



Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct: Ethics TODAY in Early Care and Education: Review, Reflection, and the Future

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Celebrating the  20th Anniversary of NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct

Ethics TODAY in Early Care and Education Review, Reflection, and the Future

Stephanie Feeney

A strong foundation in professional ethics, which includes knowledge of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and skill in applying it to the real-life workplace, is an essential part of the professional repertoire of every early childhood educator.

Two-and-a-half decades ago, NAEYC saw the need to help educators meet the growing challenges with moral implications that arose in their work with children birth through age 8. The Association articulated educators' deeply rooted values and established guidelines for practice. A five-year development process followed and involved leaders in the early childhood education field and NAEYC members. This led to the first Code of Ethical Conduct, which is still followed today (NAEYC 2005). Since that first

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NAEYC Governing Board approval 20 years ago, the Code has continued to be reviewed regularly and revised as needed.

This article celebrates NAEYC's accomplishments with regard to professional ethics and looks at how this work may move forward in the future. In this writing I describe the ethical journey of early care and education in the United States, explain why ethics is so important for early childhood educators, and share some hopes for the future of ethics in early childhood education.

The journey

At first, the topic of ethics may seem too abstract or boring. But when early childhood educators look at the real ethical issues they encounter in their work, it gets more interesting, often compelling. Professional ethics helps us as early childhood educators to think about our responsibilities to children, families, communities, and society and to address some of the difficult situations we face every day.

Some of the issues early childhood educators encounter, for example,

- **Relate to children's behavior:**

A large-for-his-age preschooler uses aggressive behavior that frightens and hurts other children. They are afraid of him, and their parents start to express concern to the center director. The teachers feel stressed and tired. They spend so much time helping manage this child that other children do not get the attention they need.

- **Involve families:**

The mother of a 4-year-old asks his preschool teacher not to let him nap in the afternoon. She says the nap causes him to stay up too late, and she can't get him up in the morning. The teacher says the child sleeps soundly for one hour every day and seems to need the sleep to be able to enjoy class activities and get along with other children in the afternoon.

- **Concern colleagues:**

A teacher hears a co-worker tell an insulting joke about children and families of a specific ethnic group.

- **Engage program directors:**

A teacher tells her director that a 2-year-old in her class has been diagnosed with contagious diarrhea. The

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director tells her not to mention this to the families of the other children and reminds her to wash her hands well after changing the child's diaper.

- Are unique to administrators:

Two center staff members indicate their interest in the lead teacher position vacancy that was recently posted. One person is a dedicated staff member for 15 years who has little formal training. She is nice to children but doesn't really understand age-appropriate curriculum. The other candidate, with a degree in early childhood education but less than two years' experience at the center, relates well



to the children. She is good at planning appropriate, engaging curriculum.

- Are particular to teachers of adults:

You make the decisions about admissions to the initial certification program. You know one of the applicants, who is wonderful with children and proud of being the first member of her family to pursue higher education, but she is unable to express the theory behind her practice and lacks proficiency in standard English.

The situations described here are all ethical *dilemmas*—predicaments that involve conflicting responsibilities and require making a choice between alternatives, each of which have advantages and disadvantages. For example, with a child who uses aggression, a teacher has responsibilities to that

Professional ethical judgments are a guide to what we ought to do and not do as professionals.

individual, to the other children in the group, and to himself or herself. The teacher of the napping child faces an obligation to the child that is in conflict with her obligation to the parent. A person facing an ethical dilemma needs ethical guidance.

Ethics terminology

When you face a situation in your work with young children and families that is challenging and difficult to resolve, the first thing you need to do is decide if it involves ethics. In the 2005 revision of the NAEYC Code, a work group of educators proposed new definitions of terms related to ethics for greater consistency of terminology use. The definitions now appear at the

end of the NAEYC Code, as a Glossary of Terms. Here, I discuss several of the terms to provide added guidance.

- **Morality** is the individual's view of what is right and wrong. It concerns people's duties and obligations to one another. It is based on values, which come from our families, culture, community, faith, and society. The first thing to ask yourself when you encounter a problem in the early childhood workplace is whether it has to do with what is *right* and with what is *just* and *fair*.

- **Values** are fundamental beliefs that we hold to be intrinsically worthwhile, that we prize for themselves, and that guide our behavior (for example: truth, beauty, honesty, justice, respect). Our values come from our

families, culture, community, faith, and society. Most early childhood educators enter the field sharing a common value for supporting the healthy development of young children.

- **Ethics** is the study of right and wrong, duties and obligations. It involves critical reflection on morality, and the ability to make choices between values and to examine the moral dimensions of relationships.

