

# Personal space and boundaries

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**06**



# Personal space and boundaries

This unit aims to enhance the learner’s understanding of the concept of close/closeness, personal space and social rules about touch. Learners are supported to learn how to manage interactions with others.

The activities are suggestions only as there remains the need to carefully plan and personalise learning experiences. When you know a learner well, you will be aware of how they communicate whether that be with behaviour, body language, speech or vocalisation or

using aids such as photographs, symbols or signs or other technology available to them. You can adapt or extend what is suggested to suit your learner’s age, cognitive ability and specific needs.



Links to Curriculum for Excellence	Learning intentions	Success criteria
<p>I am aware of the need to respect personal space and boundaries and can recognise and respond appropriately to verbal and non-verbal communication. <b>HWB 0-45b</b></p> <p>I am learning about respect for my body and what behaviour is right and wrong. I know who I should talk to if I am worried about this. <b>HWB 0-49a</b></p>	<p>With the appropriate level of support and resources children and young people learn:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ The idea of being close and far away from others.</li><li>▶ The idea of personal space (self)</li><li>▶ To identify the roles of familiar adults.</li><li>▶ We have a choice about who comes into our personal space.</li><li>▶ The idea of respecting others personal space.</li><li>▶ Who it is appropriate to touch, hug or kiss.</li><li>▶ To indicate to an adult if upset.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ I move closer or farther away from another person if I need to make an adjustment (prompted or unprompted).</li><li>▶ I can identify familiar adults from home, school and community.</li><li>▶ I can accept or reject contact or touch from others.</li><li>▶ I can give or withdraw permission for help I am offered.</li><li>▶ I know where on the body, and how, I can touch others.</li><li>▶ I can indicate to an adult if I am upset.</li></ul>

## Links to other themes

Learning within these other thematic units will support learning on this theme:

- ▶ Consent
- ▶ Masturbation
- ▶ My Body

## Why this learning matters

Children and young people need to learn what is okay in terms of personal space and boundaries, thinking about how they behave around others and how they should expect others to behave near them. This understanding is vital in social situations at home, in school and in the community. When children and young people learn about personal space and boundaries they are also learning about what is appropriate/inappropriate touch and this helps them protect themselves.

### Activities, ideas and supports for learning

#### There are 7 sections:

1. My personal space
2. Personal space, behaviours and being close to others
3. Touch
4. Touch: Parts of my body are covered by my pants/my private parts
5. Hugging
6. Kissing
7. A Policy on Close Physical Contact/Touch

## 1. My personal space

To help children and young people learn about being close, personal space and social rules about touch, we must acknowledge that the child or young person themselves must have their own personal space acknowledged and respected. Using/adapting these approaches they will learn about their own personal space through the lens of the relationships they have with the people around them.

### My Circle

You may already use the approach that is referred to as *Circle of Friends* to help children and young people to learn about their relationships with others. The approach can be used to help build the learner's understanding of personal space and boundaries. One of the best descriptions of the approach and how to use it to learn about personal space and boundaries is provided here [Circle of friends and personal boundaries | Raising Children Network](#) and the accompanying illustration helps explain how a circle can look.



Produced by the Raising Children Network, Australian Parenting network

In essence the circle captures the child at the centre, family next, then extended family or best friends, then people we might think of as acquaintances (peers who are not friends, family friends, this can be decided with the child), and then those professional people who help the child – teachers, carers, health professionals etc. and finally strangers.

Of course it is the creation of the drawing with the learner that is important. You build from the centre, then add the concentric rings as understanding grows. Take as much time as you need to develop the work, and with time and appropriate prompts and supports learners will explore the type of relationship they have with each person in their circle. If you make it large enough it might really help to use photographs. In time, this can be a useful tool for considering questions like: *Who can I hug? Who can I kiss? Who can touch me? It can also be used to identify: Who can I talk to about.... Who can I tell...?*

The tool can be used to help understand that there can be changes in terms of who comes into the child/young person's circle – the person who drives school transport might change, the person providing personal care might change, the teacher might change, new classmates might arrive, new friendships might develop and all can be recorded and considered as part of the circle.

