

# SAFE TOUCH GUIDELINES

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&  
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CHOICE SUPPORT

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**choice**support  
*make life more interesting*

# THE RESEARCH TEAM

## Leonie Elliott-Graves

Leonie is a PhD candidate and visiting lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research focuses on developing choice and leadership for participants with learning disabilities through drama. She holds an MA in Applied Theatre from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London and a BA in Drama and Theatre Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London.

She has worked as a drama facilitator and independent advocate with people with learning disabilities for over seven years and continues to develop work as an applied theatre practitioner both independently and as part of her work at Goldsmiths.

She works closely with organisations including Wac Arts and Choice Support on the programs they deliver for young people and adults with learning disabilities to continue to find new ways of engaging in empowering creative practices.



## Dr Thomas Doukas

Thomas is the Head of Inclusive Research & Involvement at Choice Support. His role is key, for the development of inclusive research and involvement aiming to improve the lifestyles and citizenship for the people with disabilities by influencing policy and strategy. Thomas has worked with people with learning disabilities for over 15 years focusing on research, active involvement and communication systems to ensure people with disabilities are involved in all aspects of the service provision and lead independent and fulfilling lives. The Involvement Team supports people with learning disabilities to develop and deliver a range of training and information sessions delivered to other disabled people or their supporters.



Other members of the team from Choice Support's services in Sutton & Merton:  
**Taramatee Irapah, Laura Faur, Helen Jopp, Elizabeth Odezugo, Edith Sagana, Sharmaine Green, Comfort Turkson, Andrea Fox**

# INTRODUCTION

Touch is an integral part of providing sensitive and good quality care for the individuals that we support. Used in context and with empathy, touch supports the development of our natural interactions with the people we support. Touch is important and may be used routinely for a variety of reasons such as to aid communication, for therapy, for emotional reasons, for purposes of care, for medical or nursing reasons, to provide physical support, to mention but a few.

Choice Support recognises that there are times when people we support are in need of physical reassurance. Supporters should feel comfortable with this so long as the person accepts the gesture, is reassured by it, and understands the supporter's intention (i.e. does not feel threatened or become aroused).

These guidelines are the result of research which was conducted in order to explore and develop intensive interaction and safe touch skills and to determine in which circumstances touch is necessary, beneficial and desired or is inappropriate and challenging.

These guidelines were created to explore new and creative ways of using touch to foster communication, support care and develop strong relationships and to increase awareness of the benefits of touch.

# HOW TO USE THESE GUIDELINES

These guidelines are a practical tool and we encourage supporters to use them as appropriate to the individual and to their own support.

Staff members supporting an individual every day may have concerns and fears about the use of touch for various reasons and these guidelines aim to clarify the reasons and conditions for touch.

Staff need to be aware that for people who have suffered abuse, physical contact may have upsetting connotations and result in a negative reaction. Cultural factors are also significant with regard to physical contact and a person's culture needs to be respected. Additionally, people with special needs e.g. an autistic disorder, may be particularly averse to physical contact and need their own personal space. Staff should always refer to information provided in the person's support plan or check with the manager.

Staff need to remember that some people they support are indiscriminate in their affections and in their approaches to unfamiliar adults and other people. This document aims to encourage people to learn about appropriate touching. Inappropriate touching by people should be discouraged and where possible the incident should be discussed with the person and the manager.

# TOUCH IS IMPORTANT

- ✓ Humans need to touch to be well and to grow.
- ✓ People who do not have positive touch suffer from 'touch hunger'.
- ✓ Touch helps all of us understand and connect with the world around us.
- ✓ Touch helps those who do not speak communicate with those around them.
- ✓ Touch makes people feel valued.
- ✓ Touch makes people feel like they belong.
- ✓ Touch makes staff feel appreciated.
- ✓ Touch reduces isolation.
- ✓ Touch stimulates people and makes them calm and alert.
- ✓ Hand-on-hand guiding helps people learn important skills.

# WHAT DOES TOUCH DO?

At the end of the activity she burst out with laughter.

Staff member 2017

Touch is also a method of communication and positive touch can be used to communicate empathy and reassurance.

Field 2013

As soon as I touched her she smiled and reached out for me

Staff member 2017

Touch helps build trust, as people are more likely to trust someone who has touched them than someone who has not

Green and Day 2013

One of the people I support fell asleep after being massaged so he felt RELAXED!

