

FOX WOOD SCHOOL



Touch Policy

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PHILOSOPHY

Many of our pupils have emotional, physical, physiological, communication and cognitive skills associated with very early levels of development. Additionally, many of our learners have impaired sensory processing which reduces their ability to derive meaning from visual or auditory cues.

Touch is the first and foremost form of communication, developing early in-utero. It is therefore the most tangible and fundamental form of communication in early life, and likely to be a key factor in ensuring that our learners are provided with rich and meaningful social experiences which promote learning. We consider that our pupils' developmental needs are a more important indicator of their learning and support needs than their chronological age, and, though seeking to be age respectful, would not deny a pupil what they need developmentally merely on the grounds of 'age-appropriateness'. Touch is an essential part of providing sensitive and high quality care and is vital for regulating and maintaining well-being for our learners. When used in appropriate contexts, and with empathy, touch enhances natural interactions and play, and therefore supports the development of communication and cognitive skills. Our learners require physical assistance to support them with movement, to help them develop their functional fine and gross motor skills and to transition between activities, equipment or environments. Touch is therefore a vital component in supporting our learners' physical development, reducing their dependency and maximising their independence. Appropriate, empathetic and sensitive touch is therefore considered vital to support the learning of pupils at Fox Wood School and College.

For the purpose of this protocol it is important to define what Touch is. Research carried out by Sheffield University defines it as: "Professional love is about adults' sensitivity towards the very young children in their care and 'reading' what is needed to make a child feel loved at any moment in time. What is appropriate will vary between children, between different practitioners even towards the same child and even between moments in time (where a cuddle may be needed one day it may not the next). It is this sensitivity which is the difference between an adequate practitioner and an outstanding one. At Fox Wood we assume that Touch means one person making contact or a connection with another at the level appropriate to their developmental age.

The nurturing power of touch has been evidence in many research studies that evidence the impact on those that have been deprived of touch and human contact.

This policy, together with practice at Fox Wood, is fully aligned with statutory requirements. It reflects and complies with the following key regulations and guidance: Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE, 2025); the Education and Inspections Act 2006, Section 93; the Department for Education's Guidance on the Use of Reasonable Force (2013, updated 2015); the Equality Act 2010; and the SEND Code of Practice.

AIMS

1. To be respectful of an individual learner's response to touch, seeking to ensure all experiences of touch are as positive as possible for them.
2. To use touch in ways that enhance a learner's opportunities to make links between experiences
3. To use touch to initiate, respond to and extend interactions; being alert to any indication that the learner is not receptive to this touch at this time
4. To respond to touch initiated by learners, and to enable learners to experience touch from one another
5. To use touch to facilitate movement experiences, including following physiotherapy and sensory swimming programmes, positioning protocols, use of On-body signs, Dance massage, Maths massage, Tac Pac, Story massage, Intensive Interaction, Sherborne and Rebound Therapy sessions seeking always to give 'as much support as necessary but as little as possible'
6. To use touch to support the development of eating and drinking skills, and to ensure safety at mealtimes
7. To use touch to comfort, alert or support learners in order to maximise their well-being, and to assist them in learning to self-soothe or self-regulate
8. To use massage which is responsive to the mood and communicative behaviours of our learners in order to support their learning needs and well-being
9. To use empathetic and sensitive handling or touch during care routines, being respectful of learners' preferences in terms of touch and allowing time for quality interaction
10. To seek to build up a limited number of trusting relationships in school/college within which touch based interactions occur and to promote the development of secure attachments
11. To use touch when it is necessary to prevent a child from harm, either from their own actions or from the environment
12. To empower our pupils by ensuring that they are explicitly taught about safe and unsafe touch, helping them to gain a better understanding of boundaries.
13. To empower our pupils by explicitly teaching them how to express (or refuse) their consent, including by ensuring that communication aids have the capacity and accessibility for non-verbal pupils to express this effectively and quickly.
14. To NOT use touch when that would interfere with our pupils' learning, remembering that they may have single sensory processing abilities and / or be unable to share attention between an adult and an object.

