

Positive Touch Policy

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1. Introduction

At Vermont School, we recognise that safe, respectful, and appropriate touch can be an important part of supporting children's social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH). Guided by the principles of the Thrive Approach, we understand that some children may require physical reassurance and regulation to feel safe, connected, and ready to learn.

This policy provides clear guidance for staff on when and how positive touch may be used to nurture, comfort, and reassure children in a safe and consistent way. Its purpose is to safeguard both children and adults by promoting practices that uphold dignity, respect, and professional boundaries, while ensuring that positive touch is used thoughtfully, therapeutically, and always in the best interests of the child.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the school's Safeguarding and Attendance Handbook, and is underpinned by statutory guidance including **Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)**. Together, these frameworks ensure that positive touch is used appropriately, transparently, and in line with our duty of care to protect and support every child.

2. Rational for the Positive Touch Policy

Vermont School works with vulnerable pupils who may experience challenges that leave them feeling dysregulated, unsafe, overwhelmed, or emotionally unsettled. In these moments, it is natural and appropriate for children to seek comfort, regulation, and reassurance from trusted adults.

Touch is a powerful form of non-verbal communication and, when used positively, plays a vital role in children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. It can strengthen relationships, reduce stress, and help children feel safe, connected, and understood.

At Vermont School, positive touch may be used to:

- Show acceptance and build trust;
- Provide reassurance and comfort during times of distress;
- Demonstrate care and affection in a safe and appropriate way;
- Support regulation and calming strategies;
- Reinforce or emphasise spoken communication;
- Offer sensory stimulation where appropriate;
- Assist with personal care routines;

- Deliver therapeutic programmes;
- Provide an alternative to spoken communication where needed.
- Remove or protect a child from danger, which may include the use of reasonable, proportionate, and appropriate physical intervention, in line with the school's Restrictive Physical Intervention (RPI) Policy

Research highlights the benefits of positive touch for children's wellbeing. It has been shown to support early bonding, reduce stress, and aid emotional regulation (Harrison, 2001). For children with autism, positive touch has been associated with improved attentiveness and better sleep (Escalona, Field, Singer-Strunck, Cullen, & Hartshorn, 2001; Cullen, Barlow & Cushway, 2005). For children with developmental delays or disabilities, it has also been used effectively to enhance caregiver-child interactions and increase comfort (Pardew & Bunse, 2005).

At Vermont School, these insights align with our trauma-informed practice, the principles of the Thrive Approach, and our safeguarding responsibilities. We view positive touch as a therapeutic tool that, when applied thoughtfully and consistently, helps children feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.

3. Guidelines for Positive Touch

At Vermont School, positive touch is always used thoughtfully, respectfully, and in ways that prioritise the wellbeing and safety of children. It is never used for the benefit of the adult, but as a supportive strategy to help pupils feel safe, regulated, and connected.

General Principles

- Positive touch should generally involve the extremities (arms and legs) or the back (e.g. a gentle hand on the shoulder or arm).
- Supportive hugs, where appropriate, should be offered *side-on* to ensure comfort and maintain personal boundaries.
- Any use of touch must be respectful, proportionate, reasonable, and never cause a child to feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or violated.

Proactive Positive Touch

Staff may use positive touch in everyday interactions to build relationships, provide reassurance, and celebrate success. Used proactively, this can reduce anxiety and prevent situations from escalating. Examples include:

- Taking a child by the hand to walk safely across a road, along a corridor, or to support balance during physical activities.
- A gentle pat on the back or an arm around the shoulders for encouragement.

Positive Touch as a Reparative Measure

Some pupils require safe touch to support healthy emotional development, particularly when experiencing distress. Touch can help calm, soothe, and regulate emotions by

triggering the release of oxytocin, the body's natural calming chemical. Examples include:

- A gentle pat on the back.
- A light squeeze on the arm.
- Hand massage.

Positive Touch as Contact Play

When a trusting relationship has been established, positive touch may take place through safe, structured play, mirroring the healthy interactions between a parent and child. This helps pupils experience joy, connection, and trust. Examples include:

- A chasing game where the adult safely "catches" the child, conducted in a controlled environment with clear boundaries to avoid over-stimulation.
- Cooperative games such as building towers with hands.

Positive Touch to Support Sensory Processing

For some pupils, therapeutic touch can be essential when they are overwhelmed and unable to respond to other sensory information. At these times, positive touch may be the most effective way of maintaining connection and supporting regulation. Examples include:

- Side-on hugs.
- Deep pressure squeezes along the arm (e.g. counting "1, 2, 3" up and down).