Staff member 2017

Sometimes touch will not be welcomed so I need to stop the activity!

Staff member 2017

Touch in the form of massage can also help reduce stress and chronic pain and can be as therapeutic for the massage giver as it is for the massage receiver.

Field 2013

# TYPES OF TOUCH

Touch is important and may be used routinely for any of the following reasons:

- ✎ For Communication – e.g. touching someone's shoulder while speaking to them to gain and maintain their attention; when using signing with someone who is deaf; hand shakes.
- ✎ For therapy – e.g. massage, sensory stimulation, physiotherapy, and hydrotherapy
- ✎ For emotional reasons – e.g. to communicate affection and warmth to a person; to give reassurance and to communicate security and comfort.
- ✎ For the purposes of personal or medical and nursing care.
- ✎ To give physical support – e.g. transfers in and out of wheelchairs
- ✎ To protect people – e.g. to be used to protect people from danger by physically intervening and managing challenging behaviours

# WHAT HAPPENS IF WE DON'T TOUCH?

- People who are touch hungry may struggle to interact or may seek inappropriate touch.
- People who do not receive touch feel isolated. This is especially the case for people with PMLD who may not be able to reach out themselves or communicate in other ways.
- Adults with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to 'touch hunger' because holding hands, linking arms and hugging are often considered inappropriate for adult service users.

