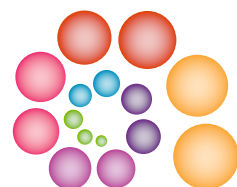




Practice Guideline: Professional Boundaries



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About this publication

Practice guidelines communicate certain expectations of Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) as outlined in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (Code and Standards)*. Guidelines also highlight how those expectations may be applied in practice. They include recommendations and provide opportunities for self-reflection and professional learning. The Code and Standards, current research and related legislation should be consulted when considering practice guidelines. Practice guidelines support the College's role to promote high standards and continuous professional learning and to govern the conduct of RECEs.

Visit college-ece.ca/en/members/resources to access all the guidelines.



In this practice guideline, you'll find information and practical guidance to help you understand:

- what professional boundaries are and the important role they play in ensuring the safety, care and well-being of everyone in the learning environment;
- the difference between an appropriate professional boundary, a blurred professional boundary and a boundary violation;
- areas where boundaries may be challenged;
- how and why boundaries might become blurred, and the associated risks; and
- the influence of contextual factors and power dynamics on professional boundaries.





• • • • • **Suggestions for using this practice guideline:**

- Take your time to review the material, additional resources and hyperlinks.
- Focus on areas that are most relevant to your current practice or sections that challenge you.
- Engage in collaborative inquiry and critical reflection during a staff or team meeting, or share in a community of practice.
- Actively engage in collaborative discussions to reflect on, challenge and question the complexities of practice.
- Use information in this resource to support policy development and/or review.
- Use this resource to support you with your Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) portfolio goal and activities.



Developing caring and responsive professional relationships that value professional boundaries is central to your practice as an RECE. Consult our companion resource, [***Practice Note: Professional Relationships***](#), along with this practice guideline, to critically reflect on your professional relationships and learn about the important role that boundaries play in maintaining the unique position of trust you hold as professionals.

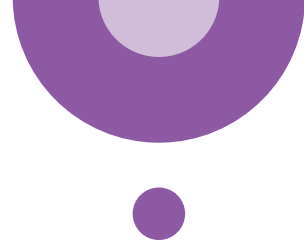
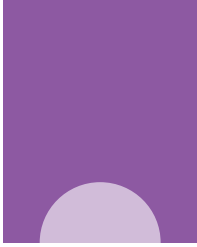


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Introduction

Professional relationships are formed and maintained within a range of professional settings and differing social, cultural and geographical contexts. Appropriate boundaries are critical to maintaining professional relationships built on care, respect, trust and integrity. Because of the unique focus the profession puts on building trusting and responsive relationships, it's no wonder that questions arise about what professional boundaries are in a care and relationship-based profession.

Professional relationships in the early learning and care environment are also quite distinct from those in other care-based professions such as nursing, social work or even teaching in a school setting, given the great deal of time RECEs spend with children and the close, affectionate interactions they have with them (including seeing to their personal care needs), and the access they may have to sensitive information about a child and/or a family's personal life.

To maintain this significant level of trust, RECEs must practise within the parameters of their professional knowledge and competence and [maintain professional boundaries](#) in their relationships with children, families and colleagues.

It's important to engage in critical thinking and reflection to understand professional boundaries and why they are important to uphold in RECEs' relationships with children, families and colleagues. With regular critical reflection, RECEs can be better equipped to identify when or if well-intentioned decisions and interactions might be veering outside of the scope of practice, the Code and Standards or another person's comfort level.



Professional boundaries in early childhood education and care



By virtue of their professional role and responsibilities, RECEs hold positions of trust and responsibility with regard to children under their professional supervision. RECEs understand the importance of maintaining professional boundaries with children, families and colleagues. They are aware of dual relationships and identify and declare conflicts of interest when they arise and take action to prevent harm to children or their families (Standard V: A).

Professional boundaries are the **limits to the professional relationships between an RECE and the individuals they care for and work with**, such as children, families, colleagues and/or community members.

The professional relationships and the boundaries in these relationships are guided by and grounded in legal, ethical and professional frameworks including:

- the scope of practice set out in the [Early Childhood Educators Act](#)
- the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#)

As the term professional boundaries suggests, setting and maintaining boundaries within professional relationships is linked to being a professional and to concepts of [professionalism](#) and ethics.

