

**Subject:**

**Pastoral Care: Guidance on the Use of  
Reasonable Force to Restrain or Control Pupils**

**Circular Number:**

**1999/9**

**Date of Issue:**

**8 March 1999**

**Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools;
- Education and Library Boards;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Association of Governing Bodies of Voluntary Grammar Schools;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; and
- Teachers' Unions.

**Summary of Contents:**

This Circular provides clarification and guidance on the use of reasonable force, by teachers and other authorised staff, to restrain or control pupils in certain circumstances. It gives guidance about who can use reasonable force, when it is appropriate to use it, and the procedures for recording incidents where reasonable force was used. It also advises that schools should have a written policy about the use of reasonable force which should be made known to parents.

**Enquiries:**

Any enquiries about the contents of this Circular should be addressed to:

Mr Jackie Simpson (Tel: 01247-279247)  
Pupil Support Branch  
Department of Education  
Rathgael House  
Balloo Road  
BANGOR  
BT19 7PR

**Status of Contents:**

Advice  
Information for schools

**Related Documents:**

Circular 1999/10  
(Pastoral Care in Schools:  
Child Protection)

**Superseded Documents:**

None

**Expiry Date:**

Not applicable

**DENI Website:**

This Circular is also  
available on  
<http://www.deni.gov.uk>

## PASTORAL CARE: GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF REASONABLE FORCE TO RESTRAIN OR CONTROL PUPILS

1. All schools have a pastoral responsibility towards the pupils in their charge and should therefore take all reasonable steps to ensure that the welfare of pupils is safeguarded and that their safety is preserved. The Board of Governors and the Principal of each school also have a duty to promote and secure good behaviour and discipline on the part of pupils at the school.

2. Article 4 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which came into force on 21 August 1998, clarifies powers which already exist under common law. It enables a member of staff of a grant-aided school to use, in relation to any pupil at the school, such force as is reasonable in the circumstances to prevent a pupil from:

- a. committing an offence;
- b. causing personal injury to, or damage to the property of, any person (including the pupil himself); or
- c. engaging in any behaviour prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline at the school or among any of its pupils, whether during a teaching session or otherwise.

3. The right of a member of staff to use such force as is reasonable to restrain or control a pupil applies:

- where the member of staff is on the premises of the school; or
- elsewhere at a time when he/she has lawful control or charge of the pupil concerned;
- to teachers at the school, **and** to any other member of staff who with the authority of the principal has lawful control or charge of pupils.

4. **The need to use reasonable force to restrain or control a pupil should be rare.** This Circular and the attached Appendix provide clarification and guidance on a number of issues relating to the use of “reasonable force” by teachers and others to restrain or control pupils. **However, it is emphasised that corporal punishment remains unlawful, and that neither Article 4 nor this Circular, in any way, authorise teachers or others to use any degree of physical contact which is deliberately intended to cause pain or injury or humiliation.** The application of reasonable force to restrain or control a pupil is to be used as a last resort, only when other behaviour management strategies have failed, and when the pupil, other pupils, members of staff, or property are at risk, or the pupil is seriously compromising good order and discipline.

Article 4 does not however prevent any person from exercising his/her right under common law to defend themselves against an attack provided he/she does not use a disproportionate degree of force to do so. The purpose of Article 4 is to make it clear that teachers, and authorised staff, are also entitled to intervene in other, less extreme, situations.



## **Need for Schools to Have a Written Policy**

5. The use of reasonable force is only one of the strategies available to schools and teachers to secure pupils' safety and well being and also to maintain good order and discipline. All those who may have to use reasonable force with pupils must clearly understand the options and strategies open to them, and they must know what is regarded as acceptable action on their part and what is not. It is important, therefore, that schools have a clear written policy about the use of reasonable force to restrain or control pupils. This should be understood by teachers, authorised staff, pupils and parents and should form part of the school's policy on discipline and child protection within its overall pastoral care policy.