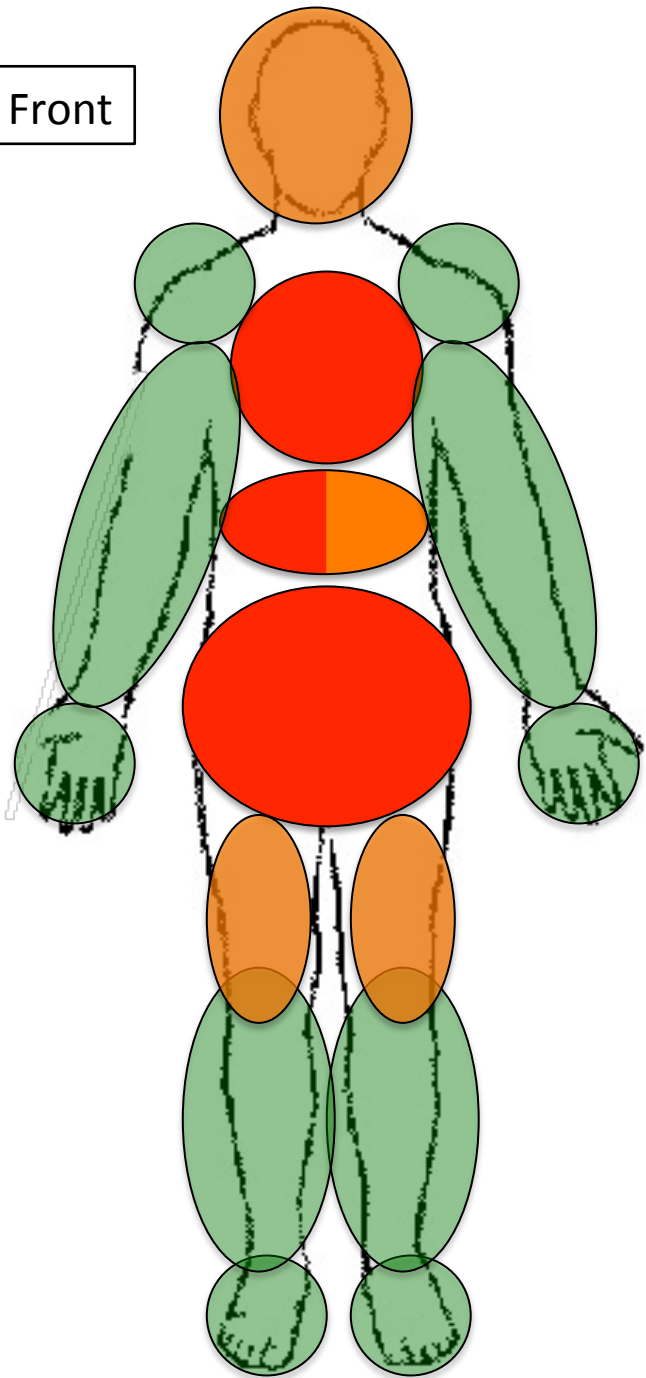


# IS IT SAFE TO TOUCH?

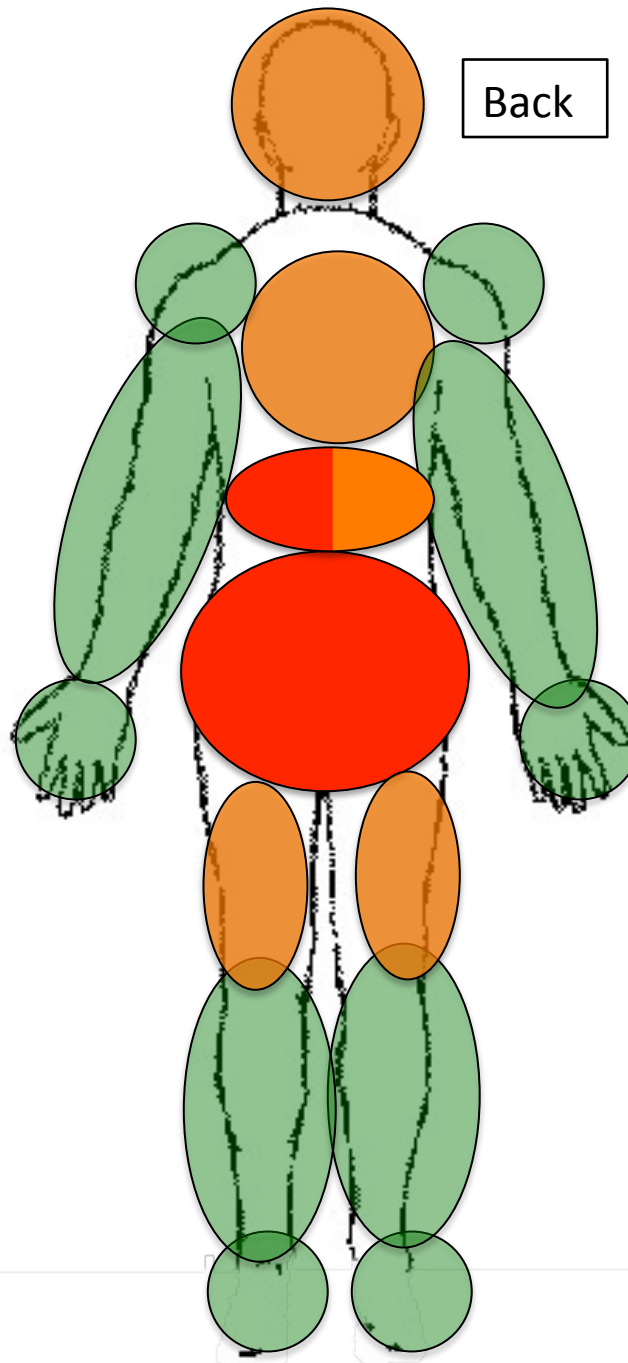
Here is where our staff think it is **SAFE** and **NOT SAFE** to touch.

Make sure staff and the people you support are comfortable with the touch you use. There will be cases where this does not apply.

Front



Back



Safe to touch but  
you must still  
assess comfort  
and risks

Sometimes safe  
and sometimes  
unsafe to touch.  
You must assess  
comfort and risks

Never safe to  
touch unless doing  
personal care

# USING TOUCH SAFELY

Staff need to be clear and open about why they are using touch and be able to explain their practice. The use of touch should be discussed openly and regularly between staff using it. It is a good idea to keep written records of your touch practice and any possible risks.

Here are some examples of appropriate and inappropriate touch that emerged from the research.

- ✔ You can allow people you support to give you brief hugs if you feel comfortable with this.
- ✔ You can allow people you support to hold your hand and kiss it briefly if you are familiar with them and comfortable with this.
- ✔ You can allow people you support to hold hands or link arms with you to help with travel and stability.
- ✘ You should discourage people you support from touching your face. You can offer your hand instead.
- ✘ You should discourage people you support from sitting on your lap. You can offer to sit side by side.
- ✘ You should avoid using touch if the person you support is very distressed and is unlikely to tolerate it.



## CONTACT INFO

To request an electronic copy of the guidelines or simply to get in touch, please contact us on:

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