Why are boundaries in professional relationships important?

Human interaction and relationship-based work is complex. Given the nature of this care and relationship-based profession, almost all of an RECE's responsibilities have an aspect of human interaction attached to them. "Professional boundaries help differentiate between actions that are professionally appropriate and those that are inappropriate or unprofessional."^{1(p3)}

Setting and maintaining clear professional boundaries works to:

- establish and create a clear divide between an RECE's professional and personal life;
- protect RECEs as well as children and families from physical, emotional and financial harm;
- prioritize the needs and best interest of children; and
- preserve the health of the professional relationships in the early learning and care environment.

When the role of the RECE in the child and family's life is clear, it creates trust and security for everyone.



Check out this short video on [Professional Boundaries, Dual Relationships and Conflicts of Interest](#), from our Standards in Practice series.



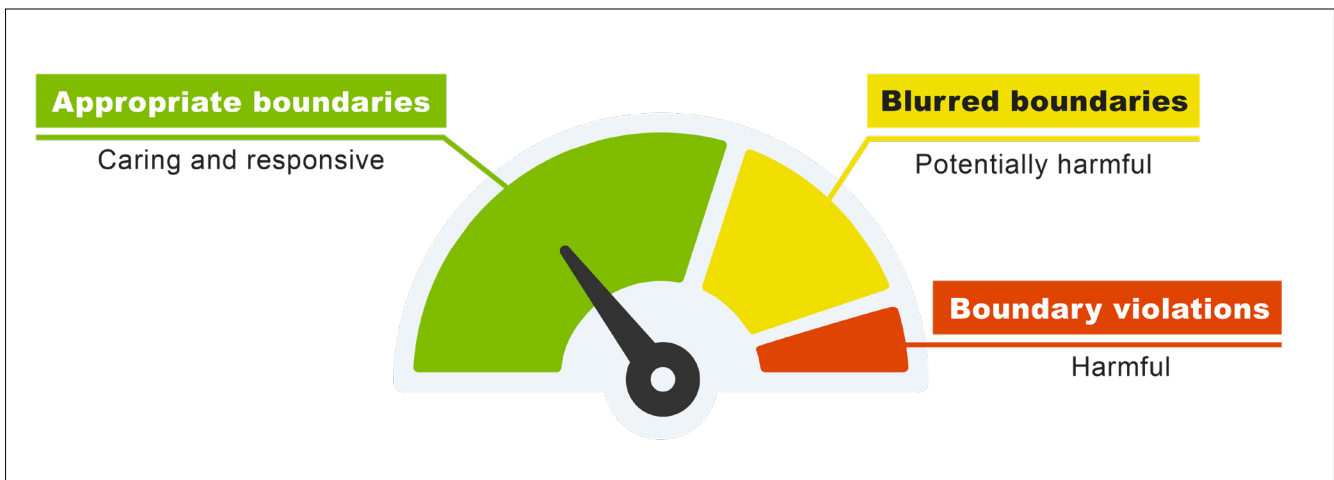
Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries

Setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries is a key responsibility in practice and is an important part of being a professional. While boundaries can sometimes be pushed or blurred by another member of the learning community (i.e., a family, colleague, child, community partner), RECEs have a professional responsibility to establish an appropriate boundary and communicate why they're setting that boundary.

However, professional boundaries are not always straightforward because boundaries can change depending on the context. They require flexibility and ongoing critical reflection to adapt to changes based on factors such as geographical location, the type of program, culture and power imbalances. We'll discuss some of these [factors](#) later in this resource.

Researchers have adopted a way of thinking about professional boundaries, which is represented below through a “boundaries gauge” model.² The model helps reflect the complexity and fluidity of boundaries in professional relationships, as well as the associated risks.

• • • • • The boundaries gauge reflects three general categories in which professional boundaries can fall:



On the left side of the boundaries gauge in the green area are **appropriate professional boundaries**. Setting and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is caring and responsive; reduces the risk of harm to children, families, colleagues and communities; and supports the use of sound [professional judgment](#) and [ethical decision-making](#).

