

Staff and Students Professional Boundaries Policy

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Policy and the associated guidelines are to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and to suggest strategies to minimise risk.

SCOPE

This Policy and associated guidelines apply to all staff, volunteers, and contractors in the school environment, whether or not they work in direct contact with children or young people. These guidelines also apply to School Board members where indicated.

POLICY

Firbank Grammar is committed to providing a safe physical, virtual and emotional environment where all students are respected and treated with dignity in an appropriate professional and caring manner where the risk of child abuse is minimised, and a safe and supportive child safe environment is maintained.

It is our policy that

- Staff exercise their responsibilities in a way that recognises professional boundaries with regard to their relationships with students at all times.
- Staff identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student.
- Staff interaction with students 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 student without discrimination.
- appropriate consequences will be applied to Staff who breach professional boundaries. The School may take disciplinary action including, in the case of serious breaches, summary dismissal.

Staff responsibilities

All Staff must:

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

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Disclosure of staff/student interactions

It is Firbank Grammar's policy that all Staff are encouraged to declare any interactions with students outside school hours. These interactions may include instances where the Staff Member is:

- related to the student
- friends with the student's parents or family
- a parent or carer of children who are friends with students at the school
- given parental consent to interact with the student for academic purposes outside of school hours and has notified the School.
- Belong to the same club/association as a student.

Firbank Grammar collects and retains records of all declarations made by Staff related to their interactions with students, or relationships with students, that exist outside of school hours or School premises.

IMPLEMENTATION

This policy and associated guidelines are implemented through a combination of:

- Staff training and development in professional conduct
- student and parent/carer education and information
- effective management of teachers engaging in inappropriate relationships with students
- effective management of conflicts of interest
- effective communication and incident notification procedures
- effective record keeping procedures
- initiation of corrective actions where necessary.

RELATED POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

- Child Safe and Wellbeing Policy
- Child Safe Code of Conduct
- Student Duty of Care Policy
- Excursion Management Policy

Appendix – Staff and Student Professional Boundary Guidelines

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COMPLAINTS AND ENQUIRIES

*The school community may provide feedback on this document by emailing:
helpdesk@firbank.vic.edu.au*

Approval and Review	Details
Approval Authority	School Board
Date reviewed	December 2020
Next Review Date	January 2025

Appendix – Staff and Student Professional Boundary Guidelines

What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a student) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a Staff Member), in circumstances where a power imbalance exists.

The fact that 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 who may only be a few years older than their students.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive and it is expected that all Staff (no matter their age or experience) use their own good judgment, think very carefully about the implications and potential consequences of engaging in certain behaviours with students, 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 student's benefit, or for 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 student?

Intimate Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student 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/carers.

Such relationships have a negative impact on the wellbeing and learning of students and colleagues, and may carry a serious reputational risk for the Staff Member and, in turn, the School.

The professional relationship of Staff and students 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 students
- unwarranted and inappropriate touching
- unwarranted and 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
- 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, for a minimum of 2 years after the student has graduated from Firbank Grammar School.

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

Personal Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student 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 carers.

It is the student'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 students may be compromised by Staff:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised School events (without parental/carer permission)
- sharing personal details about their private lives with students
- meeting with students 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 student.

Fair Learning Opportunities

The main focus of teaching is effective student learning and as such, teachers are expected to support their students with their professional expertise so as to offer them the best education in their individual circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning between teachers and students 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 student’s abilities, skills and talents by catering to their individual abilities and respecting their individual differences
- encouraging students to develop and reflect on their own values.
- interacting with students without bias
- not engaging in preferential treatment
- not discriminating against any student on the basis of race, sex, sexuality, disability or religious or political conviction
- always making decisions in students’ best interests.

Electronic Communications between staff and students

It is expected that all Staff at the School will adhere to the following guidelines:

- all use of technology should be for educational purposes or for the organisation of co-curricular activities.

- all email communication between Staff and students should be via the School email system and reflect a professional Staff/student relationship
- Staff should not communicate with students via text message where it is not in a professional context.
- Staff should not give out their personal telephone numbers or social media contact details, unless under special approved circumstances. All instances of this must be approved by the HoC, and records of this approval are retained.
- 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 student.
- Teachers are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents/carers or students on holidays, weekends or in the evening.
- Any student personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the School should only be used for School communications.

Physical contact with students

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 students both in and outside of School grounds:

- Staff should avoid unnecessary physical contact with students
- Minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous physical contact in the context of the situation is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory pat on the back or handshake)
- 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 student. Note that a student 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:

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- Checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of students changing should be done, where possible, with another Staff Member present and always in a manner that respects students' privacy and personal space
- Always knock and advise of presence prior to entering a bedroom or dormitory and leave the door open
- Ensure that while in a bedroom or dormitory a strict Staff/student relationship is upheld and that inappropriate behaviour, such as sitting on a student's bed, is not undertaken.

Boarding House

Staff in the Boarding House must take particular note of the following:

- Staff to not be alone in room with a door closed with a student at any time, inclusive of boarding house assistants on duty in the boarding house after hours, between 5pm and 7am and on weekends and public holidays.
- Staff must not allow students to enter into the staff quarters or staff bathrooms at any time

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 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 Board if the conflict involves the Principal, and arrangements should be implemented to avoid the conflict situation if possible. For example, the teaching of students by a Staff Member with a conflict should be avoided.

Any significant decisions relating to these students 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.

