

Code of Practice for Appropriate Behaviour when working with Young People

Introduction

It is important to remember that a vital role of all youth service staff is to 'model' appropriate behaviour to young people. All workers should actively demonstrate how an individual can be anti-oppressive and non-exploitative, whilst being caring, assertive and able to join in enjoyable social educational activities.

Youth service staff need to be able to develop relationships of trust between themselves and young people, whilst at the same time being clear about the boundaries of their professional role.

Workers also need to take care that their behaviour outside of youth work does not undermine the confidence of young people and their parents/carers or the County Council, in their ability to perform their youth work role. This short document provides a brief insight into the code of practice expected of Youth Service staff. This should be considered alongside other formal guidance for employees contained in the County Council's Personnel Hand Book.

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Young People's Service, Group Manager

Appropriate professional distance to avoid accusations of sexual relationships

Youth service staff should be particularly careful to avoid situations which could be misinterpreted to portray staff as showing a sexual interest in the young people that they are working with. To avoid this situation arising, set out below are a number of 'do's' and 'don'ts'.

Staff should avoid displaying unintentional and inappropriate subliminal messages to young people whether this is through body language, physical contact or the wearing of revealing clothing.

Staff should not allow a situation to arise where they are on their own behind a closed door with a young person, unless it is as part of their agreed role.

Staff should not give individual young people lifts in a vehicle (if this does arise in an emergency situation the young person should sit in the back, whenever possible, whilst the worker drives), unless this is part of their agreed role.

Staff should never give lifts to young people as pillion passengers on a motorcycle or scooter, due to the close physical contact of this kind of transport.

All youth service staff carrying young people in their own vehicles must have appropriate 'Business use' included in their vehicles insurance policy.

Staff should not visit a young person at their home, unless as part of their agreed role. Staff must inform their line manager of their intention, in advance of any home visit, in order to obtain their approval.

Staff should avoid any unnecessary physical contact with young people, either in a casual way (e.g. during swimming activities) or when helping them to put on equipment, unless it is for health and safety reasons (for example adjusting harnesses)

Staff should not encourage physical contact from young people. However, where physical

contact does take place, such as a comforting arm, it should be young person initiated and not sought after by the member of staff. It should be right for the situation and take place in a safe environment. Alternatives should ideally be developed for when greeting or welcoming young people, such as a 'fist bump'.

On residential events staff should not sleep in close proximity to young people. Where possible there should be separate rooms/tents for staff and young people, but where this is not possible clear boundary lines should be observed (e.g. young people should sleep on one side of the room and staff on the other). Staff should not use inappropriate terms of endearment in general conversation with young people such as love or darling.

Staff should not share personal possessions or clothing with young people (except for reasons of health and safety in an emergency situation).

Staff should not over share details or information about their personal lives and circumstances. They should be mindful about the information that they do share and be cautious about how, when and why information is shared, taking into consideration if the context is appropriate. When information is shared, it should be done so in a measured approach and only enough to enable the building of positive relationships with young people. Staff should not reveal details about other members of the team. If in doubt, please seek clarity from a line manager beforehand.

Young people should be treated equally and fairly and staff should not buy or give personal gifts.

Young people should not be given the responsibility of handling keys for Centres or Mobile Units, nor should they have access to alarm codes or codes for restricted areas.

Staff should be careful not to offer, or appear to offer, preferential treatment to any individual young person.

Staff will not share with, or expose young people to any pornographic or erotic images,

either in print, electronically (including web sites and via email), or via mobile phone images.

It is not good practice to use your own personal mobile phone during Youth Work sessions, except where there is an emergency situation, and in such cases it is important that the line manager is informed.

A staff member may need to address issues with young people in the toilets or changing room areas. In these circumstances, staff should not do so alone. Staff should knock on the door and announce that they are about to come in to the room before entering.

Occasionally members of staff may find that young people show signs of developing a 'crush' on them. It is important that this is in no way encouraged, but it should not be ignored either. A clear statement that "it is not appropriate due to my position within the Youth Service", delivered in a caring and supportive style, is the correct response. Staff must immediately inform their line manager of any situation of this kind, so that it can be formally noted, and any appropriate actions recorded to support both the member of staff and the young person.

