

# ~ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS ~

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MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

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## INCLUDING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN TRAINING SESSIONS

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*Ethical dilemma—a moral conflict that involves determining appropriate conduct when an individual faces conflicting professional values and responsibilities. ~ NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct*

### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood teachers and caregivers deal with value-based decisions and face what are frequently described as "ethical dilemmas" nearly every day. In fact, the ability to adhere to moral values and promote professional ethics is becoming even more critical for practitioners in a litigious society. Yet most professional development sessions do not include either instruction on professional ethics or tackling relevant dilemmas as part of the learning experience.

Perhaps this oversight is because discussing ethical dilemmas arguably takes time and serious consideration before meaningful resolutions can be identified. Introducing ethical dilemmas forces people to acknowledge a world where the right thing to do may not be completely apparent. In addition, discussing ethical dilemmas might make some people feel uncomfortable and even emotional.

However, most would agree that professionals in early childhood constantly deal with situations that are definitely not "black and white." Is it possible that many trainers are so focused on their topic that they have not seriously considered introducing ethical issues? Maybe all trainers need is a bit of persuasion combined with concrete information and available resources to gently nudge them to consider this timely addition to training session activities.

### NAEYC CODE OF ETHICAL CONDUCT AND STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

In May 2011, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reaffirmed the 2005 Code and updated the Code of Ethical Conduct position statement to reflect consistency with the "Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators," which was first adopted in July 2006. The "Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators" was reaffirmed by the NAEYC Governing Board at the same time, and changes were made to Ideals and Principles that address responsibilities to families to "ensure alignment with current family engagement best practices in the field."

According to NAEYC, "the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct offers guidelines for responsible behavior and sets forth a common basis for resolving the principal ethical dilemmas encountered in early childhood care and education. The Statement of Commitment is not part of the Code but is a personal acknowledgement of an individual's willingness to embrace the distinctive values and moral obligations of the field of early childhood care and education."

NAEYC's description of the conceptual framework for developing the Code describes each area addressed and the format used: "The Code sets forth a framework of professional responsibilities in four sections. Each section addresses an area of professional relationships: (1) with children, (2) with families, (3) among colleagues, and (4) with the community and so-

ciety. Each section includes an introduction to the primary responsibilities of the early childhood practitioner in that context. The introduction is followed by a set of ideals that reflect exemplary professional practice and by a set of principles describing practices that are required, prohibited, or permitted. The ideals reflect the aspirations of practitioners."

NAEYC explains that the principles described in the Code combined with professional judgment serve to guide ethical conduct: "The principles guide conduct and assist practitioners in resolving ethical dilemmas. Both ideals and principles are intended to direct practitioners to those questions which, when responsibly answered, can provide the basis for conscientious decision making. While the Code provides specific direction for addressing some ethical dilemmas, many others will require the practitioner to combine the guidance of the Code with professional judgment."

The position statement clearly reflects understanding of the complexities of resolving ethical dilemmas: "Often 'the right answer'—the best ethical course of action to take—is not obvious. There may be no readily apparent, positive way to handle a situation. When one important value contradicts another, we face an ethical dilemma. When we face a dilemma, it is our professional responsibility to consult the Code and all relevant parties to find the most ethical resolution."

"The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct provides a common framework for helping educators understand their moral commitments. It helps them to know and act upon the core values and ideals that guide those who work in the early childhood field in their professional relationships with children, families, colleagues, and society. It also assists them in understanding their ethical responsibilities and provides guidance for addressing ethical dilemmas that arise in the workplace." ~ NAEYC

## MONTANA'S KNOWLEDGE BASE

The Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base booklet includes the principles described in the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and a small section on related competencies within the content area of Pro-

fessionalism. Ethical considerations are also embedded throughout other content areas as well.

Following are the basic competencies described in the ethics section of the Knowledge Base booklet:

- Maintains confidentiality regarding sensitive information about children and families
- Articulates and adheres to the professional Code of Ethical Conduct
- Avoids situations that may present a conflict of interest and collaborates with colleagues, families, and other professionals to take action toward prevention of these types of situations
- Ensures that written, verbal, and digital communication with families, community members, or other professionals is professional and adheres to the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct

If these skills are considered essential to working with young children and families, then it only makes sense for trainers to include ethics and related activities in early childhood training events as well.

"Knowledge of ethics and the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct are essential parts of the knowledge base of every caring and competent early childhood educator."  
~ S. Feeney and N. Freeman

## NAEYC RESOURCES

NAEYC has created numerous resources to help professional development specialists teach professional ethics and guide practitioners as they learn effective processes for resolving ethical dilemmas. These include a glossary, resolution process, practice scenarios, and tool kit. All are available at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).

### ~ Glossary

The NAEYC Code document itself includes the following glossary of terms related to ethics:

Code of Ethics—defines the core values of the field and provides guidance for what professionals should do when they encounter conflicting obligations or responsibilities in their work.

Values—qualities or principles that individuals believe to be desirable or worthwhile and that they prize for

themselves, for others, and for the world in which they live.

Core Values—commitments held by a profession that are consciously and knowingly embraced by its practitioners because they make a contribution to society. There is a difference between personal values and the core values of a profession.

Morality—peoples' view of what is good, right, and proper; their beliefs about their obligations; and their ideas about how they should behave.

