



Maintaining Professional Boundaries When the Work Feels Personal

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INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

- Children as vulnerable community members
- Adult responsibility to ensure safety and protection
- Importance of boundaries in advocacy roles

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

- Definition of professional boundaries-guidelines, limits, and expectations that define safe, respectful, and appropriate interactions between professionals and the people they serve
- Why boundaries matter:
 - - Protect children from harm or exploitation
 - - Protect professionals from liability and risks
 - - Support healthy, trusting relationships

BIAS, BELIEFS, AND BOUNDARY RISKS

Impact of
personal biases on
decision-making

Beliefs and
emotions can blur
boundaries

Warning signs:
favoritism, over-
identification,
secrecy



- Strong feelings
(positive or negative)
may cloud judgment



- Example:
Oversharing with a
client you relate to



- Risk of over-
involvement or
disengagement

BLURRED ROLES DUE TO EMOTIONAL BIAS

POWER IMBALANCES AND STEREOTYPING

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graph TD; A["- Biases tied to gender, race, or social background affect decisions"] --> B["- Example: Assuming one group needs more support"]; B --> C["- Can reinforce inequality and harm trust"]
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  - Example: Assuming one group needs more support
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## RATIONALIZING BOUNDARY CROSSINGS

- Personal values or experiences justify bending rules
- Example: Sharing personal phone number selectively
- Leads to inconsistent practice

## RISK TO TRUST AND PROFESSIONALISM



- BIAS-DRIVEN  
DECISIONS DAMAGE  
FAIRNESS



- REDUCES TRUST  
AND CREDIBILITY

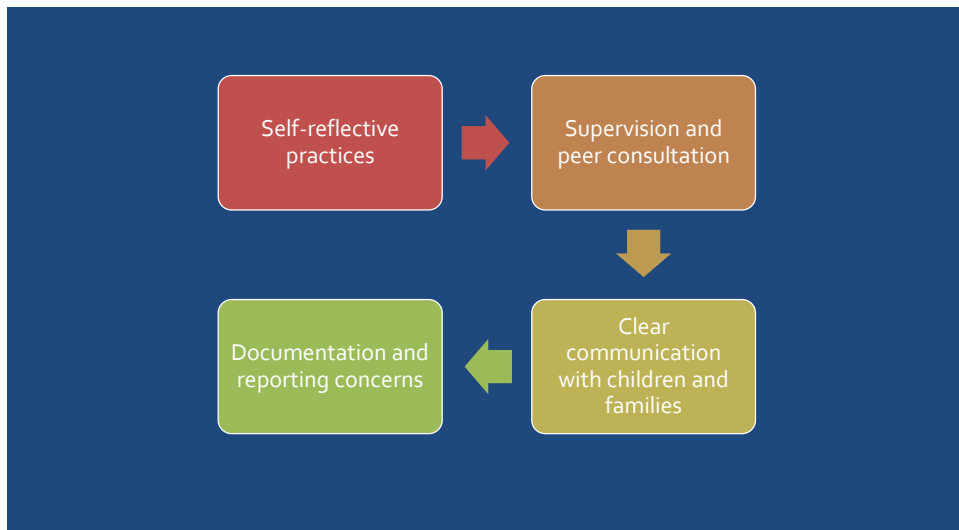


- MAY LEAD TO  
ETHICAL OR LEGAL  
ISSUES

## BOUNDARY CROSSINGS VS. BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

- Boundary Crossing: deviation, may be appropriate
- - Example: attending a child's event at family request
- Boundary Violation: harmful or exploitative action
- - Example: engaging in personal relationships
- What situations test my boundaries?

## STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES



## JOURNALING & REFLECTION

- - Keep a private log of daily interactions
- - Note moments of strong emotion
- - Ask: 'Why did I react this way? What belief influenced me?'

## EMOTIONAL CHECK-INS



- Pause to identify feelings during/after interactions



- Consider if emotions are driving decisions



- Helps prevent role confusion



- Seek regular feedback from supervisors/peers



- Discuss cases to uncover blind spots



- Gain perspective on boundary issues

## SUPERVISION & CONSULTATION

## BOUNDARIES SELF-AUDIT

- - Review recent interactions:
  - • Unequal attention?
  - • Oversharing personal details?
  - • Taking on parental/friend role?
- - Use checklist for self-monitoring

### Personal Awareness

- ☐ Did I notice strong emotional reactions (positive or negative) toward a child today?
- ☐ Did my personal experiences, beliefs, or values influence how I responded?
- ☐ Did I practice self-care so my stress or fatigue did not spill into interactions?

