



# The Use of Reasonable Force and Restrictive Interventions in Schools

## Introduction

Welcome to your course on the 'Use of Reasonable Force and Restrictive Interventions in Schools'.

The course will cover:

- what constitutes a restrictive intervention
- what is reasonable force and who can use it
- when reasonable force can be used
- what happens in situations when reasonable force has been used.

Most school staff will, at some point in their career, have cause to use a degree of physical contact with students. This can range from simply leading a student to safety by the arm to, at the other extreme, an instance where a fight needs to be broken up or a student needs to be restrained to prevent violence or injury to themselves or others.

Of course, the use of reasonable force in any circumstances should be used as a very last resort. Schools employ a wide range of strategies to promote good behaviour and, in the event of these not having the desired effect, techniques to de-escalate situations, which should prevent the need to use force from ever occurring.

Many schools refer to extreme situations requiring reasonable force as 'positive handling'. Some schools acknowledge that all staff have the power of reasonable force should the need arise. Yet others limit those who can use 'positive handling' or 'reasonable force' to members of the senior leadership team or staff who have received specialist training in appropriate restraint techniques.

This is why it is important that you read, understand and follow your own school's policy on the use of reasonable force. Sometimes this is called a 'physical restraint' policy. This course reflects the Department for Education's latest advice on the subject.

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## Reasonable force, restrictive intervention and restraint

### What is 'reasonable' force?

Force is generally used in schools to **control** and/or **restrain** students. Simply put, it means that staff should use no more force than is needed in the circumstances. It should be proportionate to the consequences it is intended to prevent.

### Restrictive intervention

A restrictive intervention is a means to prevent, restrict or subdue movement of the body, or part of the body, of a student. This could be a physical action as well as a non-physical action, such as standing between two students, blocking a student's path or active physical contact such as leading a student out of a room.

### Restraint

Restraint means to hold someone physically back or bring them under control. Typically, it is used in more extreme circumstances, for example, where two students are fighting and refuse to stop without physical intervention.

Of course, school staff should never act in a way that may cause injury, but in very extreme cases, it may not always be possible to avoid injuring a student.

### Who can use reasonable force?

According to Section 93 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, all members of school staff have a legal power to use reasonable force. It can also apply to people that the headteacher has temporarily put in charge of students, such as unpaid volunteers or parents helping out on a trip organised by the school.

### When to use reasonable force

#### Prevention

Reasonable force can be used to prevent:

- students from hurting themselves or others
- damaging property
- disorder.

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When a situation occurs where control or restraint may be required, the decision on whether or not to physically intervene is down to the professional judgement of the staff member concerned, and it should always depend on the individual circumstances. To make this assessment, the member of staff should consider:

## Is it necessary?

- Staff should consider whether there are more effective, less restrictive ways to manage a situation.
- Consider whether a restrictive intervention is likely to successfully reduce the relevant risk or whether it would escalate the situation further or cause more harm.

- ### Is it proportionate?

- Staff should use the least amount of force or least restrictive intervention necessary for the least amount of time required to reduce the relevant risks.
- If the intervention itself is escalating the situation, staff should reconsider their approach and attempt an alternative strategy.
- Staff should consider the personal circumstances of the student, such as medical conditions, special educational needs or vulnerabilities, their characteristics such as age and size and relevant equality implications under the Equality Act 2010.

## Have you considered the student's welfare?

- Staff should consider the impact on the student's overall welfare, balanced against any actions taken. Past trauma or neglect, communication difficulties or diagnosed/undiagnosed medical conditions can mean that the use of restrictive interventions can be particularly distressing.
- Where possible, staff should clearly and calmly communicate to the student what is happening, why and what the student needs to do.
- Verbal and non-verbal strategies should be used to ensure those with speech, language and communication difficulties or English as an additional language can still understand what is happening.

Training on the use of restrictive interventions should enable staff to judge when it is appropriate to use restrictive interventions, even in situations where quick thinking is needed. If an assessment has been made to use restrictive interventions, staff should be supported in their decision making.

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## Situations where reasonable force can be used

- remove disruptive children or young people from the classroom where they have refused to follow an instruction to do so
- prevent a student behaving in a way that disrupts a school event, trip or visit
- prevent a student from leaving a classroom, where allowing them to leave would risk their safety or lead to behaviour that disrupts the behaviour of others
- prevent a student from attacking a member of staff or another student
- stop a fight
- restrain a student at risk of harming themselves through physical outbursts.

## Situations where reasonable force cannot be used

You **cannot** use force as a punishment because it would fall under the definition of corporal punishment which is illegal.

## Power to search without consent

In addition to the general power to use reasonable force, headteachers and authorised staff can use such force as is reasonable given the circumstances to conduct a search without consent for the following prohibited items.

- knives and weapons
- alcohol
- illegal drugs
- stolen items
- tobacco and cigarette papers
- fireworks
- pornographic images
- any item that has been or is likely to be used to commit an offence, cause personal injury or damage to property.

Force cannot be used to search for items banned under the school rules. For example, if your school has a 'no chewing gum' rule, you cannot use force to search for it.

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## Seclusion

Seclusion is a non-disciplinary intervention whereby a student is confined to a place away from others and prevented from leaving. This should only be used as a safety measure to protect others from harm. For example, when a student is experiencing high levels of emotional or behavioural dysregulation and not necessarily acting with intent.

