

Belfast Royal Academy

per vias sapientiae



**Use of Safe Handling
and Reasonable Force**

Title	Guidelines on the Use of Safe Handling
Summary	Guidance regarding i. Physical contact with pupils; ii. Safe handling; iii. Use of reasonable force.
Purpose	To ensure all staff understand the standards of behaviour expected and in particular, the acceptable boundaries of physical contact with pupils.
Operational Date	September 2026
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Introduction

All staff have a responsibility to maintain confidence in their ability to safeguard the welfare and best interests of children and young people. Integral to this is a clear understanding of standards of behaviour expected and in particular the acceptable boundaries of physical contact with pupils. School staff must accept that all physical contact can be open to scrutiny and that even perfectly innocent actions can sometimes be misconstrued.

The Code of Conduct makes it clear that whilst, as a general principle, staff are advised not to make unnecessary physical contact with children and young people, it is also unnecessary and unrealistic to suggest that physical contact should only happen in emergencies. It is not possible to be specific about the appropriateness of each physical contact, since an action that is appropriate with one child in one set of circumstances may be inappropriate in another, or with a different child. Staff should, therefore, always use their professional judgement.

As a general rule, when physical contact is made with pupils this should be in response to their needs at the time, of limited duration and appropriate given their age, stage of development, gender, ethnicity and background. Appropriate physical contact in schools may occur most often with younger pupils, for example, physical comforting can give welcome reassurance to a distressed younger child.

Purposes

The following purposes underpin the School's policy and practice to:

- create a learning environment in which pupils and adults feel safe;
- protect every person in the school community from harm;
- protect all pupils against any form of physical intervention, which is unnecessary, inappropriate, excessive or harmful; and
- develop and implement guidance for staff (teaching and non-teaching) so that they are clear about the circumstances in which they might use reasonable force to restrain pupils and how such force might be applied.

SAFE HANDLING/USE OF REASONABLE FORCE

The underpinning principles of safe handling and the use of reasonable force are that these should be in line with the rights of the child under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and should never be used as a punitive measure, i.e. as a form of punishment. This is reiterated in the abolishment of corporal punishment, making it illegal for education staff to use physical harm to punish a child under their care. In relation to seclusion, a child should never be placed involuntarily in any environment in which they are alone and/or physically prevented from leaving as a form of punishment, as this may constitute an act of 'Deprivation of Liberty' without the appropriate authority to do so. Supportive practices in meeting the health and wellbeing needs of pupils, including those with Special Educational Needs, should be agreed with the appropriate health care professionals and parents/carers of the pupil. Guidelines are offered by the Department and the Education Authority NI under its control.

Prevention of situations where physical contact with a pupil has to be considered is at all times preferable to having to react to such situations. The difficulties of achieving this in practice are clearly recognised. An ethos within the school which encourages good behaviour and a sense of shared community is important. At an individual level, teachers should focus on class and pupil management techniques (including the use of the Solihull Approach) which minimise conflict and encourage pupils to take less aggressive approaches to situations.

The School will consider:

- Environmental Risk: The school should perform a risk analysis to identify high-incident zones and determine the necessary level of oversight for each.
- Individual Risk: When the school anticipates that a student's behaviour may escalate to a point requiring reasonable force, a proactive response plan must be developed. This planning process will include consulting with the pupil and their parents and briefing of staff.
- Planned intervention in which staff employ, where necessary, pre-arranged strategies will be based upon a risk assessment and recorded within the pupil's education plan or risk assessment.
- Emergency or unplanned use of force/intervention, which occurs in response to unforeseen events, e.g. pupil fights

Definition of Reasonable Force

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, Article 4, outlines the powers a member of school staff can use in restraining students. Legislation allows 'members of staff' to use 'reasonable force' and defines a member of staff as 'any teacher who works at the school and any person who, with the authority of the Principal, has lawful control or charge of pupils at the school'. However, schools are reminded that reasonable force/restraint should only be used as a measure of last resort.

School staff may only use reasonable force/restraint:

- to prevent a pupil from committing an offence;
- to prevent a pupil causing personal injury to, or damage to the property of, any person (including the pupil themselves);
- to prevent a pupil from engaging in any behaviour prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline at the school or among any of its students.

