**Student: friend or foe**

## Advice about maintaining professional relationships with secondary students

This article encourages PDHPE teachers to use professional distance and common-sense approaches in their management of good relationships with their students.

## Code of conduct

Teachers must be aware that their own conduct at all times, must be keeping with that specified in the [Department’s Code of Conduct](https://policies.education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/code-of-conduct-policy) and of their role and responsibilities pursuant to it.

Resilience research confirms that the presence of a caring adult in aspects of their lives is important in assisting students to overcome adversity and achieve at school.

Effective teaching in PDHPE relies on positive relationships that are developed in a professional manner. The teacher is, by the nature of their role, in a position of trust, authority and influence.

They can have a significant impact upon students’ educational progress, social and emotional wellbeing and behaviour and have the responsibility and authority to manage interactions and situations. Relationships need to be carefully managed for the safety of all involved.

Effective teaching and learning is supported by establishing a trusting relationship between student and teacher that:

* focuses on the needs of the student
* models and fosters caring and supportive relationships to increase self-confidence, awareness and management of behaviour and positive attitudes towards assisting others.

Clear guidelines are provided to ensure appropriate relationships with clear expectations of the student and teacher.

## How can you establish trust?

The answer lies in being professional and predictable. As the teacher you are in a position of trust. You are an adult who has the authority and experience to manage the learning situation for students who have much less power in the situation than you do. Even where a student has life experiences beyond yours, in the student-teacher relationship the power for managing the relationship rests with you.

It is important to establish trust in a professional way which ensures that students feel safe. Aim to be:

* predictable
* consultative
* affirming
* respectful
* non-exploitive.

Teachers should always be able to answer honestly that their actions are in the best interests of the student and that they are exercising a duty of care. Professional distance is a useful concept in defining appropriate professional relationships.

## What is professional distance?

Professional distance is an attitude as well as an action. As a teacher, you need to be aware that you have a significant impact upon students’ educational progress, social and emotional welfare, and behaviour.

Students observe what you do and are influenced by your actions.

## Actions that contribute to maintaining appropriate professional distance

* Approach students in a friendly, open way, but avoid being too familiar. Don’t physically invade their personal space, and don’t invade their emotional space. Avoid inviting yourself into discussions about their families, friends or feelings.
* Set the limits of the relationship. You are the teacher, not a best friend.
* Structure the location and times at which you are available to students. For example, there should be rules about student access to the staffroom.
* Avoid using “street” language (but know what the words mean).
* Dress appropriately. Be guided by other staff in your school community.
* Be clear about parameters for touching students. Ask yourself, “Is this touch necessary to meet the needs of the student?”
* Avoid being alone with a student. If this is unavoidable, make sure you can be seen by others.
* Discipline fairly and consistently. Don’t play favourites.
* Remember that professional distance and consistency are important to the maintenance of objectivity.

## How can some student-teacher interactions be misinterpreted?

Even the most professional teachers may find their actions misinterpreted from time to time. This is because we all respond to situations based on our own experiences, and no matter how clear or predictable we may try to be, we cannot anticipate every student’s experiences and reactions in a particular situation. Developing a relationship of trust, as outlined above, will reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation.

Interactions can be misinterpreted where a student is “surprised” by a teacher’s actions. Students may well respond with an accusation of teacher misbehaviour, or with a physical response such as pushing or hitting, particularly if the teacher touches or handles a student without forewarning or permission. Always explain to students what you are going to do, especially if they are angry or upset.

Sometimes interest in a student’s personal problems can be misinterpreted as being intrusive or abusive if it occurs without clear permission and appropriate boundaries. Teachers will need to gain “permission” to ask why a student is upset or distracted, and need to be aware of how this attention, even where permission has been given, may appear to other students. For example, you might say: “I can see that you are upset. Is there anything that you want to tell me about that I could perhaps help you with?”

When actions are misinterpreted it is very important to quickly and clearly correct the misinterpretation. Avoid responding with anger against the student. Clarify the misinterpretation.

Ask the student what he or she thought was meant by the action or words. An explanation will usually be helpful. An apology may be appropriate. What can you do if a student develops a crush on you?

Given the nature of the teaching relationship and the developmental stages of students, it is quite likely that some students will develop a “crush” on a teacher. When this occurs, professional distance becomes extremely important in ensuring that the welfare of the student is safeguarded, whilst at the same time the welfare and effectiveness of the teacher are not compromised.

As well as ensuring that professional distance is maintained, the following actions should be taken.

* Recognise when it is happening. “Crushes” are a common phenomenon in adolescent development and are a reflection of your role as a teacher. De-personalise the situation. Remember that students of either sex may develop a crush on you.
* Let your supervisor or colleagues know and seek support for managing the situation.
* Be scrupulously even-handed in your dealings with the student.
* Avoid unwittingly encouraging the crush. Be particularly careful about being alone with the student or discussing personal issues. The student with a crush will often misinterpret the teacher’s actions as being an indication that the teacher also has feelings for the student.
* Maintain the dignity of the student. Do not ridicule or publicly humiliate him or her.
* Do not provide your personal address, phone numbers or family details to the student.
* Be prepared for rumours about yourself and the student. Plan ways to handle rumours with your supervisor or colleagues.
* Arrange support for the student. Students can become very upset when cherished beliefs about teachers are not reciprocated.
* Allow time. The crush will pass. Once it has passed, do not refer to it again or hold it against the student.

## What happens if you know students in your social life outside school?

In many communities, the relationship between teacher and student does not cease at the school gate. A student is always a student, regardless of the situation in which contact with a teacher takes place.

Some practical hints

* Clarify the nature of the out-of-school relationship with the student, and don’t be afraid to adopt a different role at school. Set limits which are expected in each situation, and which are in the student’s best interests. Enlist the student’s support in helping you to maintain the professional relationship.
* The relationship you have with the student will be different from that which you have with other students. However, don’t allow that relationship to lead to a perception by the other students that you treat that person in a special way (either positively or negatively) in the school environment.
* Be aware of the possibility that the student may expect special consideration at school and ensure that you do not encourage this expectation.
* Decide what you will be called in each environment and stick to it.
* Avoid referring to outside activities when talking with other students. Remember that students may not want it known in school that they know you outside.
* Avoid discussing other teachers or students with the student. Do not discuss the outcomes of tests, assignments or other school activities.

## Conclusion

Child protection policies aim to ensure that students learn in an environment in which their personal safety is guaranteed and where they are protected socially, emotionally and physically. All students should feel that they can rely on the teacher to provide them and their peers with respect and care. They also want to know that teachers will challenge behaviour from others that is not respectful of them.

You need to use common sense in your relationship with students. If you detect problems, no matter how embarrassing, address them quickly. The development of a caring and trusting relationship with students is the most beneficial contribution that you can make to their development. By taking a few simple steps you can have a great relationship with students and facilitate learning within PDHPE, without compromising their care and protection and without exposing yourself to risk.

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