If a student is to be secluded, the space should be safe and not feel threatening or intimidating to the student. They should be supervised at all times during the period of seclusion. Once the immediate risk of harm has reduced, the student should be allowed to leave. Seclusion should not be carried out through threat of punishment.

## Communicating about the use of restrictive intervention and seclusion

There is not a requirement to have a specific policy on the use of restrictive intervention and seclusion, but all schools are required to have a behaviour policy and to make it known to students, parents and staff. Typically, this is where the use of restrictive interventions is described and it is good practice to set out the circumstances where these may be used.

The policy should emphasise the importance of minimising the need to use restrictive interventions, such as through prevention and de-escalation, looking at whole school measures as well as tailored approaches for individual students. It should also acknowledge the school's legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for children with disabilities and/or children with special educational needs. This should not only depend on the circumstances, but also on the information and understanding of the needs of the student concerned.

## The DfE guidance

The DfE guidance 'Restrictive interventions, including use of reasonable force, in schools 2026' says that schools should not have a 'no contact' policy because there is a real risk that it may place a member of staff in breach of their duty of care towards a student or even prevent them from taking the action needed to stop a pupil causing harm.

## Parental consent

Parental consent is not required to use force on a student, but by taking steps to ensure that staff, pupils and parents are clear about when reasonable force may be used, the likelihood of complaints will be reduced when force has been properly used.

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## Unacceptable types of force

A panel of experts\* has identified that certain restraint techniques present an unacceptable risk when used on children and young people.

These are:

- the 'seated double embrace' which involves two members of staff forcing a person into a sitting position and leaning them forward, while a third monitors breathing
- the 'double basket hold' which involves holding a person's arms across their chest
- the 'nose distraction technique' which involves a sharp upward jab under the nose.

\*Physical Control in Care Medical Panel – 2008

## Consideration for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Some children with SEND or social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs may react to distressing or confusing situations by displaying behaviours which could be harmful to themselves or others.

Environments or situations that are unfamiliar, sensory overload or feelings of fear and anxiety can all be triggers. For students who are non-verbal or find verbal communication difficult, they might express their fear, discomfort or anxiety through actions instead. This can lead to students with SEND being disproportionately subjected to the use of restrictive interventions.

Schools should work with students, parents and other professionals to develop prevention and de-escalation strategies. These could include:

- removing stimuli that may be causing distress
- changing body language, facial expression or tone of voice
- supporting the student to express their emotions before getting overwhelmed
- engaging the student in an activity which can help to manage their feelings of anxiety.

Schools should try to understand the underlying triggers of challenging behaviour so that they can create an inclusive environment which provides proactive support, considering the impact of school policies on students with SEND.

## Recording and reporting

Schools now have a legal duty to ensure that procedures are in place for recording and reporting each use of force to the parents/carers of the student involved, as soon as practicable after the incident, though this



should be done no later than the same day. The same applies to any incident whereby seclusion was used with a student.

An exception to these requirements is when reporting the incident would likely result in serious harm to the student. If there is no one that it can be reported to without resulting in significant risk or harm, the local authority where the student resides should be informed.

Best practice would include inviting parents/carers in to have follow-up discussions about the incident where appropriate. This could include a discussion about:

- any behavioural triggers or warning signs
- what de-escalation strategies were used and how effective they were
- what might be done differently in the future.

## Complaints

If a student complains that force has been used on them, the following factors must be taken into account.

### Investigation

All complaints about the use of force should be thoroughly, speedily and appropriately investigated.

### Defence

Where a member of staff has acted within the law – that is, used reasonable force in order to prevent injury, damage to property or disorder – this will provide a defence to any criminal prosecution or other civil or public law action.

### Evidence

Should a student make a complaint, the onus is on the person making the complaint to prove that their allegation is true. It is not for you, as a member of staff, to show that you acted reasonably.

### Suspension

Staff should not automatically be suspended when they have been accused of using excessive force. The guidance 'Keeping children safe in education' should be referred to. It makes it clear that a person must not be automatically suspended or suspended without careful thought. The circumstances of the case should be carefully considered to see if a suspension is warranted until an allegation is resolved or whether alternative arrangements are more appropriate.

Should a member of staff be suspended, the school should ensure that the person has access to a named contact who can provide support. Governing bodies should always consider whether a member of staff has acted within the law when reaching a decision about whether or not to take disciplinary action.

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## Duty of care

As employers, schools and local authorities have a duty of care towards their employees. It is important that appropriate pastoral care is given to any member of staff who is subject to a formal allegation following a use of force incident.

## Positive physical contact

It is not illegal to touch a student. There are occasions when physical contact, other than reasonable force, is appropriate.

For example:

- holding the hand of a child at the front or back of the line when going into assembly
- when comforting a distressed student
- when a student is being congratulated or praised
- to demonstrate how to use a musical instrument
- to demonstrate exercises or techniques during PE lessons or sports coaching
- to give first aid.

## Summary

This course has explained the power of reasonable force and restrictive interventions. It has covered what reasonable force means and who can use the power. It also detailed when restrictive interventions and seclusion can be used and when they cannot, as well as what happens in situations where they have been used.

As explained in the course, schools now have a duty to record and report any use of restrictive interventions or seclusion to parents/carers, so your school policy should also reflect this.

You have now completed the course and we trust you have found it useful.

You are now ready to complete the questionnaire. Click **Questionnaire** to undertake the questions.

Finally, there is the opportunity for you to leave feedback on the course and we would be very grateful if you would take a minute to do so.

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