6. In drawing up a written statement of the school's disciplinary policy, as required in Article 3 of the 1998 Order, it is recommended that the Board of Governors, in consultation with the Principal, should:

- include a statement setting out the school's policy and its guidelines on the use of reasonable force to restrain or control pupils;
- discuss these with staff who may have to apply them; and
- issue or make them known to parents and pupils.

Boards of Governors should also have regard to any advice issued by Education and Library Boards and, where appropriate, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

7. The Department has asked a Working Group, comprising representatives from the Education and Library Boards, CCMS and schools, who are already drafting best practice guidelines for schools on a wide range of disciplinary matters, to draft a model policy for schools on the use of reasonable force based on the guidance in this Circular. This will be available later this year. Schools may wish to draw up their own policies in the meantime in order to provide guidance to staff and others on the use of reasonable force and its place in the school's strategies for maintaining good behaviour and discipline.

8. A statement of the school's policy on the use of reasonable force to restrain or control pupils should be included with the information the school gives parents about its overall policy on discipline and standards of behaviour.

9. The Department considers that it would also be useful if schools designated an experienced senior member of staff (the Principal or a senior teacher, or perhaps the designated teacher for child protection) as having special responsibility for providing guidance to other staff on the use of reasonable force. This teacher should also assume responsibility for notifying parents about incidents where reasonable force has had to be used and for dealing with any complaints which may emerge. This will help to ensure a consistent approach within the school to the use of reasonable force and the reporting arrangements.

**C JENDOUBI (MRS)**  
**School Effectiveness Division**



## **GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF REASONABLE FORCE TO RESTRAIN OR CONTROL PUPILS**

### **Who may use reasonable force?**

#### ***Teachers***

1. Article 4 of the 1998 Order authorises teachers to use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances to prevent a pupil from:

- committing an offence;
- causing personal injury to, or damage to the property of, any person (including the pupil himself); or
- engaging in any behaviour prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline at the school or among any of its pupils whether during a teaching session or otherwise.

#### ***Non-teaching staff***

2. Other members of staff at the school are also authorised to use reasonable force in the circumstances described at 1. above, provided they have been authorised by the Principal to have lawful control or charge of pupils. This might, for example, include classroom assistants, midday supervisors, and escorts. In addition the authorisation could extend to education welfare officers and educational psychologists.

3. In determining which non-teaching staff to authorise, Principals will wish to have regard to the roles and responsibilities of the staff concerned. In particular they should consider whether the staff have a responsibility to supervise pupils as part of their normal duties or whether, from time to time, they may have to take on that responsibility when a teacher is not present.

#### ***Volunteers***

4. Suitably vetted volunteers normally work only under the direction and supervision of a teacher or other member of staff and should not be expected to assume sole responsibility for the safety and well-being of pupils. Where a situation arises, therefore, where the use of reasonable force may need to be exercised, the volunteer should alert the member of staff in charge and defer to his/her judgement as to the appropriate means of handling the situation.

There may, however, be circumstances in which the Principal may need to authorise a volunteer to use reasonable force in exceptional circumstances. These might include school visits, holidays and residential activities where some degree of delegated responsibility may have to be given to the volunteers in the organisation of activities; where a member of school staff may not be readily available to deal with an incident; and where it is possible that significant harm will occur if action

is not taken immediately. Where volunteers are so authorised, it is essential that they receive appropriate training and guidance.

5. **The key issue is that all non-teaching staff and volunteers must be identified and specifically authorised by the Principal to be in control of or in charge of pupils.** The Principal should clearly inform all persons concerned and ensure that they are aware of and understand what the authorisation entails. Principals may find it helpful to arrange for training or guidance to be provided by a senior member of the teaching staff who has been designated as having special responsibility for this matter and who has already received suitable training on the use of reasonable force. Principals should also keep an up to date list of authorised non-teaching staff and others who are so authorised and ensure that teachers know who they are, for example, by placing a list on the staff room notice board.

