



Ethics in teaching: Speaking up

A professional guide for teachers

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What is this guide for?

Teaching is complex relational and intellectual work which requires constant ethical decision making. Teaching is not only a technical role, but also an ethical one. It requires hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute, effective ethical reasoning. Ethics are essential to teaching (Truscott & Crook, 2016). What teachers think, value and do really matters.

From time to time, we all engage with situations that present us with a professional challenge. Individually, we can be faced with an issue where something doesn't feel right, which requires us to have the professional courage to speak up. Collectively as a profession we can find ourselves reflecting on matters highlighted by a public inquiry or systemic investigation. This guide is intended to inform your understanding of ethical behaviour in relation to speaking up and how this interacts with legislation and your professional responsibilities. It prompts you to consider your actions and whether you might require further advice or professional learning.

One of GTC Scotland's roles as the independent regulator for teachers in Scotland is to champion and enhance teacher professionalism. We work in the public interest to enhance trust in teaching by setting, upholding and promoting high standards. This involves providing information or advice where we identify any risk areas, where further focus is required to embed teaching standards or when action is needed to assure trust in teaching.

For the purposes of this guide, teachers include teachers of primary, secondary, additional support needs and further education. You should read this together with the [Professional Standards and the Code of Professionalism and Conduct \(COPAC\)](#). Together these form the teaching standards set by GTC Scotland which describe teacher professionalism in Scotland.

This guide is for GTC Scotland registered teachers and is also relevant to anyone, including members of the public, wishing to understand the expectations of registered teachers in relation to speaking up.

What is expected of teachers?

COPAC sets out the principles of conduct that are expected of teachers in meeting their professional and ethical obligations. It is designed to provide guidance and raise awareness of issues and situations which can potentially arise. Parallel to this, the professional values of social justice, trust and respect and integrity are core to teaching standards and underpin your identity as a teacher.

Your commitment to these professional values should be demonstrated in your behaviour both at work and outside of work. As a teacher you have a responsibility to be a positive role model to learners, always exercising sound judgement and considering your ethical responsibilities. Your teaching environment should be inclusive, accessible and safe and align with teaching standards and safeguarding practices.

Employers also have expectations of teachers, and you should be familiar with these and their relevant policies.

Why a focus on speaking up?



As individuals committed to the teaching profession, there is a need to continue to reflect on our professional responsibilities. The information in this guide should be seen as support for that personal reflection, to guide professional behaviour and identify professional learning needs and discussion points. It aims to promote and build confidence in addressing professional challenges, this includes having the professional courage to 'speak up' when you have concerns.

Anyone on the Register of Teachers needs to feel confident that their voices will be heard and respected, particularly when they feel something isn't right. Speaking up is a professional duty for all teachers including the need to take action in any workplace, to raise a concern if you've seen, heard or suspect wrongdoing or serious risk.

It is always better to have raised your concerns than to stay silent. By speaking up you could make a real difference or stop harm from happening. It is important that we enhance our self-awareness and professional confidence in raising and reporting any concerns we may have.

Teaching happens in different contexts, in different roles, within different learning and working cultures. Each context will have policies and procedures that need to be followed in certain circumstances, for example, when expressing opinions in public about your employer and an awareness of the Data Protection Act requirements on handling information about learners and their families. Teachers need to treat sensitive, personal information about learners with respect and confidentiality and not disclose it unless required to do so by your employer or by law.

Teachers sometimes need to address inappropriate comments, views and behaviour from learners, for example, bullying or racism and will need to open conversations, individually or collectively, that can inform and educate that these views or behaviours are never acceptable.

As teachers, we take the same stance with adults ensuring anyone who has experienced or has been a witness to unacceptable behaviour feels safe and knows it will never be acceptable.

Speaking up to protect the rights of children and young people

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) seeks to protect the welfare and development of children and applies to all children from birth to 18. Every child has rights, whatever their ethnicity, gender, religion, language, abilities or any other status.

Education is a highly relational system made up of people, relationships and is firmly grounded on having respectful and inclusive approaches which align with the expectations of the Equality Act 2010. This act outlines protections from discrimination, harassment, and victimisation for those with protected characteristics. It should be a core part of teaching practice to ensure all learners feel safe, included, and valued and that teaching professionals feel confident to speak out if there is discrimination, bullying or harassment of any kind.

Child protection guidelines and policies place a responsibility on everyone to protect children and young people from abuse or neglect, requiring you to report incidents or matters where a child or young person has been harmed or placed at risk of harm.

You must raise any concerns which you may have about the behaviour of any colleague in connection with a child or protected adult, using the appropriate procedures in place.

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is Scotland's multi-disciplinary strategy for enhancing the wellbeing of children in Scotland and is underpinned by the UNCRC. One aspect of this strategy is ensuring that information is handled in a way that respects the rights of the individual and ensures that children, young people, and families get access to the right support at the right time.

Children and young people spend a large amount of their lives in an educational setting; as a result, teachers have a key role to play in child protection as they are often well placed to spot warning signs.



Speaking up about workplace issues



Speaking up can help stop a problem before it gets any worse and it could even prevent the wrongdoing, risk or danger, happening in the first place. Many employers have policies in place to support teachers speaking up about wrongdoing. Sometimes these are joint agreements with professional associations, which provide clarity about expected working practices and the routes available to speak up about concerns.

Speaking up about workplace issues is sometimes referred to as whistleblowing. Teachers should understand their responsibilities under their employer's child protection and whistleblowing (or equivalent) policies. This requires maintaining up-to-date knowledge and understanding of child and protected adult procedures.

Protecting children involves recognising when to be concerned about a child's safety, understanding when and how to share these concerns and knowing what steps are required to ensure the child's safety and wellbeing.

In line with your employer's Child Protection Procedures, there will be a designated member of staff who should be contacted. If you are ever in doubt about speaking up, or an individual's welfare and safety, you should speak to your designated contact, a line manager, a trusted colleague or a professional association representative when you have concerns and seek appropriate advice.

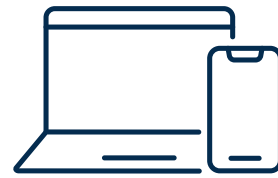
What you can do



To help you to consider your ethical responsibilities and know when to speak up, you should ask yourself:

- what do I need to do to fulfil my role and responsibilities to this child, young person, protected adult or colleague?
- am I secure in my knowledge of protected characteristics to feel confident to speak up?
- am I maintaining my knowledge, skills and abilities by regularly participating in professional learning in relation to child protection?
- what action do I need to take in relation to my position of trust as a professional?
- do I feel confident in my role as a professional to speak up and raise concerns?
- how can I find out who I should talk to, and what should I do, when something doesn't feel right?
- should I seek assurance that the concern I have raised is being investigated?

Additional GTC Scotland website resources



[Professional guides](#)

[Equality and diversity hub](#)





The General Teaching Council for Scotland

We are the independent regulator for teachers in Scotland. We work in the public interest to enhance trust in teachers by setting, upholding and promoting high standards.

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