



Boundary Training: Promoting Healthy Adult-Student Relationships

United Educators' member K-12 schools often ask, "What are the proper boundaries for our staff's interactions with students?" Many types of behavior raise questions. For example, a:

- Popular teacher invites students to link personal social media accounts containing photos and details about hobbies, interests, and friends to the teacher's account
- Volunteer coach encourages students to buy athletic gear from a company the coach owns and operates
- Guidance counselor accompanies a student to spiritual awakening groups after school without informing the student's parents

These activities may or may not violate school rules or laws and may be intended for the student's benefit. But a personal boundary may have been crossed in each instance, depending on the roles and responsibilities of the adult employee or volunteer.

Boundary training helps school staff provide underage students with education, supervision, and guidance. It is designed to promote healthy relationships and prevent sexual and other types of misconduct, such as bullying, hazing, harassment, conflicts of interest, and financial impropriety.

Drawn from the field of psychology, boundaries may be described as the personal limits people set to determine the appropriateness of their own and others' behavior in any given situation. Although an encroachment may not violate any laws, it may be a risk factor for an unhealthy relationship. Boundary training is increasingly popular for adult school employees and volunteers at public and independent K-12 schools.

What Is Boundary Training?

Boundary training helps school staff provide underage students with education, supervision, and guidance. It is designed to promote healthy relationships and prevent sexual and other types of misconduct, such as bullying, hazing, harassment, conflicts of interest, and financial impropriety. The goal is to instill values and keep staff behavior healthy and appropriate to their functional roles at the school. Minor transgressions are referred to as boundary "crossings," while major transgressions are "violations."

Risk Factors for Unhealthy Relationships

An important part of boundary training is sensitizing staff to what constitutes unhealthy relationships with students and how they arise.

Adults who engage in misconduct with students may be poorly trained, physically or emotionally impaired (for example, through substance abuse, mental disorder, or unresolved emotional issues or abuse), or involved in a life crisis such as marital problems or professional issues.

Students who are victimized may lack a close relationship with parents or friends and have a history of being abused or neglected. They can exhibit low self-esteem and seek inordinate amounts of approval from adults or peers. These vulnerable students typically are unaware of the legal and ethical standards for transgressions and don't know where to turn for advice and support.

David Wolowitz, a New Hampshire attorney who specializes in representing independent schools, has written and facilitated training on this subject. He has identified four risk factors for unhealthy staff-student relationships:

- 1. Power imbalance.** When the power or influence level of two people differs, the person with greater power or influence is more likely to violate the boundaries of the subordinate person. Factors that affect the relative power of staff and students include their ages, experience, cultural background, and emotional maturity. Typically, staff members hold superior positions over students, however, a student leader, popular athlete, or child of parents who financially support the school may be in the superior position.
- 2. Poor boundary setting.** Staff members may have developed poor boundary skills in childhood or in response to a current life problem or crisis. Their inappropriate behavior may be physical, verbal, or financial in nature and it may arise at school or in an extracurricular, social, or other context.
- 3. Role confusion.** Staff members engage in various roles with students—such as teacher, advisor, counselor, or coach. These roles may shift or blend over time. The person in the superior power position has the primary responsibility to maintain an awareness of his or her role. The boundaries appropriate to that role should be maintained regardless of the wishes of the student or other person in the inferior power position.
- 4. Accountability.** Staff often may engage in private or one-on-one interactions with students in such places as residence hall rooms, classrooms, automobiles, and health or counseling centers. The isolation is often unavoidable and may encourage students to treat the adult as a surrogate parent or close friend and disclose personal and sensitive information relating to, for example, their families or dating relationships. Staff members need to be aware of the potential problems of isolation and the appearance of impropriety.

Establishing Healthy Boundaries

Once staff members recognize how unhealthy relationships arise, they need guidance on setting and maintaining safe boundaries with students. Guidelines developed by Wolowitz; Jane Bluestein, an author and speaker who specializes in boundary training; and other experts include the following:

