



Staff and Student Professional Boundaries Policy

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Statement of Commitment to Child Safety and Wellbeing

All children and young people who come to Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School ("Strathcona") have a right to feel and be safe. We are committed to the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people. We are committed to providing a child safe and child friendly environment, where children and young people are safe and feel safe and are able to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives.

We have a zero tolerance for child abuse and other harm (including discrimination and racism) and are committed to acting in students' best interests and keeping them safe from harm.

The School regards its child safety and wellbeing responsibilities with the utmost importance and is committed to providing the necessary resources to ensure compliance with all relevant child protection laws and regulations and maintaining a child safe culture.

Each member of the School community has a responsibility to understand the important and specific role that they play individually, and collectively, to ensure that the wellbeing and safety of all students is at the forefront of all that they do, and every decision that they make.

Purpose

All staff, volunteers and contractors at the School hold a unique position of influence, authority, trust and power in relation to students. This creates an inherent power imbalance, which leaves students with little or no means of enforcing professional boundaries. It is therefore up to people in these roles to understand and abide by professional boundaries with students at all times.

It is also important for all staff to understand professional boundaries with students because breaching them may, in some circumstances, be a criminal offence. For example:

- most grooming behaviours will not only breach professional boundaries but may also amount to a crime
- sexual activity between a student aged 16 or 17 and a person with "care, supervision or authority" for them is a crime.

This policy is designed to:

- help staff understand professional boundaries with students and be aware of what conduct might amount to a breach
- provide strategies that minimise the risk of breaching professional boundaries
- provide guidance about protective behaviours for staff
- reduce the possibility of vexatious claims of inappropriate behaviour against staff.

Scope

Professional boundaries with students apply to everyone who works or volunteers at or for the School. This means that, if you are a:

- staff member
- volunteer; or
- contractor

this policy applies to you.

We refer to everyone in this list together as "**staff**" or "**staff members**" in this policy.

It does not matter:

- whether you are an adult or under the age of 18
- how often you work or volunteer at or for the School.

However, the terms "staff" and "staff member" do not include students who are volunteering with coaching or tutoring younger students at the School. If you are a student, you must instead comply with the [Student Code of Conduct](#) and other relevant School policies.

The [Adult Child Safety and Wellbeing Code of Conduct](#) applies in all school environments. School environments include the following physical, virtual and online places used during or outside school hours:

- a campus of the School
- online or virtual School environments made available or authorised by the School Board (or the Principal on its behalf) for use by a student (including email, intranet systems, software applications, collaboration tools and online services)
- other locations provided by the School or through a third-party provider for a student to use, including but not limited to:
 - camps
 - approved homestay accommodation
 - delivery of education and training such as registered training organisations, TAFEs, non-school senior secondary providers, another school
 - sporting events, excursions, competitions and other events.



Policy Statement

1. You **must**:

- follow the guidelines for professional boundaries set out in this policy
 - exercise your roles and responsibilities at or for the School in a way that maintains professional boundaries in your relationships with students at all times
 - identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student
 - interact with students in a manner that is professional at all times, including inside and outside of school hours
 - immediately report any conflicts of interest to the Principal as soon as practicable
 - remove yourself from decision-making where a conflict has been identified
 - give equal learning opportunities to each student without discrimination.
2. The School considers any breach of professional boundaries to be a child safety incident. As a result, if you are a staff member, or a direct contact or regular volunteer/contractor, you must:
- report all breaches of this policy internally to the School, following the procedures set out below
 - report any breach that meets the threshold for external reporting to the relevant external authority, following the [Child Safety and Wellbeing Reporting and Responding Obligations Policy](#)
 - document your internal and external reports, following the [Child Safety and Wellbeing Record Keeping Policy](#).
3. If, in good faith, you make an internal report alleging a breach of professional boundaries, the School will protect you from victimisation or other adverse consequences.
4. The School will apply appropriate consequences to staff members who breach professional boundaries, as set out in the **Breach** section below.
5. If you have parental permission to interact with a student outside school hours or an existing/prior personal relationship with a student, the School encourages you to formally declare this to the School, following the procedures below. Declaring this will enable the School to be aware of appropriate and inappropriate interactions between staff and students and give context to the situation if an allegation of inappropriate behaviour with the student is made against you.
6. The School verifies declarations by staff, about permitted interactions and existing/prior personal relationships with students and their families, with the student's parent/carer.
7. The School maintains records of all declarations made by staff, about permitted interactions and existing/prior personal relationships with students and their families, in accordance with the [Child Safety and Wellbeing Record Keeping Policy](#) and general Human Resources Management policies and procedures. It makes these records available to the parents/carers of a student on request.



