



Professional Conduct

Practice Note #1

AFLW Player Development

AFL Mental Health and Wellbeing



The Player Development Principles of Best Practice provide guidance and suggestions on how clubs can support AFLW player's needs and development. The first pillar- Leading Player Development – ensures there is safe and trusted levels of support for the players through responsibility and accountability in the relationships Player Development Managers build, as well as embarking on their own development as professionals.

What's in this Practice Note?

Guided by the AFLW [Principles of Best Practice](#), this practice note provides insight into the following areas of professional conduct:

- **confidentiality**
- **professional relationships (case examples)**
- **information gathering and case management**
- **note taking, and**
- **sharing information**

What is professional conduct?

Player Development Managers hold a crucial role in providing support and care to players. The effectiveness of their role is influenced by the trust they hold with both players and the club. Professional conduct refers to the way PDMs behave and interact with players and staff. It is characterised by a focus on the players' needs, rather than self-interest or the performance of the team. Professional conduct may be the single greatest influence over building and maintaining the trust of players. It also relates to how PDMs adhere to the principles and policies of the AFL and their Club. It differentiates their role from a friend, coach or team mate.

Why is professional conduct important?

Professional conduct is crucial to ensure the best interests of the player and/or the playing group are maintained at all times, and not unduly influenced by performance. Professional conduct also relates to upholding boundaries in relationships to ensure effective and safe practice and the safety of the PDM.

Boundaries

What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries are rules and frameworks that help protect the relationship between the PDM and the player. Obvious examples of boundaries include rules about not engaging in sexual or romantic relationships with players or ensuring players' personal information is not shared with others without their consent. Other boundaries are more subtle, like limiting self-disclosure, setting time boundaries on your availability and not engaging in activities outside your role. Each of these 'rules' ensure players and PDMs are safe and the caring role remains professional and not personal. All PDMs need to develop skills to navigate the fine balance between building a relationship characterised by trust and genuine regard with players, while maintaining a professional relationship that doesn't stray into friendship or carer roles.

Recognising when someone is crossing personal and professional boundaries can be challenging in a sporting environments. The culture of mateship, team first and openness is one of the best parts of working in sporting environments. Boundaries might need to be consistently upheld and gently reinforced on a continuous basis

What is a PDMs Duty of Care?

Duty of Care is defined simply as a legal obligation to always act in the best interest of players and others. This includes not acting or failing to act in a way that results in harm. This might mean knowing the limits to your expertise and competence in managing a situation and to always act within your area of competence. E.g. not give advice about how to treat a health or mental health condition if you do not have qualifications to do so. A duty of care also includes not agreeing to do something in the workplace you do not believe you can safely do.

Navigating Confidentiality

What does confidentiality mean for PDMs?

Confidentiality refers to the safeguarding of personal and private information that is shared between the Player and the PDM. Upholding confidentiality is the cornerstone of building trust and ensuring safety. Personal and private information is protected by Privacy Law, which is why health practitioners have governing bodies that provide ethical responsibilities about confidentiality. PDMs are encouraged to outline the *limits of confidentiality* when working with players, as well as clarifying their role in player support.

Disclosure of personal and private information without consent other can occur only:

1. to protect the player, or another individual from serious harm.
2. to report domestic violence, abuse or neglect of children, or people with disabilities.
3. if a court order is received.

Additional support and informed consent:

At times, supporting a player may incorporate other staff members, such as the Club Psychologist or Doctor. Conversation is crucial for the player to understand the networks available to them and their role in providing support. From here, the player must provide consent for information to be passed on to any of these networks. It is recommended that this is done in writing, to ensure that the player understands and agrees with shared information, along with outlining information that is not to be passed on.

Consent to pass on information does not provide permission for information to be discussed freely. A PDM must outline the parameters and context of what the player has agreed for them to discuss in regards to their personal information. It is important to consider this as a part of the discussion with the player when seeking consent.

Confidentiality is a legal right:

The culture of football clubs may challenge the concept of confidentiality, especially when there is an emphasis on openness and sharing. All individual's right to confidentiality is protected by law. Therefore ongoing education and management of expectations may be needed.