Appropriate Boundaries



RECEs who maintain appropriate professional boundaries are better able to develop and practise within balanced professional relationships (see the Key Elements of Professional Relationships section of the [*Practice Note: Professional Relationships*](#)).

Appropriate Boundaries

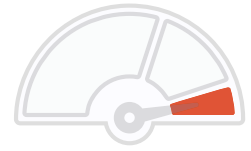
- Are practices that are put into place by the professional to promote children's rights and to safeguard children's sense of security and feelings of safety and belonging.
- Conduct or behaviour that is grounded in and guided by the Code and Standards.
- Set an ethical divide between a professional and personal relationship.
- Reduce the risk of over-involvement in a professional relationship.
- Demonstrate kindness, compassion, professionalism, accountability and are an act of care.
- Uphold the unique level of trust the public has in RECEs and uphold the integrity of the profession.
- Promote the best interest of children, families, colleagues, and RECEs.

Examples



- A parent invites their child's RECE to be friends on Facebook. The RECE decides to respectfully decline the friend request and explains that the reason is because they prefer to keep their personal and professional lives separate.
- A parent knows that their child's RECE has recently gone through a divorce and asks them for legal advice about custody agreements. The RECE lets the parent know that they are not qualified to give that kind of advice. Instead, they provide the parent with information about services for that type of support.
- An RECE asks a child if they would like a hug after they've fallen down to which the child responds with "no". The RECE respects the child's decision and offers them support in a different way.
- An RECE is in an online group chat with their colleagues. The conversation frequently turns into negative gossiping. The RECE tries to change the dialogue to be more positive and productive. However, their attempts don't work, so the RECE informs the group that the topics within the chat don't feel respectful to others and they need to exit the chat.
- A family invites their child's RECE to their wedding. The RECE thanks the family for the invitation but respectfully declines the invitation by saying, "I'm honoured to be invited to share in such a wonderful celebration, but unfortunately I won't be able to attend because it would be blurring the line of my professional role."
- An RECE refrains from checking work emails after working hours and their supervisor respects their decision.
- An RECE creates a professional social media account in order to communicate with a family, as that is their only method of communicating with their child's educators.
- An RECE responds to a child who only wants to sit on their lap by explaining that they love spending time with them, but want to make sure that everyone has a chance to sit close and feel included.

Boundary Violations



On the opposite side of the boundaries gauge in the red area are **boundary violations**. Boundary violations by an RECE cause harm, whether intentional or not, and do not support the best interest of a child, family or colleague. When there is over-involvement in an RECE's professional relationships, boundary violations are more likely to occur.

Boundary Violations

- Behaviour or conduct that is inappropriate and unprofessional. It could be a pattern of inappropriate or unprofessional behaviour or conduct, or a one-time event.
- Behaviour or conduct that is harmful, or that causes a risk of harm (whether the harm manifests itself or not).
- Result from a lack of professional judgment on the part of the professional.
- Do not demonstrate conduct that is guided by or grounded in the scope of practice or the Code and Standards.
- Are prohibited and can constitute professional misconduct and/or a criminal act.
- Diminish the level of trust the public has in the profession.

Examples



- A supervisor continues to text one of their staff with an invitation to meet up after work, even though the supervisee has said they are not interested.
- An RECE shares a story with their colleague in front of children and families about how drunk they got at a party on the weekend.
- An RECE continues to rub a child's back to help them fall asleep during rest time, even though the child has repeatedly said, "Stop". The RECE ignores the child's verbal request to stop and keeps rubbing their back anyway.
- An RECE chooses a side when a family is going through a divorce proceeding and is vocal about their opinion to the child, the parents and their colleagues.
- A sexual relationship occurs between an RECE and their placement student.
- An RECE has an intimate relationship with a parent of a child in the program and the RECE provides preferential treatment to that child.
- An RECE posts pictures of the children in the program on their personal social media without consent.
- An RECE pressures a grandparent of a child into buying the product that they're selling by refusing to take "no" for an answer and consistently bringing it up.
- An RECE disagrees with a family's political beliefs and takes it out on their child by ensuring the child is the last to get food at mealtimes.
- An RECE regularly refers to a child in the program as their "boyfriend".





