

Support Without Touch: Promoting Autonomy

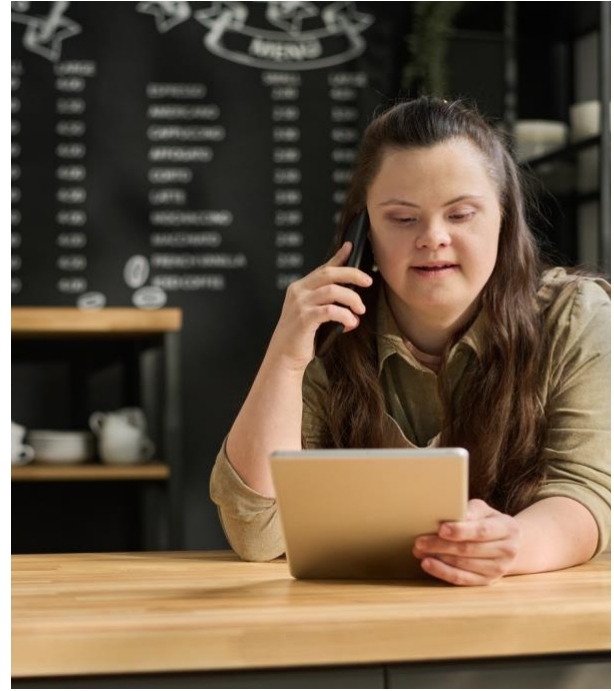
Overview

Children with disabilities often have many things done to them and for them throughout their day, which can limit their opportunities to make choices and develop independence at the same pace as their peers. This makes it especially important to intentionally build self-advocacy skills early and to actively support bodily autonomy.

Giving students space and teaching ways to regulate without touch helps them feel safe and build skills. Research on trauma and sensory processing shows that many students can find unexpected or frequent **touch stressful**, even when adults mean to be kind.

When adults rely on rubbing backs, tickling, or letting students sit in laps, students may become dependent on adults to calm down instead of learning strategies they can use **independently**.

Adults are encouraged to teach regulation skills such as using visuals, movement breaks, breathing, quiet spaces, and predictable routines because these tools support **long term self control** and **confidence**.



By **limiting physical contact** and focusing on teaching coping tools, Staff help protect student dignity, respect personal boundaries, and support regulation skills across settings.

Guidelines

Safe Kids Thrive says clear guidelines help adults know what kinds of physical contact are okay and what kinds are not, so students feel safe and respected and no one is left wondering if a behavior might be harmful. These guidelines also help protect adults and students by preventing inappropriate or harmful interactions and making it easier for staff to notice and report concerns right away.

Appropriate	Inappropriate	Harmful
• High fives • Handshakes • Fist bumps • Side hugs • Pat on the back or shoulder • Verbal praise • Positive reinforcement for good work • Tending an injured child/youth • Using a child's given name • Hand-Under-Hand support	• Tickling, wrestling • Roughhousing • Piggyback rides • Backrubs or massage • Seating a child on one's lap • Patting on the buttocks • Unwanted affection • Using a nickname like sweetie • Hand-over-Hand support	• Grabbing, shaking • Slapping, spanking • Pinching, pushing • Kicking • Touching private body parts • Shaming • Belittling, embarrassing • Referencing physical development or appearance

Why it Matters

When we provide meaningful choices, honor all forms of communication, and respect personal boundaries, we teach students their preferences matter and they have a voice in what happens to and around their bodies. This is critical given that students with disabilities experience significantly higher rates of sexual abuse and unwanted touch, and many incidents go unreported. Because of this increased vulnerability, the way adults use touch in school settings matters greatly. Avoiding unnecessary physical contact and consistently respecting personal space reduces risk and models clear, respectful boundaries

and reinforces each student's right to safety and control over their own body.

Statistics

- People with disabilities are sexually assaulted at about **3 times the rate** of people without disabilities.
- 83% of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lives.
- Only about 3% of cases involving people with developmental disabilities are ever reported.
- Children and teens with disabilities are more likely to experience sexual violence than their peers without disabilities; in some studies, almost 3 to 5 times more likely.

What Can You Do?

