

# Guidance on Personal, Professional, and Environmental Boundaries

Guidance

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## 1 About this guidance

This guidance explores the value of boundaries and offers guidance for developing, promoting, and maintaining healthy boundaries in a youth work<sup>1</sup> role and setting. It should be read alongside policies on lone working, safeguarding and a code of conduct.

## 2 Value of boundaries

### 2.1 Why prioritise boundaries

Successful youth work is built upon a trusted relationship that supports open communication and the sharing of information. Boundaries are intended to support this effective and professional relationship, whilst identifying limits around appropriate behaviours in the relationship.

Youth workers should seek to maintain culturally and age-appropriate boundaries across areas such as self-disclosure, relationships, communication, confidentiality, language, respect, behaviour, and beliefs.

Healthy boundaries with young people will:

- ensure a safe space for all;
- build the confidence of young people, youth workers, organisations, and the wider community; and
- promote empowerment and avoid unhealthy, dependent relationships.

## 2.2 Who boundaries support

Generally, boundaries are in place to protect a vulnerable group or in relationships where there is a power imbalance. However, effective boundaries keep everyone safe – you, young people, your colleagues, and the organisation in which you work.

More specifically for:

- The professional: promoting wellbeing and avoiding burnout.
- A young person: role modelling healthy boundaries in a way that promotes empowerment and independence, avoiding dependency. (Whilst a youth worker may be a safe and trustworthy adult, it is important young people develop the skills to manage boundaries with others).
- The organisation: promoting a professional environment to deliver impactful services and mitigating undue risk by promoting physical and emotional safety for all.

## 2.3 Coproducing Boundaries with Young People

There is evidence to suggest that boundaries developed and maintained in collaboration with young people can be very impactful. Young people demonstrate an awareness of individual and organisational boundaries, as well as an ability to uphold them. So, while boundaries may be discussed as part of the youth worker relationship, it could be considered beneficial to co-produce the wider organisational parameters of boundaries as well. This not only creates a sense of shared ownership but empowers young people in the creation of their safe spaces and relationships.

## 2.4 Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to the sharing of personal information about yourself to another. Some of this may be implicit or unintentional, such as an accent you may have or the shoes you wear. Other times it is by sharing something verbally about yourself or experiences. You could consider self-disclosure in the following five ways; appearance, beliefs, behaviour, feelings and experiences. Young people can actively seek out someone whom they believe they have a shared experience with when seeking support and therefore could be an important part of encouraging a young person to open up. NYA supports the academic perspective that proportionate and relevant self-disclosure has a place in building trusting and authentic relationships. It is these more informal and open relationships that can enable connection, rapport and meaningful communication. However, whilst working with young people we must consider both the value and 'noise' that self-disclosure can play in the development of relationships with young people. It is important to assess, and reflect on, the appropriateness of self-disclosure.

Considerations include:

- Being intentional, purposeful, and conscious as opposed to accidental.
- Ensuring cultural and age appropriateness.
- Whether it is centred around the needs of the young person not for the youth workers personal gain, motive, or emotional need.
- If self-disclosure will result in the youth worker becoming the dominant discussion topic and the centre of the interaction.
- Frequency, depth, or intimacy of what is being shared.
- Expectation, responsibility, and impact of having to hold personal information.
- Its value in building commonality versus disempowering, or positive-negative impacts of disclosure.

In summary, youth work can require self-disclosure. However, the relationship should always remain centred around the young person's needs and the youth worker should continuously reflect on its appropriateness. For further thoughts around self-disclosure you may wish to read the work of [Taylor & Francis, Murphy and Ord](#).

## 2.5 Digital

Boundaries are equally important in an online space. This can include how much time is spent online, the content you are viewing, who you follow or allow to follow you, whether WhatsApp, Snap or other social channel is most appropriate. Professional accounts should always be used for any online interaction e.g., a work phone for calls or work social media profile to keep in touch about group logistics or information sharing.

Similar considerations around self-disclosure and boundaries should be considered on a personal and organisational level for digital communication. It is advisable to have reference to the use of social media and communication outside of the youth work setting referenced in a code of conduct or other policy. This ensures consistency, transparency and that consideration has been given to events such as online disclosures and appropriate relationships.

# 3 Organisational Culture

## 3.1 Maintaining and repairing boundaries

Boundaries are not always easy to define and are sometimes challenging to maintain. This is partly because there is an inherent paradox. The more a professional role requires involvement in other people's lives, the more important maintaining boundaries can become, and the harder that can be. Therefore, the practice of maintaining boundaries is a dynamic and at times emotional endeavour.

It's unlikely that you can predict or prescribe appropriate boundaries for every eventuality. However, an organisation has a duty to outline their approach to personal, professional and environmental boundaries, being clear responsibilities and the parameters within which youth workers operate and young people participate. These guidelines should always apply in order to meet the expectations of a professional role. Therefore, as an organisation you may have a position on managing the grey areas, as well evolving with change needs and environments.

A dynamic culture around boundaries will be supported by:

- establishing a consistent culture of practice at the start of any employment or relationship
- an open and communicative organisation and team
- valuing the limits of boundaries, giving the opportunity and encouragement to discuss concerns or mistakes
- empowering all workers to challenge and question boundaries
- clear guidelines when boundaries are not maintained that are consistently implemented
- having the opportunity for individuals to reflect, learn and improve
- effective quality assurance practices.