### When a child or young person requires personal care

Many aspects of our work with learners on RSHP topics requires us to consider how we as adults behave and communicate with children and young people. If you work with children or young people who require personal care then it is important to consider how you ask permission to provide what they need, and then to behave in ways that acknowledge and respect what is being communicated to you. This is important even if you do something regularly. However often you help, and whoever does this, the child or young person is should be informed about what is happening. This builds awareness and understanding for the child/young person of their own personal space, that they can accept or reject contact or touch from others and can give or withdraw permission for help that is offered.

- ▶ Transitions into the provision of personal care can be marked by a particular signifier – a photograph, picture, physical object, smell or something tactile. The adult can use the signifier to lead into and ensure awareness and consent regarding what is happening. The child/young person can use it to request support. As with much of our approach to RSHP education, such an approach needs to be shared across the learner's home and school contexts as well as any additional service such as respite care.
- ▶ For some children and young people you can ask for consent to provide support and you can wait until they respond – when you know the child, you will know how they communicate agreement/ consent or not.
- ▶ Seeking a child or young person's consent can be difficult – an example might be if their favourite word is 'no' and they use it all the time. This is where it is essential to know them so you understand better the meaning of their communication.
- ▶ A key question to ask when providing care is whether the child or young person is afforded the dignity they deserve. For example, are they assured enough privacy? Is the room private to ensure no one can just walk in? When supporting personal care/toileting, does the young person remain covered as much as is possible? Are they comfortable? Using gloves and PPE can help the child distinguish between professional safe care and unwanted touch.
- ▶ There is no doubt this is complex, especially when you need a child/young person to comply with a task. For some aspects of personal care or toileting try to introduce choice to an essential task – you could ask: *Who would you like to help you to go to the toilet?* And offer a choice of two people.
- ▶ Even when you know that a child/young person might not fully comprehend the support you are giving, continue to verbalise and talk through what you are doing, be explicit and polite. An example might be a young man with an erection while having a pad changed, meaning that you cannot finish the task. You can place a towel/ cover across the young man and acknowledge you will wait with a comment such as: *We will need to wait until your erection goes away before we can put your pad on.*



## 2. Personal space, behaviours and being close to others

In these activities children and young people consider their first interaction with someone – how they say hello – and there are also activities to support learning about being too close or too far away from other people.

### Too close? Too far away?

In interactions with a child/young person use the language – as well as whatever other communication tools or supports a learner has – to explore the concept of *close* and *far away*:

- ▶ As you speak or provide support you can ask: *Am I too close? Am I too far away?* You can plan to be too close or too far away when doing something with the child/young person so that you can practice, show and explain the adjustment you make.
  - ▶ You can give a child/young person this feedback when they interact with you. Perhaps they are delivering a message but stand too far away – indicate to them and say: *I can't hear you, you are too far away, come closer.*
  - ▶ Or perhaps they are very excited to tell you something and are very close – indicate to them and say: *You are very excited, you are too close to me, take a step back please, then we can talk.*
  - ▶ Over time, with practice and feedback that should focus on positive reinforcement when they get it right, the intention would be that the learner is adopting behaviours that reflect social expectations of the distance that should be maintained between people.
- How I say hello**  
(Supporting PowerPoint available)
- The PowerPoint offers some ways in which we say hello. This can be used to build understanding of the different 'hellos' there are: a smile, a high five, a handshake, a nod of the head, a hug, a kiss on the cheek, a kiss on the lips.
- Colleagues from Newmills School have created an individual story called *Rainbow Road* for learners to consider who they meet in the course of the morning and how they say hello – helping establish behaviours that acknowledge how well a person is known and then how intimate the greeting might be – from a kiss for mum to a high five for classmates. This is an adaptation of their approach. The options in terms of how we say hello can draw from the PowerPoint presentation.
- ▶ To make the story *Rainbow Road* create a multicoloured path from card to represent the journey from home to school.
  - ▶ At the start of the road is 'home' where the child/young person might meet several people from mum or dad to siblings or other family members. The starting point would be to establish that the learner shows understanding of who familiar adults are. And can then develop and show understanding of key ways to greet others.
  - ▶ Start the story as they wake up. *Who do they see?* To be matched with: *How do they say hello?* Then they might wash, dress and go for breakfast: *Who do they meet?* and *How do they say hello?* As the morning progresses, along the way there will be others who are met – on their transport to school, at a local shop if they stop there. Then finally: *Who do they meet in school?* Matched with: *How do they say hello?*
  - ▶ Personalising the journey with photographs of people who the child/young person regularly meets will help. You can use photographs of strangers to represent people they might meet in the street, at a shop or someone who is a visitor at school.