The legislation extends to the premises of the school and when a member of school staff has lawful control or charge of the student concerned. DE Circular 1999/09 provides clarification and guidance on the use of reasonable force, by teachers and other authorised staff, to restrain or control students in certain circumstances.

Based on this legal framework, the working definition of "reasonable force" is: **The minimum force necessary to prevent a student from physically harming themselves or others or seriously damaging property but used in a manner to preserve the dignity of all concerned.**

Principles for the Use of Reasonable Force

The application of force is contingent upon the specific circumstances of each incident. Staff must evaluate the following criteria:

- **Student Profile:** Assess whether force is appropriate based on the pupil's age, sex, physical stature, medical history, and any Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND).
- **Necessity and Legality:** Physical intervention is only lawful when strictly necessary. Force is unjustifiable for resolving trivial misdemeanours or situations where non-physical alternatives remain viable.
- **Proportionality:** Any force applied must be proportionate to the severity of the behaviour and its potential consequences. Staff should always employ the **absolute minimum force** required to de-escalate the situation.

Reasonable force/restraint should:

- Only be used as a measure of last resort;
- Preserve the dignity and respect of all concerned;
- Never be used as a form of punishment;
- Never deliberately cause pain/injury to a student.

All instances of the use of reasonable force/restraint should be recorded, parents/carers should be informed and follow up support provided to the pupil and staff involved.

If Physical Contact with a Pupil Cannot Be Avoided

1. In a situation where other behaviour management strategies have failed to resolve the problem, or are inappropriate (e.g. in an emergency), there is a wide variety of circumstances in which physical contact with a pupil might be appropriate, or necessary, to restrain or control a pupil. They will fall into three broad categories:
 - a. to prevent a pupil from committing an offence;
 - b. to prevent a pupil causing personal injury to, or damage to the property of, any person (including the pupil themselves);
 - c. to prevent a pupil from engaging in any behaviour prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline at the school or among any of its students.
2. Examples of situations that fall into one of the first two categories (a and b) are:
 - a pupil attacks a member of staff, or another pupil;
 - pupils are fighting;
 - a pupil is causing, or at risk of causing, injury or damage by accident, by rough play, or by misuse of dangerous materials, substances or objects;
 - a pupil is running in a corridor or on a stairway in a way in which he/she might have, or cause, an accident likely to injure him or herself or others;

- a pupil absconds from a class or tries to leave school **(N.B. this will only apply if a pupil could be at risk if not kept in the classroom or at school).**
3. Examples of situations that fall into the third category (c) are:
- a pupil persistently refuses to obey an order to leave a classroom;
 - a pupil is behaving in a way that is seriously disrupting a lesson.
- 4.(a) Any physical contact with a pupil must not be more than that which is both reasonable and appropriate in the circumstances. These are the standards which would be applied by a court in deciding whether use of physical force in a particular case might have constituted assault and/or battery.
- 4.(b) However, some practical considerations also need to be taken into account:
- Before intervening physically, a member of staff should seek to deploy other behaviour strategies. Where these have failed, the member of staff should, wherever practicable, tell the pupil who is misbehaving to stop, and what will happen if he/she does not. The member of staff should continue attempting to communicate with the pupil throughout the incident, and should make it clear that physical contact will stop as soon as it ceases to be necessary. A calm and measured approach to a situation is needed and staff should never give the impression that they have lost their temper, or are acting out of anger or frustration, or that they wish to punish the pupil.
 - Sometimes a member of staff should not intervene in an incident without help (unless it is an emergency), for example, when dealing with an older pupil, or a physically large pupil, or more than one pupil, or if the teacher believes he/she may be at risk of injury. In those circumstances the member of staff should remove other pupils who might be at risk, and summon assistance from a colleague or colleagues, or where necessary telephone the Police. The member of staff should inform the pupil(s) that he/she has sent for help. Until assistance arrives the member of staff should continue to attempt to defuse the situation orally, and try to prevent the incident from escalating.
 - Situations where a pupil refuses to obey an order to leave a classroom need to be handled carefully as they can be a prelude to a major confrontation, especially if physical contact with a pupil is used to eject older pupils. Where a pupil persistently refuses to leave a classroom and the teacher believes that the use of reasonable force will endanger the teacher or other pupils, assistance should be summoned quickly, for example by sending a trusted pupil for help.
 - As mentioned previously, if a school is aware that a pupil is likely to behave in a disruptive way that may require the use of reasonable force, it will plan how to respond if the situation arises. Such planning needs to address:
 - managing the pupil (e.g. reactive strategies to de-escalate a conflict, holds to be used if necessary);
 - involving the parents to ensure that they are clear about the specific action the school might need to take;
 - briefing staff to ensure they know exactly what action they should be taking (this may identify a need for training or guidance);
 - ensuring that additional support can be summoned if appropriate.

