Handout 4: Appropriate Physical Contact with People who Require Personal Care Assistance

Many workers have responsibilities in providing personal care to people with a disability. This is the type of care that involves physical contact such as assisting with toileting, bathing, hygiene, dressing, grooming, eating and drinking and positioning. In these situations the physical or personal boundaries that exist between people who have a professional relationship is very different to those with whom we have a personal or intimate relationship.

These personal boundaries tell us when and where it is appropriate to touch the people we have different relationships with, how much space we want around ourselves and how much other people may want. These boundaries are developed as we move from childhood to adulthood and are the result of personal experience, cultural rules and social norms.

This can present issues for the person being cared for and the carer. Carers are having contact with a person in a way that would otherwise be unusual. This may cause them feelings of discomfort and unease.

People who are being cared for may also feel uncomfortable. They have the additional difficulty of being in a position of powerlessness. They are reliant on someone else to do things for them that are usually private and personal. This can make them vulnerable to abuse and sexual harassment.

People with a disability need to be protected from any abuse of this power by the carer.

Some ways that a service can protect people include:

1. Carers need to have very clear guidelines from their organisation about what is acceptable touching and what is not. Unacceptable touching is a form of abuse.

2. Carers need to be regularly supported and supervised about how they provide a personal care service. They should be assisted to assess their own feelings about the care they are providing. If they are feeling uncomfortable there should be other ways to provide the care.

3. It is sometimes inappropriate and disrespectful for people of the opposite sex to provide personal care to someone. An organisation should take this into consideration when recruiting staff and allocating staff to clients.

4. Staff should be educated about different personal boundaries that exist within different cultural and religious groups.

5. People with a disability should be supported to develop as much independence as they possibly can so that their reliance on others is reduced.

6. People with a disability should be supported to learn ways to indicate consent and make choices.
7. The rights of people to refuse a service if they are uncomfortable, to make complaints, to be free from unwanted touching needs to be clearly stated in policies and procedures and upheld by everyone involved.