



Peel Park

Primary School  
and Nursery

*The Path to Success*

## **Safe Touch Policy**

February 2024

Review Date: February 2025

## **Introduction: Why use touch?**

Research has recognised that physical touch is incredibly important for a child's development. Touch is essential in order to provide sensitive, good quality care and support natural interactions and is part of the development, emotional wellbeing, care and education of pupils.

Touch is the earliest sensory system to become functional and is the foundation for all other sensory systems. Positive touch is beneficial for both psychological and physiologically development. Psychologically, touch can be calming and relaxing and is vital for emotional wellbeing. Physiologically, touch facilitates the growth of the body's cells and the development of the brain and nervous system.

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, channelled and communicated safely. In recognition of this, under special, agreed and supervised conditions, staff will consider using safe touch as one of the means available to them for example to calm a distressed child, contain an angry or wild child and or encourage or affirm an anxious child or a child with low self-esteem. 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 staff will use only under supervision and in line with a whole school Policy on Touch.

However, in the current social climate there is a tendency to associate touch with intimacy and sexuality. Safeguarding children from inappropriate physical interactions is crucial but it is also essential to recognise that the use of positive, appropriate touch is incredibly important for a child's wellbeing, sensory regulation and emotional security.

The guidelines below describe the school's procedures on the use of appropriate physical touch.

## **Purposes of Touch**

Staff at Peel Park Primary School routinely engage in the physical touch with pupils for the following reasons:

- To aid and develop communication - through the use of Intensive Interaction; when engaged in social interaction; when prompting to gain attention;
- To offer physical support and guidance - for moving and handling; to support a child by holding his or her hand when walking around school; when guiding into rooms;
- To offer reassurance and support - comforting distressed or upset pupils, communicating warmth, comfort and reassurance and to develop positive emotions;
- Physical prompting and support- gestural and physical prompts during learning activities such as hand over hand or hand under hand support;
- To support pupils with personal care routines (all children will have an Intimate Care Plan or another form of Care Plan);
- Protection- from other students or from themselves (for example self-harming or absconding), including restraint and physical intervention;
- To carry out support programmes- physiotherapy (as advised by Physiotherapists), sensory massage and swimming;
- Responding to pupils' physical contact appropriately;
- Giving rewards such as high fives, fist pumps or a pat on the back.

## General Principles and Guidelines

Staff need to have a clear idea of why they are using physical touch with pupils. Staff must not be touching pupils for the sake of it or because it is easier or saves time. Staff must discuss the use of touch with colleagues if they are unsure.

It is advised that, where appropriate, staff have consent from the pupil who is involved in the use of touch. Where children are able to understand and use language to provide consent, staff must explain to the child the physical touch and why it is being used, asking for consent.

Where a child's comprehension and usage of language is more limited and it may be difficult to gain verbal consent, staff should be sensitive to the non-verbal indications that the child is giving as to whether consent is given. For example, a child may pull away or make a negative facial expression.

Staff must be aware that some pupils may seek physical touch from adults to support their emotional well-being. This must be discussed with parents/ carers as well as with the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Staff also need to consider the influences of race, gender, age, sexual identity and disability:

- Gender difference may make someone feel uncomfortable;
- A child's personal history may distort the understanding of a 'safe' adult;
- Pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds may be used to different types of touch;
- Pupils with multisensory impairments may be startled by touch;
- Pupils with sensory integration difficulties may interpret touch differently to others;
- It is important for staff to familiarise themselves with the needs of different pupils and to ask advice if they are unsure.

### 1) Touch

Any touch should be brief, gentle and on parts of the body which include: the head, hands, back, feet, arms or shoulders.

### 2) Reparative touch

It would not be appropriate or beneficial to suggest that staff do not comfort pupils who are upset or distressed. Healthy, emotional development requires safe touch as a means of calming, soothing and containing distress for a frightened, angry or sad child. Touch used to regulate a child's emotions triggers the release of the calming chemical oxytocin in the body. Reparative touch may include stroking a back or an arm, rocking gently, cuddling, tickling or sitting on an adult's lap (lap cushion may be used), hand or foot massage. Staff need to be aware of a pupil's individual needs and circumstances and should use their professional judgment when comforting pupils.

### 3) Lap sitting

Many of our younger children along with our children, who are at a very early developmental stage, in addition to some of our children with attachment and trauma needs, will seek the comfort and close proximity from an adult by sitting on his/ her lap. In many cases, having the child sit alongside and next to the adult on the floor or on the carpet will be enough to help soothe and comfort the child's distress and this should be offered as a first suggestion. In other situations, it will be appropriate to allow the child to sit on the lap of an adult as long as this is forward facing. It is good practice to ensure that there are other adults in the classroom and the adult has to feel comfortable with allowing the child to have such close comfort. As soon as the child is regulated, then the child should be removed to sit alongside the adult.

#### 4) Hand Holding

Staff should use their professional judgement when holding hands with children. Some of our children often need support with walking and balance or may need support to prevent them from running. Staff need to be clear that the physical contact used is appropriate for the individual child, taking into account the child's age, their developmental stage as well as their emotional needs.

#### 5) Sensory massage and other therapeutic programmes

Our school offers sensory massage as a means of supporting children's regulation and developing interaction with others. The massage can take three forms:

- 1) Massaging the fingers, hands and lower arms;
- 2) Massaging the feet;
- 3) Massaging the back.

Consent for massage must be given by parents or carers. The detail of the massage must also be shared with parents or carers. Where parents/ carers require more information, staff must invite them into school to model the massage that their child has the opportunity to receive.

Other therapeutic programmes such as physiotherapy will only take place following a visit and advice by a physiotherapist. These must also be discussed with parents/ carers to gain consent for these to take place in school by school staff. Staff must feel comfortable and appropriately trained in delivering any physiotherapy advice.

#### 6) Intimate and Personal Care

In using touch during intimate and personal care routines, staff should ensure that pupils are comfortable and familiar with the staff member delivering intimate care. Staff should be aware of the types of touch used. Pupils with ASD, multisensory impairment and/or sensory integration difficulties may become confused and distressed with certain types of touch. Staff must talk to the child during any intimate care or other care procedures to verbalise what is happening and to provide reassurances. For some children, visual support cards will be needed to exemplify and enhance meaning. All children, who have intimate and personal care in school, must have their own Intimate Care/ Personal Care Plan that is agreed by parents or carers.

#### 7) Children who touch staff inappropriately

Occasionally, children may engage in physical contact that staff find inappropriate. Staff should withdraw from these situations as soon as possible and these should be discussed with the Designated Safeguarding Lead. Where these behaviours might be a regular occurrence, strategies for supporting the child with more appropriate behaviours must be outlined on an individual risk assessment.

If staff feel it is not appropriate to respond to physical contact from a child, staff should avoid open rejection and should try to divert and redirect the child instead.

If staff members are in any doubt about any issues concerning appropriate touch, this should be discussed with the Headteacher and the Designated Safeguarding Lead. All staff have a responsibility to ensure safe and appropriate practice at all times. At no point and under no circumstances should staff members use touch to satisfy their own need for physical contact or reassurance. No staff member should be using touch that is invasive or which could be confusing, traumatising or experienced as eroticising in any way whatsoever. Should any such touch be used and observed, this must be reported to the Headteacher, the Designated Safeguarding Lead, or the Chair of Governors who will consult the Local Authority Designated Officer. It should not be discussed with any other members of staff.