#### Depending on your learners:

- ▶ If you want to make the story less personal/individual (and so take any pressure of individuals) you can create a character who, like the children or young people in the group, goes through a journey similar to theirs, meeting people along the way. *Who do they meet? How do they say hello?*
- ▶ You might consider whether we always use the same way to say hello even with the same person, because we can change our mind.
- ▶ If working with a small group, learners can share how they say hello to different people. *Who gives mum a kiss? Who gives wee brother a hug?*
- ▶ You might give time to practicing how we use a particular way of saying hello: *How hard or gentle should a high 5 be?*

#### Being close/too close/it is polite to leave space

We want children/young people to learn that they can make (more) space for others and also that they can say/indicate that they need (more) space. A key message is that it is polite to leave space. Some approaches follow:

- ▶ When it comes to learning it helps to use real contexts, those situations where the learner already acknowledges and understands the issue but also where they do not. Being in a queue, say for lunch, is a good scenario. If you see someone is too close to the person in front of them you can gently intervene and verbalise: *I think you are a too close to Amy....* And then depending on what you know about the child/young person you might ask what could they do? Or suggest some options or a specific way that more space might be created. If this adjustment is made then acknowledge this and verbalise what has been done right and what is now better (including for Amy).

- ▶ Positive reinforcement when children and young people get this right (whether they understand it to be so or whether accidental) is also important; acknowledging good practices reinforces those very behaviours: *Good queuing today, look you have left space between you and Amy!*
- ▶ Drama/role play scenarios might work for some learners. Set up a scene – waiting in a queue at the supermarket check-out, waiting to pay for your ticket at the cinema, sitting on a bench in the park. In the playing of the parts – you can model the activity first – you can exaggerate somewhat, have fun with the situation. *Am I too close? Am I too far away?* Of course these are also possible real world scenarios that adults from home or school can use to explain and establish what is too close or too far away.
- ▶ There are also physical ways that you can establish appropriate distances. One simple way is to establish and practice an arms-length space between people (although being careful about arms being lifted quickly and hitting someone).
- ▶ Some children and young people will be uncomfortable or distressed by another person being too close. They can be supported to understand that it is okay for them to take a step back or to the side, to move their chair/seat or if they are verbal to politely ask the other person to give them more space. Material throughout this unit reinforces messages about taking a step back, moving a chair, keeping an arms-length. You could create a bespoke PowerPoint/social story for a young person with images of them and simple text along these lines: *I don't like it when someone is too close/I can take a step back/I can move my chair/I can say 'you are too close'/I am happy when there is more space.*

In our response to Covid there has been a lot of work done to establish the amount of space encouraged between people, this will have helped some children and young people understand the concept of personal space albeit for a specific set of challenges. Post Covid it might be a good idea to leave some of those social distancing markers in place for practice.

### 3. Touch

Touch or close physical contact facilitates communication, in fact it can be fundamental to how children and young people in your setting communicate. It also gives a sense of warmth and care for another person. We know that touch is important in play, emotional support and of course in practical ways for moving and handling or providing personal care. We also need to acknowledge that there is a need to build the tolerance some children and young people have toward being touched.