Ethics—the study of right and wrong, or duty and obligation, that involves critical reflection on morality and the ability to make choices between values and the examination of the moral dimensions of relationships.

Professional Ethics--the moral commitments of a profession that involve moral reflection that extends and enhances the personal morality practitioners bring to their work, that concern actions of right and wrong in the workplace, and that help individuals resolve moral dilemmas they encounter in their work.

Ethical Responsibilities--behaviors that one must or must not engage in. Ethical responsibilities are clear-cut and are spelled out in the Code of Ethical Conduct (for example, early childhood educators should never share confidential information about a child or family with a person who has no legitimate need for knowing).

### ~ Resolution Process

In the preface of *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code (2nd edition)* by Stephanie Feeney & Nancy K. Freeman, with Peter J. Pizzolongo (NAEYC 2012), it states that

"Early childhood educators need to be aware of the impact of their behavior and to act in the best interests of those they serve. This is critically important because while their actions can lead to positive outcomes for children and families, they can also harm them. Knowledge of ethics and the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct are essential parts of the knowledge base of every caring and competent early childhood educator."

These authors have developed a process for applying the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and resolving ethical dilemmas. The process includes:

- Identify the problem.
- Decide if it involves ethics.
  - Is it a dilemma or responsibility?
  - Can it be finessed? In other words, is there a way to resolve the problem that satisfies all the involved parties and avoids having to make a difficult decision.
- Look for guidance in the NAEYC Code.
  - What are the conflicting values?
  - How should they be prioritized?
- What is the most ethically defensible course of action?

### ~ Practice Scenarios

The authors also created scenarios to help practitioners practice using the NAEYC Code for guidance in figuring out what they might do when faced with each situation. The following questions serve to guide these ethical dilemma discussions:

- What core value(s) apply in this situation?
- To whom do you have responsibilities?
- What guidance can you find in the Code? List the relevant items from the Code and their letters (be sure to look in all 4 parts and at Ideals and Principles)
- Based on your analysis of the guidance from the Code what do you think "the good early childhood educator" should do in this situation?

### ~ Tool Kit

NAEYC offers the Code of Ethical Conduct Tool Kit as well. The Tool Kit gathers a few of the previously described resources in one place. These resources provide professional development specialists with tools to conduct sessions and related learning activities on understanding and using NAEYC's Code.

- *Code of Ethical Conduct PowerPoint Presentation*—32 slides based on NAEYC's publication: *Teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct*.

- *Applying the NAEYC Code*—handout of situations with ethical dimensions for group problem solving.
- *NAEYC Publications that Address Professional Ethics*—a bibliography of NAEYC resources on ethics.
- *Code of Ethical Conduct Videos*—online vignettes of author Stephanie Feeney and NAEYC senior director for professional development, Peter Pizzolongo, discussing the history of the NAEYC Code's development and subsequent revisions, the importance of a code of ethics for a profession, and the three elements of the NAEYC Code. The 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.

## CONCLUSION

While it is unlikely that every training event can—or even should—include emphasis on ethics and ethical dilemmas, opportunities to promote awareness may naturally arise. Prepared trainers can take advantage of these “teaching moments” to acknowledge difficult situations, emphasize an effective process for resolution, and offer professionally recognized resources.

In many training events, however, it is appropriate and perhaps even essential to include learning activities directly related to professional ethics. After all, these situations are likely to be the source of most teachers' stress and worry.

If nothing else, trainers can introduce and promote the NAEYC resources. The Glossary alone provides a meaningful first step to understanding the importance of paying attention to ethical considerations both as individual practitioners and in professional development experiences. ~

## \*RESOURCES

\*NAEYC *Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment*, reaffirmed and updated May 2011. The position statement; available at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).

\*NAEYC *Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Program Administrators*, reaffirmed and updated May 2011. A supplement to the position statement; available at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).

\**Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code*, 2nd edition (NAEYC 2012). Stephanie Feeney & Nancy K. Freeman, with Peter J. Pizzolongo. With updated language and references to the 2005 revision of the Code of Ethical Conduct, this book, like the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, seeks to inform, not prescribe, answers to tough questions that teachers face as they work with children, families, and colleagues. To help us all become well acquainted with the Code and use it in our professional lives, the authors present a useful framework as well as helpful examples and questions to clarify key points about ethical conduct and to stimulate reflection and discussion on the critical issues that confront us all.

\**Teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct: Activity Sourcebook* by Stephanie Feeney, Nancy K. Freeman, & Eva Moravcik (2005). Companion resource to *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code*. A book full of engaging, effective ways to introduce the 2005 NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and explore thorny ethical issues that face early childhood educators. The authors share a wealth of tools and techniques developed through their extensive experience teaching about ethics and the NAEYC Code.

\**Training Solutions #21 Ethical Responsibilities to Adult Learners* (December 2008). Available at [www.mtcecp.org](http://www.mtcecp.org).

Sources for Glossary terms and definitions

\*Feeney, S., & N. Freeman. 2005. *Ethics and the early childhood educator: Using the NAEYC code*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

\*Kidder, R.M. 1995. *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living*. New York: Fireside.

\*Kipnis, K. 1987. *How to discuss professional ethics*. *Young Children* 42 (4): 26-30.

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