

Solo Practitioner

code of practice for
working with children
and young people



Solo Practitioner: code of practice for working with children and young people

Introduction

This code has been compiled by the Arts Council in collaboration with the arts sector and the Health Service Executive (Information and Advice Persons). We would particularly like to acknowledge the contribution of Music Network's Continuing Professional Development Programme. We would like to thank the children, young people and parents who gave consent for their images to be used in the guidelines. The code is intended to provide support and guidance to artists working in a solo capacity as practitioners, facilitators or tutors with children and young people. It is based on, and should be read in conjunction with, established good practice guidelines such as:

- *Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People in the Arts Sector* (www.artscouncil.ie/Publications/ChildGuidelinesEnglish.pdf)
- *Our Duty to Care* (www.dohc.ie/publications/our_duty_to_care.html) and
- *Children First, National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (www.dohc.ie/publications/children_first.html)

What is a code of practice?

A code of practice is a statement of principles and best practice. It provides an ethical framework within which practitioners clearly set out their responsibilities and expectations. It provides information so that participating children and young people, parents, collaborators and the public will be informed. It provides a measurement of accountability against which to evaluate standards of practice.

Why should I develop a code of practice?

A code of practice demonstrates that you are aware of your responsibilities as a practitioner and that you are committed to best practice. It enables you to clearly set out your approach to working with children and young people and to negotiate, where necessary, with collaborators or commissioning bodies with whom you may work.

What is the legal status of a code of practice?

A code of practice is a voluntary code, it does not have any formal legal status other than to provide guidance as to what may constitute "reasonable" behaviour in certain instances. However, it does demonstrate that you, as a practitioner, are committed to best practice and prepared to take all reasonable steps to fulfill your duty of care to children, young people and others with whom you work.

Are there any laws or guidelines I should know about?

There are a number of Acts (laws) which are relevant to working with children and young people.

- *The Child Care Act 1991* confers a statutory duty on the Health Service Executive (HSE) to identify and ensure the welfare of children and young people. In this Act a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18 years, provided they are not or have not been married. This Act forms the basis for child protection services in Ireland.
- *The Protection for People Reporting Child Abuse Act 1998* provides protection for anyone reporting suspected or alleged child abuse 'in good faith' to designated offices of the HSE or An Garda Síochána, including employees who may report a concern independently of their employers procedures. It also provides protection to people against false or malicious allegations.
- *Children First, National Guidelines for the Child Protection and Welfare 1999* outlines the duties and responsibilities of everyone working with children or young people including both the relevant statutory bodies (HSE and An Garda Síochána) as well as voluntary and community organisations and individuals.

Principles of Best Practice

- **Ethical practice**
Practitioners should act in a professional and responsible manner at all times. They should be honest and fair in their professional dealings, acting with integrity, equity and respect at all times.
- **Duty of care**
The safety and well-being of children and young people who attend or participate in classes, workshops, activities and programmes is the primary consideration at all times.
- **Safe environment**
Practitioners should strive to create a safe environment to ensure the safety and well-being of both themselves and those who work with them. This relates to both the physical spaces within which they work and to the codes of behaviour they adhere to and promote in their work.
- **Non-discrimination**
Practitioners must at all times respect the rights and dignity of people they work with. They should treat all people equitably, and not discriminate on grounds of age, gender, ability, race or ethnicity, cultural or religious beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, social or economic status.
- **Working in partnership**
Even when working alone or as a solo practitioner, it is important to maintain a partnership approach to parents, participants, commissioning bodies, collaborators, customers or others with whom you come in contact in the course of your work. Partnership requires equity, good communication, transparency, feedback and reflexivity.
- **Professional conduct and development**
Practitioners should ensure that they only undertake work for which they are competent, prepared and equipped and that they engage in on-going professional development in order to maintain and develop their skills and competencies.

Key components of good practice in child protection and welfare

- * Recognition that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration.
- * Includes a code of behaviour for adults and children.
- * Puts in place health and safety procedures appropriate to age, ability, activity and setting.
- * Be aware that age, ability, gender, culture and background impact on children's needs, abilities and experiences.
- * Has an awareness of child abuse or welfare concerns.
- * Knows the action to be taken when child protection or welfare concerns arise.
- * Know the action to be taken if allegations of child abuse are made.
- * Become familiar with reporting procedures to the HSE and An Garda Síochána.
- * Work in partnership with parents and carers.
- * Develop and implement an anti-bullying policy.
- * Have a complaints procedure in place.
- * Have an accidents procedure in place.
- * Undertake relevant training in working with children and young people.