### Role Clarity

- ☐ Did I maintain my professional role (teacher, counselor, caregiver) rather than slipping into a parental, friend, or peer role?
- ☐ Did I avoid making exceptions for certain children that I would not make for others?
- ☐ Did I recognize the limits of my role and refer out when necessary?

### Communication & Information Sharing

- ☐ Did I avoid oversharing personal details about my life?
- ☐ Did I respect the child's privacy and confidentiality in an age-appropriate way?
- ☐ Did I communicate with families and colleagues openly, without secrecy or favoritism?

**Time & Attention**

- ☐ Did I divide my time fairly among children without giving special treatment?
- ☐ Did I avoid extending one-on-one time in ways that could create dependence or favoritism?
- ☐ Did I stay mindful of appropriate physical and emotional closeness?

**Decision-Making**

- ☐ Were my decisions guided by professional standards and the child's best interest, not by my personal emotions?
- ☐ Did I pause to reflect when I felt pulled to "bend the rules"?
- ☐ Did I seek supervision or consultation when I felt uncertain?

**Accountability**

- ☐ Can I confidently explain and justify my decisions/actions to a parent, supervisor, or colleague?
- ☐ Did I document interactions and decisions when appropriate?
- ☐ Did I ask for feedback or self-reflect on areas for growth?

- Ask: 'If I were the parent/guardian or colleague,

how would I view this behavior?'

- Helps identify favoritism or over-involvement

**PERSPECTIVE-TAKING**

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## VALUES CLARIFICATION



- Identify personal core values



- Compare with professional ethics



- Note areas of conflict or overlap

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## MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

- Use breathing or grounding to reduce reactivity

- Create space between emotion and action

- Lowers risk of impulsive boundary crossings



- Training on cultural humility, trauma-informed care,



and implicit bias



- Build tools to distinguish personal beliefs from role

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## PEER ROLE-PLAY & SCENARIO PRACTICE

Rehearse

- Rehearse boundary challenges with colleagues

Reflect on

- Reflect on feelings and responses

Build

- Build confidence in professional decision-making

## ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNERSHIPS

- - Partner with a trusted colleague
- - Regularly check in on boundary challenges
- - Provide honest feedback and support

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## THE HUG

A child you support runs up to you and hugs you tightly after a session. The child seems to find comfort in physical touch.

- How should you respond in the moment?
- What is the difference between healthy reassurance and a possible boundary concern?
- How can you show care without crossing professional boundaries?

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## THE PARENT INVITATION

A child's parent invites you to their family barbecue, saying, *"You're like family now!"*

- What are the risks of attending?
- How could this affect your professional role with the child and family?
- How would you politely decline without offending the parent?

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## THE SECRET

A child whispers, *"I want to tell you something, but you can't tell anyone else."*

- What are your professional and legal responsibilities here?
- How do you balance trust-building with mandatory reporting?
- What is an appropriate way to explain confidentiality limits to children?

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## THE SOCIAL MEDIA FRIEND REQUEST

You receive a friend request from a teenager you work with on social media.

- Should you accept, decline, or ignore? Why?
- What boundary issues can arise from connecting on social media?
- What does your agency policy say about digital boundaries?

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## THE EXTRA HELP

A child is struggling academically, and their parent asks if you can tutor the child outside of work hours for extra pay.

- Does this create a boundary crossing or violation?
- How might this affect the professional relationship with the child and family?
- What are alternatives you could suggest?

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## THE OVER-IDENTIFICATION

You find yourself drawn to one particular child because they remind you of your own life experiences. You start giving them more attention than others.

- What warning signs suggest your boundaries are being tested?
- How might this affect the child and the group?
- What strategies can you use to maintain fairness and professionalism?

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## ACTIVITY IDEA

- Reflection exercise — Write down one personal trigger or bias that could influence your professional boundaries, then share strategies (voluntarily) for managing it.

## CONCLUSION & Q&A

- Key takeaways: boundaries protect children and professionals
- Apply reflection strategies in daily work
- Resources: policies, ethics codes, supervision

Thank You



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