5. Teachers have a duty of care to take all reasonable steps to ensure that pupils in their charge are not exposed to the risk of harm or suffer any undue injury. The discharge of this duty may necessitate the use of physical contact with a pupil but teachers should not attempt to restrain a child if they are likely, by doing so, to put themselves at greater risk of injury than would be justified by the duty of care to that child or others.

- 6.(i) What might be regarded as constituting reasonable force?

Physical intervention can take a number of forms. It might involve staff:

- physically interposing between pupils;
- blocking a pupil's path;
- holding;
- pushing;
- pulling;
- leading a pupil by the arm;
- shepherding a pupil away by placing a hand in the centre of the back; or
- in extreme circumstances using more restrictive holds.

- 6.(ii) While it is difficult to define what a court might deem to be acceptable use of physical force, the following would probably be considered to be reasonable and appropriate:

- a) a holding tactic in which a pupil is restrained without injury to enable the pupil to calm down;
- b) the holding of a pupil's arms or legs to prevent or restrict punching or kicking;
- c) the use of just enough physical force, without causing injury, to remove a weapon or a dangerous object from a pupil's grasp; and
- d) physically preventing a pupil from exposing him/herself to possible danger by leaving the premises.

7. In exceptional circumstances, where there is an immediate risk of injury, a member of staff may need to take any necessary action that is consistent with the concept of 'reasonable force', for example, to prevent a young pupil running off a pavement onto a busy road, or to prevent a pupil hitting someone, or throwing something.

However, staff should never act in a way that might reasonably be expected to cause injury, for example by:

- holding a pupil round the neck, or by the collar, or in any other way that might restrict the pupil's ability to breathe;
- slapping, punching, kicking or using any implement on a pupil;
- throwing any object at a pupil;
- twisting or forcing limbs against a joint;
- tripping up a pupil;
- holding or pulling a pupil by the hair or ear;
- holding a pupil face down on the ground.

8. Staff should also avoid touching or holding a pupil in any way that might be considered indecent.
9. Before intervening physically, teachers should:
 - a) if at all possible, warn the child that physical restraint will be used if he/she does not desist; and
 - b) make every effort to ensure that another teacher is present to act as assistant and witness.
10. While intervening physically, teachers should:
 - a) use only the minimum force necessary to prevent injury or damage;
 - b) use physical force for the minimum period necessary to allow the child to regain self-control;
 - c) talk to the child constantly and reassuringly; and
 - d) keep their own temper under control.
11. When the immediate crisis has passed and the situation brought under control:
 - a) the circumstances and justification for the physical contact with a pupil should be recorded immediately, along with an account of what happened by the teacher and witness;
 - b) the incident should be discussed as soon as possible with the teacher's line manager who should offer support and guidance;
 - c) the pupil should be given the opportunity to discuss why physical contact was necessary;
 - d) parents and/or those with parental responsibility should be informed of the facts as soon as possible; and
 - e) the incident should be fully recorded by the school.

That report should include:

- the name(s) of the pupil(s) involved, and when and where the incident took place;
- the names of any other staff or pupils who witnessed the incident;
- the reason that force was necessary (e.g. to prevent injury to the pupil, another pupil or member of staff);
- briefly, how the incident began and progressed, including details of the pupil's behaviour, what was said by each of the parties, the steps taken to defuse or calm the situation, the degree of force used, how that was applied, and for how long;
- the pupil's response, and the outcome of the incident;
- details of any obvious or apparent injury suffered by the pupil, or any other person and of any damage to property.

SECURITY IN SCHOOLS: OFFENSIVE WEAPONS ACT 1996

Since 1 September 1996, under Section 4 of the Offensive Weapons Act, it is an arrestable offence to carry a knife or other offensive weapon on school premises, including

playgrounds and playing fields. The Police have powers of entry and search in respect of such weapons on School premises.