

# Safe Touch Guidelines for Youth Leaders

adapted from Friedman, 2004; ACA/Johnson *For Their Sake*, 1992; Thurber, 2000, 2001, and Ditter, 1994, 2003

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All people like to feel safe, both physically and emotionally. Part of our job as youth development professionals is to help our children feel safe, even if they do not have that feeling all the time at home or at school. Understanding how to provide safe touch and protect children from unwelcome touch is a requisite step to helping all youth feel safe. Children and adolescents are, each in their own way, physical and sexual beings. They are curious and easily over-stimulated. As one of the adults at your summer program, you are responsible for setting appropriate limits around touch, regardless of what a child may express. You are also responsible for setting a positive example, in your self-expression, your interaction with fellow staff, and your interactions with youth.

The following guidelines are general recommendations. The policies at your camp, school, or other youth-serving organization, as well as the laws in your state, may be different in important ways. Always consult with your director and the policies and documentation your employer has provided.

## Definitions: *What is child abuse?*

- The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), (42 U.S.C.A. §5106g), as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003, defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum:
  - Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or
  - An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.
  - Most Federal and State child protection laws primarily refer to cases of harm to a child caused by parents or other caregivers; they generally do not include harm caused by other people, such as acquaintances or strangers.

## Definitions: *What are the specific kinds of abuse and neglect?*

- Within the minimum standards set by CAPTA, each State is responsible for providing its own definitions of child abuse and neglect.
  - Most States recognize four major types of maltreatment: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.
  - Although any of the forms of child maltreatment may be found separately, they often occur in combination.
  - In many States, abandonment and parental substance abuse are also defined as forms of child abuse or neglect.
- The examples provided below are for general informational purposes only. Not all States' definitions will include all of the examples listed below, and individual States' definitions may cover additional situations not mentioned here. Consult [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) to learn more.
- **Physical abuse** is non-accidental physical injury (ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death) as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or otherwise harming a child, that is inflicted by a parent, caregiver, or other person who has responsibility for the child.<sup>2</sup> Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caregiver intended to hurt the child. Physical discipline, such as spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child.

- **Neglect** is the failure of a parent, guardian, or other caregiver to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect may be:
  - Physical (e.g., failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision)
  - Medical (e.g., failure to provide necessary medical or mental health treatment)<sup>3</sup>
  - Educational (e.g., failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs)
  - Emotional (e.g., inattention to a child's emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs)
- These situations do not always mean a child is neglected. Sometimes cultural values, the standards of care in the community, and poverty may be contributing factors, indicating the family is in need of information or assistance. When a family fails to use information and resources, and the child's health or safety is at risk, then child welfare intervention may be required. In addition, many States provide an exception to the definition of neglect for parents who choose not to seek medical care for their children due to religious beliefs that may prohibit medical intervention.<sup>4</sup>
- **Sexual abuse** (sometimes called "molestation") includes activities by a parent or caregiver such as:
  - Fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.
  - Sexual abuse is defined by CAPTA as "the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or the rape, and in cases of caretaker or inter-familial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children."
- **Emotional abuse** (sometimes called "psychological abuse") is a pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support, or guidance. Emotional abuse is often difficult to prove and, therefore, child protective services may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm or mental injury to the child. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms are identified.
- **Abandonment** is now defined in many States as a form of neglect. In general, a child is considered to be abandoned when the parent's identity or whereabouts are unknown, the child has been left alone in circumstances where the child suffers serious harm, or the parent has failed to maintain contact with the child or provide reasonable support for a specified period of time.
- **Substance abuse** is an element of the definition of child abuse or neglect in many States.<sup>5</sup> Circumstances that are considered abuse or neglect in some States include:
  - Prenatal exposure of a child to harm due to the mother's use of an illegal drug or other substance
  - Manufacture of methamphetamine in the presence of a child
  - Selling, distributing, or giving illegal drugs or alcohol to a child
  - Use of a controlled substance by a caregiver that impairs the caregiver's ability to adequately care for the child