#### **Where can reasonable force be used?**

6. The right of a teacher or other person to use reasonable force applies where the pupil concerned is on the school premises **and** when he/she has been authorised to have lawful control or charge of the pupil concerned elsewhere e.g. supervision of pupils in bus queues, on a field trip, or other authorised out of school activity such as a sporting event or educational visit.

#### **What is meant by reasonable force?**

7. There is no precise legal definition of “reasonable force” so it is not possible to state, in fully comprehensive terms, when it is appropriate to use physical force to restrain or control pupils or the degree of force that may reasonably be used. It will always depend on the circumstances of each case. However, there are three relevant considerations to be borne in mind:

- the **use of force** can be regarded as reasonable **only** if the circumstances of the particular incident warrant it. The use of any degree of force is unlawful if the particular circumstances do not warrant the use of physical force. Therefore physical force could not be justified to prevent a pupil from committing a trivial misdemeanour, or in a situation that clearly could be resolved without force;
- the **degree of force** employed must be in proportion to the circumstances of the incident and the seriousness of the behaviour or the consequences it is intended to prevent. Any force used should always be the minimum needed to achieve the desired result;
- whether it is reasonable to use force, and the degree of force that could reasonably be employed, might also depend on the age, level of understanding and sex of the pupil, and any physical disability he/she may have.

#### **Is it appropriate to use reasonable force in every situation?**

8. **Reasonable force should not be used automatically in every situation nor should it be used as a form of discipline. In a non-urgent situation, reasonable force should only be used when other behaviour management strategies have failed.** That consideration is particularly appropriate in situations where the aim is to maintain good order and discipline, and there is no

direct risk to people or property. Any action which could exacerbate the situation needs to be avoided, and the possible consequences of intervening physically, including the risk of increasing the disruption or actually provoking an attack, need to be carefully evaluated. The age and level of understanding of the pupil is also very relevant in those circumstances - physical intervention to enforce compliance with staff instructions is likely to be increasingly inappropriate with older pupils and **should never be used as a substitute for good behaviour management**.

9. Staff may not always have the time to weigh up the possible courses of action and it would be prudent therefore for them to have considered in advance the circumstances when they should and should not use reasonable force. Staff should, whilst taking due account of their duty of care to pupils, always try to deal with a situation through other strategies before using reasonable force. All teachers need to be aware of strategies and techniques for dealing with difficult pupils and situations which they can use to defuse and calm a situation. Best practice guidelines on successful discipline policies are currently being drawn up by a Working Group comprising representatives from schools, the Education and Library Boards and CCMS. These will be circulated to all schools shortly.

### **When might it be appropriate to use reasonable force?**

10. In a situation where other behaviour management strategies have failed to resolve the problem, or are inappropriate (eg in an emergency), there are a wide variety of circumstances in which reasonable force might be appropriate, or necessary, to restrain or control a pupil. They will fall into three broad categories:

- a. where action is necessary in self-defence or because there is an imminent risk of injury;
- b. where there is a developing risk of injury, or significant damage to property;
- c. where a pupil is behaving in a way that is compromising good order and discipline.

11. Examples of situations that fall into one of the first two categories are

- a pupil attacks a member of staff, or another pupil;
- pupils are fighting;
- a pupil is causing, or at risk of causing, injury or damage by accident, by rough play, or by misuse of dangerous materials, substances or objects;
- a pupil is running in a corridor or on a stairway in a way in which he/she might have or cause an accident likely to injure him- or herself or others;
- a pupil absconds from a class or tries to leave school (**NB this will only apply if a pupil could be at risk if not kept in the classroom or at school**).

12. Examples of situations that fall into the third category are:

- a pupil persistently refuses to obey an order to leave a classroom;
- a pupil is behaving in a way that is seriously disrupting a lesson.