There may be situations where an RECE's boundaries are crossed by another member of the learning community. For example, a parent engages in excessive communication with their child's educator by calling and texting them on weekends and late at night, or a supervisor undermines an RECE by discussing the RECE's personal life in front of children and families. A lack of respect of boundaries by another member of the learning community is unacceptable, should be addressed immediately and requires professional and respectful communication. Sections 2 and 3 of the [*Practice Guideline: Communication and Collaboration*](#) provides strategies for addressing challenging situations with families and colleagues.

Boundary violations with children, families or colleagues include sexual misconduct and non-sexual boundary violations. Non-sexual boundary violations can be emotional, physical, social or financial (Standard V: B.4). RECEs also understand that making discriminatory or racist remarks or engaging in discriminatory or racist behaviours against another individual or group of people may be a boundary violation and is an act of professional misconduct ([Professional Misconduct Regulation](#)).



Reminder on reporting obligations

RECEs have an immediate duty to report to a Children's Aid Society if they have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm or injury. Further, Standard IV states that RECEs have a responsibility to report professional misconduct, incompetence and incapacity of colleagues which could create a risk to the health or well-being of children or others in the learning environment to the appropriate authorities. This includes reporting to the College if the conduct is that of an RECE (C.11).

For more information on the duty to report, review the [*Professional Advisory: Duty to Report*](#).

Blurred Boundaries



In between appropriate boundaries and boundary violations are **blurred boundaries**. Blurred boundaries are represented in the boundaries gauge in yellow, to reflect a caution zone.

Maintaining a clear divide between the professional and personal spheres is especially challenging in a care and relationship-based profession where RECEs are forming close, trusting relationships with children, families, colleagues and the communities they serve.

Due to the nature of the profession and the different contexts that RECEs practise within, blurred boundaries inevitably occur. Therefore, it's important to have critical conversations about blurred boundaries so that RECEs can understand the associated risks and continue to foster learning environments that prioritize the care, safety, inclusion and well-being of children and families.

While a boundary violation is clearer to define and illustrate with examples, blurred boundaries can be challenging to describe because they can be nuanced and situation specific. In addition, there can be a wide range of contextual factors that influence an RECE's practice and professional relationships, such as culture, dual relationships, workplace policies and power imbalances – all of which have a direct impact on boundaries.

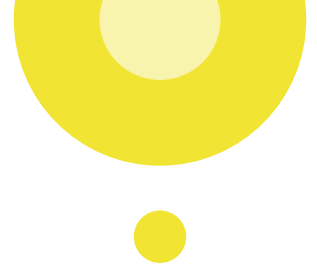
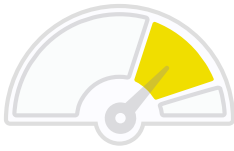
Blurred Boundaries

- Can be viewed as inappropriate and unprofessional.
- Can occur when a professional lacks knowledge, or insight into how and why their conduct is blurring a boundary.
- Do not necessarily cause direct, immediate harm, and may not happen intentionally, but if left unchecked and unmanaged has the potential to turn into a boundary violation and harm a child, family, colleague or community member.
- Can result from over-involvement in professional relationships.
- Can be restored to an appropriate boundary if identified, critically reflected upon and corrective action is taken to amend practice.

Examples



- An RECE who is friends with their colleagues becomes the centre supervisor and is now responsible for supervising those colleagues. One friend keeps trying to find out information from their supervisor because they're still friends, but the RECE starts to feel uncomfortable sharing information with them before it's shared publicly with the rest of the staff.
- An RECE tells a parent that they should really cut their son's hair because it's getting way too long and makes him look like a girl.
- A family offers an RECE a fully paid vacation so that the RECE can care for their child.
- Based on their observations, an RECE decides to send a letter home to selected families in the program reminding them to make sure their children are eating their fruits and veggies, not eating too much sugar and are going to bed by 8 pm because sleep is important.
- A supervisor has been making comments to her colleague who is attempting to take on some new leadership responsibilities, basically accusing her of wanting to steal her job. The RECE steps back from attempting to take on the additional roles out of fear of losing her job.
- An RECE lives in the same neighbourhood as some of the families from the program and offers to drive the children home to save their parents a trip.
- An RECE continually shares a personal problem with a parent at drop off when the parent is trying to get away and go to work.



