

**Title: *Staff and Student Professional Boundaries*****Staff and Student Professional Boundaries**

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**1. STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO CHILD SAFETY**

The Geelong College has a zero tolerance for child abuse and are committed to acting in children's best interests and keeping them safe from harm. The College regards its child protection responsibilities with the utmost importance and as such, is committed to providing the necessary resources to ensure compliance with all relevant child protection laws and regulations and maintain a child safe culture.

Child abuse includes sexual offences, grooming, physical violence, serious emotional or psychological harm, serious neglect and a child's exposure to family violence. The Geelong College is committed to the protection of all children from all forms of child abuse and demonstrates this commitment through the implementation of a comprehensive Child Protection Program designed to keep children safe.

**2. INTRODUCTION**

The Geelong College is committed to providing a safe physical and emotional environment where all of 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.

The Geelong 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, at all times, 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.

**3. APPLICATION**

This document applies to all Teaching staff, Business Operations staff, Council members, Volunteers, Third Party Contractors and External Education Providers (together, known as "staff" for the purposes of Child Protection related policies only). Also, this document applies to boarding house management.

The practice of protective behaviours at all times will also reduce the possibility of vexatious claims being brought against staff.

The following guidelines are designed to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and some strategies to minimise the risk of boundary violations.

**4. BEHAVIOUR GUIDELINES**

All Staff are expected at all times to:

- Exercise their responsibilities in a way that recognises professional boundaries with regard to their relationships with students at all times;
- Identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student;

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- Interact with students in a professional manner at all times, including inside and outside of school hours;
- Report conflict of interest issues to the Principal as soon as practicable; and,
- Ensure equal learning opportunities are given to each student without discrimination or favouritism.

## 5. IDENTIFYING 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, care, 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 this power imbalance 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 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. If in doubt, staff should seek clarification from a colleague or Child Protection Office.

### 5.1 Key Questions

Staff should ask themselves the following key questions when unsure about whether professional boundaries are being, or have been, crossed,:

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

### 5.2 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 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 carry 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;

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- 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/or,
- 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.

### **5.3 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.

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 parental/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 recognise at all times that their role is not to be a “friend” or “parent” to a student.

### **5.4 Fair Learning Opportunities**

The main focus of teaching is effective student learning and as such, teachers are expected to support their students with their professional expertise so as 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 on the basis of race, sex, sexuality, disability or religious or political conviction; and,
- always making decisions in students' best interests.

**5.5 Electronic Communications between Staff & 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.

**5.6 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 in 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 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.

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During off-campus excursions, boarding, sporting events or camps, the same physical contact guidelines apply as well as the following:

- checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of students at time when they may be 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 change room, bedroom or dormitory; and,
- ensure that while in a change room, 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.

**5.8 Managing Conflicts of Interest**

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

Due to the nature and size of The Geelong College community professional boundaries may be tested from time to time. 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 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 sports teams) should be referred to another staff member and endorsed by a supervisor such as the Head of School or Principal.

**6. 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 where a conflict has been identified.

Where a staff member breaches this policy The Geelong College may take disciplinary action, including in the case of serious breaches, summary dismissal (where relevant).

**7. 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 inappropriate 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.