Case Examples

Case Example: “What’s going on?”

Coaches and support staff working with a player quite often want insight into players circumstances to support them holistically. When circumstances are particularly sensitive for the player, giving coaches an “update” can provide some challenges when the player wishes to keep things confidential.

PDMs can be placed in a predicament, when coaches and staff enquire about certain behaviours and/or moods of a player that the PDM has been supporting. The question of “what’s going on?” can leave the PDM managing commitments to supporting the players, while potentially jeopardising the working relationship with crucial members of Club staff. The last thing a PDM wants is to break the trust of a player, and being on the outer with a coach!

How do you support a player who wishes to remain private, while you have coaches and football managers wanting insight and guidance to managing behaviours?

Considerations:

How would the coach benefit from knowing this information – do they need insight, or do they just want to know?

- Those in leadership roles may seek information to ensure they are managing all aspects of the individual, but that might not always be the best way to support the player.
- Working with other staff members to create trust in the support rather than a need for knowledge is one way of managing the “What’s going on?”.
- Offering coaches suggestions on their role in supporting the player, keeps the focus on the actions of support, rather than the detail of the situation. It also let’s them feel involved in the process, without needing to know all the information.

Is the player open to some common ground, identifying something that can be provided to those who are concerned and may be able to support further?

- When working with the player, allow them to step back and view the situation from different angles of support. Are others showing concern towards them, and is it warranted. Talk through with them the potential benefits of sharing a snippet/s of information with certain people, in order to support the best outcome.
- Remember sharing of information lies solely in the players hands (except in the case of risk) and therefore should be respectfully discussed as to what might come of sharing that information. For example, sharing a pregnancy with a S/C Coach will allow for physical training adaptations.
- Provide a line that supports the players right to privacy: eg. “The player has asked for privacy, and therefore if any information is provided that can be shared with you, I will discuss it then, for now, it would be great if you (insert action-based support).

Case Examples

Case Example: Follow, Request, Like, Comment, Post

Social media is a huge part of sport – used for promoting, communicating, and engaging players with fans, as well as connecting people. However, reaching out through the different networks to connect via the “Socials” may influence the working relationship between the PDM and the Player. Insight into the players life online may be beneficial when working with them – seeing their engagement with others, how they represent themselves, and how their moods and behaviours reflect through the online world. But it can also open the PDM up to blurring the lines of professional conduct and role responsibilities.

What is the “ok thing to do” when navigating connections online – should PDMs be on players social media? Who should be adding who? What can you post about your own lives, if it relates to your work? Can you turn manage a professional relationship online with the playing group you are employed to support?

How can you professionally conduct yourself with players on social media?

Considerations:

Using social media to engage with players can be helpful in communication, but be mindful of how this works.

- Group chats work well in sharing information with players about potential opportunities and getting messages out to the group efficiently. It is important to monitor who is in the group chat, and what it is being used for. Conversations that become off topic, or may be related to things outside of football operations and support may lead to difficult situations to manage.
- Be mindful of how you interact online with players – what are you liking, commenting on etc. How might that reflect on your professional, working relationship with the player.

What are you posting about, and how does it relate to the work you are doing to support players?

- Social media allows you to share with others small segments of your life. But when it comes to working in a caring role, reflect on the appropriateness of how you show parts of your work life.
 - For example, celebrating a win by sharing a picture of a group of players singing the Club song, versus a birthday shout out to a player that you work with to support.
- You can create a professional brand for yourself by providing insight into the work you do, and the environment you work in, without crossing the boundaries of personal acknowledgements.
- Protect yourself in these situations – remembering that the internet is for life. Anything that is posted, liked, commented on can be screen shot. But more importantly it sets a tone for the type of boundaries you put in place when working with players.

Case Examples

Case Example: “We’re friends right?”

Working closely with players, you get to know them pretty well. Creating relationships built on trust, support, and the sharing of close information are values that align closely with those associated with friendship. The nature of football clubs is social, friendly, and when players are disclosing information about themselves to you, they often look for some transference, so they can get to know more about you and your life. PDMs often share similar interests as the players, including sport and families, and normalising yourself as a person rather than just a support worker can be beneficial into building relationships with the players.

Friendships with players may also exist away from the Club, through other sports or clubs/interest, but how do you ensure that the professional relationship is not compromised? Managing boundaries in relationships become important, as there lies a fine line between being someone’s friend, versus being someone’s colleague.

How can you remain relatable and approachable, while managing the boundaries of a working relationship?

Considerations:

Defining relationships is important, especially if there is relations already established, or you share common interests and activities

- Supporting the group objectively should be at the forefront of the role. This can be challenged with relationships that step outside the support role. Having clear definitions of working relationships, along with awareness of interactions with those individuals is important.
- Obvious, but important, is maintaining confidentiality on areas discussed with players in social settings. This means being aware of the context in which information is shared, both formally and informally, as well as not discussing other players outside of the football environment.

Players want to get to know you, but in order to maintain your professionalism, be aware of adequate disclosure.

- Sharing snippets about yourself and your life are important in building trust and normalising yourself as a person, but be aware of how much you disclose things about your own life. Some players may look for relatability in your own experiences, but they may not be appropriate, or could possibly be over sharing information that is not relevant.
- It is not your responsibility to be the players carer, it is your role to care, and there lies a big difference in the approach to social interaction with players. Ultimately the PDM aligns as a players colleague, in a role to care for them. There must be a line in which care and support stops before it becomes the unspoken reference of “parent/big sibling” to the group.

Transference: *refers to the idea in which a person redirects feelings from one person to another, for example, an individual treating another person as a mother figure. This may throw challenges to the working relationship between to people. Countertransference occurs when the PDM redirects their feelings onto the players, such as acting like a parent to them. Awareness of this is important in order to prevent issues in supporting the players, and not blurring the lines of role responsibilities.*

Professional Conduct:

Note Taking

Reasons for taking notes:

PDMs have a duty of care, and therefore taking notes allows for accountability. Notes allow for a history of meetings and services to be kept to assist in the appropriate support for the player. Keeping a record also assist in cases of referral to other support staff or external services. Players should be told that case notes and other records are being kept, as they have the right to access them upon request. Explaining to players the purpose of the notes, ensuring privacy and who has access to them is recommended. It is therefore important to understand what is useful and appropriate in relation to what is included in the notes.

What should be included in the notes?

Most case notes initially contain the same general information for each individual, such as personal details, family environment etc., and are kept updated if a players personal circumstances change. Engaging in a consistent approach is recommended, for example, using the THINK guide, that allows for essential information on the player to be obtained safely. From the initial information gathered, general case notes are recommended when ever dealing with a player, or meeting with other support staff to discuss the player.

Recommendations for case notes included:

- Keep notes brief, with enough detail to understand the circumstance.
- Keep notes simple and relevant, including
 - Reason for meeting
 - Key areas discussed, including details on major issues/challenges
 - Actions that need to follow from the meeting
 - Consent to discuss with other support staff (if applicable)
- Be mindful of what is written about the player, as the player can access these at any time
 - note only what was discussed,
 - what was observed, and
 - any relevant statements.
- Emotional reactions and opinions, judgements, and speculations of the note taker should not be included
- Write notes as soon as possible
- Consider the notes - Would they be useful to another PDM if you were to leave the Club?
- Be mindful of where notes are stored and who can access to view them

Example 1: Player led meeting

Meeting with *Player* in player rec room office. *Player* requested following team meeting – where team was announced and had not been selected. *Player* disclosed feelings of disappointment and frustration with selection process, and went on to indicate feelings of not enjoying training at the moment, as not seeing results in hard work. Indicated also some troubles in finding time for family around football commitments. Offered suggestion of meeting with coach to discuss selection process and feedback, to which *player* requested my attendance for support. Also offered follow up meeting to discuss family time options. *Player* to arrange meeting with coach, and provided consent to state reason for meeting being to provide player with feedback. Follow up meeting set for next morning. 15.12.20