- ***Establish boundary limits and parameters early in relationships.*** Staff members are encouraged to stay within their assigned roles, whether it be teacher, coach, counselor, advisor, or house parent.
- ***Maintain personal awareness.*** Staff members should be alert to their own behavior and how personal stresses (i.e., health, family, employment) may affect their interactions with students. Consider the impact of one's behavior on students, parents, colleagues, and others. If a boundary is crossed, examine the motive. Discontinue or correct the behavior. When a student acts inappropriately, discuss the situation so that the student understands how to conduct himself or herself properly.
- ***Avoid risky behavior.*** Staff members should be careful to avoid putting themselves in ambiguous or compromising situations with students. Physical contact should be limited and appropriate to the adult's role at the school. Minimize the sharing of personal information. Avoid secrets, unless the student's disclosure is made confidentially with a counselor or clergy member. Staff should not consume alcohol while on duty or in the presence of underage students.
- ***Use appropriate settings.*** Schedule meetings with students at regular times and when other staff members are present. Where appropriate, one-on-one meetings with a student should be conducted in rooms with an open door or unobstructed window views. School rules must be followed when transporting students in a staff member's personal vehicle. Avoid entering the bedrooms or bathrooms of students while on school trips and at other times, unless necessary for health or other reasons. Minimize contact with students away from the school except on school-sponsored functions.
- ***Motivate students and build self-esteem.*** Modeling appropriate boundaries concepts can build students' self-esteem and reduce their vulnerability to misconduct with adults or peers. Rather than relying on a list of do's and don'ts, offer the student choices within reasonable limits to encourage cooperation. Communicate positively by making promises for achievement rather than threats for failure. Respond to a student's problems or emotions with acceptance and support.
- ***Document and communicate.*** Staff members and schools should maintain documentation of any interaction with students that might be interpreted as a boundary violation. Discuss the situation with the parents and other staff, as appropriate. Ensure that students understand whether communications will be kept confidential. Discuss the circumstances in which confidentiality will not be protected, such as imminent risk of harm to the student or another person.





Schools Should Be Emotionally Safe

Healthy relationships between school staff and students help students learn and grow in an emotionally safe environment. Boundary training encourages staff to understand their roles and appropriate behavior with students. Schools should consider implementing boundary training for all adult employees and volunteers who have frequent contact with students.

Training Staff at Your School

The goals of boundary training are for staff to understand what constitutes both healthy and unhealthy relationships and how to set boundaries with students in a positive learning environment.

An outside consultant or school employees, such as counselors or administrators, may facilitate the training. An effective way to introduce the material is to encourage the staff to talk about their various roles with students. The concept of boundaries can then be described, followed by large or small group discussions of how staff may falter when they attempt to advise, discipline, or get closer to students.

Real-life situations can be modified for confidentiality purposes and used as case studies to illustrate varying degrees of proper or improper conduct.

Topic areas for adult staff training may include the following:

- **Physical contact.** Discuss what is educationally appropriate versus inappropriate touching. What is the school's policy on giving and receiving hugs and other physical affection? When does a staff member stand so close that he or she invades a student's personal space? Are there different physical contact policies for staff members in varied roles, such as athletic coaches, music teachers, or history teachers?
- **Verbal and electronic communications.** Boundary issues often arise when staff engage in informal talk and electronic messages (for example, email or instant text messages) with students. Should staff ever use slang or vulgar language with students? Gossip about other students or staff? Give students a home or cell phone number or a personal email address? Should staff disclose or respond to questions involving their dating history, relationships, or sexual orientation?
- **Giving praise.** Staff should be careful of their language when offering praise to students individually or in front of their peers. How should teachers compliment students without becoming too personal? Can a teacher commend a student for his or her physical attributes?
- **Off-site school activities.** Trips and outings away from school also raise issues. When should a staff member transport students in his or her personal car? Who enforces curfew? How should staff intervene if students tell stories and jokes of a sexual nature or that are otherwise denigrating to other students?
- **Attire.** Discuss how staff set an example in their own choice of clothing and accessories as well as their obligation to enforce the dress code with students. When is clothing too revealing or sexual? When does the clothing promote negative influences, such as drugs, sex, violence, and death? To what extent may clothing reflect membership in an unhealthy culture, such as gangs?



- ***Loans and gifts.*** When is it appropriate for staff to give or receive gifts to students or their family members? Should a staff member pay for a student's meals? Is it ever proper to make or receive a loan from a student or her family?
- ***Conflicts of interest.*** Issues arise when staff involves students in business and other ventures separate from the school. Should a teacher ever give a course assignment which may benefit the teacher personally? When is it appropriate to hire students in a staff member's personal business? May a teacher accept babysitting, house sitting, and other jobs from students' families?
- ***Application of school rules.*** Teachers, coaches, counselors, and other staff are in a position to apply school rules to benefit particular students. How can staff do so fairly and without favoritism? When is it appropriate to write passes to excuse late arrivals or absences from class or other activities?
- ***Social, political, and religious activities.*** Social and other involvements away from school carry risks. How should staff interact with students at activities and events not connected with the school? Should staff invite students to their homes? What types of relationships may staff maintain with students' families?



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