



# Safe & Appropriate Physical Interaction with Students

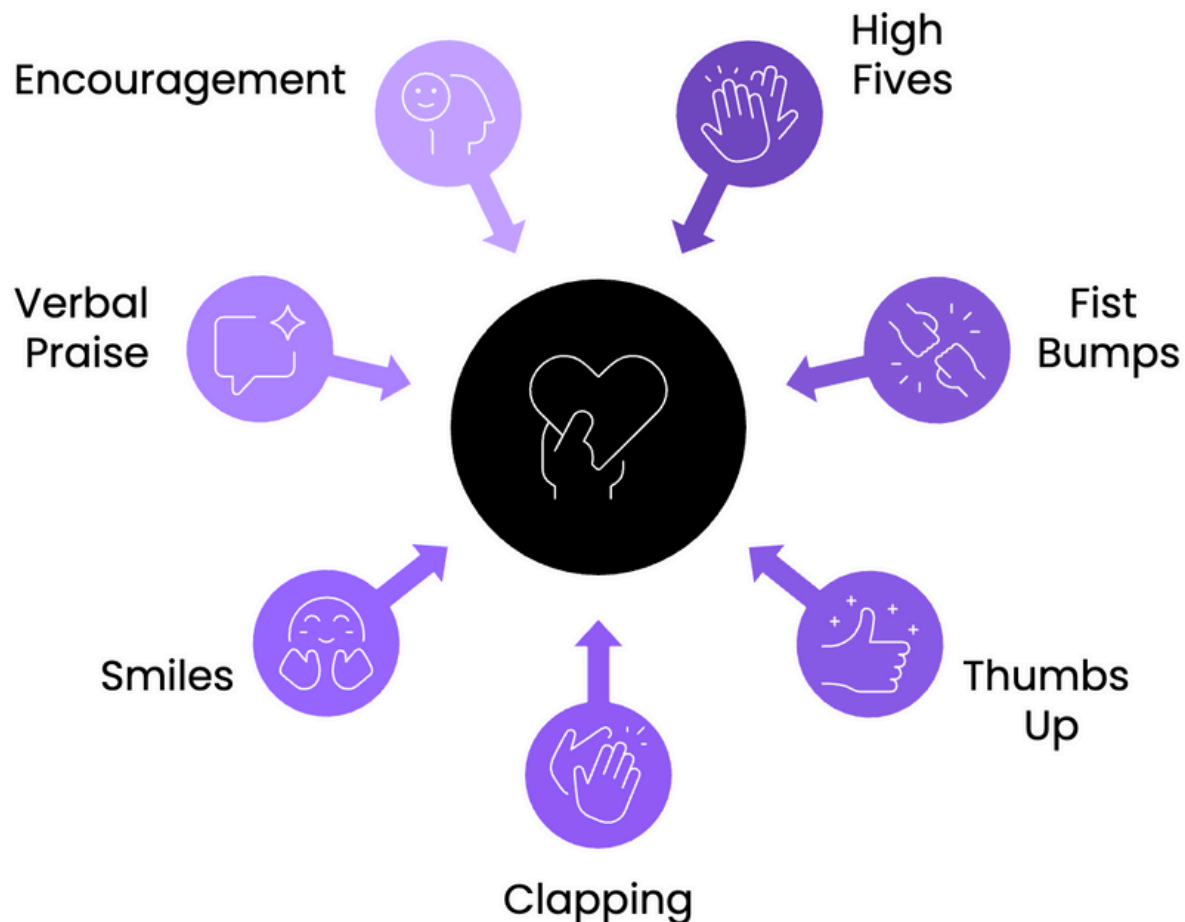
Safe, limited physical interactions protect students and staff and ensure that all interactions are respectful, appropriate, and free from misinterpretation. These expectations apply in all settings, including one-on-one tutoring, small groups, classrooms, and school common areas.

## Why this Matters:

Maintaining professional physical boundaries is a core part of our responsibility to students, families, and school partners.

- Students deserve to feel safe, respected, and supported.
- Staff deserves clear boundaries that protect them professionally.
- Even well-intentioned physical contact can be misunderstood or make others uncomfortable.
- Consistent practices help build trust with students, families, and school partners.