Here we give some attention to notions of appropriate/'YES' and inappropriate/'NO' touch, respect for boundaries and building skills to protect oneself. Before sharing some approaches, a couple of reminders for us adults:

- ▶ As adults we must think about whether it is necessary to touch a child or young person. We are often keen to help and do the right thing. If we want to encourage self-help, resilience and age-appropriate behaviour we do need to pause and consider whether our offer of help – which often includes physically touching someone – is necessary. One example would be taking someone's hand, something we often do for a very small child but is this necessary for a teenager? Another is sitting on an adult's knee. While this may be comforting, is it appropriate for a teenager? If we allow this in school, could this add to a child's vulnerability elsewhere? We have a duty of care to teach and model good behaviour

- ▶ In terms of helping the child or young person understand that they have choices and can manage who comes into their personal space, we encourage adults to *ask permission*. Seeking and giving permission is a topic that is touched on in many of the units in this resource – there is a unit called *Consent* with lots more on how to support learning. In the context of this unit on *Personal Space and Boundaries* we would encourage adults to be explicit in asking a child/young person for permission when making physical contact or providing support that necessitates being close. As always, this requires an understanding of how the learner communicates and taking time to wait for and acknowledge a response.



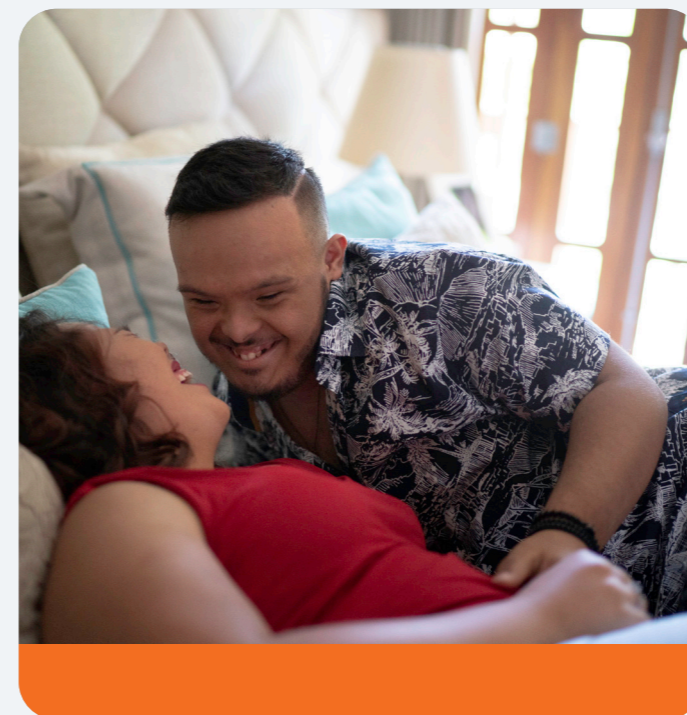
#### Touching others/appropriate (YES) touch/ inappropriate (NO) touch (Supporting download available)

There are two sets of cards provided for this activity.

1. The first presents a range of people that the child/young person might encounter in their day: mum, dad, brother, sister, grandmother, grandfather, friend, teacher, PSA, school janitor, office staff, bus driver, school canteen staff, school cleaner, shopkeeper. You can add to this list. Some learners might benefit from these cards having photographs of key people known to the learner, others might be fine with the words/visuals represented.
2. A second set describes kinds of touch: hand shake, high five, holding hands, hug, kiss on the cheek, kiss on the lips, arms round shoulders, tickle, hitting, touch private parts.

There are a number of things you can do with the sets.

- ▶ To start, the learner might need to work on understanding of each card (person or touch) one by one. As understanding grows, and over time, both sets of cards can be used to develop awareness and understanding of touch from a range of familiar people.



- ▶ Cards are also provided that help extend understanding of appropriate and inappropriate touch, these can be introduced when the learner understands the sets of cards. These say:

- 'YES' touch is a touch that makes me feel safe or happy.
- 'NO' touch is a touch that makes me feel hurt or scared.

Using these cards to extend learning, the child/young person can be encouraged to consider which touch, from which person, they consider good or bad. This might change day to day, they might normally like a kiss from mum as they leave for school but maybe today they are in a different mood.