Remember, a critical component related to blurring of professional boundaries is the associated risk of harm to others (i.e., children, families, colleagues, communities and/or the profession). RECEs are responsible for identifying risks and must take proactive steps to manage the risks and/or restore balance in the professional relationship by establishing an appropriate boundary.

Risks of blurred boundaries

Blurred boundaries create a level of risk which the RECE is responsible for appropriately managing. Examples of risks associated with blurred boundaries are that they can:

- Have unintended consequences and complicate professional relationships between an RECE and another member of the learning community – a child, a parent, colleague, supervisor or community partner.
- Appear to be positively influencing a relationship at first, but with additional closeness and lack of critical reflection, can result in an RECE losing sight of their professional role.
- Give the appearance to other families that an RECE is playing favourites with a particular child and/or family. This can lead to harm and diminish the trust in the RECE's ability to support all children.
- Lead to impaired professional judgment (Standard V: B.2) and poor decision-making.

Pause and Reflect

Take a moment to review the following scenarios and think about the role of the RECE and what you would have done in a similar situation or if you observed it happening.

• • • • • Blurred boundary

A child is welcomed in the morning by an RECE who reaches out to hug the child, pulling them onto their lap saying: “Come on, I need my morning hugs and cuddles!” In response to the RECE’s actions, the child stiffens and pulls away. The child verbally says, “No. I don’t want to.” The RECE realizes that their actions made the child feel uncomfortable, apologizes to the child, and allows the child space.

In this example, the RECE reads the child’s verbal and non-verbal cues and realizes that their conduct was inappropriate and made the child uncomfortable. The RECE might even engage in further self-reflection and learning about the interaction.

RECEs understand that children’s cues (verbal and non-verbal) give powerful insight into how they’re feeling about the conduct, statements or touch of an RECE.

• • • • • Boundary violation

A child is welcomed in the morning by an RECE who reaches out to hug the child, pulling them onto their lap saying: “Come on, I need my morning hugs and cuddles!” In response to the RECE’s actions, the child stiffens and pulls away. The child says, “No. I don’t want to.” The RECE continues holding the child and tickles the child trying to get them to enjoy it and smile and laugh.

In this example, the RECE fails to read these verbal and non-verbal cues which indicate that their conduct was inappropriate and made the child uncomfortable.

As a result, the child avoids the RECE in the morning and tries to sneak into the centre at drop off time to avoid the “morning hugs”. The child also mentions something to their parent about this RECE after being picked up one day. The child remains uncomfortable and avoids any interactions with the RECE even refusing to go to the washroom with them. This puts the child at risk of physical, social and emotional harm.



Areas where professional boundaries may be challenged

Take a moment to reflect on the various examples of boundary challenges that can exist between RECEs and children, families, colleagues and community members. These are areas where blurring of boundaries may be more likely to occur.

Note that the following types of boundary challenges can also overlap with each other.

Emotional / Social

- Boundary challenges related to emotional or social aspects of a professional relationship may involve friendships in the workplace (i.e., between colleagues, RECEs and supervisees, or RECEs and other staff) or friendships with families. This type of dual relationship can cause harm to others in the learning environment if unmanaged.
- Emotional and social boundary challenges can also include favouritism, asking for or seeking out favours or socialization outside of the work environment (i.e., attending a party hosted by a family), to name a few.



Sexual

- Sexual/intimate conduct and/or actions must NEVER occur between an RECE and a child – this is a criminal offence, and professional misconduct.
- Sexual/intimate relationships can at times occur between an RECE and an adult member of a child's family or between adult colleagues. RECEs understand that this dual relationship can have serious consequences and can cause harm if not managed appropriately.
- Sexual/intimate relationships between an RECE and a supervisee are considered to be professional misconduct.



Physical

- Physical boundaries can relate to touch, consent, physical space or non-verbal communication, to name a few.



