

## Boundary setting for In Home Care Educators

### What are boundaries?

In every relationship we engage in, we set limits. We all have boundaries that we draw around ourselves to define who we are as individuals.

How strong that boundary is depends upon our relationship with each person we are in a relationship with and also the context of that relationship. Think of the different boundaries you set with your parents, as opposed to a partner. Does the person who sells you groceries in the corner store know as much about you as your sister does? Do you know as much about them?

Boundaries are the invisible lines we establish that say this is what I am comfortable about what you know about me and what I know about you. This is what I am comfortable doing with you and having you do with me. This is what I am comfortable revealing about myself and what I am comfortable understanding about you.

As an educator you need to have professional boundaries with families. You have information about the families that you care for that other people, including other professionals who work with the family outside

### Why is boundary setting so important in In Home Care?

An educator who goes into a family home to work is creating a relationship with a family and with the children of that family that is based on trust.

of their home don't have. Families also know more about you than they would if you were not working in their home.

Professional boundaries are the limits that protect the family you are caring for and you. If you cross boundaries, generally you are behaving as an educator in an unprofessional manner. Educators need to be able to recognise when we may be crossing the invisible line which separates a family from an educator and which defines our relationship as professional.



You are often working in a situation where a family is at a vulnerable time in their lives through illness, or disability.

Educators working in a family home invariably develop close relationships with the children they are caring for and other family members. Drawing boundaries is very important to ensure everybody is safe and knows what behaviour is and isn't ok.

We can't be great educators if we are too distant from a family. We also can't be great educators if we are too

involved with a family. Professionally the best place to be in is in between being cold and distant and becoming overinvolved or close friends with the family, or even worse part of the family.

Being an educator is your job. Of course you will grow closer to a family over time. But you are the one that needs to draw the lines and remember that this is your job and that as an educator you are a professional.

A useful question to ask yourself often could be:

**“Is what I am doing /about to do in the best interests of the child/children and their family?”**

If the answer is no, you may be crossing professional boundaries.

## Who is who In Home Care?

### The Family

It is important to remember that no matter what their situation is the family always remain as the principle carers of each child. As an educator you need to remember and honour the fact that the family you are working with are the first educators of the child and that above all, they, are the ones who have the right to make decisions about their child/ren. Families also have entered into an agreement with an In Home care Service for the provision of IHC and have accepted certain responsibilities via their receipt of the Child Care Subsidy they receive to help offset the cost of care.

### The IHC Service

The In Home Care service is the organisation that has an agreement with the family to provide IHC and via that your services. The service is the legal provider of education and care and receive Child Care Subsidy on behalf



of the family you provide care to. The service either employs you or engages you to provide education and care to a specific family on their behalf. The service needs to follow The service also needs to work with the IHC Support Agency as required in the IHC Guidelines. The service is required to provide a tailored, individual education program based on each child's knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests as detailed in the family's Family Management Plan.

### The Educator – you

You provide education and care to the children of a family. You must follow the services policies and remember that you are engaged or employed by the service, not be the family, despite the fact you are working on the family's home. You must deliver a tailored, individual education program based on each child's knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests as detailed in the family's Family Management Plan. The service should provide you with an updated Family Management Plan each quarter.

Each of the three roles above are partners in the provision of In Home Care. Unless each respects the other's roles and understands the boundaries of those roles, there is potential for the roles to merge. All partners are working to ensure the education, care and safety of the children but each have different roles within this.

### It's up to you to set limits

You are in someone's house every day. You may have little privacy, while you are there, from the family (if they are not out of the house working during your shifts), and the family has little privacy from you.

You need to remember that you are the professional in the situation. Family members may choose to normalise the situation by making you into a friend. You may feel more comfortable being in someone's house by becoming their friend. The children may treat you as a defacto parent. You may come to love and care for the children you are working with a lot.

Because you are the professional you need to set the limits. You need to remember that you are an educator, not a friend or a family member. If you become overinvolved with the children or with the parents you are working with, you are cutting across what should be your professional boundaries.

Families are eligible for In Home Care because of three reasons – either the parents work non-standard hours, are geographically isolated or have challenging or complex needs. Supporting families with complex needs

can be overwhelming. Educators are generally quite caring people and you can naturally be tempted to do



as much as you can to help out a family facing stressful situations. But if you do more than you are required to as an educator you can burn out.

It is up to you to set limits on how involved you are with the family, what your role is, and sticking to the times you are engaged for.

It is also up to you to set limits on what you do. Your role is to care and educate children – not to undertake housework (other than that related to caring for the children) or care for the adults in the house.

## Signs that there may be boundary issues

Can you recognise any of these signs in your work with a family? It may be that there are boundary issues.

- Accepting more than token gifts from a family – a good check is would a family give a gift like this to me if I was in a centre based service or if I was an FDC educator. If the answer is no, you should probably not take the gift.
- Do you have a lot of personal conversations with the mother or father of the children? Are you there trusted confidante or are they yours?
- Is there a lot of physical contact between the mother or father and you?
- Do the children get unduly distressed when you leave for the day?
- Are you always invited to important family occasions like birthdays as if you are a member of the family?
- Are you emotionally involved with the family?
- Do family members call you outside of work hours?
- Does the family consider you to be a friend? Do you consider them as your friends?
- Are you considering or have you already accepted them as friends on social media?