- ▶ You can also use the cards to explore how the child/young person likes to touch others. For example, take the hug card and find out: *Who do you like to hug?*
- ▶ Discussion might also identify some things that the child/young person wants to change about how others engage with them and come into their personal space – if they do not like hugs from a classmate who hugs them, this can be shared and acted upon.



## 4. Touch: Parts of my body are covered by my pants/my private parts

(Supporting PowerPoints available)

In this unit the focus on private parts is about appropriate and inappropriate touch. In another unit the topic of Masturbation is addressed. We address masturbation in another unit because it is not always helpful to think about a child or young person touching their genitals as masturbation – it can be a soothing behaviour, it is a perfectly natural thing that many children do, and it may not be helpful to conceptualise it as a sexual behaviour or as ‘bad touch’. What we want to do with the learning activities in this unit is to make sure self-touching does not become problematic, and establish as much awareness as we can that people do not generally touch another person’s private parts.

This latter point is difficult to establish for learners for whom there might be levels of personal care that mean an adult is helping/cleaning them. Again, elsewhere, we have addressed how an adult should undertake these tasks – respecting privacy and dignity. The degree to which we can create awareness and understanding for the young person about familiar adults touching them will vary.

The concept of private is also challenging. A learner may, over time and with reinforcement, develop understanding of the idea of private and be able to apply that to private parts. Some learners may just need to be supported to develop awareness that parts of their body are covered by their pants. You can use materials from the My Body unit to support learning in this regard.

To develop an approach that is designed for the individual learner we provide a script below, one that you can adapt and build using images of the learner and their bedroom for example, and also using symbols known to them and/or images drawn from the bank of images we provide elsewhere: see the password protected images here [IMAGES - RSHP](#)

As you create your PowerPoint/social story learners may begin with slide 1, then 2 and work towards greater awareness.

**Parts of my body are covered by my pants. They are my private parts. (For girls)**

- ▶ My pants cover my vulva and my bottom.
- ▶ My vulva, my bottom and my breasts are my private parts.
- ▶ I can touch my private parts.
- ▶ I can touch my private parts in my bedroom.
- ▶ I must not touch another person’s private parts.
- ▶ If someone touches my private parts I will tell my parents, carers or teacher.
- ▶ If I need help in the shower or on the toilet my parent or carer might touch my private parts to help me.

**Parts of my body are covered by my pants. They are my private parts. (For boys)**

- ▶ My pants cover my penis, testicles and bottom.
- ▶ My penis, testicles and bottom are my private parts.
- ▶ I can touch my private parts.
- ▶ I can touch my private parts in my bedroom.
- ▶ I must not touch another person’s private parts.
- ▶ If someone touches my private parts I will tell my parents, carers or teacher.
- ▶ If I need help in the shower or on the toilet my parent or carer might touch my private parts to help me.

The final bullet about help a child/young person might need can be adapted to be more specific to the learner. Sometimes educators, parents or carers like to name health professionals here. We would suggest this should be added if a child/young person does have relevant/regular health interventions from a health professional that require them to see or touch private parts.

### Let’s Talk Pants

The NSPCC resource Let’s Talk Pants is a successful approach to teach children about privacy, private parts and to seek help from a trusted adult if they ever have any concerns. The song is a great hit with children. The animation and some of the resources may be adaptable to support work with learners with more complex additional support needs. The song is a great way to introduce every session where there is learning about private parts of the body: [Talk PANTS & Join Pantosaurus – The Underwear Rule | NSPCC](#)

## 5. Hugging

Social rules about hugging are really rather complicated, and very much dependent on what the person likes or what is culturally, age or context appropriate. Some families like to hug when they say hello or goodbye. You will often see young people hug each other when they meet. But you would not expect a young person to hug their teacher. Some children and young people with complex additional support needs may not welcome close contact but others may have developed behaviours that mean there are lots of cuddles given as part of social interactions. A balance needs to be found, and behaviours need to be established that protect the young person from inappropriate touch from others, but also protect them from hugging inappropriately and finding themselves being misunderstood and in danger.