Personal values and morality are a necessary foundation, but they are not enough to guide professional behavior. They must be supplemented with professional values and standards of ethical behavior (as NAEYC outlined in 1989). Professions have their own distinctive values and ethical commitments. As early childhood educators, we view our commitment to children and families through these prisms:

- **Professional ethics** involves reflection on professional responsibility that is carried out collectively and systematically by the membership of a profession. Professional ethical judgments are not statements of taste or preference, nor are they the same as personal morality or law. They are a guide to what we ought to do and not do as professionals.

- **Core values** are deeply held commitments embraced by members of a profession because they contribute to society. These values are at the heart of the profession's moral commitments.

- **A code of ethics** is a document that maps the profession's responsibility to society. It conveys a sense of the mission of a field and acknowledges the obligations its members share in meeting their responsibilities. One of the most important things about a code is that it lets a profession speak with a collective voice. It supports practitioners in their work, so they base their decisions not on their individual values and morality but rather on the core values of the profession.

The roots of the NAEYC Code

A code of ethics is a hallmark of every profession because it assures society that a profession is serving the public good and that services will be provided with acceptable moral conduct. How has ethics in early care and education evolved over time?

Since its founding, NAEYC has sought to identify and disseminate policies and practices that would be beneficial to young children in our society. This goes back to the 1920s and NAEYC's first publication, *Minimum Essentials for Nursery School Education* (NCNS 1929), which for the first time discussed standards for practice in nursery schools.

In 1976 NAEYC's Governing Board made a resolution calling for the development of a code of ethics, but a commitment to develop a code did not emerge until later. Instead, the Board decided that a Statement of Commitment expressing some of the main values and ideals of the field would be developed and printed on the back of Association membership cards. It remained there from 1977 to 1998.

Interest in an ethics code grew again after NAEYC published the book *Ethical Behavior in Early Childhood Education* (Katz & Ward [1978] 1991) and subsequently expanded it. In 1984, NAEYC president Barbara Bowman asked my help in exploring the development of a code of ethics for NAEYC members. I agreed but quickly realized that although having served on the NAEYC Board gave me a perspective, I had little knowledge of how to go about developing a code. I sought help from a University of Hawaii colleague, philosophy professor and ethics expert Kenneth Kipnis.

NAEYC's adoption of a code gave members invaluable help in facing hard decisions with ethical implications.



I and other early childhood educators who worked with him learned a great deal about moral philosophy and the philosopher's rigorous analytic skills and love of logic and truth. (He often said that from working with us he learned a lot about caring and the use of process.)

The first step was to explore early childhood educators' understanding of their ethical responsibilities. We conducted surveys and workshops and wrote articles for *Young Children* (Feeney & Kipnis 1985) to get input from teachers, administrators, adult educators, and others involved in the field about the core values of early childhood education and care. We asked what, as we put it in our series of workshops, "the good early childhood educator" would do in each of the frequently occurring ethical situations presented. In 1987, NAEYC formed a commission to oversee the work on ethics. Based on input from the field and with the guidance of the Ethics Commission, the NAEYC Governing Board approved the Code of Ethical Conduct in 1989.

NAEYC is a voluntary membership association open to anyone involved with or interested in early childhood education. Other professional groups, like the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association, have membership requirements, such as rigorous entry requirements,

prolonged training, and mandatory compliance with the association's code of ethics. Thus, the NAEYC Code provides ethical guidelines that are optional, voluntary, and not enforced. NAEYC's adoption of a code gave members invaluable help in facing hard decisions with ethical implications.

In drafting the NAEYC Code, Kipnis and I recognized the lack of time and resources to address the kinds of ethical issues faced by every subgroup of early childhood educators. We focused on day-to-day work with children in early care and education settings. Later,

teacher education groups ACCESS (American Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators) and NAECTE (National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators) worked with NAEYC to develop a supplement to the code for early childhood adult educators (NAEYC 2004), which was approved by NAEYC's Governing Board. Next, the Board appointed a work group to advise it on development of a supplement for administrators (NAEYC 2006). These documents do not replace the NAEYC Code but supplement it with guidance particular to specialized roles in early childhood education. The current NAEYC Code is a 2005 revision developed with support from an advisory workgroup appointed by the Governing Board.

The importance of a code of ethics for early childhood educators

Some of the reasons a code of ethics is essential for early childhood educators include the following:

We care for children who are too young and too vulnerable to protect themselves. In any profession, the more powerless the client is in relation to the practitioner, the more imperative the practitioner's

ethics become (Katz & Ward [1978] 1991). The more control a practitioner has, the greater the necessity to insure against the abuse of that power. Early childhood educators have great power over young, relatively helpless children. Therefore, we must behave ethically because the damage we can do is so great.

