

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLCSW Ethics Committee and is intended as a resource for members. The issues covered in this publication have been identified by social workers as part of the NLCSW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

The Ethics of Boundaries in Social Work Practice

Boundaries are fundamental to the social worker-client relationship. Boundaries allow for safe, caring, and professional relationships to be established, while ensuring the best interest of clients is paramount. However, ethical dilemmas pertaining to boundaries, including virtual boundaries, can be quite challenging. This edition of Ethical Compass explores boundaries in social work practice and highlights issues for consideration.

Boundary Challenges: Examples of ethical dilemmas pertaining to boundaries may include: a client or former client sends you a friend/contact request on social media; you wonder if it is okay to hug a tearful client; you question how much self-disclosure is appropriate; a neighbor asks for professional advice; a relative presents for services; you are planning your child's birthday party and a client is a classmate of your child; or you have shared social media contacts with clients. Dealing with boundary issues can be difficult and therefore, thinking through the complexities using an ethical framework is crucial.

Professional Responsibility: The professional responsibility for social workers to maintain boundaries is outlined in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice.

“Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients” (CASW Code of Ethics, p. 7)

“Social workers maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship” (CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, p. 11).

“Social workers take care to evaluate the nature of dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the needs and welfare of their clients are protected” (CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, p. 12).

“Social workers establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with clients and former clients on social media platforms” (NLCSW Standards of Practice, p. 10).

“Where a dual or multiple relationship exists, social workers are responsible for ensuring that appropriate boundaries are established and maintained, and that the social worker-client relationship is safeguarded” (NLCSW Standards of Practice, p. 11).

Critical Thinking: In reflecting on professional boundaries, social workers consider the continuum of boundaries; from *encounters*, to *crossings*, to *violations*. Boundary encounters (e.g., meeting a client in public) involve minimal risk of harm to clients, and social workers address them in a way that is respectful to clients, is in keeping with social work ethics and standards, and maintains the professional boundary. Boundary crossings (e.g., self-disclosure) have the potential for more risk, and caution and reflection on one’s ethical responsibilities is important. Social workers use their professional judgement, ethical guidelines, and standards of practice to inform their decision-making. Social workers analyze the risks and benefits, consider the context of practice and cultural issues, reflect on how the client may perceive the situation despite the social worker’s intent, and identify strategies to mitigate risk. Boundary violations occur when social workers engage in actions or enter dual relationships that are harmful to a client (e.g., sexual, or romantic relationship, online intimate relationship, or benefitting from a client’s vulnerability). Boundary violations often involve a substantial breach of the code of ethics and standards of practice, and the harm or potential harm to clients is high.

Informed Consent: It is important that social workers discuss boundaries within the informed consent process (e.g., social media policy). Boundary challenges and conflicts of interest that arise within the social worker-client relationship should be discussed with clients in a transparent and respectful manner. Given the inherent power differential in the social worker-client relationship, engaging in collaborative dialogue with clients is important in promoting client self-determination and respecting the client’s right to make choices based on full informed consent.

Documentation: When addressing boundary challenges in social work practice, it is important to document the issue, steps taken to mitigate risk, and one’s professional decision-making. As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice, “Social workers document their ethical decision-making process and decisions” (p. 11).

This edition of Ethical Compass explored boundaries in social work practice. To address complex boundary challenges in social work practice, it is essential that social workers continuously reflect on the importance of maintaining professional boundaries in the professional relationship; review the code of ethics and standards of practice; engage in critical reflection, address boundary issues through clear informed consent; and document one’s decision-making. In addition to these strategies, social workers should also avail of consultation and supervision; use models of ethical decision-making including the NLCSW document Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice; review relevant NLCSW practice documents; and engage in continuing education with a focus on social work ethics.

References:

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- NLCSW. (2021). Ethical decision-making in social work practice. https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Ethical_Decision_Making_in_Social_Work_Practice_Updated_August_2021.pdf
- NLCSW. (2020). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Standards_of_Practice_for_Social_Workers_in_NL.pdf