Financial

Financial boundary challenges can involve:

- the acts of giving and receiving gifts from families, colleagues or children;
- lending money or soliciting financial advice from a child's parent; or
- promoting a business to colleagues or families to buy or affirm a particular product.



Communication

- Boundaries related to communication can involve the ways in which RECEs communicate with children, families, colleagues or others in the workplace. Boundary challenges can involve the particular language or words being used, use of nicknames or pet names, types or nature of questions being posed, messages conveyed, advice given, or cues (verbal and/or non-verbal) that are communicated.

Time

- Protecting and honouring personal time as an RECE is a boundary that can be challenging to maintain at times, but is an important boundary that values well-being and mental health. As professionals who dedicate their lives to caring for others, RECEs understand the importance of time away from their professional role and responsibilities to recharge, rest and care for themselves. This is deeply important to protect well-being and prevent burnout.

Technology

- Boundaries related to technology involve use of social media, email, cell phones, or other technology platforms between RECEs and others in the learning community.



Dual relationships

Dual relationships can make maintaining professional boundaries more challenging. RECEs who have dual relationships have a professional responsibility to take proactive steps to ensure they are managed appropriately and aren't resulting in impaired professional judgment. A few examples of these types of relationships include:

- an RECE's own child is enrolled at their workplace;
- an RECE teaches dance at the community centre attended by some of the children from the EarlyON where she works; and
- an RECE is the landlord of their colleague.

Consider these examples of dual relationships and reflect on how you might navigate them as a professional. What are some strategies you could implement to maintain a clear divide between professional and personal roles? For more information on dual relationships and how to manage them, review the [*Practice Guideline: Dual Relationships*](#).



Why boundaries may become blurred

• • • • • Blurring of professional boundaries in early childhood education can occur for a variety of reasons:

- The result of an action by an RECE
 - Whether intentional or not, a lapse in or lack of professional judgment, and lack of critical reflection on their professional relationships can result in blurred boundaries.
- The result of an action by a member of the community
 - Sometimes, a member of the community may engage in blurring of boundaries with an RECE. For example, a parent may offer an RECE an extravagant gift during the holidays to show their appreciation for their child's educator. The parent may be unaware that their action is blurring a boundary. In these circumstances, it's the responsibility of the RECE to set and maintain the boundary by clarifying why it wouldn't be appropriate to accept the gift.

- Geographic location, culture or other contextual factors
 - Many RECEs live and work in close-knit communities within urban, rural, northern or remote communities and may have personal and professional relationships (i.e., familial, cultural) with children, families and colleagues. The interconnectedness presents RECEs with the challenge of separating the two aspects of their life, but knowledge of proactive steps to manage dual relationships and regular critical reflection are key in these situations to ensure no harm is being done to those they care for or work with.
- Lack of workplace or organizational support and/or policy
 - Lack of workplace policy, support and guidance can result in situations where RECEs may face challenges with establishing and maintaining professional boundaries. Employers and supervisors have a responsibility to ensure that their organizational policies are reflective of practices that support the development of caring and responsive relationships that value appropriate professional boundaries. Employers also have a responsibility to check in with their staff when there are concerns and/or questions about professional relationships and boundaries. Ongoing and open communication and critical reflection about boundaries as a team can support RECEs in managing their professional relationships and create a workplace culture where educators may feel more comfortable approaching management when questions or concerns arise.

Blurred boundaries can be short-lived or a single act. As previously noted, they can impair professional judgment and lead to unintended risks or harm.

When a boundary is blurred, there's often something that will alert an RECE of conduct which may have been inappropriate, such as another individual's cues.

Once a blurred boundary has been identified, it's important for the RECE to critically reflect on the blurred boundary and consider how they can amend their practice to restore the professional relationship.



Pause and Reflect

With colleagues or independently, take a moment to pause and reflect on the following questions related to setting and maintaining professional boundaries.

