



Between Closeness and Distance: The Ethical Dimension of the Social Rehabilitation Educator's Work in Light of the "Be Friendly, Never a Friend" Principle

Marcin Jurczyk, Daria Szafrąńska

Keywords

social rehabilitation, educational relationship, professional ethics, boundaries, socially maladjusted youth

Contact

Marcin Jurczyk
Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach (University of Silesia in Katowice), Polish Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities in London
marcin.jurczyk@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-0099-4730

Daria Szafrąńska
Studentka kierunku pedagogika resocjalizacyjna z penitencjarystyką w Uniwersytecie Śląskim w Katowicach
daria.sz@poczta.fm

Abstract

The article explores the ethical and professional dimensions of educational relationships in the social rehabilitation of socially maladjusted youth. It focuses on the "Be friendly, never a friend" principle as a framework supporting both professional conduct and the effectiveness of educational interventions. The paper discusses the importance of boundaries in establishing the educator's authority, preventing burnout, and avoiding emotional role confusion. It presents practical strategies for applying the principle in resocialization settings, emphasizing the need for balance between empathy and professional distance. The article also highlights the role of self-reflection and ethical standards in fostering a relationship that supports change and development in the rehabilitative process.

1. Introduction

In the field of social rehabilitation work with socially maladjusted youth, the quality of the educational relationship plays a particularly important role. This aspect is of paramount importance in the process of changing attitudes and behaviors in young people, and its effectiveness largely depends on the educator's ability to maintain appropriate interpersonal relations. One of the most critical and simultaneously most challenging aspects of this work is maintaining a proper interpersonal distance that enables effective educational influence while avoiding ex-

cessive closeness, which could disrupt the hierarchy within the relationship. The principle “Be friendly, never a friend” reflects a fundamental tenet of professionalism in working with youth. It means that the educator should be kind, helpful, and responsive to the needs of young people, while at the same time maintaining a professional boundary so as not to overstep the limits of the professional role.

The role of the educator in working with socially maladjusted youth is unique, as these young individuals often experience identity crises, have difficulties in establishing healthy relationships with peers and adults, and their behaviors may result from earlier negative upbringing experiences. In this context, the educator performs not only an educational function but also a therapeutic one, aiming to support the youth in the process of social adaptation while protecting them from reverting to destructive behavioral patterns.

The educator should be open, kind, and empathetic, yet at the same time aware of the boundaries set by their professional role. Respecting these boundaries does not equate to indifference; rather, it enables effective influence on young people while maintaining a balance between closeness and distance. Only in this way is it possible to build a relationship based on respect and trust, which creates space for development and change. It is crucial that the educator not only responds to the immediate needs of the youth but is also capable of anticipating and appropriately addressing difficult situations that may arise during the social rehabilitation process.

The educational relationship in work with socially maladjusted youth must be individualised. Depending on the individual needs of each young person, the educator should be able to adapt their approach to best support the change process. A key role here is played by the ability to listen and perceive not only what is verbally expressed but also what is communicated through gestures, body language, or behaviors. This requires the educator to possess not only pedagogical competence but also a high level of sensitivity and emotional engagement in working with youth, while at the same time maintaining a professional distance that protects against burnout and enables the consistent application of a professional approach in every situation.

2. The Educational Relationship

The educational relationship in the context of social rehabilitation is unique and specific, playing a vital role in the process of individual transformation. It is an asymmetrical relationship, meaning that the educator occupies a leading position due to greater experience, knowledge, and responsibility. Such a relationship is based primarily on trust, clearly defined principles, and firmly established flexibly applied boundaries. Only within such a structure is effective pedagogical influence possible, leading to internal change in the person undergoing social rehabilitation.

Konopczyński (2018) emphasizes that effective social rehabilitation requires the educator not only to possess a high level of substantive competence, such as familiarity with pedagogical theories, psychology, and law but also to demonstrate specific personality traits. These include emotional maturity, the ability to empathize, patience, and an understanding of the complex and often difficult situations in which the individuals under care find themselves. The educator should be not only an authority figure but also a guide and a source of support, someone who is trustworthy and capable of motivating change and inspiring responsible decision-making.

Urban and Stanik (2008) stress that the bond between educator and pupil should be based on genuine trust, which requires openness, honesty, and consistency in action. On the other hand, the relationship must not lead to excessive emotional closeness, as this may compromise its professional nature. It is essential to clearly define roles, boundaries, and responsibilities, as only then can a balance between closeness and distance both of which are essential in social rehabilitation work be maintained.

