



Guidelines on Healthy Family Boundaries

MSF Asian Family Conference

6 November 2024

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AGENDA

1. Current landscape and purpose of guidelines
2. Key guideline components and utilisation
3. Dissemination plans



LOCAL STORIES OF INAPPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES

I wonder if there are any developmentally informed practical actions which can be incorporated into programmes or interventions to help families understand about family boundaries?



Jail for man who molested granddaughter while her parents were in prison

When the girl was in Primary 4 in 2012, she complained of body aches after returning home from playing football. The man massaged her with baby oil that night and developed a sexual urge before molesting her beneath her underwear.

He continued to molest the girl in the same manner while giving her massages. Her siblings would be asleep during the acts.

The Straits Times - 26 Apr 2021

Man who sexually abused daughter since she was 3 gets 28 years' jail and caning

Prosecutors told the court that the girl became afraid of showering alone after she saw people drowning on TV, which led to the man showering with her.

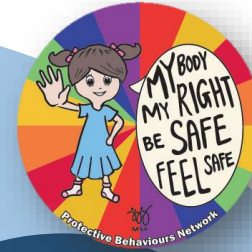
Yahoo! News - 22 Jun 2021

CURRENT PREVENTIVE INITIATIVES

Programme that teaches children to protect themselves against sexual abuse (“KidsLive: I Can Protect Myself” by Singapore Children’s Society)



Protective Behaviours Programme



Individual and Family sessions

Group work

Public Education (e.g., The Garden of Safety by PAVE)



Nurturing Early Learners and Character and Citizenship Education



Ministry of Education
SINGAPORE

Protective Behaviours (PB) was brought into Singapore by Child Protective Service in 2018.

The following agencies are currently running this programme:

Ministry of Social and Family Development (Child Protective Service and Clinical and Forensic Psychology Service), PAVE Integrated Services Ltd, HEART@Fei Yue Child Protection Specialist Centre, Montfort Care Child Protection, Kampong Kapor Community Services, Chen Su Lan Methodist Children's Home, Singapore Children's Society, Allkin Singapore Ltd, Methodist Welfare Services, and Ministry of Education (Guidance Branch)

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE GUIDELINES

Formation of workgroup comprising 9 representatives from 5 divisions

1

Conducted literature reviews and environmental scans of existing local programmes.
Drafted initial write-up integrating literature and practice experiences from workgroup.

2

Obtained input from Ministry of Education, medical experts, religious leaders and Protective Behaviours practitioners.

3

Refinement of guidelines.

4



GUIDELINES ON HEALTHY FAMILY BOUNDARIES

- It aims to enhance children's safety around their parents/caregivers by sharing appropriate boundaries when conducting activities of daily living (i.e., affection, hygiene, and privacy).
- This will be the first published practitioners' guide in Singapore to provide clear recommendations on healthy family boundaries.



PRACTITIONERS' RESOURCE GUIDE

GUIDELINES ON HEALTHY FAMILY BOUNDARIES

Maintaining appropriate physical,
emotional and sexual boundaries

2024

PRINCIPLES

HEALTHY FAMILY BOUNDARIES

We have the right to feel safe at all times!

Parents are responsible for keeping their child safe

Parents must listen, believe, and take action when their child discloses an uncomfortable or threatening incident

Every child has the right to feel safe

No child should be exposed to unsafe touches or told to keep unsafe secrets

SAFETY

RIGHTS

EMPOWERED

RESPECTED

SAFE

PROTECTED

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

- Intimate caregiving behaviours and interactions tend to be categorised according to **affection, hygiene** and **privacy**.
- **Culture, the child's age, and gender** are the factors that influence whether interactions are considered appropriate or inappropriate between parents/caregivers and children.
- Research also highlighted instances of **boundary violations**, which may contribute to inappropriate sexual behaviours in children.

GUIDELINES



Affection

- Hugging/ Giving neck or back rubs/ Lap-sitting
- Kissing



Hygiene

- Co-toileting/ Cleaning after toileting
- Bathing children/ Co-bathing with children
- Applying medication to private areas




Privacy


- Co-sleeping
- Co-dressing/ Exposure to parent or caregiver nudity
- Exposure to sexual behaviour



Does this interaction disregard what is age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for their child?