We encounter many ethical issues in our work. After our original ethics survey in 1986, Ken Kipnis and I read moving descriptions of the issues early childhood educators were confronting. I remember him saying, "These people are in ethical pain." We encounter ethical issues more often perhaps because we do not deal with a sole client, as most doctors and lawyers do. In any situation, we have obligations to a number of constituencies—children, families, colleagues, administrators, agencies, and policy makers. The Code of Ethical Conduct helps us sort out the issues and pro-

vides guidance when we encounter conflicting obligations.

A code helps us to understand our responsibilities, prioritize our obligations, and find wise resolutions to the ethical dilemmas we face. Like a compass, a code can point us in the right direction, but we need to choose the road to take. The resolution of a dilemma requires examination of core values and items in the NAEYC Code, and application of our best professional judgment based on these informed considerations.

A code supports us in doing what is right. It provides support for behaving ethically when there is pressure or temptation to do what is easiest or what will make people like us. Nancy Freeman, who coauthored several articles and books about the NAEYC Code (see "Resources," p. 77), says, "When your back is against a wall, the code of ethics can hold up the wall."

In any situation, we have obligations to a number of constituencies—children, families, colleagues, administrators, agencies, and policy makers.

A code helps to unify our field. Early childhood educators are a diverse group; we work in many different settings, and there is little to unite us except our commitment to children. The Code of Ethical Conduct is based on a collaborative process that reflects our common values and beliefs. It underscores what we have in common and can help to forge a sense of professional identity.

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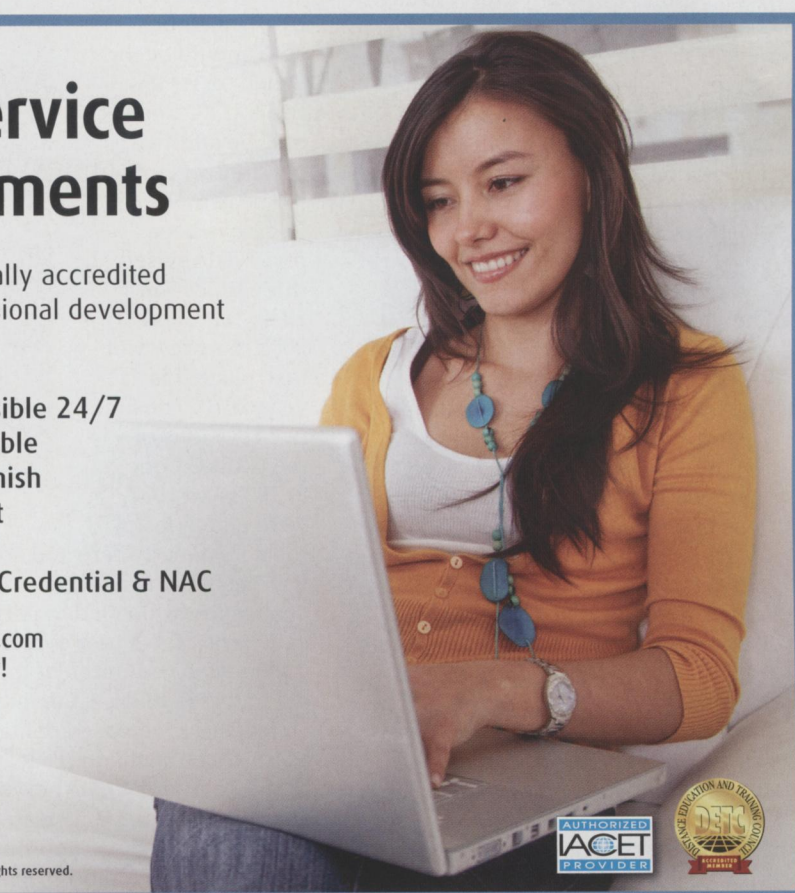
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A code communicates to the broader community who we are and what we do. It is a statement that explains to those outside our field what we believe and what we stand for. It is a special kind of promise that communicates how the public can count on us to behave. Letting others know our commitment to ethical standards enhances our credibility and our professionalism.

What makes a code of ethics effective?

Over the years I have learned some valuable lessons about how to make a code of ethics useful and effective.

A code represents many voices.

The members of a profession need to feel they own their code. The NAEYC Code emerged from the history and traditions of early childhood education and care in the United States. When it was written, we sought, and the Association continues to seek, input from grassroots members of the field, both in workshops and through the journal *Young Children*. One goal in developing the NAEYC Code was that the process be as important as the code itself. The approach we used was so effective that professor Kipnis used it in working with other professional groups, including prison doctors and bioethics specialists.

