

Finessing Your Way Through Ethical Dilemmas

ETHICS AND THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR: USING THE NAEYC CODE BY STEPHANIE FEENEY  
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Some definitions for clarity...

Values – qualities or principles that individuals believe to be desirable or worthwhile for themselves, for others, and for the world in which they live

Morality – what people view as right, good, proper; beliefs about obligations and ideas about how they should behave

Ethics – the study of right and wrong, duty and obligation



## What can the code do for you?

- ❖ Offer professional ideals and principles
  - ❖ Provide and articulate professional values
  - ❖ Offer guidance for promoting best interests
  - ❖ Provide support for a risky stance
  - ❖ Offer justification for difficult decisions
  - ❖ Provide a resource for generating discussion
  - ❖ Offer assurance of professionalism to wider community

## Ethical Responsibilities

- ▶ To Children
- ▶ To Families
- ▶ To Colleagues
- ▶ To Community and Society

What are examples of our ethical responsibilities  
to each of the four groups?

### Ideals

- Desirable, exemplary professional behavior

### Principles

- Rules of professional practice
- Practices that are required, permitted, or prohibited

## Sample Page from Code:

NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct

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**Principles**

**P.1.1.** Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, unkind, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or threatening to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.

**P.1.2.** We shall care for and educate children in positive emotional and social environments that are cognitively stimulating and that support each child's culture, language, ethnicity, and family structure.

**P.1.3.** We shall not participate in practices that discriminate against children by gender, race, ethnicity, gender, special abilities or disabilities, gender, age, or marital status, or exclude them from programs or activities on the basis of their sex, race, national origin, immigration status, preferred home language, religious beliefs, marital status, gender identity, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs or other affiliations of their families. (Aspects of this principle do not apply in programs that have a lawful mandate to provide services to a particular population of children.)

**P.1.4.** We shall use two-way communications to involve all those with relevant knowledge (including families and staff) in decisions concerning a child, as appropriate, and with confidentiality of sensitive information. (See also P.2.4.)

**P.1.5.** We shall use appropriate assessment systems, which include multiple sources of information, to provide information on children's learning and development.

**P.1.6.** We shall strive to ensure that decisions such as these will be informed, retention, or assessment to special education services will be based on multiple sources of information and will never be based on a single assessment, such as a test score or a single observation.

**P.1.7.** We shall strive to build individual relationships with each child through observations, interactions in teaching strategies, learning environments, and curricula; and consult with the family so that each child benefits from the program. If any such child has not been exhausted, all curriculum placement does not meet a child's needs, or the child is seriously jeopardizing the ability of other children to benefit from the program, we shall consult with the child's parents and appropriate specialists to determine the additional services needed and/or the placement option(s) most likely to ensure the child's success. (Aspects of this principle do not apply in programs that have a lawful mandate to provide services to a particular population of children.)

**P.1.8.** We shall be familiar with the risk factors for and symptoms of child abuse and neglect, including physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse and physical, emotional, and sexual neglect. We shall know and follow state laws and community procedures that protect children against abuse and neglect.

**P.1.9.** When we have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, we shall report it to the appropriate authorities in accordance with law and that appropriate action has been taken. When appropriate, parents or guardians will be informed that the referral will be made to the authorities.

**P.1.10.** When another person tells us of his or her suspicion that a child is being abused or neglected, we shall assist that person in taking appropriate action in order to prevent the child.

**P.1.11.** When we become aware of a practice or situation that endangers the health, safety, or well-being of children, we have an ethical responsibility to protect children or inform parents and/or others who can.

**Section II**

**Ethical Responsibilities to Families**

Families<sup>7</sup> are of primary importance in children's development. Because the family and the early childhood practitioner have a common interest in the child's well-being, we believe that a positive relationship based upon communication, cooperation, and collaboration between the home and early childhood program in ways that enhance the child's development.

**Ideals**

**12.1.** To be familiar with the knowledge base related to working effectively with families and to stay informed through continuing education and training.

**12.2.** To involve families in decision making, trust and create partnerships with the families we serve.

**12.3.** To welcome all family members and encourage them to participate in the program, including involvement in shared decision making.

<sup>7</sup>The term family may include those adults, besides parents, with the responsibility of being involved in educating, nurturing, and advocating for the child.

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Questions to ask yourself!