• • • • • **For reflection:**

- How do you communicate your professional role to families?
- Do families have a clear idea about the role of an RECE in their child and family's life?
- Do you have a clear idea about your role as an RECE in a child and family's life?
- Do you have dual relationships with a child, family, colleague, supervisor or community partner? What can you do to ensure that within the dual relationship(s), appropriate professional boundaries are being established and maintained?
- Do you engage in regular critical reflection on your professional relationships? How might ongoing critical reflection support you in maintaining appropriate professional boundaries?
- Consider how you will establish and communicate boundaries to families (i.e., family handbook, upon enrollment, policies, through regular and ongoing communication and relationship building). What supports can help you in establishing and communicating boundaries?
- Consider how you can set a boundary when you have a friendship with a family or colleague before a professional relationship begins. How might you articulate this important part of being a professional?
- What are the differences between being *friendly* and being a *friend*? Why is this important to consider?
- Think about boundaries related to social media use and managing your accounts in a way that demonstrates professionalism. For example:
 - What might you say to a family that asks you to follow their business account and buy the products they sell? What might you say to a parent who requests a 'friendship' on a social media platform?



Influences on professional boundaries



As a part of an RECE's professional practice, they are obligated to understand the inherent imbalance of power in relationships between a professional and a child or family. It is part of an RECE's responsibility to know and understand that care must be taken to ensure that children and families are protected from potential abuse of an RECE's position of power during, after, or related to the provision of their professional services (Standard V: B.3).



Power dynamics in professional relationships and boundaries



Every professional relationship in the context of early childhood education and care will have some aspect of power dynamics at play. RECEs hold a position of power by virtue of having:

- professional knowledge, skills and experiences that children and their families rely on for their safety, health, well-being, development and learning;
- access to children's bodies and supporting them with personal care needs;
- access to personal information about a child, family or colleague;
- a position of authority as a professional in the relationships they form with the children and families; and
- a position of authority as an employer or supervisor while working not only with children and families but colleagues under their professional supervision (i.e., co-workers, students, volunteers, other professionals and community partners).

Because of the power imbalances that exist between the professional and the children and families, setting and maintaining professional boundaries is always the RECE's responsibility. This ensures that RECEs use their specialized knowledge and skills fairly and appropriately. RECEs must also consider the power they hold in their professional relationships resulting from privilege attached to aspects of identity (i.e., race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, religion, ability, education, mental health, language spoken, citizenship).

As professionals, RECEs have a responsibility to gain an understanding about how power and privilege operates to marginalize and further oppress certain groups or people and ensure they never use their privilege or power for personal gain or to oppress others – this is a boundary violation and could constitute professional misconduct.

There are also power dynamics among professionals based on role or title. RECEs in supervisory positions must think about the ways their professional role and title put them in a position of power, and how that may influence the professional relationships they form and nurture with colleagues, supervisees, students, families and other community members. They must also ensure they never use their authority to exploit a supervisee.



Read and consider the content in the [*Practice Note: Supervision of Supervisees*](#) to support you in understanding boundaries in relationships when an RECE is providing professional supervision of another adult.

Lastly, RECEs need to understand that the power dynamics and imbalances noted above can intersect with one another. Intersecting identities add complexity to the ways that power influences an RECE's practice, professional relationships and the boundaries within the relationships. Because of this, RECEs have a professional responsibility to engage in ongoing critical reflection about their beliefs, biases, position in society and their professional relationships. RECEs should also engage in ongoing professional learning to prevent the misuse of their privilege, power, or authority in professional interactions with children, families, colleagues, or community members, ensuring clear boundaries are maintained.



Read and consider the content in the [*Practice Note: Beliefs and Biases*](#) to support you in the ongoing process of identifying and addressing your beliefs and biases.



Professional boundaries across contexts and cultures

Professional boundaries can be “situation specific” and vary based on culture, circumstances, the community, the kind of program and resources available. “What may seem clear in one situation might not be clear in another program, culture, community, or even with families who share the same culture.”^{3(p8)}


Blurred professional boundaries can pose varying levels of risk to a child, family or colleague since they may vary across contexts and cultures. RECEs should recognize that determining a course of action requires critical reflection and ongoing communication, collaboration and learning that is grounded in the Code and Standards. Take a moment to reflect on the following contextual and cultural considerations related to professional relationships and boundaries, and reflect on examples of your own:

- The geographical context in which the early learning and care is provided. For example, in small or close-knit communities where dual relationships are unavoidable, professional boundaries may be blurred more often.
- Community contexts. For example, in particular contexts and communities, RECEs may hold a variety of roles that see their professional and personal boundaries overlap.