Professional Boundaries: Guidelines for Teachers

This policy and its procedures reflect information about professional boundaries in teacher-student relationships set out in The Victorian Teaching Profession's Code of Conduct (VIT Code of Conduct).

The VIT Code of Conduct provides useful information about professional boundaries in teacher-student relationships. However, they are not an exhaustive list of unacceptable, unwise or "at-risk" behaviours which may breach boundaries associated with teacher-student relationships. They are to be read and understood in conjunction with the School's [Adult Child Safety and Wellbeing Code of Conduct](#) and this policy and its procedures.

What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a student) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a staff member). Professional boundaries must be established, maintained and respected at all times.

However, sometimes it may be difficult to recognise where the boundaries lie, especially for younger staff members who may only be a few years older than their students or when a current or recently graduated student at the School becomes employed as a support staff such as an Academic Tutor, Sports Coach, Exam Invigilator or in any other employment capacity. Refer to the relevant section below for further guidance.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive, and given that sometimes 'grey areas' may occur, the School expects all staff (no matter your age or experience) to use your 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?
- Should I discuss this matter with another colleague?
- 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 and Grooming

You **must not** initiate or develop a relationship with any student that could be misinterpreted as having a romantic or sexual, rather than professional basis. It does not matter whether the student is over the age of consent for sexual activity or whether the relationship is consensual or condoned by parents/carers.

In addition, you **must** refrain from conduct which could be considered or perceived to be grooming.

In addition to serious negative effects for the student involved, such relationships are likely to be a criminal offence. Even in cases where they are not (such as when a student is aged 18 or over) they have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of other students and colleagues and carry a serious reputational risk for both you and the School.



The professional relationship of staff and students may be breached by:

- flirtatious behaviour or dating
- developing an intimate personal relationship
- sexual relations
- using sexual innuendo or inappropriate language / 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
- involving yourself in a student's home life, for example, by gaining the trust of the student's family and becoming involved in family activities
- attempting to bribe a student into silence about any inappropriate conduct.

Personal Relationships

You **must not** initiate or develop a relationship with any student that has, or could be perceived or misinterpreted as having a personal rather than professional basis. It does not matter whether the relationship is consensual or condoned by parents/carers.

You **must** recognise at all times that your role is not to be a "friend" or "parent" to a student.

It is the student's **perception** of your behaviour and not your intention that is important.

The professional relationship between staff and students may be compromised by:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised School events (without parental/carer permission)
- sharing personal details about your private life with students
- meeting with a student alone outside of school hours without a valid context and without permission from the School and/or the parents/carers (for more information, refer to **Declaration of Staff/Student Interactions** below)
- focusing inappropriate or excessive attention on a student who is vulnerable, such as a student having problems with their parents, or who is new to the School and hasn't yet established a circle of friends
- privately giving a student money, credit for a mobile phone or a meal, unless it is for an emergency such as a lost bus fare or having no food (if you do this in an emergency context, you should notify your supervisor or the Principal and keep a record of this interaction)
- using a student to gain a personal benefit, such as using a student's expertise or connections to obtain monetary gain, goods or services



- offering advice to a student on personal matters other than in an authorised situation such as authorised pastoral care
- asking a student questions about personal/sexual matters or not immediately stopping (respectfully) discussions of a personal/sexual nature by a student that are not in keeping with your role (for example, these kinds of discussions may be appropriate if you have a pastoral care role).

Relationships with Former Students

If you are a registered teacher, it is a breach of the VIT Code of Conduct to have a sexualised relationship with a former student:

- within two years of the learner completing their senior secondary schooling or equivalent; and
- in all circumstances, the former student must be at least 18 years old before a relationship commences.

No matter your role at the School, you should be aware that developing or encouraging romantic or sexual relationships with recent former students (aged 18 years or over) may violate professional boundaries and the School strongly discourages you from doing so. The imbalance of power and authority that exists in the staff/student relationship does not suddenly disappear after the student finishes their schooling.

If you engage in a romantic/sexual relationship with a recent former student at the School, this may generate concerns that you previously breached professional boundaries while the former student was under your care. In particular, concerns may arise that:

- you engaged in grooming behaviour while the person was still a student
- the emotional intimacy of the relationship developed while the person was still a student.