Appropriate contact and communication with young people

Staff should not invite young people to their own home in any circumstances.

It is imperative that Youth Service staff adhere to appropriate boundaries outside of work as well as during work time.

Staff should not socialise with young people they work with either in the community or through personal social media sites, on occasions where staff find themselves at a gathering where known young people are in attendance it is important that youth work values and professionalism is maintained at all times.

For instance, taking photographs of young people or buying young people drinks is not considered to be good practice.

Staff should not give out their personal phone number, either land line or mobile, or their home address to young people under any circumstances.

Staff should not use their own mobile phone to call or text young people. If the situation arises where staff think their youth work role requires them to have access to a work mobile phone, then they should discuss this request with their line manager.

Staff should not give out their social networking site contact details or their personal email address to young people. Equally, staff should not contact young people through a social networking site, unless for instance via the Council's Facebook page.

Where staff, who may have to work from home, need to communicate with young people e.g. D of E staff, then any variation to this Code of Practice needs to agree in writing by their Team Manager.

Where staff live and work in the same area, the situation may arise that their own children may wish to access youth service provision. In these cases, the children of staff members should access their nearest youth service provision. If this is the same provision that the staff member works at, certain processes should be put in to place and a specific risk assessment should be implemented. A specific worker who is not the young person's parent should be identified as the 'go to' member of staff for that individual and both staff and young people should be made aware of this. Staff should not attend residential events when their own children are in attendance.

Responsible Use of Social Media and Youth Service expectations

If a young person tries to contact you through a social networking site, staff should ignore their request or communication completely, and inform their line manager of the situation.

Whilst an individual's opinions, thoughts and beliefs are their own, the sharing of images

and text, which is not in line with anti-discriminatory Youth work practice is unacceptable. Anti-discriminatory Youth Work practice aims to address discrimination, which is often the underlying cause of social exclusion. Discrimination often leads to a person or group being unfairly treated because of a particular characteristic, such as gender, disability, age, ethnic origin, skin colour, nationality, sexuality and/or religious belief.

Youth Service staff are reminded that the sharing of obscene or oppressive material not only contravenes the ethics and values of Youth Work but could potentially bring the service into disrepute and is likely to result in disciplinary action being taken.

Staff should use the most appropriate language to achieve young people's learning, dependent on the context and situation. For instance; whilst conducting a sexual health project, whenever possible staff should use the correct biological terminology, but when this is not satisfactory to achieve the young people's desired learning outcomes, staff may have to use the 'street names' for various body parts or sexual acts. This would be achieved through the group jointly agreeing alternatives that aren't considered offensive by them.

Staff should be non-oppressive in their language, humour and discussion of their own opinions and attitudes. They are also expected to challenge the behaviour of young people and colleagues over issues relating to discrimination and prejudice in a professional manner.

Emergency Situations

In emergency situations; staff must act decisively to protect the safety of the young people they are working with. In certain circumstances this may necessitate a course of action which may put the worker at risk of having their intervention misinterpreted. In such cases it is the workers responsibility to notify the young person's family or carers and their own line manager immediately, or should they not be available, to contact a senior officer

within the Youth Service Leadership Team or the out of hours Youth Service duty officer.

In the event of a physical altercation taking place between young people, if it is appropriate for a staff member to intervene and the staff member is able to do so, this should be done with a reasonable and appropriate intervention in order to prevent further harm occurring to any person involved.

In the event of a medical emergency, medical interventions should only take place by a trained person and in line with the current First Aid Needs Risk Assessment for the Unit and the Youth Service Medications Policy.

Safeguarding/Child Protection

If a safeguarding allegation is made against a member of staff, their current role within the Service will be swiftly assessed, and depending on the severity of the allegation and the individual situation they will either be suspended or redeployed for the duration of the formal investigation process. It should be noted that the act of suspension is neutral, and does not imply guilt on the part of the member of staff concerned.

Further reading

Youth service job descriptions available on request

Ethical conduct in youth work – National Youth Agency

<http://www.nya.org.uk/resource/ethical-conduct-youth-work/>

Social media policy – Nottinghamshire County Council

<http://home.nottscc.gov.uk/working/customers-communications/publishing-online/social-media>