Barnstorm Theatre Company. Photo: Derek Speirs



WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Code of Behaviour for Adults¹

A child centred approach

- Treat all children and young people equally.
- Listen to and respect children and young people.
- Create an atmosphere of trust.
- Involve children and young people in decision-making as appropriate.
- Provide encouragement, support and praise (based on effort rather than achievement).
- Use appropriate language (physical and verbal).
- Offer constructive criticism when needed.
- Treat all children and young people as individuals.
- Respect differences of ability, culture, belief, ethnicity and sexual orientation.
- Respect a child's or young person's personal space.
- Discuss boundaries on behaviour and related sanctions, as appropriate, with children, young people and their primary carers.
- Encourage feedback from groups and individuals.
- Use age-appropriate teaching aids and materials.
- Be aware of a child's or young person's other commitments when scheduling activities.
- Be cognisant of a child's or young person's limitations, due to a medical condition for example.

1. Adapted from *Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People in the Arts Sector*, Arts Council 2006

Good practice

- Maintain a register with name, address, phone, special needs, attendance, emergency contact.
- Make parents or carers, children and young people aware of your Child Protection Policy.
- Maintain regular communication and keep parents or carers informed of any issues that concern their children.
- Record any incidents and accidents and inform parents or carers promptly.
- Report any child protection or welfare concerns to the HSE (duty social worker) or An Garda Síochána (out of hours or in an emergency).
- Have emergency procedures in place e.g., medical assistance, fire safety, etc.
- If working within another organisation (as a contractor) agree a code of practice and how child protection procedures will be managed.
- When working with groups ensure proper supervision and ratios of adults to children depending on age, ability and activities involved.
- Work in an open and transparent manner – letting children, young people and parents know the structure and content of your programmes.
- Plan and be sufficiently prepared, both mentally and physically for your activity.
- Evaluate work practices on a regular basis.
- Observe appropriate dress and behaviour.
- Maintain awareness around language and comments made. If you think that something you said may have caused offence or upset, then try to address it in a sensitive manner as soon as possible.

Inappropriate behaviour

- Avoid spending excessive time alone with children and young people.²
- Don't use or allow offensive or sexually suggestive physical or verbal language.
- Don't single out individual children or young people for excessive attention such as favouritism, criticism, ridicule or unwelcome focus of attention.
- Don't allow or engage in inappropriate touching in any form (see "physical contact" page 9).
- Do not engage in any form of physical chastisement or humiliation.
- Don't socialise inappropriately with children or young people outside of structured activities.

2. Excessive time is understood as time over and above the time period of the activity

Working alone or on a one-to-one basis with children or young people

It is recognised that many practitioners across a range of art forms may from time to time work alone with a small group or on a one-to-one basis with children and young people e.g., in an individual teaching capacity. Sometimes this may happen in a private venue, such as a practice room or the teacher's or young person's home. In this situation, in addition to the guidelines outlined above, the following is recommended:

- Ensure that parents, or other responsible adults (e.g., teachers or youth leaders) are informed about the structure, content and duration of the programme (e.g., teaching techniques, material covered, length of lesson).
- Ensure that parents/carers are informed about your responsibilities in relation to child protection and welfare and your code of practice.
- If working in a child's or young person's home ensure that a parent or a responsible adult nominated by the parent is present.
- Encourage parents to bring and collect children and ensure they feel welcome to wait if desired. If parents decide that children or young people may come unaccompanied, ensure that parents are aware of timing of lessons and that all parties are made aware in good time if a lesson is cancelled or if a child or young person will not, or does not attend.
- Provide copies of your CV detailing qualifications, experience and references, including any specific training or experience in working with children and young people. Provide evidence of child protection awareness training (e.g., Keeping Safe attendance certificate) and Garda Vetting if available.
- Agree aims and objectives for the programme – e.g., becoming competent with a particular instrument, area of practice or technique, preparing for examinations or grades, participating in performances. Encourage participants to have an input into choosing materials covered and accommodate preferences as far as possible.
- Inform children, young people and parents of your code of practice, and provide a written summary (e.g., short printed leaflet or hand-out).
- Clarify your expectations of children or young people's responsibilities – e.g., come prepared, practice or complete exercises between lessons, attend punctually.