The School will investigate any complaint that a staff member has abused their position and acted unprofessionally by engaging in a relationship with a former student, regardless of when that relationship commenced. In considering whether there has been a breach of professional boundaries, the School may take the following factors into account:

- the length of time that has passed between when the former student attended the School and the commencement of the relationship
- the age difference between the former student and the staff member
- the emotional/social maturity of the former student
- the vulnerability of the former student
- evidence of the nature of the student-Staff relationship, including its closeness, dependence, significance and length, while the student was at the School
- any misconduct of the staff member during their professional relationship with the student.

Current and Recently Graduated Students at the School Becoming Employees

If you are a current or recently graduated student at the School and become employed by the School, it is important to recognise that your closeness in age to current students can increase the risk of you breaching professional boundaries. Your role has changed. You are now a staff member in a position of responsibility and authority, and your actions must reflect this.



The guidelines below will help to support you in navigating the shift from being a student to staff member:

- Recognise that you are now a staff member, not a peer.
- Respect each student's right to their personal space and privacy.
- Communicate with students in a professional manner not as a friend.
- Avoid sharing jokes, stories or topics that could be seen as inappropriate for a staff member.
- Avoid giving preferential treatment to students that are your friends.
- Do not share any privileged information that you obtain as a staff member with students.
- Use school-approved communication channels only with students (e.g., school email).
- Report any conflicts of interest that may impact your ability to maintain professional boundaries to your reporting manager.

Fair Learning Opportunities

The main focus of teaching is effective student learning. 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.

If you are a teacher, you should demonstrate your 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 Communication between Staff and Students

You **must** 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 you and students should be via the School email system and reflect a professional staff/student relationship
- you should not communicate with students via text message where it is not in a professional context
- you should not give out your personal telephone numbers or social media contact details
- you must not accept or request students as 'friends' on your personal social media accounts or otherwise use your personal social media accounts to communicate in any way that is not condoned or approved by the School
- you should not exchange personal pictures with a student



- If you are a teacher, you are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents/carers or students on holidays, weekends or in the evening
- You must only use student's personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the School should for School communications.

Physical Contact with Students

Situations may arise involving physical contact with students that can be perceived in a manner that was not intended. For this reason, you **must** avoid unnecessary physical contact with students both in and outside of School grounds.

The following guidelines for physical contact with students assist in understanding what contact is and is not "unnecessary physical contact":

- administering necessary first aid is not unnecessary physical contact
- physical contact that is minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous and appropriate for the context of the situation is not unnecessary physical contact and is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory pat on the back or handshake)
- physical contact that occurs in the context of technical sport, drama and dance instruction is not unnecessary physical contact and is acceptable provided that it
 - occurs in a class situation not in a 1:1 situation
 - is brief
 - occurs with the consent of the student. Note that a student may withdraw consent for this contact either verbally or gesturally, so you must remain vigilant while engaging in necessary contact situations. Once consent has been withdrawn no further contact can be or should be made.

Changing Areas, Bathrooms and Off-Campus Excursions and Camps

In school changing areas (any place where students change their clothes) and student bathrooms and during off-campus excursions or camps:

- the same physical contact guidelines apply
- check sleeping arrangements and supervise students changing clothes in a manner that respects students' privacy and personal space. In particular:
 - checking/supervision should, where possible, occur in the presence of another staff member
 - male adult staff must not enter female changing areas, bathrooms or accommodation and female adult staff must not enter male changing areas, bathrooms or accommodation, except in an emergency
- always knock and advise of your presence prior to entering a changing area, student bathroom, bedroom or dormitory
- strictly uphold a professional staff/student relationship while in a bedroom/dormitory and do not engage in behaviour that could be perceived as inappropriate, such as sitting on a student's bed.

Managing Conflicts of Interest

If you have an existing/prior personal relationship with a student, such as a family relationship or close friendship network, conflicts of interest may arise.



These situations may be more prevalent in close or rural communities where professional boundaries may be tested due to the nature and size of the community. In these circumstances, you need to be far more diligent in developing and maintaining these boundaries.

If you believe that you have a conflict of interest with respect to a student, you should not be involved in important decisions about that student.

You **must** notify the Principal, or the Chair of the Board if the conflict involves the Principal. The School will implement arrangements to avoid the conflict situation where appropriate and possible. These might include that any significant decisions relating to the student (such as the appointment of classes or selection in sports teams) is referred to another staff member or endorsed by a supervisor.

Declaration of Staff/Student Interactions

If you have an existing/prior personal relationship with a student or have permission from a student's parents/carers to interact with the student outside of school hours, it might look to others like you are breaching professional boundaries when in fact you are not. For example, you might be:

- related to the student
- friends with the student's parents or family
- given parental consent to interact with the student for academic purposes outside of school hours.

To promote a culture of openness and transparency and protect you from perceived or actual breaches of professional boundaries, you must declare to your reporting manager in writing any existing or prior personal, family or social relationship and/or interaction with a student, or if you have permission from a student's parents/carers to interact with a student outside of school hours (such as tutoring). Your reporting manager will assess the nature of the relationship and consult with a Child Safety Officer if necessary. If the relationship raises potential concerns or requires further oversight, the matter is escalated to the Principal, who will determine appropriate actions to manage boundaries. All written declarations will be stored in your staff records.

Report Any Concerns

If you are concerned that a child, young person or student aged 18 or over is in immediate danger, call the Police on 000.

Any person, including all Staff, Volunteers, Contractors, parents/carers and students, can at any time, contact DFFH Child Protection if they are concerned about the wellbeing of a child aged under 17.

You can do this by:

- during business hours (8:45am-5:00pm, Monday to Friday), contacting the Child Protection intake service for the local government area where the child resides, listed [here](#)
- after hours, telephoning 13 12 78.

Staff

If you witness or suspect a breach of professional boundaries, report this to a Child Safety and Wellbeing Officer or the Principal as soon as possible.

If the breach involves the Principal, report this to the Chair of the Board.



A breach of professional boundaries could involve the abuse or other harm of a child, young person or student aged 18 or over. For information about how to identify key indicators of abuse or other harm, refer to the [Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy](#).

Reporting internally does not replace other legal and policy obligations that you may have. In addition to the above, you must also follow all responding and reporting obligations that apply to you. Depending on the circumstances, these obligations may include:

- reporting to DFFH Child Protection
- reporting to the Police
- reporting Reportable Conduct to the CCYP
- taking steps to protect students from future risks of abuse or other harm, where those steps are within your power or responsibilities to take (to meet your duty to protect obligations)
- reporting teacher misconduct to the VIT
- providing information to other external agencies.

These are explained in the [Child Safety and Wellbeing Reporting and Responding Obligations Policy](#).

Students

Students who are the victim of or who witness or suspect a breach of professional boundaries can:

- disclose this to a School Child Safety and Wellbeing Officer
- disclose this to any other staff member, volunteer or contractor. This might be done:
 - verbally
 - in writing
 - through electronic means (such as email)
 - indirectly (such as in written assignments, in artworks or in any other way)
- contact [ChildWise](#).

Parents/carers, family members or other school community members

Parents/carers, family members and other community members who witness or suspect a breach of professional boundaries can contact:

- the School's Child Safety and Wellbeing Champion
- the Principal (or if the concern relates to the Principal, the Chair of the Board).

Communications will be treated confidentially on a 'need to know' basis.

Professional Boundaries and Reportable Conduct

This policy outlines expected standards of behaviour for all staff at the School. However, breaches will not always be Reportable Conduct. For example, a volunteer accepting a social media 'friend' request from a student would be a breach of policy but may not amount to Reportable Conduct.

These kinds of breaches can be dealt with at the School level and the School does not need to report them to the Commission for Children and Young People.

Implementation

The School implements this policy through a combination of:

- Staff training and development in professional conduct
- student and parent/carer education and information
- effective management of staff who engage in inappropriate relationships with students or otherwise breach professional boundaries
- effective management of conflicts of interest
- effective communication and incident notification procedures
- effective record keeping procedures
- initiation of corrective actions where necessary.

Breach

If you breach this policy, the School can investigate your conduct. You could face disciplinary action, such as (depending on the severity of the breach):

- attending remedial education
- attending counselling
- increased supervision
- the restriction of duties
- suspension
- in the case of serious breaches, termination of employment, contract or engagement.

You could also face civil or criminal penalties.

Source of Obligation

- Victorian Child Safe Standards, Standard 2
- Ministerial Order 1359, Clause 6

Policy Review

The School Board has strategically delegated aspects of its child safety and wellbeing policy review responsibilities to the School executive team, to support operational efficiency in policy development, while retaining ultimate oversight and approval authority for the Child Safety and Wellbeing Program.

All policies and procedures that make up the Child Safety and Wellbeing Program will be reviewed by the relevant approval authorities (School Board or executive team) at least once every 2 years or earlier if required, such as if a significant child safety incident occurs at the School or due to changes in legislation.