Positive Touch to Support Positive Behaviour and Build Relationships

Some pupils actively seek therapeutic touch in response to positive interactions. Used appropriately, this can strengthen trust and provide non-verbal affirmation, particularly for children who find verbal communication difficult. Examples include:

- Side-on hugs.
- Pats on the back or shoulders.
- Light "raindrop fingers" on the back.
- Gentle physical play in a safe and appropriate setting.

Positive Touch as a Preventative Measure

Positive touch may also be used to guide, calm, and prevent escalation before anxiety or distress develops. This approach is always respectful and supportive, giving the child both physical and emotional space. Examples include:

- Using an open-palm, caring guide on the shoulder, elbow, or back to safely move a child away from a stressful situation. The adult then steps back to give space and time for reflection, re-sharing of expectations, or reassurance ("It's okay if you need space").
- Raising a hand as a visual signal for "Stop" or "No thank you."

- Open-hand gestures, palms up at 45°, to reinforce the message: "If you want space, that's okay."

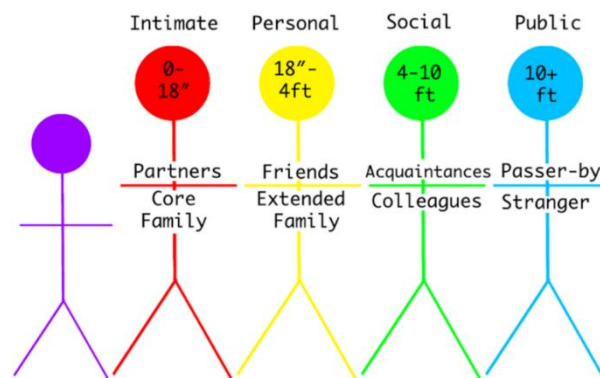
Restrictive Physical Intervention (RPI)

Vermont School has a separate Restrictive Physical Intervention (RPI) Policy. RPI will only ever be used as a last resort and solely to prevent pupils from:

- Causing injury to themselves.
- Causing injury to other pupils.
- Causing injury to adults.
- Causing serious damage to property where this could compromise the safety of others.

4. Personal Space

We recognise that understanding and respecting personal space is an essential part of supporting our pupils' emotional regulation, social development, and sense of safety. Children in our school may have differing comfort levels with proximity and touch, and staff must always be sensitive to these individual needs.



Implementation for Staff

- Staff should observe pupils' verbal and non-verbal cues to determine comfort levels with proximity.
- Positive touch should only be applied when appropriate and safe, or when indicated in their RSP.
- Staff must always respect children's boundaries and avoid entering intimate or personal zones without consent, unless required for safety, safeguarding, or therapeutic intervention.

By embedding awareness of personal space into daily practice, staff can support children in feeling safe, regulated, and able to engage positively with adults and peers.

5. Professional Judgement

Staff should exercise professional judgement at all times, ensuring that any use of positive touch prioritises the child's wellbeing and maintains safety for both the child and the

adult. Touch must be purposeful, proportionate, and appropriate to the child's individual needs, with attention to boundaries and comfort.

If you feel that you have engaged in positive touch with a child and:

- You are uncomfortable with the nature of it;
- You feel it could be misconstrued;
- You would like to reflect, or are unclear on how to respond with boundaries

Speak to a DSL face-to-face and log on CPOMs before the end of the working day. This ensures that any concerns a child may raise with a parent can be considered promptly, and that the school can initiate parental consultation or involve the LADO where required.

Some examples are noted below with the appropriate response:

Child's behaviour	Adult's response
Child hugs the adult front on	Adult turns their body to the side. ● "Thank you for the hug." ● "Let's have a side hug. That is more comfortable."
Child comes into your intimate space. - 'Intimate' means familiar or closely acquainted. - Personal could also be understood as 'social' however the language we use at Vermont School is Personal and Intimate.	The adult shows their personal and intimate space. Personal space is from the tips of your fingers to your elbow. Place your hand on your shoulder and indicate that that area is your intimate space: ● "This is my personal space and this is my intimate space. When people enter this, if I am not prepared, I am not sure why they are coming in and so I might react a bit defensive. So if I am aware, I can greet you in the right way. If you want to enter my intimate space, say can I come closer?". Opportunity for reflective conversation ● Has anybody ever come into your intimate space? ● How did that feel?
Child runs and jumps on your back/ or on your front.	At Vermont School we cannot carry children unless it is on their Personal Handling Plan and agreed by parents. Language: "Stop" "Let's walk together" "What do you need?" "Would you like a hug – we say "Can I have a hug please?" If needed, undertake this hug sideways on to the child.

6. Staff Training

All Vermont School staff receive specialist, advanced training from the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) through the annual safeguarding programme. This training is regularly updated and forms part of staff induction, completed before staff have direct contact with pupils.

