

Social Boundaries in Different Kinds of Relationships

Level	Relationship	Gesture	Explanation	Examples
Level 1	Self, God, your most private thoughts	No special gesture except maybe for prayer.	No matter how well someone knows you, there are always things that people will not know. These are your most private thoughts and dreams.	Yourself. When you are talking with God or praying or 'off in your own world'
Level 2	Committed relationship with someone you are very close to, a close boyfriend or girlfriend, or someone you are married to.	Full body hug	Someone whom you love and trust and know very well and who knows you in this same way, usually one person. Someone you have an intimate relationship with; someone you would sleep with (have sexual activity) and share very private things with.	Your boyfriend or girlfriend if you have known them quite a while and have a committed relationship with them. A marriage partner. Some parents with young children.
Level 3	Close friends	A-frame hug	Someone who knows many things about you and vice versa; someone with whom you share a warm relationship--not a large number of people in this group	Closest friends, siblings, parent, maybe an aunt or uncle or cousin if they are close to you, some members of your wider community if you get to know them well.
Level 4	Friends	Handshake	Someone who knows some things about you and vice-versa, or someone who knows many things about only one part of your life. There could be many people in this group.	Many people in the community, new people that you are introduced to. Classmates, co-workers, friends of friends, members of a team you are on, some professionals such as a doctor you know well if there is a special occasion.
Level 5	Acquaintances	Wave or Smile	Someone you recognize enough to say "hello" to and make small talk and vice versa. You know each other's first names (maybe) but probably not both names. You usually see them in one particular place.	Bank teller, crossing guard, public transit drivers, neighbors, local store owner or clerk. Professionals you see occasionally.
Level 6	Strangers or Professionals	No definite response. In some cases, not even eye contact.	People you do not know at all and who do not know you; professionals unless you know them well and have been seeing them for a long time, others who are being paid to have a certain role in your life but would otherwise not be in any relationship with you.	Everyone else not in one of the above categories—strangers, civic workers such as a park or washroom attendant, a waiter or waitress in a restaurant, doctors, dentists, therapists—unless you have come to know them. Then may change to a smile.

Some things to notice:

- There will be more people in the groups as you move down the levels of intimacy.
- Movement between levels takes time. Relationships grow and change –when trust is built and people move up levels it is exciting and we feel happy. When trust is broken and people move down levels we feel sad.
- Everyone in the relationship must agree to the terms and type of relationship (for example, whether you shake hands or hug). This is sometimes spoken, but often not. People often give signals to each other with eyes or their body language.
- Looking at the people and relationships around us helps us to be grateful and celebrate who is in our lives.
- Looking at the people and relationships around us can help us see where there are empty spaces in our lives. We may feel sad about these.
- Sometimes relationships feel “off.” This is often because something happening between people does not match the relationship level that they are in. For instance, someone you do not really know tells you something private about themselves. You feel awkward. Or it could involve abuse from someone you trust. You feel confused. Tell someone you trust when a relationship feels “off”.
- There are differences among families and cultures. Our family and our culture will affect how we relate to people.
- These levels combine well with the Circles exercise in which young people draw out where their various relationships fall based on the level of intimacy.

**Adapted from a teaching tool created by L’Arche Toronto and originally inspired by the program “James Stanfield Circles .”*