- Cultural customs, beliefs, values or practices that differ from your own. This could include cultural customs or views related to physical touch, communication styles, gift giving, role of the family and extended family in the child’s life, parenting styles, attending events, dietary preferences etc. For example, hugging and physical closeness, as well as supporting personal care needs can vary greatly depending on culture.
- Past experiences or trauma can impact an RECE’s ability to establish and maintain professional boundaries. For example, an RECE who experienced family divorce may seek ways to support a family going through a separation and might engage in behaviour that veers outside scope of practice or that blurs professional boundaries.
- Personal relationships that have turned professional. For example, an RECE hires a family member (sibling, child, partner, etc.) to work in the program, or an RECE’s family friend registers their child at the RECE’s workplace.

• • • • • Take a moment to review the following examples demonstrating how power, culture and context can intersect.

An RECE may love coming to work and look forward to hugs from the children, families or their colleagues. Additionally, in their culture hugs are often used as a warm and casual gesture. In this example, the RECE needs to consider the position of power they hold to determine if these hugs are meeting their own personal need or the need of the individual they are hugging. Consent and conversations about consent are important, because sometimes people say “yes” to those in authority positions when they would rather say “no”. It is the role of the professional in this situation to continually reflect on this and to take the lead of the children and families.



On the other hand, perhaps a child or parent is seeking physical touch in the form of a hug to comfort them or as a way of greeting the RECE. Or a family may have been used to offering hugs in the morning because it was reciprocated at the previous early learning program they attended. However, not everyone wants or benefits from hugs and that's okay. There are lots of ways to show affection and care. It's the role of the professional in these situations to respectfully articulate the reasoning for setting a professional boundary.

Navigating the contextual and cultural factors that affect professional relationships and boundaries can be challenging and complex, but it's important to avoid a rigid, inflexible, one-way approach to boundaries. Through open and responsive communication, collaboration, critical reflection, ongoing learning and unlearning, RECEs can build caring and responsive relationships that value cultural differences, equity and appropriate professional boundaries.

- • • • • This resource has highlighted the unique complexities and nuances associated with maintaining professional boundaries that RECEs may encounter. In such an interconnected world and practice, where care, closeness, trust and relationships are integral to the profession, establishing boundaries separating personal and professional spheres can be challenging.

However, as professionals, RECEs also recognize the essential role boundaries play in ensuring the safety of children, families, colleagues and themselves, safeguarding their own well-being and mental health, and maintaining public trust in the profession. Through ongoing critical reflection and dialogue about professional relationships and boundaries, using sound professional judgment, and seeking support when questions or concerns about boundaries arise, RECEs can continue to develop and uphold the caring and responsive relationships that are so fundamentally important to the practice of early childhood education and care.



Additional resources to support your learning

- [Practice Guideline: Communication and Collaboration](#)
- [Practice Guideline: Diversity and Culture](#)
- [Practice Guideline: Dual Relationships](#)
- [Practice Guideline: Professionalism](#)
- [Practice Note: Beliefs and Biases](#)
- [Practice Note: Ethical Decision-Making](#)
- [Practice Note: Professional Judgment](#)
- [Practice Note: Professional Relationships](#)
- [Practice Note: Professional Supervision of Supervisees](#)
- [Professional Advisory: Duty To Report](#)
- [Reflection Guide: Beliefs and Biases](#)
- [Standards in Practice: Standard V - Professional Boundaries, Dual Relationships and Conflicts of Interest](#)
- [Video \(3 mins\): Snapshot: Standard V - Professional Boundaries, Dual Relationships and Conflicts of Interest](#)



References

- ¹ Feeney, S., Freeman, N.K., & Moravcik, E. (2020). [Focus on ethics. Professional boundaries in early childhood education](#). *Young Children*, 75(5).
- ² Cooper, F. (2012). *Professional boundaries in social work and social care – A practical guide to understanding, maintaining and managing your professional boundaries*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- ³ Feeney, S., Freeman, N.K., & Moravcik, E.



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