Lickey Hills Primary School and Nursery

Policy on the use Safe Touch in School

September 2022

The use of 'safe touch' by designated adults needs to be supervised, monitored and reviewed on a regular basis, as indeed does the policy, to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of children, parents, carers and staff.

The developmentally necessary experience or safe touch

The quality of the child's relationships with significant adults is key to their healthy development and emotional health and wellbeing.

Context:

Our policy on Touch has been developed in the context of the Local Authority Child Protection Procedures and Policies. It takes into account the extensive neurobiological research and other empirical studies relating to attachment theory and child development that identify safe touch as a positive contribution to brain development, emotional regulation, mental health and the development of prosocial skills.

To whom does it apply?

It applies to all staff and children working within our schools. Identified staff in our school are trained in the identification and use of Positive Intervention and safe touch as a developmental intervention.

Why have a policy on touch?

In order to protect children and school staff from allegations under Child Protection procedures some schools and Local Authorities have adopted `No Touch' policies. However this school is adopting an informed, evidence-based decision to allow safe touch in special cases as a developmentally appropriate intervention that will aid healthy growth and learning. Research shows clearly that healthy prosocial brain development requires access to safe touch as one of the means of calming, soothing and containing distress for a frightened, sad or angry child.

It is essential for all children to learn the difference between safe and unsafe touch and to experience having their strongest emotions contained, validated, accepted and soothed by a significant adult through behavior plans and or thrive plans. If children are behaving in unacceptable, threatening, dangerous, aggressive or out of control ways, they have not yet learned how their strongest emotional reactions can be contained, channeled and communicated safely. In recognition of this, under special, agreed and supervised conditions, staff will consider using safe touch as one of the means available to them for example to calm a distressed child, contain an angry or wild child and or encourage or affirm an anxious child or a child with low self-esteem.

Safe touch used to calm, soothe and regulate a child's emotions is a needed developmental experience. The brain does not develop self soothing neuronal pathways unless and until this safe emotional regulation has been experienced. Where children have had insufficient experience of safe touch and calming regulation this may be a priority to help the brain to develop access to thinking, judging and evaluating mechanisms. Safe touch is one of the key ways of regulating children's emotions, but it is a strategy that staff will use only under supervision and in line with a whole school Policy on Touch and positive intervention. Other means of calming, soothing and containing children's strong emotions include:

- Slowing one's pace
- Lowering the voice
- Breathing more deeply
- Initially matching the pitch and volume of the child's emotional display (shout, cry etc) and then regulating it down
- Talking slowly, firmly and quietly in an unhurried unflustered way
- Providing clear predictable consistently held boundaries

The developmentally appropriate (and therapeutic) use of safe touch is defined by situations in which abstinence would actually be inhumane, unkind and potentially psychologically or neurobiologically damaging.

Examples include the empirically backed beneficial use of touch in the comforting of a child who is in an acute state of distress and / or out of control. Not to reach out to the child in such circumstances could be re-traumatising and neurobiologically damaging, confirming or inviting anti-social behaviour patterns. Abstinence in the face of intense grief, stress and/or rage reactions can lead to a state of hyper-arousal, in which toxic levels of stress chemicals are released in the body and brain. The severely damaging long-term effects of this state have been intensively researched worldwide and are well documented. Moreover, gentle safe holding is appropriate if a child is:

- Hurting himself/herself or others
- Damaging property, and/or is incensed and out of control, so that all verbal attempts to engage him/her have failed.

Such necessary interventions are fully in line with guidelines set out in the Government Document, New Guidance on the Use of Reasonable Force in School.' (DfEE 1998). The staff team members are trained in the safest and gentlest means of holding a child which is entirely designed to enable the child to feel safe and soothed, 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 emotional experience, without such an intervention (holding) the child can be left at risk of actual physical or psychological damage.

Appropriate and inappropriate touch

We are highly aware of the current atmosphere where due to fears of abuse, touch as a natural and important form of human connection has been almost vetoed in some school contexts. Our policy rests on the belief that every member of staff needs to appreciate the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch. Hence all staff have to demonstrate a clear understanding of the difference. They have to show themselves to be highly aware of both the damaging and unnecessary uses of touch in an educational context. Touch is not to be used as an ill-thought out or impulsive act of futile reassurance/gratification or as a block to referral for psychological assessment.

Safe touch

To ensure touch is only used appropriately the following guidelines are followed:

- Parents/carers should be informed of the school policy on Touch.
- Teachers/support staff should be trained in all aspects of safe touch

- Staff members should agree the use of safe touch in discussion with their case supervisor and a part of school induction.

Adult rule:

- No adult should use touch when alone with a child.
- All school doors will have a window in them so no adult is every with a child without being able to be seen
- Use brief, gentle contact on open clothed parts of the body: hands, arms, shoulders, head, hair, shoes.
- In the Early Years there are times when a child may ask to sit on an adult's lap. Our aim is to help our children to become as independent as possible during these early years. With this in mind a child will first be encouraged to sit alongside the adult, on their own chair, while they calm down and regulate. If a child is at a point of extreme emotion then the adult must decide whether sitting them on their lap is appropriate, whether there are other adults around and whether it is the most appropriate form of helping the child to re regulate themselves. Once calm is restored for a child in extreme distress, they should be moved off an adult's lap as soon as possible, to sit alongside the adult.

All staff must be clear on these rules when working with children. They will be shared during all staff inductions and reminders given regularly in communication meetings and safeguarding training. All staff will sign on My Concern to say they have read and understood this policy.

Unsafe touch

At no point and under no circumstances should staff members use touch to satisfy their own need for physical contact or reassurance.

No unsafe touch: All staff are trained to be fully cognisant of touch that is invasive or which could be confusing, traumatising or experienced as eroticising in any way whatsoever. Should any such touch be used it would be deemed as the most serious breach of the Code of Ethics, warranting the highest level of disciplinary action.

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H. Williams