



Positive Touch Policy Bennerley Fields School

Our policy on touch and physical contact has been developed with due consideration of neurobiological research and studies based on and around the positive impact of touch. Our key aim is to facilitate a safe and happy school where pupils and staff alike enjoy coming to school and experience positive relationships with all who they come into contact with. These positive relational experiences are fundamental to our positive ethos and this policy fully supports this.

The Importance of touch and physical contact

The importance of touch and physical contact reaches many levels. Besides having physical needs for food, cleanliness and shelter, we also have touch and physical contact needs. Think about this for a moment...

What is the **first sense that develops in the womb?**

The sense of **touch**.

What is the **first language baby understands** after being born?

Touch and crying.

Unlike animals, our human babies are born not able to walk or move around on their own. Our senses of sight, smell, hearing and taste only fully develop after birth. But our sense of touch develops while still in the womb. This proves how essential and important touch is for our survival. Touch is a vital component to successful social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.

Aims

At Bennerley Fields we believe that all our pupils have the right to independence, choice and inclusion and we seek to provide opportunities for personal growth and emotional health and wellbeing. However, rights also involve responsibilities, such as not harming other people's rights. Pupils unable to control their actions or unable to appreciate danger have a right to be protected; as do other students using the school and all staff have a duty of care to exercise.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the Positive Engagement Policy (Behaviour) and Physical Intervention Policy, Lone Working Policy, Intimate Care Policy and Safeguarding and Pupil Protection Policy.

Rationale

Pupils learn who they are and how the world is by forming relationships with people and things around them. The quality of a pupil's relationship with significant adults is vital to their healthy development and emotional health and wellbeing. Our policy takes into account the extensive neurobiological research and studies relating to attachment theory, pupil

development and special educational needs, for example; autism that identify safe touch as a positive contribution to brain development, mental health and the development of social skills. At Bennerley Fields we have adopted an informed, evidence based decision to allow safe touch as a developmentally appropriate intervention that will aid healthy growth and learning.

Our policy rests on the belief that every member of staff need to know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch. Hence, staff need to demonstrate a clear understanding of the difference. Equally, when a pupil is in deep distress, staff are trained to know when and how sufficient connection and psychological holding can be provided without touching. They are also trained through Pro-act Scip to physically support a pupil when needed. Through Pro-act Scip staff are trained to understand pre-emptive and preventative methods to supporting a pupil to self-regulate and manage their emotions and their bodies safely. When focusing on physical intervention, holding; staff are trained in a range of graduated responses to holding and supporting pupils and as part of this, to support pupils when required.

It is crucial that all involved in our school community understand that not all holding is restraint, indeed restraint is only ever used as a last resort (Please see Physical Intervention Policy). However at Bennerley Fields we are clear that we use appropriate touch to support our pupils to self-regulate and be ready and prepared for learning and, indeed, life.

We consider five different types of touch and physical contact that may be used, these are:

1. Casual / Informal / Incidental Touch

Staff use touch with pupils as part of a normal relationship, for example, comforting a pupil, giving reassurance and congratulating. This might include putting an arm out to bar an exit from a room, taking a pupil by the hand, patting on the back or putting an arm around the shoulders. The benefit of this action is often proactive and can prevent a situation from escalating.

2. General Reparative Touch

This is used by staff working with pupils who are having difficulties with their emotions. Healthy emotional development requires safe touch as a means of calming, soothing and containing distress for a frightened, angry or sad pupil. Touch used to regulate a pupil's emotions, triggers the release of the calming chemical oxytocin in the body. Reparative touch may include sitting on an adult's lap (if written and agreed in the Personalised Learning Plan) with face to face always being avoided and where possible within sight of other colleagues. This will be age and stage appropriate. Other examples of this type of touch include patting a back, squeezing an arm, or hand or foot massage and of course Peer Massage

3. Contact Play

Contact play is sometimes by staff adopting a role similar to a parent in a healthy pupil-parent relationship. This will only take place when the pupil has developed a trusting relationship with the adult and when they feel completely comfortable and at ease with this type of contact. Contact play may include an adult chasing and catching the pupil or an adult and pupil playing a game of building towers with their hands.

4. Interactive Play (Rough and Tumble Play)

This structured play follows clear rules and is operated under close supervision by staff. It will only ever take place when all participants are in agreement and completely understand the rules. This sort of play releases the following chemicals in the brain:

1. Opioids - to calm and soothe and give pleasure;
2. Dopamine - to focus, be alert and concentrate;
3. BDNF (Brain Derived Neurotropic Factor) - a brain 'fertiliser' that encourages growth.