Repairing boundaries when they've been overstepped applies to a one-to-one relationship as well as between a worker and their organisation. Trust and safety should underpin your organisational approach and therefore repairing and maintaining those boundaries is paramount.

In a circumstance where an individual worker is struggling to maintain boundaries, or they have been overstepped the boundaries, it is recommended that a clear and consistent procedure is followed. This may include a requirement for the worker to:

- document the conversation in detail.
- book a one-to-one conversation with their line manager to discuss the situation and identify actions to be taken. This may include a discussion with the young person directly.
- ensuring regular, documented meetings or conversations take place to review the situation until both the worker and manager feel the relationship has re-established healthier boundaries. This should clearly capture agreements around why and how that was achieved.
- access any clinical supervision, peer support, counselling, or HR services as necessary and appropriate.

Boundaries may also be tested or become blurred when young people transition out of a youth club or service. This raises questions around ongoing contact, especially where staff may be one of the few consistent and trusted adults in a young person's life. While some organisations introduce blanket rules – for example, no contact for three years after a young person leaves – this can unintentionally create barriers to the relational and supportive nature of youth work.

A Transitional Safeguarding approach offers a more nuanced lens for practitioners to consider the continuing needs and vulnerabilities of young people, especially those aged 18 and over, whose formal access to services may have ended. In such cases, some flexibility in practice, guided by reflective supervision and risk-assessed boundaries, may be appropriate.

To support safe, ethical, and proportionate decisions about maintaining contact, it is advised that the following be considered:

### **1. Regular supervision and peer learning**

Line management 1:1s and team reflections should allow space to discuss boundary-related dilemmas. Using real-life (anonymised) case studies can support reflective learning, recognising the uniqueness of youth work and its relational value.

### **2. Thoughtful use of self-disclosure**

Practitioners should continuously ask: “Who is this for?” when sharing personal information. Referencing Jon Ord's framework from *Youth Work, Self-Disclosure and Professionalism* (Murphy & Ord) can help interrogate whether disclosures support the young person's growth or meet the youth worker's own needs.

Ask yourself:

- a. Is this relationship/contact for the benefit of the young person?
- b. Is it supportive of positive change?
- c. Are there other, more appropriate forms of support or relationships?

### **3. Applying the principle of legitimate contact**

The concept of “legitimate contact” (see [Youth Work in Private Dwellings: Safety first – no compromise](#) Page 8) can help navigate these grey areas. Legitimate contact should be documented, purpose-driven, and professionally endorsed within clear safeguarding parameters.

### **4. Proactive transition planning**

Rather than allowing relationships to end ambiguously, youth clubs can provide young people with exit support: information on local networks, ongoing help, or support opportunities that can help maintain positive direction beyond the club setting.

## 3.2 Supervision and reflective culture

Beyond any organisational guidance there is a critical need to be mindful and reflective about youth work in practice. Youth workers have a personal responsibility to continually develop, process boundary issues and have an ethical responsibility to hold each other to account.

An organisation can support the achievement of this practice by building a culture that supports the formative, normative and restorative practice of youth work, enabling positive change in youth work practice. This can be through:

- regular opportunities for reflection and discussion with line managers
- establishing peer support networks
- action learning sets
- opportunities for learning and development
- informal or formal supervision

In this context, supervision refers to a process of critical reflection about ongoing work, as opposed to objectives, goals or key performance indicators.

Organisations and individuals are encouraged to embrace all methods of personal and professional improvement that maintain the wellbeing of youth workers and wellbeing, as well as upholding organisational responsibility.

## 4 Private dwellings

Currently, there are no appropriate frameworks, legislation, or consistent safeguarding protocols in place to ensure that youth sector activities delivered in private dwellings — including the homes and gardens of youth workers, volunteers, or young people — are safe for all involved. With this in mind, the NYA believes that youth work or enrichment activities is fundamentally unsafe.

Using private homes for youth work raises significant safeguarding and professional risks. It blurs essential boundaries between practitioners and young people, which can lead to allegations, misunderstandings, or inappropriate behaviour. These risks not only compromise the safety and wellbeing of young people but also expose practitioners and organisations to reputational and legal vulnerabilities. Domestic environments are not designed or regulated for youth sector delivery, and typical household insurance does not cover youth work activities. Public liability insurance and appropriate safeguarding procedures would be required to operate safely.

In limited, mitigated, and extenuating circumstances — where there is no alternative and where not engaging would exclude a young person from accessing critical support — delivery in a private dwelling may be considered as a last resort. In such cases, organisations must ensure all recommendations set out in the NYA's guidance [Youth Work in Private Dwellings: Safety first – no compromise](#) are followed. This includes undertaking robust risk assessments, maintaining supervision standards, securing the necessary insurance, and implementing safeguarding protocols equivalent to those expected in formal youth work settings.

If youth work is being delivered in a private dwelling under these exceptional circumstances, practitioners should seek support and guidance from their local authority, Regional Youth Work Unit, the NYA, or the NSPCC, and ensure that relevant training, oversight, and accountability measures are in place

For individual activities such as tuition or music lessons, or any other group activity such as sports or religious activities, please refer to the Government [guidance](#) on keeping children safe during community activities, after-school clubs and tuition: non-statutory guidance for providers running out-of-school settings for the relevant due diligence requirements.