



Two Rivers Federation

Policy and Guidance on Safe Touch

Agreed by Governors: March 2023
Review: March 2026

Children learn who they are and how the world is in relationships. The quality of the child's relationships with significant adults is key to their healthy development and emotional health and wellbeing.

Context

Our policy on Touch has been developed in the context of the LEA Protection Procedures and Policies. It takes into account the extensive neurobiological research and other empirical studies relating to attachment theory and child development that identify safe touch as a positive contribution to brain development, emotional regulation, mental health and the development of pro-social skills.

To whom does it apply?

It applies to all staff and children working within the THRIVE programme and other school and pre-school contexts.

All staff share training in the use of safe touch as part of the THRIVE approach. The day-to day practice is delivered and monitored by the HLTA (Mrs Debbie Passmore) who receives regular supervision from a lead advisor. This is overseen by the Executive Head Teacher/SENDCo.

Why have a policy on touch?

In order to protect children and school staff from allegations under Child Protection procedures most schools and LEAs have adopted 'No Touch' policies. However this school is adopting an informed, evidence-based decision to allow safe touch in special cases as a developmentally appropriate intervention that will aid healthy growth and learning.

The developmentally appropriate (and therapeutic) use of safe touch is defined by situations in which abstinence would actually be inhumane, unkind and potentially psychologically, or neurobiological, damaging. Abstinence in the face of intense grief, stress and/or rage reactions can lead to a state of hyper-arousal, in which toxic levels of stress chemicals are released in the body and brain. The severely damaging long-term effects of this state have been intensively researched worldwide and are well documented. Moreover, gentle safe- holding is appropriate if a child:

Is hurting himself/herself or others,(or is likely to hurt himself/herself and/or others) or is damaging property, and/or is incensed and out of control, so that all verbal attempts to engage him/her have failed.

Such necessary interventions are fully in line with guidelines set out in the Government Document, 'New Guidance on the Use of Reasonable Force in School.' (DfE 1998).

School Policy on the use of force and restraint:

The school refers to these guidelines but in particular staff must note the following points on the use of force or restraint:

- The use of force or restraint must only occur when a child is placing themselves or others in danger and must be in an extreme circumstance
- Staff have received PIPS training (Passive Intervention and Prevention Strategies)
- 'Grabbing' clothes is also considered as handling
- Further support from another member of staff must be sought if at all possible
- Ensure where possible that a difficult situation is pre-empted and that further staff support is sought in good time
- Always use positive praise and recognition of the correct behaviour as a method for behaviour management
- In the event of a 'safe hold' a report form is completed and signed by the EHT.

Appropriate and inappropriate touch

We are highly aware of the current atmosphere where due to fears of abuse, touch as a natural and important form of human connection has been almost vetoed in some school contexts.

Our policy rests on the belief that every member of staff needs to appreciate the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch.

Hence all staff have to demonstrate a clear understanding of the difference. They have to show themselves to be highly aware of both the damaging and unnecessary uses of touch in an educational context. Touch is not to be used as an ill-thought out or impulsive act of futile reassurance/gratification or as a block to referral for psychological assessment.

Equally, when a child is in deep distress, the staff team need to know when and how sufficient connection and psychological holding have been or can be provided/established without touching.

Safe Touch Research

Research shows clearly that healthy pro-social brain development requires access to safe touch as one of the means of calming, soothing and containing distress for a frightened, sad or angry child. It is essential for all children to learn the difference between safe and unsafe touch and to experience having their strongest emotions contained, validated, accepted and soothed by a significant adult.

If children are behaving in unacceptable, threatening, dangerous, aggressive or out of control ways, they have not yet learned how their strongest emotional reactions can be contained, channeled and communicated safely. Safe touch used to calm, soothe and regulate a child's emotions is a needed developmental experience. The brain does not develop self-soothing neuronal pathways unless and until this safe emotional regulation has been experienced. Where children have had insufficient experience of safe touch and calming regulation this may be a priority to help the brain to develop access to thinking, judging and evaluating mechanisms.

Safe touch is one of the key ways of regulating children's emotions, but it is a strategy that fully trained staff will use only under supervision and in line with a whole school Policy on Touch.

Other means of calming, soothing and containing children's strong emotions include:

- Slowing one's pace
- Lowering the voice
- Breathing more deeply
- Initially matching the pitch and volume of the child's emotional display (shout, cry etc.) and then regulating it down

- Talking slowly, firmly and quietly in an unhurried unflustered way
- Providing clear, predictable consistently held boundaries.

To ensure touch is only used appropriately the following guidelines are followed:

- Parents/carers should be informed of the school policy on Touch.
- Parents/carers should provide signed consent for their child to be part of the Thrive program
- Parents/carers wherever possible should be involved in the Thrive Assessments and Action Plans and be regularly updated as to their child's progress through the program
- Teachers/support staff should be trained in the Thrive approach
- Teachers/support staff should be trained in all aspects of safe touch

Staff members should agree the use of safe touch in discussion with their line manager and its use recorded and monitored.

Unsafe touch

At no point, and under no circumstances, should staff members use touch to satisfy their own need for physical contact or reassurance.

Should any touch that is invasive or which could be confusing, traumatizing or experienced as eroticizing in any way whatsoever is used it would be deemed as the most serious breach of the Code of Ethics warranting the highest level of disciplinary action.

*Please refer to the Intimate Care policy for further guidance on safe touch. March 2020-Review March 2023