- If you feel uncomfortable working on a one-to-one basis, consider working with small groups – e.g., children or young people of similar interests or levels of competence. Remember participants learn from others as well as from teachers or instructors and the opportunity to perform with or in front of others can be very beneficial.
- Provide feedback on progress regularly and keep a written record, as appropriate.
- Address any difficulties or issues promptly, and keep a written record of issues discussed, agreements reached, names of those involved and dates, as appropriate.
- Maintain open communication with all parties, and invite feedback including comments or complaints.
- If you work in your own home or rented premises, ensure that the venue is safe and free from hazards and is adequately insured for the purpose and activities undertaken.
- If you work in a shared or public premises ensure that the proprietors or management are informed about your activities and that a register of people arriving and leaving is maintained (for safety and evacuation purposes).
- Ask for a copy of the venue's health and safety statement and child protection policy and procedures, including the name and contact details of their designated child protection person. Provide a copy of your own code of practice.
- Consider who else may use or be present in the venue while children or young people are there and ensure that parents are informed as to who else will have contact with their children (including colleagues, housemates, or other residents, etc.).
- It is recommended that you do not transport children or young people alone in your own car or other vehicle. If you do decide to provide lifts, ensure that parents are fully informed and have given permission. Ensure that you are insured to carry passengers in the course of your business and that your vehicle complies with safety requirements e.g., safety belts, appropriate seats for younger children.



Waterford Youth Arts. Photo: Derek Speirs

How do I manage physical contact and touch?

Physical contact is appropriate when needed:

- * To teach or correct posture.
- * To provide comfort and reassurance e.g., if a child is hurt or distressed.
- * To provide physical assistance where needed, relevant to the age and ability.
- * To provide safety or help in an emergency.

Touch should be:

- In response to the need of the child and activity not of the adult.
- Explained and clarified in advance – check children or young people’s comfort level when doing touch exercises.
- With the child’s consent – resistance from the child should be respected.
- Open and not secretive.
- Governed by the age, ability or development of the child.
- Used as necessary in an emergency or dangerous situation.



Barnstorm Theatre Company. Photo: Derek Speirs

Should I have a code of behaviour for children and young people?

Yes. Ideally, it is advisable to develop a code of behaviour for children and young people through consultation and negotiation. The following is an outline of areas to consider in drawing up an agreed code:

- Listen to and respect children's, young people's (and adults) views and opinions.
- Listen to and follow instructions and directions from leaders.
- Use appropriate language (physical and verbal).
- Respect differences of ability, culture, belief, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.
- Respect other people's personal space.
- Don't bully other people.
- Respect property and equipment and follow all safety procedures.
- If you have a concern or a complaint ask about the complaints policy.
- If you have a concern about your own or another child or young person's safety or welfare, ask about the child protection policy.

Why do I need an anti-bullying policy?

An anti-bullying policy is an essential component of good practice when working with children and young people. Bullying can occur between peers (young or older), by adults towards younger people or by younger people towards adults. What distinguishes bullying from other forms of behaviour is that the bully always targets someone who is in some way vulnerable or less powerful. Bullying is best dealt with through openness and discussion rather than sanctions or secrecy. Clear statements such as, *bullying is not acceptable; everyone has the right to be treated equally and with respect;* help to set the tone for your activities and give a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated.

How do I deal with complaints?

As an individual practitioner it is important that children, young people or parents know that you are receptive to hearing complaints and will respond fairly and openly.

- Develop a clear, transparent procedure for dealing with comments or complaints.
- Encourage children, young people or parents to talk to you at an early stage if there is any aspect of your practice with which they are not satisfied.
- Keep a record of any complaints made, including date, persons involved, the content of the complaint and resolution reached.
- Use your complaints log to reflect on your practice. Does it indicate that you have not given sufficient information or that the goals or objectives of your activities have not been agreed? Are there areas of your practice that you can improve or amend in order to avoid complaints arising in the future?



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