## Safe Ways to Show Care and Encouragement





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Use non-invasive interactions that are clear and professional. What is considered appropriate does not change based on student age—professional boundaries remain the same for all students.

| Interaction                            | Implementation  |
|--|---|
| <b>Verbal Praise and Encouragement</b> | <p>Use <b>specific, encouraging language</b> to recognize effort, focus, or progress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“You stayed focused through that whole problem,” or “I noticed you didn’t give up when it got tricky.”</i></li> <li>• <i>“You’ve got this. Take your time,”</i></li> <li>• <i>“I’m here to help if you need it.”</i></li> </ul> |
| <b>High Fives</b>                      | <p><b>High fives</b> can be used briefly to celebrate success or effort when a student agrees.</p>  |
| <b>Fist Bumps</b>                      | <p><b>Fist bumps are</b> a simple, <b>low-contact</b> way to acknowledge achievement or excitement.</p>   |
| <b>Thumbs Up</b>                       | <p>A <b>thumbs up</b> is a clear, <b>non-physical</b> way to show approval or encouragement from a distance. This works especially well during instruction, assessments, or independent work time.</p>  |
| <b>Clapping</b>                        | <p><b>Clapping</b> can be used to celebrate effort, improvement, or group success. This is <b>a safe way</b> to publicly recognize students without physically singling them out. Keep it brief and inclusive.</p>  |
| <b>Smiles</b>                          | <p><b>Smiling</b> helps students feel welcomed and supported. <b>Positive facial expressions</b> communicate warmth while maintaining <b>professional boundaries</b>. This is often one of the most effective ways to safely build rapport.</p>   |



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## Physical Contact to Avoid:

Personal space is everyone's right, and not all students are comfortable with it. Physical contact should only occur when it is clearly required by a student's documented support needs and aligned with assigned job duties.

- To prevent misunderstandings and maintain **professional boundaries**, staff should avoid:
  - hugs (initiated by staff or prolonged hugs initiated by students)
  - students sitting on laps
  - holding hands
  - physical comforting that goes beyond brief, appropriate gestures
  - any contact that could be seen as affectionate, private, or exclusive

| Do This                              | Instead of This                               |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| High Five or Fist Bump               | Hugs or students sitting in your lap          |
| Verbal praise and encouragement      | Physical affection (hugs)                     |
| Standing or sitting beside a student | Holding or pulling a student close            |
| Offering choice and consent          | Assuming physical contact is welcome          |
| Calm redirection using words         | Physical guidance or comforting through touch |

## Best Practice:



- **Offer options:** *"Would you like a high five or a thumbs up?"*
- Accept a **student's choice** without question or pressure.
- Model **respectful communication** about **boundaries**.



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## How to Gently Redirect Physical Contact:

When a student seeks physical contact, respond calmly and kindly while setting a clear boundary. Even when a student initiates physical contact, staff are responsible for redirecting to appropriate, professional interactions.

| What to Say  | What to Avoid Saying               |
|--|------------------------------------|
| <i>"I can sit next to you, but not with you on my lap."</i>              | <i>"Come sit with me."</i>         |
| <i>"I can tell you want comfort. Let's take a deep breath together."</i> | <i>"It's okay, I'll hold you."</i> |
| <i>"I want to keep everyone safe. Let's do a high five instead."</i>     | <i>"You can give me a hug."</i>    |
| <i>"I'm glad you're excited. We can celebrate with a fist bump."</i>     |                                    |

Even comforting language should redirect students toward safe, non-physical alternatives.

### Key tips:



- Use a warm tone.
- Acknowledge the student's feelings.
- Redirect immediately to a safe alternative.
- Stay consistent without shaming or embarrassment.

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## When a Student Is Upset or Seeking Comfort:

Stay nearby and at the student's level without touching.

- Use calm words and breathing strategies.
- Offer choices that do not involve physical contact.
- If additional support is needed, follow site procedures for assistance.

## If You're Unsure, Ask Yourself:



- Would I be comfortable if this interaction were observed by a parent, administrator, or school partner?
- Does this interaction require physical contact, or can it be handled with words or gestures?
- Is this consistent with how I interact with all students?

## Why Consistency Matters:

- Using the same boundaries with all students prevents confusion or favoritism.
- Consistent practices protect staff from misunderstandings or allegations.
- Clear expectations help students learn respectful social boundaries.

## Remember:

- If you are **unsure how to handle a situation** involving physical contact, reach out to your supervisor for guidance.
- **Showing care** does not require physical affection.
- **Clear boundaries** help students feel **secure** and **respected**.
- **Safe interactions** protect both students and staff.
- When in doubt, **choose verbal encouragement** and **visible, appropriate gestures**.
- Maintaining **professional, respectful boundaries** allows us to build **strong, positive relationships** while keeping everyone safe.