



**SEEM COLLABORATIVE**  
**GUIDELINES FOR TOUCH BETWEEN STAFF AND STUDENTS**  
**Pilot Guidelines for 2017-2018 School Year**

**PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES**

Research shows that children and teens with disabilities experience higher rates of sexual abuse than those without disabilities. As an organization that educates students with disabilities--many of whom are survivors of abuse-- SEEM places a high priority on creating an environment that proactively prevents abuse and supports the safety and wellbeing of students

SEEM also recognizes that one of our organizational strengths is our ability to be responsive to the unique needs and circumstances of our students, particularly those who have not been served by one-size-fits-all educational environments. To reflect this value, SEEM's guidelines don't prohibit specific types of touch, but instead provide guidance designed to ensure that all staff are making choices about touch that are safe and healthy for students.

Individual schools or programs may make specific decisions about types of touch that are not acceptable based on the students' age and educational needs. In those cases, staff are expected to abide by those touch protocols.

**VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY**

Any time a staff member is touching a student the touch must be intended to serve the student. The staff member must be able to articulate the reason for the touch. Staff are also expected to be mindful about potential negative effects of touch, given the large number of SEEM students who are survivors of abuse and trauma who may be upset or confused by touch from staff.

**The following are recognized reasons why it is acceptable for staff to touch students:**

Education: To teach children about healthy touch. Many students come to SEEM needing education about boundaries and social skills Touch may be used to provide support and encouragement.

Sensory: To give students sensory support, to help students stay or get calm.

Therapeutic: To give students individual emotional support in a way that is comprehensible to and wanted by the student. Touch for therapeutic reasons may take the form of gentle safe holding or hugs when such touch is appropriate to the relationship between the staff member and the student and intended to serve the student. Therapeutic touch is also used when students need rehabilitation or development of their physical, occupational, or motor skills.

Safety: To maintain physical safety and prevent violence, to prevent a student from self-injuring or injuring others.

Hygiene and medical: To help students with toileting and self-care, to help students with routine medical needs or in response to a medical emergency.

Instructional: To help students learn physical or life skills when hands-on instruction or physical guidance is the most effective way to teach the student the skill (for example hand-over-hand writing instruction).

**The following are not acceptable reasons for SEEM staff to touch students:**

- When we need emotional support or want a student to respond to our feelings
- If a student experiences sexual arousal from the touch or experiences a trauma response as a result of the touch.
- When students have an adverse reaction to touch
- Out of aggression or our own frustration
- When a student (through words or body language) is refusing touch in a non-emergency situation with the exception of incontinence or disruptive hygiene issues
- In a manner that provokes sexual arousal or suggests sexual expectations

**COMMUNICATION AND REFLECTION ABOUT TOUCH**

SEEM values communication and constructive challenge among staff. Teams are encouraged to have regular conversations about touch and to review the ways they touch students based on this guidance. These conversations are intended to be a forum for mutual support and consensus building among staff about the types of touch that are most appropriate and effective.

**IF A STAFF MEMBER OBSERVES TOUCH THAT IS NOT CONSISTENT WITH THESE GUIDELINES**

SEEM supports staff in being direct and constructive in discussing touch with coworkers. Consistent with the skills taught in the Challenging Conversations training, SEEM supports staff in approaching a coworker and discussing the specific behavior or touch situation that is causing concern. If direct conversation is not productive or otherwise not possible, SEEM encourages staff to do the following:

- Report the situation to a supervisor or the principal
- Address the concern in a team meeting

