

## 2021 Staff & Student Professional Boundaries (Standard 3)

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### Introduction

This policy applies to all teaching staff, support staff, Board members, volunteers, third party contractors and external education providers (together known as 'staff' for the purposes of this policy only).

Emmaus College staff hold a unique position of influence, authority, trust and power in relation to students at the College. As such, it is their duty, always, to maintain professional boundaries with students. The Crimes Act 1958 (Vic) includes certain offences for persons, including teachers, whose position places them in a position of care, supervision or authority, with a student.

The following policy and guidelines are designed to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and some strategies to minimise the risk of boundary violations. The practice of protective behaviours always will also reduce the possibility of vexatious claims being brought against staff.

### Our Policy

Emmaus College is committed to providing a safe physical and emotional environment where all our students are respected and treated with dignity in an appropriate professional and caring manner where the risk of child abuse is minimised, and a safe and supportive child safe environment is maintained.

It is our policy that;

- staff exercise their responsibilities in a way that always recognises professional boundaries in their relationships with students
- staff identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student
- staff interaction with students is always professional, including inside and outside of school hours
- conflict of interest issues must be reported to the Principal as soon as practicable
- equal learning opportunities are given to each student without discrimination and
- appropriate consequences will be applied to staff who breach professional boundaries

### What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a student) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a staff member) in circumstances where a power imbalance exists.

The fact that College staff are in a unique position of trust, authority and influence with students means that there is always an inherent power imbalance that exists between them. It also means that professional boundaries must be established, maintained and respected at all times.

In most cases the imbalance of power is clear, however sometimes it may be more difficult to recognise especially for younger staff members who may only be a few years older than their students.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive, and given that sometimes 'grey areas' may occur, it is expected that all staff (no matter their age or experience) use their own good judgment, think very carefully about the implications and potential consequences of engaging in certain behaviours with students, and always err on the side of caution.

### When unsure about whether professional boundaries are being or have been breached ask yourself:

- Would I modify my behaviour if a colleague was present?
  - How would I feel about explaining my actions at a staff meeting?
  - Am I sharing information for the student's benefit or for my benefit?
  - Am I dealing with this student differently from others in similar circumstances?
  - Is my language or demeanour different from normal when dealing with this student?
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### Intimate Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is or can be misinterpreted as having a romantic or sexual rather than a professional basis. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual or condoned by parents / carers. Such relationships have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of students and colleagues and may cause a serious reputational risk for the staff member, and in turn, the College.

The professional relationship of staff and students may be breached by:

- flirtatious behaviour or dating
- development of an intimate personal relationship
- sexual relations
- the use of sexual innuendo, inappropriate language and or material with students
- unwarranted and inappropriate touching
- unwarranted and inappropriate filming or photography
- deliberate exposure to sexual behaviour of others (e.g. pornography)
- having intimate contact without a valid context via written or electronic means (e.g. email, letters, telephone, text messages, social media sites or chatrooms)
- going out, whether alone or in company to social events such as the movies or dinner; and
- exchanging gifts of a personal nature that encourages the formation of an intimate relationship

Staff should also be aware that developing or encouraging romantic or sexual relationships with recent former students (over 18 years of age) may violate professional boundaries and are strongly discouraged from doing so.

The imbalance of power and authority that exists in the staff / student relationship does not suddenly disappear after the student finishes their schooling. Staff should not assume that they will be protected from disciplinary action by claiming that a relationship began only after the student left the College, as there may be a reasonable belief that the emotional intimacy of the relationship developed while the staff / student relationship existed.

### Personal Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is or can be perceived or misinterpreted as having a personal rather than professional element. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual or condoned by parents or carers.

If it is the student's **perception** of staff behaviour and not the intention of the staff member that is important.

An established and expected professional relationship between staff and students may be compromised by staff:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised College events (without parent/carer permission)
- sharing personal details about their private lives with students or
- meeting with students outside of school hours without permission from the College

Staff must always recognise that their role is not to be a 'friend' or 'parent' to a student.

### Fair Learning Opportunities

The focus of teaching is effective student learning and as such, teachers are expected to support their students with their professional expertise to offer them the best education in their individual circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning between teachers and students characterises their relationship.