A code succeeds when it is known and used. NAEYC is committed to making the Code available and keeping it visible to our membership through its activities and with supporting literature. The Association has printed and distributed more than a million copies of NAEYC's *Code of Ethical Conduct & Statement of Commitment* in English and in Spanish, in inexpensive brochures. The Code is available online at www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSETH05.pdf. NAEYC has published more than 40 articles and two books on the NAEYC Code and professional ethics. Ethics workshops are offered at state and national conferences. The Association includes professional ethics in policy documents, teacher education guidelines for two- and four-year programs, and NAEYC Accreditation program

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materials. The text of the NAEYC Code is now widely included in early childhood textbooks.

A code is a living document. To be vital and reflect the membership of an organization, a code must be scrutinized regularly to ensure it reflects the real issues and concerns of the field and offers guidance relevant for the times. It must respond to changes and diversity in the organization's membership, to the moral climate of the nation and society, and to new challenges faced by the field. When the NAEYC Governing Board accepted and approved the first NAEYC Code, it decided that regular, periodic review by the membership should occur. Based on review, the NAEYC Code may be affirmed, updated, or revised.

The NAEYC Code has been reviewed/ revised three times—in 1992, 1997, and 2005. A review will take place this year, 2010. The first two revisions of the NAEYC Code, in 1992 and 1997, were minor. In 2005, the field of early care and education was changing and faced serious new challenges, which led to fairly significant revisions. A new core value was added—the commitment to “Respect diversity in children, families, and colleagues.” Increased demands for assessment of children's learning led to the addition of *nine* new statements about the assessment strategies and instruments that are appropriate to use with young children. Before 2005 the NAEYC Code had not addressed

child assessment because the issue had never come up.

In addition, in recognition of the need for early childhood educators to be effective advocates for children, NAEYC added new Ideals (Collective) in Section 4 of the Code, Ethical Responsibilities to Community and Society:

I-4.3—To work through education, research, and advocacy toward an environmentally safe world in which all children receive health care, food and shelter; are nurtured; and live free from violence in their home and their communities.



I-4.4—To work through education, research, and advocacy toward a society in which all young children have access to high-quality early care and education programs.

Creating supplements to the code for adult educators and program administrators also illustrates how work on ethics responds to the needs of various segments of the early care and education field.

Ethics and the future in early care and education

More than 25 years ago, we had just begun the work to develop a code of ethics. Now, a whole new generation of early childhood educators is on board in programs, schools, centers, and family child care homes, as well as scores of related specialists, including adult educators, officials in licensing and program monitoring, and other positions. I envision a new future of ethical educators in early childhood education, expanding their thinking and being strengthened in their ethical decisions and resolutions by the strong foundation of the NAEYC Code that exists and responds to needs and change in the early care and education field.

I envision a time when early childhood educators

- grow in their commitment to making the Code of Ethical Conduct an important part of their daily work with children and adults;
- become more skilled in understanding ethics and using the NAEYC Code not as an answer book but as a stimulus for serious thought and reflection about ethical responsibilities;
- recognize that the NAEYC Code belongs to them and participate in the ongoing work on ethics;
- commit themselves to helping others, both within and outside the early childhood field, to know about educators' strong moral commitment to children and to a code of ethics, which will happen because we have shown the positive effects of ethical guidance on the welfare of children and on our sense of competence and professional identity;
- have access to consistent and effective training in professional ethics to help them meet their moral commitments to children and families; and

A code must respond to changes and diversity in the organization's membership, to the moral climate of the nation and society, and to new challenges faced by the field.

• help educators of older children become more aware of the importance of professional ethics by modeling good practice, which will happen because our work has some valuable information for these educators: ACEI (Association for Childhood Education International) has endorsed the Code. In addition, NAFCC (National Association for Family Child Care) has adopted the Code.

My hope too is that we use our moral commitment as educators to further the collective ideals of seeking a safe world, ensuring high-quality early childhood programs for every child, and becoming ever more skilled in making our Code of Ethical Conduct the basis for successful advocacy addressing the needs of young children and their families.

Work on the practice of ethics provides opportunities for people in different roles and with different perspectives to focus on shared values. Paying attention to professional ethics can strengthen the community of early childhood educators and remind us to keep our moral compasses pointed in the direction of achieving what is best for all young children and all families.

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View an Online Series of Videos
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Conversations with Stephanie Feeney and Peter Pizzolongo



Author Stephanie Feeney and NAEYC senior director for professional development, Peter Pizzolongo, discuss the history of the NAEYC Code's development and subsequent revisions, the importance of a code of ethics for a profession, and the elements of the NAEYC Code.

The Feeney/Pizzolongo conversations demonstrate a process for using the NAEYC Code to address ethical dilemmas. They explore strategies for furthering recognition of the code and its use by all who provide services to young children and their families. The series includes seven videos, varying in length of viewing time, and are accessible at www.naeyc.org/yc.

Additional resources for teaching about and using the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct are available on the NAEYC Web site:

www.naeyc.org/ecp/resources.

Resources

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