Interactive play may include: throwing cushions across to and or at each other or using soft foam bats to 'fence' each other.

5. Positive Handling/Restrictive Intervention

Positive Handling/Restrictive Intervention will only be used as a last resort in order to stop students:

1. causing injury to themselves
2. causing injury to other pupils
3. damaging property
4. having a negative impact on good order

The overriding principle relating to positive handling is that the **best interests of the pupil** take precedence over every other consideration. The first line of paragraph of the Pupils Act 1989 in the UK stated that the welfare of the pupil shall be the paramount consideration. Therefore, when restrictive intervention is considered, it is regarded as a last resort and should only be used in exceptional circumstances. Restrictive Intervention will normally only be carried out by trained members of staff, however all staff have a right to defend themselves from attack, using an appropriate level of reasonable force. In an emergency, for example if a pupil were at immediate risk of harm, or about to inflict injury on someone else then any member of staff would be entitled to intervene, including those without specific training.

It is unlawful for a member of staff to use any degree of physical contact which is deliberately intended to punish a student, or which is primarily intended to cause pain or humiliation. Physical interventions should only be used when dialogue and diversion have failed to stop the behaviour and should always be the minimum needed to achieve the desired result, taking into account the age and size of the pupil. The decision to use any physical and or restrictive intervention must take account of the immediate circumstances of the situation, coupled with prior knowledge of the student and be based upon an assessment of the risks associated with the intervention. All staff need to follow set guidelines on handling students and should be trained. Any physical intervention, restrictive intervention/touch should avoid contact that might be misinterpreted as sexual and respects the cultural expectations of the individual.

How the brain is programmed

As human beings, we are socialised, programmed and conditioned *through* our sensory systems. Our brain is literally programmed through these systems via the environment as we grow. Our brain cells unconsciously and automatically develop and change in response to the physical environment that we experience, and we will only see and understand what is our personal experience and our interpretation of the experience. And whatever happens during that experience, whether it be perceived as pain or pleasure, is responsible for the beliefs and patterns that we create which then shape our lives.

To put it simply, through relational experiences and the environment we create, we can change the way the brain of a pupil (and indeed each that of each other) develops – we are brain surgeons, and as we know we create the weather!

The essentialness of appropriate touch

We define the appropriate use of touch as in situations in which abstinence would actually be inhumane, unkind and potentially psychologically or neurobiologically damaging. Indeed, studies have shown that young babies who have been deprived of early touch stimuli, build a **resistance to touch and nurturing** (despite the desperate need for positive touch) and the ability by the brain to handle and assimilate touch actually becomes impaired. In extreme cases, this lack of touch causes **listlessness and depression**. In translating these findings to a home or school setting, examples of appropriate touch would include the natural and beneficial use of touch in the comforting of a pupil who is in an acute state of distress. We have a clear understanding that to not to reach out to the pupil in such circumstances could be re-traumatising and neurobiologically damaging.

Supporting a distressed pupil

Failing to physically soothe a pupil when in the face of intense grief and/or upset can lead to a state of hyper-arousal in which toxic levels of stress chemicals are released in the body and brain. (The severely damaging long-term effects of this have been well researched world-wide and are well documented.) In such states of distress, touch can often be the only means of maintaining a connection with the pupil when he or she can no longer hear or make use of words or soothing tone/eye contact and therefore is in danger of dissociating, with all the detrimental effects that this can bring.

Moreover, it may be in the best interests of a pupil to physically hold them if they are hurting either themselves, others, or is damaging property and is so incensed and out of control that all verbal attempts to engage him or her have failed. Such necessary interventions are fully in line with guidelines set out in the government guidance 'Behaviour and Discipline in Schools' January 2016, 'Use of Reasonable Force in Schools 2013' and KCSIE September 2022.

"The use of force to control or restrain pupils" (DSCF April 2010) is included in Positive Engagement Policy (our behaviour policy). The staff at Bennerley Fields are trained in the safest and gentlest means of holding a pupil, which is entirely designed to enable the pupil to feel safe and soothed and to bring him or her down from uncontrollable states of hyper-arousal. Whilst limits and boundaries in such circumstances can be a vital corrective experience, moreover, without such an intervention, the pupil can be left at risk of actual physical or psychological damage.