- Hold a team meeting to discuss ways to promote [independence and body autonomy](#).
- Use [hand-under-hand](#) supports instead of hand-over-hand
- Complete [Sensory Audit](#)
- Only use appropriate touch from the [guidelines](#) above
- Teach strong self-regulation tools (like [breathing strategies](#), [visual supports](#), [regulation toolbox](#))
- Teach [self-determination language](#)
- Teach [explicit lessons](#) about their [bodies and boundaries](#). This supports

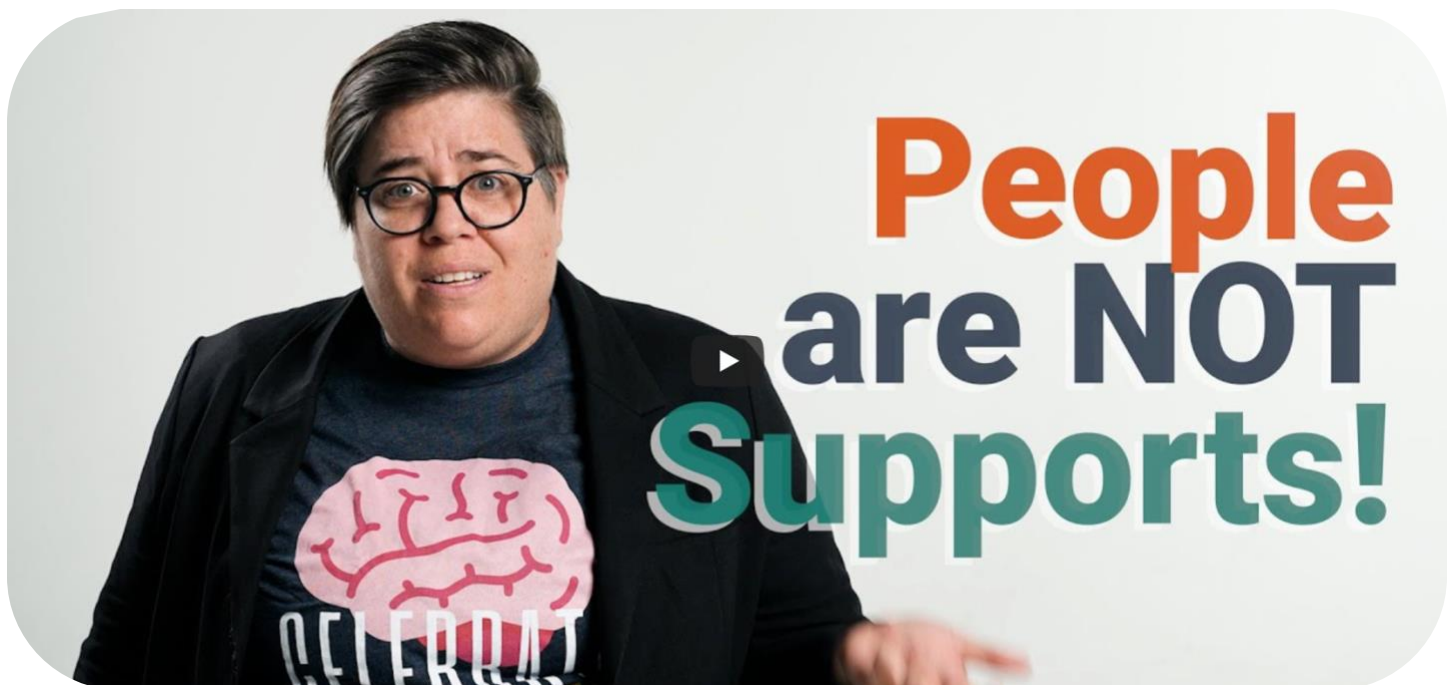
students in understanding consent and safety.

- Provide transition cues verbally and/or visually
- Prioritize delivering instruction in inclusive settings. Children with disabilities are safest in community settings where isolation is avoided.
- Plan antecedent strategies as a team to avoid utilizing touch within behavior support plans.

This kind of teaching helps students feel in control of their own bodies and builds skills that keep them safer and more independent now and as they grow.

People are NOT Supports!

Understanding the difference between supports, strategies, and resources. Five Moore Minutes: youtu.be/rOIUnnxCspA (5:52 minutes)



References/ resources

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