## There are codes that can help you set boundaries

### ECA's code of Ethics

Do you have a copy of the ECA Code of Ethics? Have you considered your work as an IHC educator in relation to the code? It may be useful to give a copy of this to your family or display it somewhere in the home. Download this from [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics)

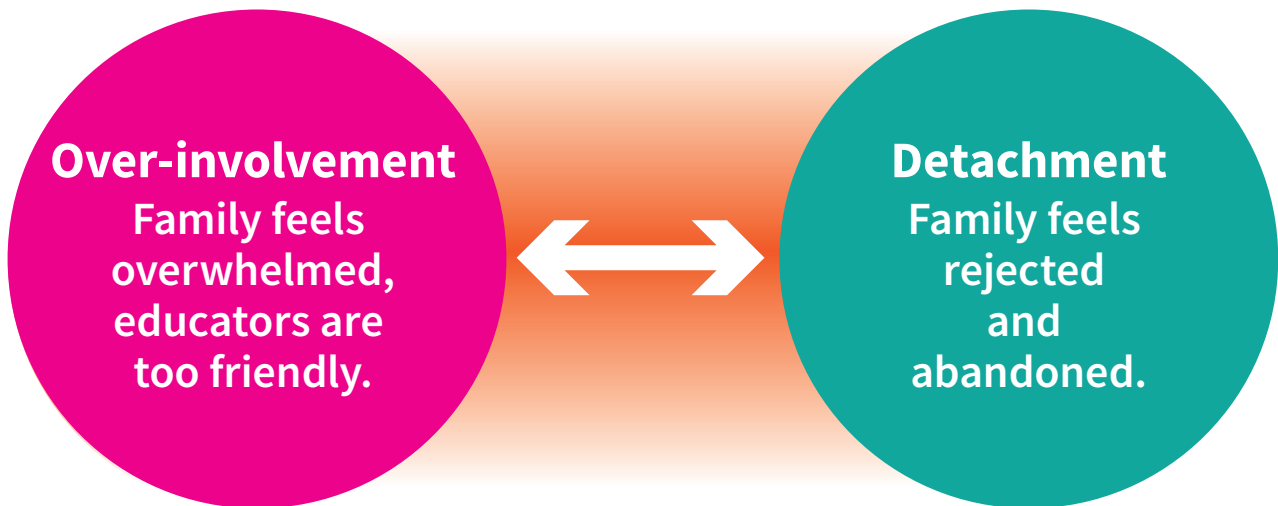
### Codes of Conduct

Ask your IHC service if it has a Code of Conduct for Educators.

You need to follow this code at all times.

## Making your In Home Care placement work

When you are working with a family's children you need their trust. They also need yours – they need to ensure for example that you are going to trust their confidentially.



*The professional relationship sits on a continuum between over-involvement and detachment, as shown above.*

You need to be involved in the life of the family, but not too involved. The relationship will grow close and often a sign of a good In Home Care educator is one who can grow that trustful relationship quickly. But gaining that trust having that close relationship shouldn't ever happen at the cost of clear, ethical and professional boundaries.

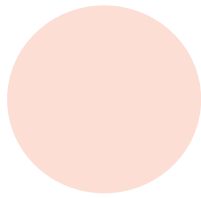
- Report any suspicions of abuse to your IHC service
- Educate children about their rights
- Assist children to develop skills around dressing and toileting themselves
- Treat children you are caring for with the same amount of care as you would your own

### What should you do?

- Make sure your family understands that your role is to work with their children
- Keep your work life and home life separate
- Make it clear that you are there as an educator – not just as another adult pair of hands
- Use professional language – this is a way of reminding a family of your professional role
- Make your family understand you work under codes of ethics and codes of conduct
- Resist the temptation to become a family friend
- Take all reasonable steps to protect children from abuse
- Have boundaries around conduct with children
- Help children learn protective behaviours

### What shouldn't you do?

- Forget that you are working when you are in a family home. It may be tempting to sit down and have a cup of tea with another family member when you start your day or when you have put infants to sleep, but remember you are there to work
- Pay for things the family needs or expect them to pay for things you need
- Offer to babysit or accept babysitting jobs for the family outside of the hours you work for the IHC service
- Engage in unprofessional behaviour (eg being late, socialising with family members, breaking a



families confidentiality, withholding information from your IHC service about a family

- Have any additional contact with your family outside of working hours
- Socialise with family members
- Be unnecessarily physical with children
- Have discussions of a mature or adult nature when children are there
- Develop special relationships with individual children
- Leave children alone with visitors to the house

- Assist children with changing and toileting when they no longer need assistance
- Have contact with a child or their family outside of when you are working with them
- Tell the children that you work with that you love them
- Treat family members as friends
- Become overly involved with a family, especially if you are caring for a child in a family with a member who is sick or dying. This may seem very hard to do, but to be able to educate and care for children you need to be able to separate emotionally

## Fixing broken boundary issues

Do you suspect that you already have some broken boundaries?  
Are you at a crisis point because of these?

### What can you do?

- Contact your IHC service. Remember they are there to provide you with support
- Contact the IN Home Care Agency on the numbers below. The IHC support Agency has a role in supporting educators
- Review your relationship with your client, can you see where you can erect some new boundaries or repair old ones?
- Re-read the ECA code of ethics. Does that give you any ideas of how you can or should act?
- Ask yourself what is in the children's best interest?

### Boundaries exist for a reason!

And one of the main reasons is to protect you as a professional, as an educator. They enable you to continue to manage your work with the family without becoming stressed. They enable you to stop the demands from a family from continually escalating. They enable you to provide limits to the children and help you to guide their behaviour. They enable you, above all to remain in balance between being over involved or too detached with the family.



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CARE**  
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