Touch as part of our daily routines

The staff initiate and respond warmly to appropriate touch from all pupils and indeed each other. Each morning the pupils are both greeted into the school and then again into their individual classrooms, this could be with a hug, a hand on the shoulder or a 'high five'. Interactions in the corridor or at the above times will often include a physical interaction, again a hug or a hand on the shoulder. This creates the nurturing, warm, caring environment that is so enabling for our pupils.

The staff are also acutely aware of the current atmosphere where, due to fears of abuse, touch as a natural and vital form of human connection has been almost vetoed in some schools. We also know that it is unfeasible, unethical, impractical and unsafe to impose a 'No Touch Policy'. We know that as part of our loco parentis obligations that there are times where touch will be necessary for the wellbeing of the pupils in our care. We understand that carefully judged contingent and/or containing touch can be therapeutic. Equally, we understand that when a pupil is in deep distress that with sufficient connection, psychological holding can sometimes be established *without* touching.

Molecules of emotion

The term 'Molecules of emotion' was coined by the scientist Candace Pert in her book of the same name. As the phrase suggests our emotional states are partly generated by molecules (chemicals) produced in our brains and bodies for various purposes. These chemicals include the hormones produced by the endocrine system and the neurotransmitters used by our nervous system. At Bennerley Fields we endeavour to keep up to date with research and further develop our own knowledge and understanding to effectively support our pupils and families about the basics in neuroscience. Indeed, the field of neuroscience (study of the nervous system) is now so fast moving that new insights emerge almost daily. We know that our brain connects to the rest of our body. After all, social and emotional intelligence is as much about the body as it is the brain. We experience our emotions and our feelings as visceral sensations in the body; we 'tremble' with fear: our guts 'churn' with anxiety; our fists 'clench' with rage; we experience 'butterflies' in the stomach when we are nervous, and so on. The fact that we experience our feelings in the body reflects the reality that the brain and body are not two separate entities joined at the neck, rather they are both elements of one integrated living organism. Our responses to the world and how we develop those responses therefore depend not only on the brain, but also the wider body systems in which the brain plays a role. We are aware of this as it supports our understanding as to how the body responds to and regulates stress; this is crucial as we support our pupils and adults to develop appropriate ways to manage stress, self-regulate etc.

At the heart of good social and emotional development lies an effective stress-regulation system. This is what enables us to respond flexibly to the challenges that life throws at us. It gives us the emotional resources to cope with life's ups and downs, to find solutions to problems and to seek help when we need it. If we lack an effective stress-regulation system, however, life is a daily challenge. Potential threats lurk everywhere (Maths, literacy - writing, the playground!!) Small upsets can trigger intense feelings of anxiety or anger. Major losses can knock us flat. Feelings of happiness and contentment remain a distant dream and pupils, adults are at significant risk of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, addiction and so on.

The brain develops most rapidly during the first three years of life. It is during this period that the neural circuitry governing the stress-regulation system is laid down. As such, how the stress-regulation system is wired depends almost entirely on the nature of the early care we receive and the relational experiences we have during those critical years. For example, if our needs are met and we are regularly calmed and soothed by our care givers, we will develop

the neural pathways that enable us to meet challenges and calm and soothe ourselves if and when we get upset. Conversely, if we are neglected or abused, our brains will be wired for threat, permanently on high alert, ready to fight, flee or freeze at the slightest semblance of danger, with limited capacity to regulate ourselves.

We understand that many of the emotional and therefore behaviour challenges that pupils present derive from poorly developed stress-regulation systems. For this reason, the staff at Bennerley Fields feel it important to understand how they can best support pupils to develop good stress-regulation systems and how to do this. An awareness of the basics of neuroscience and some of the important chemicals within the body is useful, particularly when understanding the importance of touch and physical contact.

Love, Care and Bonding:

Certain chemicals such as **opioids**, **oxytocin** and **prolactin** produce positive states of love, trust, connectedness and wellbeing in the brain and body and diminish negative feelings of loneliness, fear and anger. As such, these chemicals are essential for social bonding: we tend to prefer to spend more time with those in whose presence we have experienced high levels of **oxytocin** and **opioids**. Responding caringly to pupils supports their brains and bodies to produce more **opioids**, **oxytocin** and **prolactin**, giving them greater access to positive mental states and increasing their resilience in later life. Caring physical contact, in particular, promotes the release of **oxytocin**. If pupils feel a sense of authentic belonging to their classroom, school and enjoy friendships with peers and caring acceptance from adults, this will all support wellbeing.