Methodology

- a. To allow time and provide meaningful cues for learners before and during interactions which involve touch
- b. To use established body cues consistently for all learners, providing the opportunity for learners to be able to anticipate and understand what is about to happen to them
- c. To use established transition cues, for example when using the bathroom or entering the pool. Initially these are presented immediately prior to the learner entering the new environment, to support their ability to predict where they are going next. Once this link is established the cue can be presented at increasing distance and time from the transition, eventually being used to help learners to sequence events in their day
- d. To ensure, as far as possible that permission is sought from the learner before and whilst touch is being used. This is essential in intensive interaction, massage and play sessions, when touch should cease immediately if the learner indicate any displeasure, dislike or discomfort.
- e. To ensure that Parental permission is sought for any close contact activities with pupils (See parental permission letter attachment to policy.)
- f. To ensure that adults know they also have the right to say 'no' to proximity or touch that they are not comfortable with, and to withdraw themselves from it
- g. To seek alternative strategies (and proactively seek advice from our School Based OT) where some forms of touch are resisted by learners, but are necessary. For example, firmer touch may be preferred, touch may be tolerated if enough cueing in is provided, or if a familiar song is used to accompany it. Sometimes touch may be necessary to ensure a learner's safety, and therefore may have to be used without the learner's permission. In these instances, the minimal amount of touch should be used for the shortest amount of time and in the least offensive way to the individual learner, whilst maintaining the pupil's safety
- h. Touch is often used as part of 'preparation for learning', which may involve positioning, putting glasses on or hearing aids in, using specialist footwear or orthotics including braces, AFO's, hand splints, stretches or passive movements to limbs etc. This touch should always be used in the context of social interaction, with alertness to pupils' communicative responses and regard to their preferences in terms of pace
- i. To use touch responsively and respectfully in therapy/ interaction sessions. The adult must be alert to the smallest cues that the touch is not acceptable to the learners today, being mindful that we all vary in our receptiveness to touch at different times, and an activity that was great fun yesterday may not be today
- j. To provide opportunities for learners to encounter and interact with each other using touch, being mindful of both how the touch is offered and how it is received, and ensuring that both parties are at ease with the interaction. We are mindful that the positioning equipment used by our learners reduces opportunities for touch, and therefore intentionally create opportunities for learners to encounter each other in less physically restrictive environments. Sessions where interaction between learners may occur include

physical / floor based sessions, Sherborne Movement sessions, swim sessions and sessions on the resonance boards

k. To ensure all staff are well trained in appropriate handling techniques for working with our learners, including manual handling, carrying out physiotherapy, swimming and sensory steps programmes and the use of specialist equipment such as class chairs, standing frames, walkers, rolls and orthotics (braces, AFO's, gaiters, wrist splints, pressure suits, specialist footwear)

l. To maximise the opportunities afforded by the pool environment for communication and physical development, both of which are supported by the considered, respectful and skilled use of touch

m. To maximise the opportunities afforded by the trampoline in rebound therapy sessions for communication and physical development, both of which are supported by the considered, respectful and skilled use of touch

n. To ensure there is quality in every aspect of care routines, and that they are seen as experiences to be shared, enjoyed and learned from rather than 'jobs to be done'

o. To seek to minimise the number of adults involved in a learner's interactions, particularly those involving personal care, and to always have a familiar adult present when new adults are getting to know learners

p. To ensure that where behaviour programmes involve adults using touch with learners, the plans are shared and understood by all the adults supporting that learner and are applied consistently

q. To ensure that our pupils are physically safe may necessitate the use of touch, for example to prevent arms from banging on doorframes, to maintain an airway whilst chest harnesses are secured etc

Right to Withdraw

Fox Wood School and College recognises and respects the right of all individuals to withdraw from any form of physical contact or proximity that they find uncomfortable. Learners should be given clear, meaningful cues before and during any interaction involving touch, and staff must seek permission wherever possible. If a learner demonstrates any sign of discomfort, displeasure, or resistance, the touch must cease immediately. Equally, staff members have the right to refuse or withdraw from touch-based interactions that they are not comfortable with. This principle ensures that personal boundaries are upheld and that all interactions remain safe, respectful, and empathetic. In circumstances where touch is necessary for safety or care, it should be applied minimally, for the shortest duration, and in the least intrusive manner possible.

Dear Parent/Carer,

At Fox Wood, we place great importance on respecting the personal boundaries of every child, young person and adult. We understand that touch can play a vital role in communication, care, and learning, but it must always be used in a way that feels safe and comfortable for everyone involved.

Please be assured that your child/young person has the right to refuse or withdraw from any physical contact they do not want. Our staff are trained to look for signs of discomfort and will stop immediately if a pupil shows they are unhappy. We are also committed to empowering every pupil to understand personal boundaries, to express whether or not they wish to be touched, and to use strategies and resources that help them communicate their choices confidently, and in ways that are accessible to them. Likewise, staff members also have the right to decline any touch they are not comfortable with.

We will always seek your consent for any close-contact activities, and where touch is necessary for safety or care, it will be used in the least intrusive way possible and for the shortest time needed. This approach ensures that all interactions remain respectful, supportive, and focused on your child/young person's well-being.

Why Touch Matters

Touch is one of the earliest and most fundamental forms of communication. For many of our learners, it helps them feel safe, connected, and understood. Appropriate, sensitive touch can support emotional regulation, build trust, and enhance social interaction. It also plays an important role in physical development, helping children with movement, positioning, and independence. When used thoughtfully, touch can make learning experiences richer and more meaningful.

Consent for Close-Contact Activities

I have read and understood the information provided about the use of touch at Fox Wood School and College.

I give consent for my child/young person to participate in close-contact activities as described in Fox Wood's Touch Policy.

I understand that I can withdraw this consent at any time; by notifying staff of this in writing.

Child/Young Person's Name: _____

Parent/Carer Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____