### **Reporting: *What should you do if you suspect a minor has been abused or neglected?***

- The law defines most youth development professionals as “mandated reporters” of suspected abuse and neglect. This includes school staff, camp staff, parks & rec staff, whether paid or volunteer. Adults responsible for children—whatever their job title—have a duty of care called *in loco parentis*. This means that the adults serve *in place of the parents*. As such, they have an implicit duty to protect young people. For this reason, they are mandated reporters.
- If you witness or hear about an instance of questionable or clearly abusive or neglectful behavior, consult immediately with your director. The law does not require you to have proof, only to have a *suspicion* that inappropriate touch or abusive or neglectful behavior may have occurred.
- Signs of possible abuse or neglect include; (a) injuries with a sketchy explanation; (b) precocious sexual knowledge; (c) public sexual behavior or sexually provocative behavior; (d) injuries to places on the body normally covered by a bathing suit; (e) withdrawn or aggressive behavior not reliably attributable to another cause (e.g., homesickness); or (f) the person tells you about an instance where he was touched or treated in an unsafe manner.
- If a young person asks, “Can you keep a secret?” the best response is, “I’ll do my best to keep our conversation private, but if I have concerns about your safety or the safety of someone else, I will involve a few other people in order to keep you safe.”

### **Safe Touch: *What are the safest and most welcome kinds of touch?***

- You are the adult, so it is always your responsibility to set safe and appropriate limits.
- Short hugs and touching young people on the hand, shoulder, or upper back is fine.
- Generally, it protects you to be in the company of other adults when touching a child.
- Never touch a young person against his or her will or if he or she expresses discomfort.
- Beware of over-stimulating a child with tickling, wrestling, or other physical activity. It is generally wise to keep playful physical touch to pats on the upper back, high-fives, handshakes, or a hand on the shoulder. These touches are unlikely to over-stimulate a child.
- Never touch a young person’s body on a place that is normally covered by a bathing suit, *unless for a clear medical necessity (e.g., you need to apply well-aimed direct pressure to stop severe bleeding), and then only with the supervision of another adult.*
- A more conservative “no-touch zone” is *waist-to-knees*. Only the child himself, his primary caregivers, or a medical professional should touch a child anywhere in the waist-to-knees zone.
- If you need to touch a young person near a place normally covered by a bathing suit: (a) explain what you’re going to do [e.g., “In just a minute, I’m going to check the safety of your climbing harness.”]; (b) demonstrate on yourself [e.g., “Here’s how I’m going to check that the loop is doubled back.”]; and then (c) ask permission [e.g., “Can I check your harness now?”].

### **Discipline: *What kind of discipline is permissible or forbidden?***

- Discipline, especially 1:1 conversations, should be done in view of other staff
- Never use abusive or derogatory language with campers
- Never hit, poke, or shake a child, or use any kind of physical discipline
- Never haze campers or use abusive or humiliating initiation rites
- Abide by the “rule of three” or “double coverage.” This means that when you are with a young person—especially in a disciplinary situation—you have another leader or staff member present.

### **Coverage of Activities: *How can you protect yourself from a false accusation?***

- If you need to touch a child (for example, to position a water-skier in the water or to fasten a safety harness on a climber), first explain the contact, then demonstrate on yourself, then ask permission. (See “Safe Touch” section above.)
- Most youth-serving organizations use double adult coverage during changing or showering times. Always have your kids within earshot and talk with them so they know you are present.
- Almost all youth-serving organizations use double adult coverage during overnights.
- Carefully supervise physical activities, such as pillow fights, that can become over-stimulating. (Note that some organizations do not allow pillow fights and other rough-housing.)