Is the parent/caregiver interacting with their child to fulfil the parent's/caregiver's own emotional needs, which include feelings of a sexual nature?



Does this behaviour disregard their child's (verbal or non-verbal) signals of discomfort?*

*Parents are responsible for ensuring that interactions are appropriate even if the child appears to be fine with it. It is important to note that their child may not always express discomfort for various reasons.



Does this behaviour put the parent/caregiver at risk of engaging in potentially abusive behaviour?

USING THE GUIDELINES — A CASE EXAMPLE

Lisa is a 7-year-old girl with age-appropriate development. Her father has been showering together with her since she was young. She has started feeling awkward about having to see her father naked and asked her father to allow her to shower on her own. However, Lisa's father insists that he has to shower her to ensure that she is properly cleaned.



Is this appropriate?

Appropriate Parent-Child Interactions

Bathing Children / Co-Bathing with Children

- Parents and caregivers need to bathe newborns and infants. When bathing, parents and caregivers must be respectful of their child's private parts.
- Parents may bathe with their toddler or young child who has yet to develop independence in performing hygiene-related tasks. As their child learns to bathe independently during their early primary school years, they may then only require adult supervision.
- It is more acceptable for parents and children of the same gender to bathe together until their early primary school years.
- For parents and children of different genders, it is recommended for co-bathing to stop by their child's preschool years, which is when children become aware and curious of body differences.
- However, should the parent or child feel uncomfortable, self-conscious or awkward, it is best to stop bathing together.
- Caregivers may continue to bathe and supervise their child when they bathe (up to early primary school years) if they are unable to bathe independently. Caregivers should avoid co-bathing with their child of that age.

Links to Child Developmental Milestones

- At age 2, children are aware of their own gender and can identify the genital areas with their functions. They do not associate genital areas with sexual functions.¹⁵
- From preschool years, children become inquisitive, including about sexual topics and bodily functions.¹⁶ Hence, privacy around bathing and toileting should be taught.
- Around age 4 to 5, children gain better gross motor skills (e.g., climbing, jumping and running) and fine motor skills (e.g., moving individual fingers, better hand-eye coordination, less clumsiness).¹⁷ From this age, most children can perform hygiene-related tasks and activities independently.¹⁸
- Starting from early primary school years, children can bathe independently without adult supervision.¹⁹

¹⁵ Brilleslijper-Kater & Baartman, 2000

¹⁶ Wurtele & Kenny, 2011

¹⁷ Santrock, 2013

¹⁸ Choby & George, 2008; Schum et al., 2002

¹⁹ Mack et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2007



Lisa's Story

What the guidelines say...



Lisa's Story

IDENTIFYING RED FLAGS

Does this interaction disregard what is age/developmentally appropriate for Lisa?

Yes. Lisa should be capable of showering independently by 7 years old. She should not be showering with a male parent/caregiver or be exposed to seeing them naked at her age.

Does this behaviour disregard Lisa's (verbal/non-verbal) signals of discomfort?

Yes. Lisa expressed feeling awkward, which may be due to her increasing awareness of body differences between genders. It is recommended that if children feel uncomfortable, parents should avoid showering with them.

Is Lisa's father interacting with Lisa to fulfil his own emotional needs, which include feelings of a sexual nature?

Her father's underlying motivation is unclear. Nonetheless, his concerns about cleanliness can be addressed in other ways instead of showering her. Alternatively, a female parent/caregiver can assist Lisa instead.

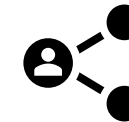
Does this behaviour put Lisa's father at risk of engaging in potentially abusive behaviour?

Yes. If this continues as Lisa grows older and/or if she continues to feel increasingly uncomfortable, her father's behaviour would be clearly inappropriate and considered abusive in nature. Lisa may also eventually develop a poor understanding of appropriate physical boundaries with others.

DISSEMINATION PLANS



MSF Asian Family Conference
(6 and 7 Nov 2024)



Dissemination of Guidelines
(Nov 2024 to Feb 2025)

- Dissemination to professionals, including those from these sectors: Social services, education, early childhood, healthcare, and child protection and welfare.
- Mode of dissemination of guidelines to agencies will be via email.
- Post-launch professional support: There will be a time-limited (6 months) email channel for professionals to provide feedback on the guidelines after the launch.

THANK YOU