Example 2: Player Follow Up

Phoned *player* to check how things were going in relation to problems with transport to training – car broken down, not able to be fixed for a number of weeks. Family unable to assist due to work commitments. *Player* worried cannot continue to uber to training due to cost. Suggested contacting other squad members who live in her area to see if they could assist. However, *player* identified that she lives and works in different areas, requiring different people in the week to assist. Plan to approach squad at training to look for assistance. *Player* to follow up with mechanic for update on car. 15.12.20

Transferring Information

Transferring player information requires consideration of sensitivity and the players informed consent. At the forefront of this process, it is important to ensure the player is protected, while keeping the process of transition as positive as possible. It is also important to protect your own professional integrity through following the appropriate process of transferring information.

It is encouraged that PDM's tackle the experience in a positive and empowering tone that is focused on what the player wants, and following the recommendations in consultation with players and clubs involved in the transfer:

Recommendations when transferring information about a player:

- As part of the exit conversations with departing players, inquire if the player would like the new PDM or RM to receive a handover of personal and professional information.
- The PDM hand over should be in writing and the content agreed to by the player. The delivery of the handover should also be agreed upon, as it could be approached with a couple of different options, and it is important that the player confirms their preferred mode of transfer. These might include:
 - Agreed letter given to the player to hand over to the new PDM
 - Agreed letter to be provided directly from one PDM to the other.
- Clarity of any information by the new PDM, is encouraged to be sought through the player, rather than directly to the PDM, unless otherwise consented in the transferring agreement.
- For information being shared with other support staff, work with the player to outline what information they would like passed on, and whether there is anything that the player wishes to not be included. This referral should also be done in writing.

Core principles for transferring player information include;

- **Trust and respect (along with confidentiality)**
- **Player agreement on content to be handed over**
- **Any specific medical or psychological handover should be club doctor to doctor with the player's consent**

THINC Player Development guide to individual development plans

THINC Player Development is a guide for PDMs when working through individual development plans (IDPs) with players. Informed by the Best Practice Principles, THINC ensures a thorough understanding of players non-athletic endeavors, levels of support, and goals for development. The following domains are used as **a discussion point for PDMs** when meeting with their players, with information contributing towards the IDP format they use within their Clubs.

PDMs should consider the environment in which these discussions are taking place to ensure safe and effective practice in supporting player development.



Thriving in High Performance Environments

- Previous education topics covered through induction and club workshops
- Social media – understanding usage and relationship with platforms
- Performance and selection expectations
- Perceived challenges to achieving potential
- Health, diet and eating habits



Home Environments

- Current living arrangements/relocation requirements
- Who lives with the player?
- Family relationships and contacts
- Travel requirements – trainings etc.
- Personal circumstances/cultural considerations



Interests and opportunities

- Areas of interest to explore throughout time in game, eg.
 - Commencing study
 - Work experience
 - Leadership opportunities
 - Personal interest development



Networks of support

- Wellbeing goals
- Mood, sleep and stress (current support/interventions)
- Strategies for self care and mental fitness (knowledge/habits)
- Social network
- Referral and coordination of care (if needed)



Commitments off field

- Education and/or Employment
- Parenting or carer commitments
- Other activities – eg. Volunteering, media, other sports
- Insight into players ability to manage commitments

Acknowledgements

AFL and AFLW Resources:

[AFL Mental Health Strategy](#)

[AFLW Player Development Principles of Best Practice](#)

References:

Aaron, J., Rashid, T., Roache, A. & Lomas, T. (2019). Ethical guidelines for positive psychology practice (version 1.0: English). International Journal of Wellbeing. 9. 10.5502.

Australian Psychological Society. (2007). Code of ethics

Department of Health. (2004). Module 11: young people and drugs – issues for workers: facilitators guide. Retrieved from <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/drugtreat-pubs-front11-fa-toc>

Further Reading:

[Australian Psychological Society Code of Ethics](#)

[Australian Community Workers Association Code of Ethics and Practice Guidelines](#)

[Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics](#)

[Exercise and Sport Science Australia Code of Professional Conduct and Ethical Practice](#)