Similarly, Sobczyszyn and Jeziorański (2019) note that the social rehabilitation relationship should serve clearly defined educational goals. It must not become a means of emotional compensation for either party. This requires the educator to possess not only advanced interpersonal skills such as effective communication, active listening, and conflict resolution but also a strong sense of responsibility, consistency in action, and the ability to maintain professionalism even in difficult and stressful situations.

In summary, the educational relationship in the process of social rehabilitation is a complex, multidimensional process that demands commitment, professionalism, and personal maturity on the part of the edu-

cator. Only under such conditions is it possible to create an environment conducive to positive change in the life of the pupil and to support their genuine reintegration into society.

3. Ethical and Professional Context of Educational Work

The principle of “be friendly, never a friend” stems from an ethical and professional approach to helping relationships. Its core assumption is to provide support and a sense of safety without assuming the role of a friend, which implies a relationship of emotional reciprocity and equality. Piorunek and Werner (2014) point out that teachers and educators often perform supportive roles, yet they are not always perceived as individuals prepared to offer emotional support. The professionalism of an educator lies in the ability to create a supportive atmosphere without crossing the boundary of familiarity, which could disrupt the relational hierarchy (Urban & Stanik, 2008).

Maintaining this balance is particularly important when working with children and adolescents, where adult relationships also serve as behavioral models. Excessive emotional involvement or blurred boundaries can lead to misunderstandings or even breaches of trust. At the same time, an attitude of kindness, openness, and empathy enables the establishment of relationships based on trust and acceptance, while remaining within a clear professional framework. Such relationships foster a sense of security in the care recipient while protecting the educator from losing objectivity or experiencing professional burnout.

Educational work especially in social rehabilitation settings involves more than performing didactic and supervisory tasks. Above all, it represents the realization of a mission with both social and moral dimensions. The educator becomes a guide for the young person, often entangled in complex family dynamics, legal issues, or emotional deficits. This role requires not only substantial professional competence but also a deep-rooted commitment to ethical standards. Social rehabilitation pedagogy cannot function without moral responsibility it is this responsibility that defines the boundaries of action and safeguards both the pupil and the educator.

As Kamiński (1992) notes, the foundation of education should be respect for the dignity of the other person regardless of their past, beha-

viors, or current attitudes. This axiological dimension of educational work highlights that every educational intervention must be marked by respect, patience, and attentiveness to the needs of the individual.

The “be friendly, never a friend” principle fits perfectly within this context, representing not only a working technique but also a moral attitude. It is not about emotional coldness or detachment, but rather about the ability to build a supportive relationship without crossing the boundaries of intimacy or over-familiarity. Śliwerski (2006) rightly emphasizes that professional distance serves a protective function it shields the educator from burnout and emotional dependency on their pupils, and simultaneously protects the young person from the risk of manipulation or unhealthy dependence.

It is also worth emphasizing that the ethics of the social rehabilitation educator's profession is not a rigid set of norms but a living moral compass that must be continuously updated through reflection, supervision, and personal development. The professionalism of the educator manifests not only in adhering to regulations but primarily in the ability to accompany young people in their journey toward change with empathy, while maintaining appropriate distance. This tension between closeness and boundaries requires maturity, humility, and ongoing development qualities that define a true professional in the field of social rehabilitation.

4. The Importance of Boundaries in Educational Relationships

In the context of social rehabilitation pedagogy, boundaries within educational relationships play a fundamental role in both establishing the authority of the educator and shaping the identity of the pupil. Their significance extends far beyond the organizational aspect they serve as the structural axis of the helping relationship, allowing for a balance between empathy and professionalism. Setting and enforcing boundaries is an act of responsibility that safeguards the well-being of the pupil as well as the mental health of the educator.

Boundaries serve a protective function they shield young people from becoming overly involved in a relationship that could undermine their sense of independence or lead to emotional dependency. Cieślowska-Ryczko (2023) observes that adolescents, particularly in the initial stages of educational contact, often engage in a phase of idealization during

which they attempt to overstep relational boundaries by idealizing or “adoring” the educator. It is essential for the educator to recognize and appropriately manage such dynamics, ensuring that professional limits are not transgressed. Often, after this initial phase, the exaggerated perception of the educator stabilizes into a more neutral and familial role, such as that of an “aunt” or “uncle.”