13. However, some practical considerations also need to be taken into account:

- Before intervening physically a member of staff should seek to deploy other behaviour strategies. Where these have failed, the member of staff should, wherever practicable, tell the pupil who is misbehaving to stop, and what will happen if he/she does not. The member of staff should continue attempting to communicate with the pupil throughout the incident, and should make it clear that physical contact or restraint will stop as soon as it ceases to be necessary. A calm and measured approach to a situation is needed and staff should never give the impression that they have lost their temper, or are acting out of anger or frustration, or to punish the pupil.
- Sometimes a member of staff should not intervene in an incident without help (unless it is an emergency), for example, when dealing with an older pupil, or a physically large pupil, or more than one pupil, or if the teacher believes he/she may be at risk of injury. In those circumstances the member of staff should remove other pupils who might be at risk, and summon assistance from a colleague or colleagues, or where necessary telephone the Police. The member of staff should inform the pupil(s) that he/she has sent for help. Until assistance arrives the member of staff should continue to attempt to defuse the situation orally, and try to prevent the incident from escalating.
- Situations where a pupil refuses to obey an order to leave a classroom need to be handled carefully as they can be a prelude to a major confrontation, especially if reasonable force is used to eject older pupils. Where a pupil persistently refuses to leave a classroom and the teacher believes that the use of reasonable force will endanger the teacher or other pupils, the school should have an emergency response procedure whereby assistance can be summoned quickly, for example a trusted pupil is sent for help.
- If a school is aware that a pupil is likely to behave in a disruptive way that may require the use of reasonable force, it will be sensible to plan how to respond if the situation arises. Such planning needs to address:
  - managing the pupil (eg reactive strategies to de-escalate a conflict, holds to be used if necessary);
  - involving the parents to ensure that they are clear about the specific action the school might need to take;
  - briefing staff to ensure they know exactly what action they should be taking (this may identify a need for training or guidance);



- ensuring that additional support can be summoned if appropriate.

**What might be regarded as constituting reasonable force?**

14. Physical intervention can take a number of forms. It might involve staff:

- physically interposing between pupils;
- blocking a pupil's path;
- holding;
- pushing;
- pulling;
- leading a pupil by the arm;
- shepherding a pupil away by placing a hand in the centre of the back; or
- (in extreme circumstances) using more restrictive holds.

15. In exceptional circumstances, where there is an immediate risk of injury, a member of staff may need to take any necessary action that is consistent with the concept of "reasonable force", for example, to prevent a young pupil running off a pavement onto a busy road, or to prevent a pupil hitting someone, or throwing something. **However, staff should never act in a way that might reasonably be expected to cause injury, for example by:**

- holding a pupil round the neck, or by the collar, or in any other way that might restrict the pupil's ability to breathe;
- slapping, punching, kicking or using any implement on a pupil;
- throwing any object at a pupil;
- twisting or forcing limbs against a joint;
- tripping up a pupil;
- holding or pulling a pupil by the hair or ear;
- holding a pupil face down on the ground.

16. Staff should also avoid touching or holding a pupil in any way that might be considered indecent.



### **What action can be taken in self-defence or in an emergency situation?**

17. Neither Article 4 nor the guidance contained in this Circular can cover every possible situation in which it might be reasonable for someone to use a degree of force. For example, everyone has the right to defend themselves against an attack provided they do not use a disproportionate degree of force to do so. Similarly, in an emergency, for example if a pupil is at immediate risk of injury or on the point of inflicting injury on someone else, **any** member of staff would be entitled to intervene whether or not specifically authorised by the Principal to do so. The purpose of Article 4 and this Circular is to make it clear that teachers, and authorised staff, are also entitled to intervene in other, less extreme, situations.

### **Is physical contact with pupils appropriate in other circumstances?**

18. The Code of Conduct for staff which has been issued to all schools makes it clear that, although physical contact with pupils should generally be avoided, there can be occasions when physical contact with a pupil may be proper or necessary other than those situations covered by Article 4. For example, some physical contact may be necessary to demonstrate exercises or techniques during PE lessons, sports coaching, music or technology and design, or if a member of staff has to give first aid. Young children and children with special educational needs may also need staff to provide physical prompts or help. Touching may also be appropriate where a pupil is in distress and needs comforting. Teachers should use their own professional judgement when they feel a pupil needs this kind of support. Guidance on these issues can be found in the Code of Conduct, and also in paragraphs 73 and 74 of the booklet accompanying Circular 1999/10 (Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection).