Joy:

Feeling joyful is a state of high arousal that involves feeling intensely alive and alert with masses of energy to do what is desired. Such feelings of joy result from optimal levels of **dopamine** and **opioids** in the brain, and optimal levels of **adrenaline** in the body. The capacity to bear intense states of joy and excitement requires an effective stress-regulation system, as without it, both brain and body can become uncomfortably over aroused. For this reason, we are aware that pupils will often need help to calm their systems down after they have experienced intense excitement and joy. For this reason, at Bennerley Fields we have chosen to use Peer Massage (See Peer Massage Policy) Not only does this calm and soothe pupils it further supports the body to release **oxytocin**, **GABA** and **dopamine** - chemicals that support pupils to be calm, alert and ready for learning.

Calm:

GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid) is one of the main neurotransmitters operating in the brain. Its role is to reduce the excitability of neurons (calming the amygdala's threat detection system among other things) and it inhibits the production of the stress hormone cortisol. Lack of **GABA** can result in high levels of fear, panic, anxiety. If pupils are not adequately calmed and soothed by the adults around them, their brain's ability to produce sufficient quantities of **GABA** can be impaired, leaving them vulnerable to anxiety disorders later in life. At Bennerley Fields staff will identify pupils who need an additional hand and or stroke to support in the self-regulation process.

Focus:

Dopamine is a chemical that plays different roles in different parts of the brain and body. In the brain, **dopamine** acts as a neurotransmitter. It plays a key role in neuronal pathways linked to attention, motivation, reward and fear, with levels increasing when there is something in our environment that we need to pay attention to. Supporting our pupils to explore and experiment activates optimum levels of dopamine production within their brains, whereas boredom, lack of stimulation have the reverse effect. It is crucial that our lessons are 'worth behaving for' are stimulating and encourage curiosity and engage the pupils.

Stress:

There are a number of chemicals that are produced in the body's response to stress. These include the hormones **adrenaline**, **noradrenaline** and **cortisol**. All three are produced by the adrenal glands in response to stressful situations. Part of the body's fight/flight response, these hormones are vital to prepare us for action. However, if levels of these hormones remain elevated for too long as a result of prolonged exposure to stress, they can have damaging effects on the brain and body, such as impairing the development of neuronal pathways. For this reason, we understand that it is vital to protect pupils from excessive levels of stress.

(Cortisol has a corrosive effect on the brain and other body tissues. It can literally kill our cells by stimulating them to death. This means that adults and pupils who are living in conditions of ongoing stress and therefore have chronically elevated levels of cortisol in the blood are at increased risk of health problems. For example, chronically high levels of cortisol have been associated with the destruction of healthy muscle and bone, impairments in cognitive, digestive and immune functioning, and poor wound healing and cell generation.)

Brain Fertiliser

BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor) is a protein that acts like a 'fertiliser' on certain neurons of the nervous system, helping to support existing neurons and encouraging growth of new neurons and new synaptic connections. It is found primarily within the brain, although it also occurs in other regions of the body. Within the brain it is particularly connected to the hippocampus and cortex, playing a vital role in learning, memory and the development of higher thinking capacities. The production of **BDNF** is increased by physical interactive play.

Teaching our pupils about appropriate touch

Our policy adheres to the belief that every individual needs to appreciate the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch.

By 'Appropriate Touch' we mean touch that is not invasive, humiliating or could possibly be considered as eroticising / flirtatious. We agree that 'appropriate' places to touch are shoulders, arms and back. Staff will invite pupils to sit closely and occasionally on their lap (upper thighs). Where possible staff will aim to turn to the side when holding a pupil therefore avoiding full frontal touch, this will ensure that these holds are not misinterpreted.

Naturally, staff are also fully aware of touch that is invasive or which could be confusing, traumatising, or experienced as eroticising in anyway whatsoever. Should any such touch be used it would be deemed as the most serious breach of the Code of Ethics warranting the highest level of disciplinary action.

Our Safeguarding Policy and Positive Handling Policy (Physical Intervention) further outline the necessity to ensure all pupils are safe in their bodies and their feelings and how the staff at Bennerley Fields work together to ensure this is the case.

Where staff are acting in the best interests of the pupil, they will be supported by the school. This Policy was implemented by the Governing Body in September 2020. It will be reviewed annually by the Senior Leadership Team.



Positive Touch Policy

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