From a neuropsychological perspective, Siegel and Bryson (2015) emphasize that children and adolescents function more effectively when clear rules and predictable relational patterns are in place. An educational environment where boundaries are well-defined fosters a sense of safety and enables the pupil to focus on self-development rather than on the ambiguity caused by unclear signals from adults. Sztompka (2002) notes that every healthy social relationship must be grounded in internalized norms without them, the structure of interaction collapses into normative chaos.

From the educator’s point of view, boundaries also serve a psychological protective function. Excessive emotional involvement may result in the phenomenon of “transference” the unconscious internalization of the pupil’s problems by the educator which can lead to emotional overload, frustration, and in extreme cases, professional burnout. Therefore, professional pedagogical practice should involve not only the initial establishment of boundaries but also their ongoing evaluation and adjustment to the situational context and developmental stage of the pupil.

Boundaries are not barriers - they are bridges that enable the construction of relationships based on mutual respect and trust without descending into undue familiarity. In social rehabilitation institutions, where everyday interactions are marked by intense emotions, conflict, and testing of norms, clear and consistent boundaries become an indispensable tool of educational practice. They are not only a guarantee of the effectiveness of the educational process but also a testament to the responsible and mature approach of the educator.

5. Practical Strategies for Implementing the “Be Friendly, Never a Friend” Principle

The principle of “be friendly, never a friend” in educational work especially in the context of social rehabilitation is not merely an ethical suggestion, but a necessity arising from the need to sustain the quality and

durability of the helping relationship. Its practical implementation is grounded in a set of strategies and attitudes that educators must develop and deliberately apply in their everyday work with individuals in crisis, particularly within institutional environments such as social rehabilitation facilities. The purpose of these actions is not to create emotional barriers, but to ensure structure, safety, and predictability elements crucial for effective change and for rebuilding the pupil's trust in adults.

Konopczyński (2009) emphasizes that the social rehabilitation relationship should be based on engaged presence a form of involvement that creates space for personal development and self-work, without crossing the boundaries of a professional relationship. Such presence does not imply indifference; on the contrary, it demands a high degree of empathy, flexibility, and commitment, though expressed in a deliberate and regulated manner. The educator cannot become a "peer," as this often leads to role confusion and a weakening of authority. Instead, they must act as a guide and mentor, combining warmth with structure.

In practice, the "be friendly, never a friend" principle is implemented, among other ways, through the manner of communication with the pupil. The language used by the educator should be comprehensible yet professional. This means avoiding colloquialisms, slang, sarcasm, or jokes that could be misinterpreted or make the relationship too casual. At the same time, active listening is crucial displaying full attention, paraphrasing, and reflecting emotions without assuming the role of confidant or personal advisor.

Another important aspect of implementing this principle is maintaining a clear separation between professional and private life. Educators should avoid contact with pupils outside of working hours, including electronic communication. In the age of social media, it is especially important to adhere to the rule of no personal connections on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Such "virtual familiarity" can significantly blur professional boundaries and lead to misunderstandings or even risky situations.

Pilch (2007) argues that the educator's behavior should model healthy interpersonal relationships for the pupil. Establishing and maintaining boundaries thus becomes an educational intervention in itself, teaching mutual respect, awareness of social norms, and emotional self-regulation. Young individuals, often shaped by experiences of chaos, violence, or rejection, need adults who are consistent and predictable rather than erratic or overly emotional.

An important strategy supporting the implementation of this principle is ongoing reflection on professional practice. Self-reflection, reflective journals, and participation in supervision and training help educators analyze their own responses, recognize signs of burnout, and identify potential boundary-crossing risks. Educational work is emotionally demanding, and thus care for one's own psychological resources is not only a right but a professional obligation for those working in social rehabilitation.

The “be friendly, never a friend” principle does not imply a cold or formal distance. On the contrary, it involves creating a relational space that allows for emotional closeness, but in a regulated and responsible way. This approach enables pupils to build trust in adults in a safe manner that respects their autonomy and personal boundaries. Such a relationship can form the foundation for genuine change one based on respect, not dependency.

In conclusion, putting the “be friendly, never a friend” principle into practice requires maturity, communication competence, emotional awareness, and a deep understanding of the nature of the helping relationship. It is not just a matter of methodology, but fundamentally an ethical stance one that respects boundaries, prioritizes the pupil's well-being, and simultaneously protects the educator from burnout, overload, and the erosion of professionalism.