### **Cabin / Bunk / Group Living: *What needs to be monitored on a daily basis?***

- Acknowledge young people’s natural curiosity about sex and their bodies. Never shame them, but do redirect explicit questions and steer conversations in an appropriate direction.
  - For example, if a young person asks, “Are you a virgin?” you might say, “I know you’re curious about me, and that’s OK, but my social life is personal.”
  - Or, if a young person says, “I’ve gone to third base. Has anyone else in the cabin gone that far?” you might say, “It’s OK to be curious about other people, but talking about your exploits is not an appropriate topic at camp. Let’s change the topic.”
- Respect all young people’s spiritual or religious convictions regarding sexuality and sexual practices. As a rule, acknowledge differences of opinion (“There are different opinions about that.”) and steer the conversation to a safer topic.
- Do not share sleeping bags or beds under any circumstances.
- Gently set limits with children who physically cling or hang on you. Instead of rejecting a child who clings on you, suggest an alternative (e.g., “How about a high-five?”).
- Be aware of children who may develop a crush on you; again, gently set limits.
- Do not give back rubs unless another adult is present and clothes are on. (Note that many organizations do not allow back rubs or any other kind of massage. Know your policies.)
- Younger children should be encouraged to change their own clothes as much as possible.
- Censor your campers’ music and movie selections and explain your reasoning for not playing media (songs, films, etc.) with strongly sexual, violent, crude, or otherwise inappropriate themes.

### **Staff Relations: *What’s appropriate when it comes to staff-staff interactions?***

- Always model the kind of touch and interaction with fellow staff that would be appropriate between children or between a child and a staff member. Good leadership-by-example helps ensure that children emulate safe touch with each other. (Note that a considerable amount of inappropriate intimate behavior occurs between children, so your example is very important.)
- Do not perform “wedgies,” “purple nuckles,” “credit card checks”—or other questionable acts that involve touching genitals, anus, buttocks, or nipples—on campers or in the presence of children. Save that kind of goofing around (which may be OK among consenting adults) for time off.
- Staff sleeping together during an overnight (or anywhere around children) is unacceptable.
- Staff sharing their romantic or sexual lives with campers—verbally or otherwise—is unacceptable.

### **Detailed Signs and Symptoms: *What exactly should make me suspicious?***

- The following list comes from the Department of Health and Human Services.
- Report these possible indicators of abuse or neglect to your supervisor. If you feel that your supervisor has not taken appropriate action, report your concern to a different trusted adult.
- If you observe someone abusing or neglecting a child, it is your legal duty to report that event. If steps are not taken to protect children from that abusive or neglectful person, is your ethical duty to continue reporting your concerns until someone takes corrective, protective action.

The following general signs **may** signal the presence of **child abuse or neglect**.

#### **The Child:**

- Shows sudden changes in behavior or school performance
- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention
- Has learning problems (or difficulty concentrating) that cannot be attributed to specific physical or psychological causes
- Is always watchful, as though preparing for something bad to happen
- Lacks adult supervision
- Is overly compliant, passive, or withdrawn
- Comes to school or other activities early, stays late, and does not want to go home

#### **The Parent:**

- Shows little concern for the child
- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home
- Asks teachers or other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves
- Sees the child as entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of emotional needs

#### **The Parent and Child:**

- Rarely touch or look at each other
- Consider their relationship entirely negative
- State that they do not like each other

## **Types of Abuse**

The following are some signs often associated with particular types of child abuse and neglect: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. It is important to note, however, that these types of abuse are more typically found in combination than alone. A physically abused child, for example, is often emotionally abused as well, and a sexually abused child also may be neglected.

### **Signs of Physical Abuse**

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the **child**:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an absence from school
- Seems frightened of the parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver

Consider the possibility of physical abuse when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child's injury
- Describes the child as "evil," or in some other very negative way
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- Has a history of abuse as a child

## Signs of Neglect

Consider the possibility of neglect when the **child**:

- Is frequently absent from school
- Begs or steals food or money
- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- States that there is no one at home to provide care

Consider the possibility of neglect when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child
- Seems apathetic or depressed
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs

## Signs of Sexual Abuse

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the **child**:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities
- Reports nightmares or bedwetting
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- Becomes pregnant or contracts a venereal disease, particularly if under age 14
- Runs away
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children, especially of the opposite sex
- Is secretive and isolated
- Is jealous or controlling with family members

## Signs of Emotional Maltreatment

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the **child**:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example)
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development
- Has attempted suicide
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent

Consider the possibility of emotional maltreatment when the **parent or other adult caregiver**:

- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
- Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems
- Overtly rejects the child

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Notes: