



PHOENIX BAY

Policy Focus	Positive Touch Policy
Lead Policy Holder	R Banks - Principal
Designated Advisory Board	Ann Morrissey
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1. Background to the Positive Touch Policy

We are highly aware of the current climate in which touch/physical comfort as a natural and important form of human connection has been almost vetoed in some schools, because of fears of abuse. As a school that takes very seriously its responsibilities to safeguard children and young people, we share these important concerns.

Phoenix Bay School works with very vulnerable and challenging students who are experiencing difficulties in their lives that can leave them feeling very distressed, angry or disorientated. In these circumstances it is natural for children to seek comfort from the adults they trust. If these adults feel they must never reach out to comfort a child at such a time, it would be deeply concerning, particularly in light of situations where the withholding of touch with a very distressed or dysregulated child can be damaging to a child's recovery and future development.

Many neuroscientific and psychological studies have shown that a lack of soothing touch in childhood, particularly during times of distress, can result in physical ill-health and problems with anxiety, aggression, or depression in later life.

2. The Definition of Therapeutic Touch:

The appropriate therapeutic use of touch is defined by situations in which abstinence (i.e. not to touch the child) would actually be inhumane, unkind and potentially psychologically or neurobiologically damaging. There is strong, empirically backed evidence that the use of touch in the comforting of a child who is in an acute state of distress is very beneficial. Not to reach out to the child in such circumstances, could also be re-traumatising.

Abstinence (i.e. not touching a child) in the face of intense grief reactions, can lead to a child shifting into a state of hyper-arousal, in which toxic levels of stress chemicals are released in both body and brain. The damaging long-term effects of this have been extensively researched worldwide and are well documented. In many states of distress, touch can often be the only means of maintaining a connection with the child when he or she can no longer hear or make therapeutic use of the adult's words or soothing tone/eye contact and therefore is in danger of dissociating (severe defence), with all the well documented detrimental effects that this can bring.

3. The Benefits of Safe, Appropriate Touch:

Gentle safe holding which is entirely used to soothe, calm and emotionally regulate, is appropriate if a child is hurting either himself, herself or others, or is damaging property, or is so incensed and out of control, that all verbal attempts to engage the child have failed¹. Such necessary interventions are fully in line with guidelines set out in the United Kingdom government document, "New Guidance on the Use of Reasonable Force in School" (DfEE 1998) and with Phoenix Bay School's own policy on the use of reasonable.

At Phoenix Bay School the adult will always have been thoroughly trained in the safest and gentlest means of comforting or holding a child, which is entirely designed to enable the child to feel safe, and to bring him or her down from uncontrollable states of hyper-arousal. Whilst limits and boundaries in such circumstances can be a vital corrective experience, without such an intervention, the child would often be left at risk of actual physical or psychological damage. Indeed, it can be very frightening for a child to feel, "full of wildness that cannot be

tamed²”, and “what a relief when adults are psychologically strong enough, warm enough and calm enough to help you with that wildness, in a warm safe and empathic way”.

4. Dealing with the Individual Differences Presented by Children and Young People:

We fully appreciate that every individual needs to appreciate the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch. Staff have been trained to be aware that when a child is in deep distress, sufficient connection and ‘psychological holding’ can be established *without* physical comfort. They have a wide repertoire of non-touching methods to offer comfort and to soothe and will use these as a first approach.

Our staff are also highly aware of both the damaging and unnecessary uses of touch in a therapeutic context, e.g. touch as an avoidance of the child’s feelings, as an ill thought out or impulsive act of futile reassurance/ gratification, as a block to important therapeutic work and conflict resolution. They have received awareness training in how to judge when touch is unwelcome. This is fully reflected in our policies and our practice.

5. The Use of Touch in the Context of Safeguarding Children:

Phoenix Bay School staff are also aware of touch which is posing as therapeutic, but which is actually being used to satisfy the practitioner’s need for contact rather than that of the child’s.

Naturally, staff are also fully cognisant of touch that is invasive or which could be confusing, traumatising, or experienced as stimulating in any way whatsoever. Should any such touch be used, it would be deemed as the most serious breach of our Safeguarding Policy for working with Children, warranting the highest level of disciplinary action.

6. Staff Training in Using Appropriate Touch:

Staff are trained to use touch only when it is necessary to comfort children or to keep them safe and when other, non-physical means of calming children are not enough. Techniques used include stroking the child’s back or the back of his/her upper arm or putting an arm around the child’s shoulders while standing beside him/her.

7. Other Policies that are Related to the Use of Appropriate Touch:

At Phoenix Bay School we have considered all aspects of the care and safeguarding of children very carefully. Our rules and practice are detailed in the following policies: Relationship and Behaviour Policy, Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, Staff Code of Conduct.

Parents/carers are very welcome to have a copy of any of these policies on request.

I, the parent ofunderstand the above, and agree to the trained Phoenix Bay School staff using touch therapeutically with my child in the ways described here, should the need arise due to states of distress or uncontrollable states of hyper-arousal, where the withholding of comforting physical comfort could be damaging.