6. Consequences of Crossing Professional Boundaries

Boundaries are essential in professional relationships; they help prevent burnout, abuse, and conflicts of interest. Excessive emotional involvement can result in the pupil becoming dependent on the educator. Modern educator should be authentic, capable of setting boundaries, and assertive. They should build their authority through consistent actions and assume the role of a guide or mentor, not that of the pupil's emotional partner (Urban, Stanik, 2008).

Working with socially maladjusted youth increases the risk of crossing boundaries. Young individuals who experience emotional deficits may seek compensatory relationships with adults, including educators. In this context, the ability to set boundaries without losing trust or relational contact becomes crucial. Urban and Stanik (2008) highlight that

the absence of clear frameworks and norms in the educator–pupil relationship may destabilize the educational process or even lead to its failure. Professionalism in education is grounded in emotional neutrality and the ability to prioritize long-term change and social rehabilitation over the desire to be liked (Machel, 2008). Przeclawska (1985) argues that an educator should not only possess theoretical knowledge but also the ability to guide the pupil’s developmental trajectory. Opora (2013) underscores that educators must remain aware of the risks involved in their relationships with pupils. Relationships should be consciously designed to minimize the potential for boundary violations. The educational relationship is meant to foster socialization.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of consistency in educator behavior as a factor in building both authority and a sense of security for the pupil. Ćwik-Karłyk (2014) points out that authority based on predictability and behavioral consistency is more enduring than that derived from sympathy or emotional closeness.

Excessive intimacy in the educator–pupil relationship may also lead to internal conflict within the educational team. Colleagues may perceive such closeness as unprofessional, which can undermine the coherence of the institution’s rehabilitative efforts (Chomczyński, 2013). Contemporary theories suggest that an educator’s effectiveness also depends on their adaptive capacity the ability to respond flexibly to changing educational situations while maintaining clearly defined boundaries.

7. Conclusion

The principle “be friendly, never a friend” is not merely a technical pedagogical guideline it is the essence of professional ethics for any educator working with youth on the margins of society. At its core, it reflects a profoundly humanistic belief that individuals in crisis need boundaries just as much as they need support. For me, as a future educator in the field of social rehabilitation, this principle serves as a beacon in the fog of emotions, challenges, and often tragic life stories of those I will be working with.

Empathy and commitment are indispensable elements of this work, but they must not blur professional roles. An educator is not a buddy who shares their private life, nor a savior attempting to fix the entire

world. They are a professional present, supportive, yet firm and consistent someone who provides the youth with space to grow rather than becoming an emotional crutch.

Though crossing boundaries may seem like a sign of deeper understanding, it is often a trap. An educator who unconsciously compensates for their own emotional needs by becoming overly involved risks numerous dangers: dependency, erosion of authority, professional burnout, or even misconduct. For a pupil who has often experienced chaos and violence, stable and predictable relationships are invaluable. Boundaries are a form of care they help the young person understand the rules of social life and build their own autonomy.

In my view, professionalism in social rehabilitation is the art of balancing heart and mind. It involves being aware of one's emotions, knowing how to regulate them, and directing the relationship not toward meeting personal needs but toward fostering the growth of another human being. It also requires self-reflection the constant questioning: "Is what I'm doing truly in my pupil's best interest?"

Therefore, I believe that consistency, clarity of rules, honesty in relationships, and a commitment to ongoing development are more important than gaining momentary approval. These are the elements that build true authority not the kind based on emotional closeness, but the kind that gives young people a sense of safety and leads them toward positive change. That is the kind of authority I aspire to build as a future educator.

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Między bliskością a dystansem: etyczny wymiar pracy wychowawcy resocjalizacyjnego w myśl zasady Be friendly, never a friend

Słowa kluczowe

resocjalizacja, relacja wychowawcza, etyka zawodowa, granice, młodzież niedostosowana społecznie

Abstrakt

W artykule opisano etyczne i zawodowe aspekty relacji wychowawczej w procesie resocjalizacji młodzieży niedostosowanej społecznie. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono zasadzie „Be friendly, never a friend” jako ramie wspierającej profesjonalizm oraz skuteczność oddziaływań wychowawczych. Przedstawiono znaczenie granic w budowaniu autorytetu wychowawcy, mechanizmy ochrony przed wypaleniem zawodowym oraz konsekwencje emocjonalnego zatarcia ról. Opisano praktyczne strategie stosowania zasady w kontekście pracy resocjalizacyjnej, wskazując na potrzebę równowagi między empatią a profesjonalnym dystansem. Podkreślono również rolę autorefleksji i etyki zawodowej w modelowaniu relacji sprzyjającej zmianie i rozwojowi wychowanka