19. There may be some children for whom touching is particularly unwelcome, because, for example, they have been abused. Physical contact with pupils becomes increasingly open to question as pupils reach and go through adolescence, and staff should also bear in mind that even innocent and well-intentioned actions can sometimes be misconstrued.

### **Should incidents where reasonable force is used be recorded?**

20. It is extremely important that there is a detailed, contemporaneous, written report of any occasion (except minor or trivial incidents) where reasonable force is used. This may help prevent any misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the incident, and it will be helpful should there be a complaint. Schools should keep an up-to-date record of all such incidents, in an incident book. Immediately following any such incident the member of staff concerned should tell the Principal or a senior member of staff and provide a short written factual report as soon as possible afterwards. That report should include:

- the name(s) of the pupil(s) involved, and when and where the incident took place;
- the names of any other staff or pupils who witnessed the incident;
- the reason that force was necessary (eg to prevent injury to the pupil, another pupil or a member of staff);

- briefly, how the incident began and progressed, including details of the pupil's behaviour, what was said by each of the parties, the steps taken to defuse or calm the situation, the degree of force used, how that was applied, and for how long;
- the pupil's response, and the outcome of the incident;
- details of any obvious or apparent injury suffered by the pupil, or any other person, and of any damage to property.

At least annually, the Chairman of the Board of Governors and the Principal should review the entries in the incident book. Records of incidents should be kept for 5 years after the date they occurred.

21. Staff may find it helpful to seek advice from a senior colleague (eg the Principal or senior member of staff who has been designated to provide training and guidance on the use of reasonable force), or a representative of their professional association when compiling a report. They should also keep a copy of the report.

22. Incidents involving the use of force can cause the parents of the pupil involved great concern. It is always advisable to inform parents of an incident involving their child (other than a trivial incident), and give them an opportunity to discuss it. The Principal, or a member of staff to whom the incident is reported, will need to consider whether that should be done straight away or at the end of the school day, and whether parents should be told orally or in writing.

#### **Are complaints about the use of reasonable force likely to occur?**

23. Involving parents when an incident occurs with their child, and having a clear policy about the use of reasonable force that staff adhere to, should help to avoid complaints from parents. It will not, however, prevent all complaints, and any complaint from a parent about the use of reasonable force on his/her child should be dealt with in accordance with the procedures set out in the booklet accompanying Circular 1999/10 (Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection).

24. The possibility that a complaint might result in a disciplinary hearing, or a criminal prosecution, or in a civil action brought by a pupil or parent, cannot be ruled out. In these circumstances it would be for the disciplinary panel or the court to decide whether the use and degree of force was reasonable in all the circumstances. In doing so, the disciplinary panel or court would have regard to the provisions of Article 4. It would also be likely to take account of the school's policy on the use of reasonable force, whether that had been followed, and the need to prevent injury, damage, or disruption, in considering all the circumstances of the case.

#### **Will suitable training and supporting advice on the use of reasonable force be provided for teachers and other authorised staff?**

25. Education and Library Boards are being asked to arrange suitable training courses for a senior teacher in each school who will then be responsible for providing "cascade" training and advice to other staff in the school. Boards are being asked to place an emphasis on and cover behaviour management strategies which seek to avoid the need to use reasonable force to restrain or control pupils. Such training will be in the context of schools' behaviour and child protection

policies. Arrangements are also being made for suitable training to be included as part of INSET and initial teacher training courses.

26. The Education and Library Boards are also establishing multi-disciplinary Behaviour Support Teams, to offer professional advice and practical support to schools on a range of behavioural and disciplinary matters, including the use of reasonable force.