual circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning between teachers and children and young people characterises their relationship.

Teachers should demonstrate their commitment to student learning by:

- maintaining a safe and challenging learning environment that promotes mutual respect;
- recognising and developing each child and young person’s abilities, skills, and talents by catering to their individual abilities and respecting their individual differences;
- encouraging children and young people to develop and reflect on their values;
- interacting with children and young people without bias;
- not engaging in preferential treatment;
- not to discriminate against any child or young person based on race, sex, sexuality, disability, or religious or political conviction; and
- always making decisions in children and young people’s best interests.

### **Electronic Communications between Staff and Children/Young People**

All staff at the School must adhere to the following guidelines:

- all use of technology should be for educational purposes or school-approved co-curricular activities;
- all email communication between staff and children and young people should be via the School email system and reflect a professional staff/student relationship;

- staff should not communicate with children and young people via text message where it is not in a professional context;
- staff should not give out their private telephone numbers or social media contact details;
- staff are not to accept or request students as 'friends' on social media or otherwise use social media to communicate in any way that is not condoned or approved by the School;
- staff should not exchange personal pictures with a child or young person;
- teachers are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents/guardians or children and young people on holidays, weekends, or in the evening; and
- any child or young person personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the School should only be used for School communications.

### **Physical Contact with Children and Young People**

All staff should be aware that situations may arise that can be perceived in a manner that was not intended. For this reason, all staff at the School should adhere to the following guidelines for contact with children and young people both in and outside of School grounds:

- staff should avoid unnecessary physical contact with children and young people;
- minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous physical contact in the context of the situation is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory handshake); and
- contact for sport, drama, and dance instruction is acceptable in a class situation but not in a 1:1 situation. If physical contact is required for specific technical instructions, it must be brief and only with the consent of the child or young person and carried out in the presence of others. Such contact must be outlined in a teaching program. Note that a child or young person may withdraw consent for this contact either verbally or gesturally and staff must remain vigilant whilst engaging in necessary contact situations. Once consent has been withdrawn no further contact can be or should be made.

### **Off-Campus Excursions and Camps**

During off-campus excursions or camps, the same physical contact guidelines apply as well as the following:

- checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of children and young people changing should be done, where possible, with another staff member present and always in a manner that respects children and young people's privacy and personal space;
- always knock and advise of presence before entering a bedroom or dormitory; and
- ensure that while in a bedroom or dormitory a strict staff/student relationship is upheld and that inappropriate behaviour, such as sitting on a child or young person's bed, is not undertaken.

### **Managing Conflicts of Interest**

Where personal relationships with students such as family relationships and close friendship networks exist, questions of conflicts of interest may arise.

This may be more prevalent in close or rural communities where professional boundaries may be tested due to the nature and size of the community. In these circumstances, staff need to be far more diligent in developing and maintaining these boundaries.

Where a staff member feels that a conflict of interest may exist, they should notify the Principal, or the Chair of the LCS Board if the conflict involves the Principal, and arrangements should be implemented to avoid the conflict situation if possible. For example, the teaching of children and young people by a staff member with a conflict should be avoided.

Any significant decisions relating to these children and young people in the School (such as the appointment of classes or selection in sports teams) should be referred to another staff member and endorsed by a supervisor.

### **Disclosure of Staff/Children and Young People Interactions**

It is LCS's policy that all staff are encouraged to declare any interactions with children and young people outside school hours. These interactions may include instances where the staff member is:

- related to the child or young person;
- friends with the child or young person's parents or family; or
- given parental consent to interact with the child or young person for academic purposes outside of school hours and has notified the School.

LCS maintains records of all declarations made by staff members related to their interactions with children and young people, or relationships with children and young people, that exist outside of school hours or School premises.

These records are kept for seven years.

### **Staff Responsibilities**

All staff are to:

- follow the guidelines as set out in this policy;
- immediately report any conflicts of interest; and
- remove themselves from decision-making where a conflict has been identified.

Where a staff member breaches this policy LCS may take disciplinary action, including in the case of serious breaches, summary dismissal.

### **Implementation**

These guidelines are implemented through a combination of:

- staff training and development in professional conduct;
- child and young person and parent/guardian education and information;
- effective management of teachers engaging in inappropriate relationships with children and young people;
- effective management of conflicts of interest;
- effective communication and incident notification procedures;
- effective record-keeping procedures; and
- initiation of corrective actions where necessary.

### **Related Policies**

Child Safe Organisation Policy

Child and Young Person Safety Code of Conduct