Teachers should demonstrate their commitment to student learning by:

- maintaining a safe and challenging learning environment that promotes mutual respect

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- recognising and developing each student's abilities, skills and talents by catering to their individual abilities and respecting their individual differences
- encouraging students to develop and reflect on their own values
- interacting with students without bias
- not engaging in preferential treatment
- not discriminating against any student based on race, sex, sexuality, disability or religious or political conviction and
- always making decisions in students' best interests

### Electronic Communications between Staff and Students

It is expected that all staff at the College will adhere to the following guidelines:

- all use of technology should be for educational purposes or for the organisation of co-curricular activities
- all email communication between staff and students should be via the College email system and reflect a professional staff / student relationship
- staff should not communicate with students via text message where it is not in a professional context
- staff should not give out their personal telephone numbers or social media contact details
- staff are not to accept or request students as 'friends' on social media or otherwise use social media to communicate in any way that is not condoned or approved by the College
- staff should not exchange personal pictures with a student
- teachers are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents / carers or students on holidays, weekends or in the evening and
- any student personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the College should only be used for College communications

### Physical Contact with Students

All staff should be aware that situations may arise that can be perceived in a manner that was not intended. For this reason, all staff at the College should adhere to the following guidelines for contact with students both inside and outside of College grounds;

- staff should avoid unnecessary physical contact with students
- minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous physical contact in the context of the situation is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory pat on the back or a handshake) and
- contact for sport, drama and dance instruction is acceptable in a class situation but not in a 1:1 situation. If physical contact is required for specific technical instructions, it must be brief and only with the consent of the student. Note that a student may withdraw consent for this contact either verbally or gesturally and staff must remain vigilant whilst engaging in necessary contact situations. Once consent has been withdrawn no further contact can be or should be made.

### Off Campus Excursions and Camps

During off campus excursions or camps the same physical contact guidelines apply as well at the following:

- checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of students changing should be done, where possible, with another staff member present and always in a manner that respects students' privacy and personal space
- always knock and advise of presence prior to entering a bedroom or dormitory and
- ensure that while in a bedroom or dormitory a strict staff / student relationship is upheld and that inappropriate behaviour, such as sitting on a student's bed is not undertaken

### Managing Conflicts of Interest

Where personal relationships with students such as family relationships and close friendship networks exist, questions of conflict of interest may arise.

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This may be more prevalent in close or rural communities where professional boundaries may be tested due to the nature and size of the community. In these circumstances, staff need to be far more diligent in developing and maintaining these boundaries. Where a staff member feels that a conflict of interest may exist, they should notify the Principal, or the Chair of the School Council if the conflict involves the Principal, and arrangements should be implemented to avoid the conflict situation if possible. For example, the teaching of students by a staff member with a conflict should be avoided.

Any significant decisions relating to these students in the College (such as the appointment of classes or selection in sport teams) should be referred to another staff member and endorsed by a supervisor.

### Disclosure of Staff / Student Interactions

It is Emmaus College's policy that all staff are encouraged to declare any interactions with students outside school hours. These interactions may include instances where the staff member is;

- related to the student
- friends with the student's parents or family or
- given parental consent to interact with the student for academic purposes outside school hours and has notified the College

Emmaus College maintains records of all declarations made by staff members related to their interactions with students, or relationships with students, that exist outside or school hours or College premises. These records are kept for a period of seven years.

### Staff Responsibilities

All staff are to:

- follow the guidelines as set out in this policy
- immediately report any conflicts of interest and
- remove themselves from decision making when a conflict has been identified.

**Where a staff member breaches this policy Emmaus College may take disciplinary action, including in the case of serious breaches, summary dismissal.**

### Implementation

These guidelines are implemented through a combination of:

- staff training and development in professional conduct
- student and parent / carer education and information
- effective management of teachers engaging in appropriate relationships with students
- effective management of conflicts of interest
- effective communication and incident notification procedures
- effective record keeping procedures and
- initiation of corrective actions where necessary

### Related Documents

[Child Safety Policy](#)

[Child Safety Code of Conduct](#)

### Review

This document has been reviewed and approved by the Education Committee in March 2021. It will be reviewed annually or as required by legislation.