

Physical Contact and Young People during Activities

This document offers guidelines for how physical contact between adults and children during activities can take place appropriately and safely. There may be a number of circumstances, particularly in a sports context when it is appropriate for an adult to touch (have direct physical contact with) a child.

- Parents need to feel confident that contact between Michaela Foundation leaders/instructors and children are safe and appropriate.
- Staff/leaders/volunteers need confidence that their actions cannot be misconstrued.
- Children have a right to say what level of contact they are comfortable with.

When is physical contact appropriate in sport?

Physical contact between adults and children in sport should take place only when necessary to:

- Develop specific skills or techniques
- Treat an injury
- Prevent an injury or accident from occurring
- Comfort a distressed child or to celebrate their success.

What are good principles to follow?

- Physical contact should take place in the interests of and for the benefit of the child, rather than the adult involved.
- Adults should explain the nature of and reason for the physical contact to the child.
- Unless the situation is an emergency, the adult should ask the child for permission, for example to aid the demonstration a specific technique.
- Children should be encouraged to voice concerns they have if any physical contact makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened.
- Contact should never involve touching genital areas, buttocks, breasts or any other part of the body that might cause a child distress or embarrassment.
- Physical contact should always take place in an open or public environment and not take place in secret or out of sight of others.
- Well intentioned gestures such as putting a hand on the shoulder or arm, can, if repeated regularly, lead to the possibility of questions being raised by observers. As a general principle adults in positions of responsibility should not make gratuitous or unnecessary physical contact with children and young people.

What about children who need specific assistance due to disability or injury?



In the case of a young person with a disability specific support or assistance may be required. The following guidelines should be followed:

- Parents/guardians or their delegated care providers should be asked to undertake all intimate or personal care tasks for their child. This is not an appropriate role for Michaela Foundation staff/leaders/volunteers and others involved in leading activities.
- When children with disabilities are lifted or manually supported, they should be treated with dignity and respect.
- Relevant health and safety guidelines must be followed to ensure the safety of the child and those assisting.
- It is recommended that those assisting receive appropriate training in order to minimise the risk of injury both to themselves and the child.

What about physical punishment?

Any form of physical punishment of children by anyone other than their parent/guardian is unlawful, as is any form of physical response to misbehaviour unless it is by way of physical intervention to prevent a young person from:

- harming themselves
- harming others
- damaging property

It is particularly important that adults understand this to protect the children in their care, their own position, and the overall reputation of the organisation in which they are involved.

What about direct contact in delivering an activity or coaching?

Some sport or activities are more likely to require coaches or leaders to come into physical contact with children and young people from time to time in the course of their duties. Examples include teaching a Campette how to use a piece of apparatus or equipment or demonstrating a move or exercise during a coaching session. Adults should be aware of the limits within which such contact should properly take place, and of the possibility of such contact being misinterpreted.

Even in sports/activities where there is a need to support or touch a child, over-handling should be avoided.

Is it ok to comfort a child or celebrate success?

There may be occasions where a distressed young person needs comfort and reassurance which may include physical comforting such as a caring parent would give. A young person may also want to mark a success or achievement with a hug or other gesture. Adults should use their discretion in such cases to ensure that what is (and what is seen by others present) normal and natural does not become unnecessary and unjustified contact, particularly with the same young person over a period of time. Contact that an adult may feel is appropriate may be unwanted or uncomfortable to a young person.