

SAMPLE TRAINING SCENARIOS FOR CODE OF CONDUCT

Scenario 1

Mike is a second-year camp counselor at your camp. He is sensitive and connects easily with those campers who are unsure of themselves and hold back from the rest of the crowd. You are a first-year counselor, but are very sensitive to the code of conduct and the importance of maintaining appropriate boundaries between adults and children. Mike's presence, personality and help with the marginal children help the camp to be a fun and formative time for all those who attend. You also learned that Mike has stayed in touch with one of the more troubled girls from last year's camp. However, you have also observed that Mike seems to be unable to hear directions about proper boundaries between camp staff and campers. On two or three occasions Mike has been reminded by his supervisor that it is inappropriate for girls to sit on his lap. Yet Mike continues with these activities, saying to you and to his supervisor, "I just can't say no to a kid who wants to play, besides, it's just harmless fun anyway." As a camp counselor, you should:

- a) Go to the camp director and demand that Mike should be immediately fired.
- b) Agree that you are probably overreacting since the children seem to enjoy Mike's attention and continue to support him in his special relationships with children.
- c) Bring the situation to the attention of Mike's supervisor who should then remind Mike that the camp's efforts to protect children are taken very seriously, that he has repeatedly ignored the Code of Conduct, that he is watching him, and that another violation will result in his dismissal.
- d) Keep a close eye on the children for any signs, symptoms, or behaviors that would indicate they are being sexually abused.

Feedback:

A is not the best answer. Although Mike has been exhibiting inappropriate behavior with the girls, and his supervisor has reminded him that it is inappropriate, he has not yet told him to stop, or discussed any clear, specific consequences that will result if his behavior continues.

B is not the best answer. No one wants to believe the worst about anybody, but a healthy suspicion is warranted when the safety of children is at risk. Ignoring your initial "gut" instincts and rationalizing Mike's behavior is dangerous. Mike may also be grooming you.

C is the correct answer. Mike has already exhibited some of the warning signs of an offender who is grooming children. He has repeatedly ignored his supervisor's directions about appropriate behavior and the Code of Conduct. It's obvious that he sees himself as "above the rules". He blames the girls who "want to play" and minimizes his own role by saying that it's just "harmless fun." His supervisor's ultimatum and follow-through are appropriate. Mike's outside relationship with the troubled girl from last year should also be explored.

D is not the best answer by itself since, if Mike is actively grooming the children, they may not exhibit those behaviors until they are actually abused. You are trying to *prevent* sexual abuse, not wait until it happens. Certainly, being aware of the children's behavior is important, but it is Mike's behavior, not the children's, that should be your main concern.

Scenario 2

Mr. Roberts is very popular with the students. He is sensitive and connects easily with students who are unsure of themselves, hold back from the rest of the crowd, or are marginalized. He often converses and jokes with the students in the halls between classes, and they respond in kind. It is common for him to greet students and staff with a hug and sometimes with a pat on the back. A male student has recently complained to the administration that Mr. Roberts' hugs and physical contact make him uncomfortable. Mr. Roberts seems to be unable to hear directions about proper boundaries between faculty and students. He has been told by the principal to stop all physical contact with students and staff. He agrees to try, but says he can't promise anything because that's just the way he is and he isn't doing anything wrong.

This scenario raises some interesting questions, red flags, and possible concerns. Is Mr. Roberts a gregarious and enthusiastic teacher who uses his "big" personality to form relationships with students, gain their trust and then try to help them "come out of their shell" or is there something more sinister going on that may warrant a call to the Department of Children and Families? Is this situation (or could this situation become) a violation of the law, the school's "code of conduct" or other district policies? Is the principal overreacting or might the situation contain potential negative consequences for the teacher, the student who complained, and for the school community? What responses and actions might result in a more positive outcome and/or what proactive measures might be considered?

Most schools and youth-serving organizations have created codes of conduct that provide written guidance to employees and volunteers about maintaining appropriate, respectful and professional physical, emotional, and sexual boundaries with minors in their care. In doing so, adults are reminded of their own vulnerability as well as the vulnerability of children to harm by means of an adult's inappropriate speech, gestures, attitudes and – in particular – physical contact that exploits, abuses or harasses. Clearly, their intent is not to prohibit all forms of appropriate physical contact with children – and appropriateness can look different in pre-school contexts as

opposed to middle and high school contexts – but to enjoin teachers and others to use “common sense” with any physical contact or touching to eliminate possible misunderstandings.

Before touching another person, especially a minor, we must be aware of how the physical touch will be perceived or received, and whether it would be an appropriate expression of greeting, care, concern or celebration. Codes of conduct should also identify acceptable forms of touching a child (high fives, handshakes, fist bumps, pats on the back or shoulder, or side hugs) and the types of physical contact to be avoided (tickling, rough-housing, wrestling, piggyback rides, any type of massage, and any form of unwanted affection). If observed or reported, these types of behaviors raise the proverbial “red flags” and need to be investigated.

Getting back to Mr. Roberts, as an extension of his popularity and ease of conversation with students, he has used physical touch to convey his friendship towards them and to make them feel at ease with him. However, this kind of touching can be (and has been) construed as inappropriate by some students who may feel that their personal space has been invaded or even worse, that the touching is sexual in nature. If students are uncomfortable with being touched, they do not feel safe and this will impact their learning environment.

Mr. Roberts does not seem to be able to interpret the “signals” given off by students who are (and others who may be) uncomfortable with his physical means of expression. Although all teachers want to maintain positive rapport with students, teachers are not friends; they are professionals and should maintain professional interactions. The student’s complaint was not about an incident of sexual abuse – but misinterpretations of intent by even a single student can lead to a teacher having to defend his or her actions, vulnerability to claims of misconduct, and to serious consequences for both the educator and for the school.

The principal acted appropriately in handling the situation internally, bringing the student’s concerns to Mr. Roberts, and prohibiting similar behavior in the future with both students and staff. The conversation and direction should be documented in writing, with consequences clearly outlined – up to and including dismissal. At this point, there is no need to involve children’s protective services, but the principal needs to be vigilant and continue monitoring Mr. Roberts’ interactions – particularly in light of the fact that Mr. Roberts himself cannot commit to compliance with the direction. In this kind of case, the students’ perception of the nature of the touching must be taken seriously. However, it must also be balanced by the observations of others and the response of the teacher in question. Students must feel that they have been listened to and that efforts will be made to secure their environment. The principal should also talk with Mr. Roberts about alternative ways for him to demonstrate support and acceptance toward his students while respecting their personal space and avoiding physical contact. If the behavior is repeated, and/or if additional complaints are received, it would be a stronger indication that something more serious is going on, and that the authorities may need to be involved.