



## A Statement

### Ethics and intimacy in intergenerational relationships

#### 'First, do no harm'

By Dr Frans Gieles

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Since 1993, Ipce members had discussions about ethics during their meetings.

I have listened to the members.

In this article, I will summarize and update the salient points of several opinions I have heard from 1993 until 2004.

#### Introduction

"Ipce is a forum for people who are engaged in scholarly discussion about the understanding and emancipation of mutual relationships between children or adolescents and adults. In this context, these relationships are to be viewed from an unbiased, non-judgmental perspective and in relation to the human rights of both the young and adult partner."  
(Ipce Mission Statement)

Ipce Statements are not officially an "Ipce Opinion" because Ipce is a forum on which several opinions are present. Ipce does not vote about these kind of texts. About these statements however, most of the members will agree. In this statement, I report what I have heard from 1993 until 2004. This is not the end of discussion. The debate will go on. A debate is part of society - and society is changing.

Human rights and a reasoned discussion are a fundamental basis for the following ethical ideas about intergenerational relationships. One of these rights is that of choice of contacts and relationships with other humans. Contact is necessary for humans, and relationships can enrich life for both partners. This is the basis of reasonable ethical thought about intergenerational relationships.

The grade of intimacy in a contact or relationship is in the first place a free choice for both partners. This may differ according to the individuals and the situation. There is only one general rule or principle that counts in every relationship: ***Do no harm.***

### Ethics

The guidelines we give here are ideals to strive for. They are meant as *global* guidelines or principles. Nobody can give exact *rules* for every situation. The guidelines provide concepts to have in mind and to take into consideration. One should, however, still make a case-by-case judgment. The guidelines are more or less tied to an actual culture and era, hence not eternal. Ethics change in the course of time, in the course of the discourse.

Ethics are not plucked from the air. For us, there are two ethical sources:



*human rights* and



*reasonable thinking*.

Our society *has* its rules and ethics about mutual relationships and intimacy between children or adolescents and adults. *Keep your distance* is the rule; fear of sexuality is its basis. In our vision, *this* is not ethical. But we are also part of this society.

This double position, criticizing the society we are a part of, results not only in our handing out sharp criticism, but also in formulating ethical principles that might be acceptable to the same society.

## **The guidelines**

### ***1. Freedom of choice***

In *any* intergenerational relationship or contact, both partners, the adult as well as the young person, should have it in their power to regulate their own lives, their relationships and the grade of intimacy.

Each partner has the right to self-determination and the responsibility to acknowledge this right in the other. Therefore, both partners in open communication will at any moment choose the grade of intimacy.



In *friendship* relationships or contacts, both partners have the freedom to withdraw from the relationship at any moment. Love and dedication are unconditional; they bind partners who are free and independent.



In *dependency* relationships or contacts, (such as parent-child or teacher-pupil) love and dedication should also be unconditional, but freedom to withdraw does not exist in practice. So, extra attention should be given to the right to self-determination and the responsibility of both partners. Here, the grade of intimacy has two limits: complete distance is not possible nor wanted, complete intimacy will interfere with the dependency: complete intimacy asks for complete freedom, which does not exist in dependency

relationships, thus complete intimacy is not possible in these relationships.

## ***2. The grade of openness***

Openness is a typical western value; many other cultures have the value to respect and maintain secrets. Openness within a relationship is a good value. **Openness to the parents is strongly recommended.**

Openness to others is a good value as long as they respect one's right to self-determination. So, openness to others may be good, but it is not always necessary and not always possible. For example, intimacy between males is still a great taboo, for instance, in most schoolyards. Or, in many families, the very existence of any form of a intimate life of a young person is a taboo.

Many young people prefer consciously to have their own secrets. They make their own choices and do not want to be protected. 'Don't treat me as a child', they say. It is their right to have this freedom. The freedom to say *no* and the freedom to say *yes*. There is also a right of privacy.

The other side of the coin is that young people should not have to carry too heavy or unreasonable secrets. One has to take into consideration how the young person lives and how his environment may react.

## ***3. Act in harmony ...***

... with the stage of development of the child.

## ***4. Do no harm***

This includes acting in harmony with the development of the child.

Harm can come from feelings of shame and dirtiness, learned from society. Harm can come from a society that uses power or violence to force the end of a relationship. One should consider this risk, as well as the risk of blackmail. The adult as well as the young person is vulnerable in this society nowadays. Thus: do no harm nor take the risk.