## Professional practice issue OR ethical issue?

- ▶ Let the children play in mud?
- ▶ Have home visits?
- ▶ Have child care for family events?

Things we may not agree on but that do not constitute ethical issues –

**Professional practice issues!**

## Professional practice issue OR ethical issue?

- ▶ Suspect a child is being abused?
- ▶ Know a coworker is not maintaining confidentiality?
- ▶ Family asks you to withhold child's nap?

Issues of right, wrong, duty or obligation -

**Ethical issues!**

# If it involves ethics...

Is it a legal responsibility?

Is there a law or statute that applies?

If **yes**, you **must** follow the **law!**

**An ethical responsibility!**

If it involves ethics...

Is it an ethical responsibility?

Is there a clear course of action required by the code?

If yes, do what is right.

If no, you have an ethical dilemma.

**Ethical dilemma**

**A moral conflict that involves a choice between conflicting values and responsibilities**

fi·nesse

*verb*

1. do (something) in a subtle and delicate manner.

What does this have to do with ethical dilemmas?

If it's an ethical dilemma...

Follow the six-step process.

1. Identify conflicting responsibilities
2. Brainstorm possible solutions
3. Consider ethical finesse
4. Use The Code of Ethical Conduct
5. Decide on course of action
6. Implement, revisit, reflect

Your center policy clearly states that any snack brought from home for the entire class needs to be healthy for the children. The parent handbook suggests fruit, veggie pizza, muffins etc. as options.

Your center also has a policy that families are welcome at any time and are strongly encouraged to be involved. One morning, a parent who has been very quiet and reluctant to get involved shows up at school with donuts for morning snack for all the children in the class.

**I-2.2**—To develop relationships of mutual trust and create partnerships with the families we serve.

**I-2.3**—To welcome all family members and encourage them to participate in the program, including involvement in shared decision making.

- **P-2.2**—We shall inform families of program philosophy, policies, curriculum, assessment system, cultural practices, and personnel qualifications, and explain why we teach as we do—which should be in accordance with our ethical responsibilities to children.
- **P-2.3**—We shall inform families of and, when appropriate, involve them in policy decisions. (See also I-2.3.)

Nia is in your infant class and has recently started eating baby food. Nia lives with her mother and her grandmother. Nia's mother is a teen parent; Nia's grandmother pays for all of Nia's child care, clothes, and diapers. Nia's mother and grandmother do not agree on food choices and feeding schedules for Nia.

Usually, Mom brings Nia to school and gives you instructions and baby food for the day. Grandma picks up Nia from school and gets the daily report about what and when Nia ate. Grandma is usually not happy with the report.

Responsibilities to Children:

**I-1.2**—To base program practices upon current knowledge and research in the field of early childhood education, child development, and related disciplines, as well as on particular knowledge of each child.

**I-1.4**—To appreciate the vulnerability of children and their dependence on adults.

**I-1.5**—To create and maintain safe and healthy settings that foster children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development and that respect their dignity and their contributions.

**I-1.10**—To ensure that each child's culture, language, ethnicity, and family structure are recognized and valued in the program.

► **P-1.1**—**Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.**

► **P-1.2**—We shall care for and educate children in positive emotional and social environments that are cognitively stimulating and that support each child's culture, language, ethnicity, and family structure.

► **P-1.4**—We shall use two-way communications to involve all those with relevant knowledge (including families and staff) in decisions concerning a child, as appropriate, ensuring confidentiality of sensitive information.

## Responsibilities to Families

**I-2.2**—To develop relationships of mutual trust and create partnerships with the families we serve.

**I-2.3**—To welcome all family members and encourage them to participate in the program, including involvement in shared decision making.

**I-2.6**—To acknowledge families' childrearing values and their right to make decisions for their children.

- **P-2.14**—In cases where family members are in conflict with one another, we shall work openly, sharing our observations of the child, to help all parties involved make informed decisions. We shall refrain from becoming an advocate for one party.
- **P-2.15**—We shall be familiar with and appropriately refer families to community resources and professional support services. After a referral has been made, we shall follow up to ensure that services have been appropriately provided.

## Debriefing

- ❖ What questions do you have about The Code?
- ❖ In what ways do you think The Code might be useful to you in your work?
- ❖ What can you do to become more comfortable using The Code?