### Who can I hug?

The activities described earlier – My Circle and YES touch/NO touch – can both be used to identify who the child/young person hugs, who hugs them, and whether these hugs are experienced as good or bad. In each case take the ‘hug’ card and sit it alongside the person identified – do they communicate a yes or a no preference? Some learners might be able to express a more developed preference of *don’t know* or *depends* to a hug? There may be a need to support the child/young person to communicate a preference to others.



**Hugging is...****(Supporting PowerPoint available)**

The PowerPoint presents some basic information about hugging. Each point in the presentation can be used for discussion and to explore the learner's experience and preferences. It says:

**Hugging**

- ▶ A hug is a way to touch someone.
- ▶ A hug is a way to say hello.
- ▶ A hug is a way to say I am happy to see you.
- ▶ A hug is a way to celebrate, like when someone scores a goal!
- ▶ A hug is a way to show love for someone.
- ▶ A hug is a way to cheer someone up if they are sad.
- ▶ If I want to hug someone I must ask them.
- ▶ If they say yes, I can hug them.
- ▶ If they say no, I must not hug them.
- ▶ Sometimes people don't like hugs.

If a child/young person does not like to be hugged this could be added to the PowerPoint, for example *I don't like it when someone hugs me, along with a message about them telling people they do not like to be hugged: If someone tries to hug me I will say 'no hugging' and step away.*

**When people hug**

When adults who are familiar to the child/young person hug, it is helpful for them to verbalise/communicate the reason to help build awareness and understanding – so at home Dad could say (communicate): *Hello, I'm happy to see you, can I give you a hug?* Or when Mum wants to give someone a hug because they look fed up she could say: *You look a bit sad, can I give you a hug?* Part of the modelling of behaviour will include pausing for recognition and permission.

**6. Kissing**

Social rules about kissing are perhaps a bit more straightforward than those for hugging, but there are still family and cultural considerations that should be understood when learning together. Communicating with the learner's family will help understand the social norms for a child/young person about kissing.

**Who can I kiss?**

The activities described earlier – *My Circle* and *YES touch/NO touch* – can both be used to identify who the child/young person kisses, who kisses them, and whether these kisses are experienced as something the young person wants/likes or not. In each case take the 'kiss' card and sit it alongside the person identified – do they communicate a yes or a no preference. Some learners might be able to express a more developed preference of *don't know* or *depends* to a kiss? There may be a need to support the child/young person to communicate a preference to others.

**Kissing is...****(Supporting PowerPoint available)**

The PowerPoint presents some basic information about kissing. Each point in the presentation can be used for discussion and to explore the learner's experience and preferences. Content can be adapted depending on whether the learner is a child or an older young person who might be learning about or reflecting on more romantic relationships. It says:

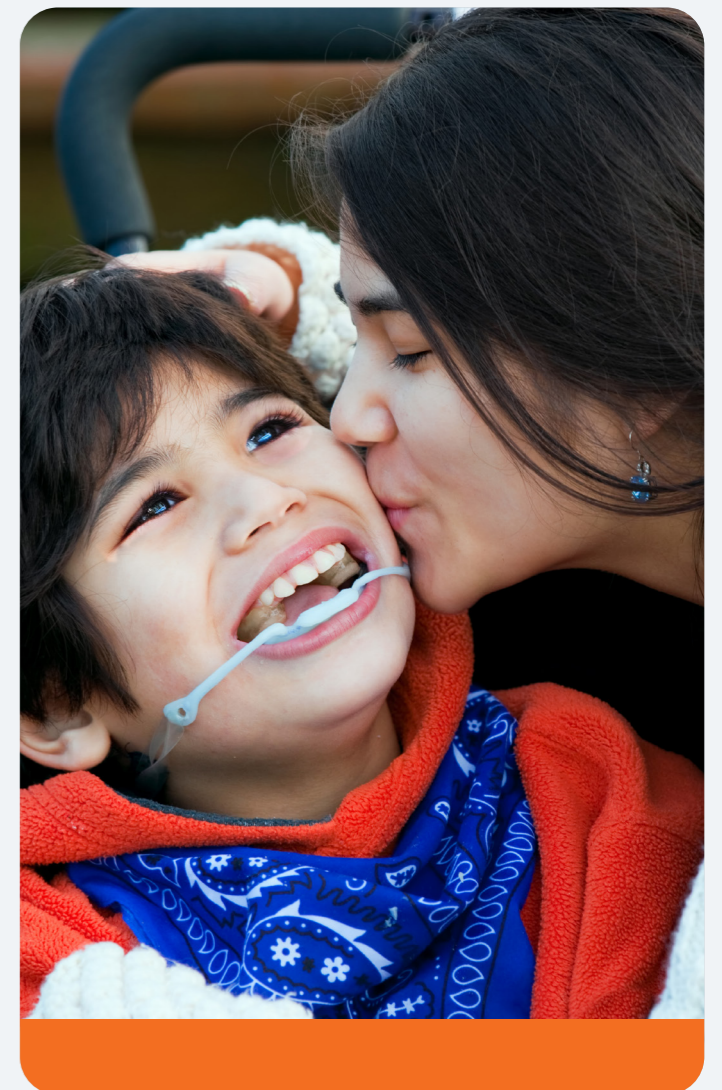
**Kissing**

- ▶ A kiss is a way to say hello to someone you love.
- ▶ A kiss is a way to say good bye to someone you love.
- ▶ Someone might kiss their girlfriend or boyfriend.
- ▶ Some people do not like to be kissed.
- ▶ There is no kissing at school.

If a child/young person does not like to be kissed this could be added to the PowerPoint, for example *I don't like it when someone kisses me* along with a message about them telling people they do not like to be kissed: *If someone tries to kiss me I will say 'no kissing' and step away.*

**When people kiss**

When adults who are familiar to the child/young person kiss them, it is helpful if they articulate the reason to help build awareness and understanding – so when the child gets home Mum could say (communicate): *Hello, can I give you a kiss?* Or when family members are leaving home they could say: *Cheerio, can I give you a kiss?* Part of the modelling of behaviour will include pausing for recognition and permission.





## 7. A Policy on Close Physical Contact/ Touch

As you consider all the ways in which you can support teaching and learning about personal space and boundaries it may be helpful to think about developing a policy for your establishment on close physical contact and touch. Such a policy might:

- ▶ Provide practical information on the range of touch between staff and children/young people.
- ▶ Acknowledge the importance of touch and physical contact in terms of communication, assistance given to children and young people for example with eating and drinking, personal care, play, emotional support, moving and handling.

- ▶ Clarify the reasons and conditions of the use of touch/physical contact and help safeguard children, young people and staff.
- ▶ Any such policy would sit alongside your existing Child Protection Policy, Guidance and practice.

Whilst policy matters it is also important to remember and reflect on the needs of the individual child or young person. What touch/physical contact is enjoyed by them? What do they benefit from? If the child/young person initiates a lot of physical contact that others find inappropriate or puts them at risk, how can we better understand their behaviours and what can we do to meet their needs?

## And finally....

### I can indicate to an adult if I am upset

Children/young people may be upset about aspects of how they manage social interactions with others. As they learn about personal space and boundaries we want them to understand and remember who they can find support from. The My Circle exercise described earlier can support children and young people to identify who they can tell if they have a question, a worry or if they are upset. Of course it is also the responsibility of adults who provide education and care to know the learner well and to be aware of changes in behaviours that might communicate worry or distress.

### Learner evaluation

Learners should be asked to show a preference as to whether they like or dislike the activities that are part of their RSHP learning. It may be possible to tell if the child/young person is enjoying their participation as it happens, this is facilitated when the adult knows the learner well and is able to interpret reactions. Whether at school or at home, you may have already worked on developing an object of reference or signifier for when you want to know a child/young person's opinion. Learner evaluation will help you to make learning more enjoyable, relevant and useful for the learner.



