



The NAEYC Code Is a Living Document

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The primary goal of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct is to provide a moral compass for early childhood educators. Based on the core values of the early care and education field, it spells out some important ethical responsibilities and provides guidance for practitioners who face difficult ethical dilemmas by helping them to reflect on the question “What would a good early childhood educator do?” It was designed to be a *living document* that would always reflect the field’s current understanding of how early childhood educators can best serve young children and their families. This article examines the Code’s history and recent developments that reflect efforts to keep it current, and it considers where future initiatives related to ethics might take us.

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Origins and development of NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct

NAEYC began exploring the issue of professional ethics in 1976. For two years ethics was a topic of discussion at the Association’s Governing Board meetings, but at that time consensus could not be reached on how to proceed. Lilian Katz and Evangeline Ward’s influential 1978 book *Ethical Behavior in Early Childhood Education* rekindled NAEYC’s interest in ethics.

In 1984 new efforts were initiated—an ethics survey was published in *Young Children* (Feeny & Kipnis 1985) and an Ethics Commission was formed. Soon thereafter NAEYC began its concerted efforts to create a code of ethics. *Young Children* published selected dilemmas received in response to the survey, and some of these scenarios were explored in more depth in subsequent issues of the journal and in ethics workshops conducted throughout the country. Those efforts led to greater understanding of the ethical dimensions of the early childhood educator’s work and resulted in a draft of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct that, after revision, the Governing Board adopted as an NAEYC position statement in 1989. This collaborative process ensured that the development of the Code would be

a grassroots effort, one that would come from the members and incorporate their views (Feeney & Freeman 1999). The process reflected the consensus-building that NAEYC believes is essential to all of its position statements and that comes from extensive field input.

When NAEYC created the Ethics Commission (later to become the Ethics Panel) more than 20 years ago, its charge was to “promote the application of the Code of Ethical Conduct and develop recommendations for the revision of the Code.” That is, the Panel became the vehicle to ensure that the Code would become a part of early childhood educators’ professional repertoire and a living document reflecting current conditions in the field. In addition to facilitating the Code’s revisions in 1992 and 1997, the Panel initiated a regular feature in *Young Children*, “Using NAEYC’s Code of Ethics,” and its members were encouraged to lead sessions focused on ethics at NAEYC Annual Conferences. The Panel also encouraged the development of two teaching resources on ethics: *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code* (Feeney & Freeman 1999) and the companion book *Teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct: Activity Sourcebook* (Feeney, Freeman, & Moravcik 2000).



Continuing efforts to involve the membership in ethics

It is valuable to consider the investments made by NAEYC and others in the field to make the Code a dynamic part of members’ professional repertoire:

- NAEYC distributed more than 23,000 copies of the book *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator* as comprehensive member benefits in 1999. Since that time more than 30,000 additional copies have been ordered. This sizeable distribution demonstrates one way that knowledge of ethics and

know-how about applying the Code is becoming readily accessible and a part of practitioners' core knowledge.



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- Over one million brochures of the text of the Code (more than 1,000,000 in English and more than 60,000 in Spanish) were ordered by educators between 1994 and 2003.
- The Code is available on the NAEYC Web site (www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pseth98.asp).
- The “Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Early Childhood Adult Educators” is also available online (www.naeyc.org/about/positions/ethics04.asp).
- Most introductory early childhood textbooks include the full text of the Code.

When NAEYC was restructured in 2001, an Ethics Interest Forum was initiated. At the same time panels such as the Ethics Panel were phased out. NAEYC's Web site describes the purpose of Forums as “provid[ing] opportunities for members to network and to discuss, reflect, and learn together.” The Ethics Forum has sponsored sessions at Annual Conferences since its inception and has had an online discussion board on the NAEYC Web site. It recently became one of NAEYC's new Web-based Online Communities. The Forum provides a means for all interested members to participate in discussions of professional ethics.

Keeping the Code current

During the Code's initial development NAEYC made the commitment to revisit and revise the Code on a regular basis. Its third revision is currently under way. The leaders of the Ethics Forum, working with NAEYC staff, launched the revision process at the 2003 Annual Conference in Chicago. Participants in the Ethics Forum meeting and in a session titled “Revising the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct” (facilitated by NAEYC staff and the Ethics Interest Forum) were asked for their feedback

and recommendations about how the Code should be revised and refined. For the past year the NAEYC Web site and notices in *Young Children* have also solicited members' feedback regarding the Code's revision.

In June 2004 NAEYC appointed a work group for the revision of the Code of Ethical Conduct. This group includes members with varied experiences and expertise. The work group has carefully considered comments submitted at Conference sessions as well as those sent to NAEYC after the journal and Web site solicitations. Soon it will submit its recommendations for changes to the Governing Board. A revised Code of Ethical Conduct can be expected in the coming months. This revision will reflect current issues faced by the field, with greater attention to topics such as assessment, the cultural context of children's development and learning, and diversity and inclusion.

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Expanding the provisions of the Code

When the Code was first developed, the decision was made to focus on the needs of early childhood professionals working directly with young children and their families. That early effort left for another day the task of addressing the ethical dimensions of those working as adult educators, program directors, and others. NAEYC's work to make the Code more useful in addressing ethical issues faced by adult educators in their specialized roles is a positive step forward.

Supplement for adult educators

In Spring 2004 NAEYC, the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE), and American Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators (ACCESS) jointly adopted the "Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Early Childhood Adult Educators." This supplement is designed to be used with the existing Code. It is the culmination of over 10 years of work and represents an important milestone in NAEYC's continuing work on professional ethics. It addresses the particular ethical issues faced by those preparing the next generation of early childhood professionals.

The supplement was the result of a multiyear process involving input from a wide range of stakeholders. It reflects input received at sessions at NAEYC's national conferences over several years and comments received about a draft published in *Young Children* in May 2003 (Freeman, Feeney, & Moravcik 2003). The supplement expands the influence of the Code and provides specific guidance regarding the unique ethical issues encountered by those who prepare adults to work in early childhood programs.

The development of this supplement represents successful collaboration between three early childhood professional organizations. It creates a strategy for adding to and extending the Code and increases the professionalism of the field. The supplement can be found online at www.naeyc.org/about/positions/ethics04.asp.

Supplement for administrators

The Ethics Forum is interested in exploring the particular ethical issues faced by program directors and administrators. Leaders of the Forum began discussing these issues in conference sessions, ethics workshops, and professional conversations in 1997. Since that time a number of others have been involved, including Anne Dorsey, Eva Moravcik, Julie Powers, Richard Cohen, and Ellie Kaucher.

The work to date has helped the Forum identify five arenas in which administrators face ethical issues. These include personnel and enrollment issues, productive relationships with families, allocation of resources, and program leadership. Each issue has an ethical

dimension that is unique to a director's responsibilities and not directly addressed in the original Code of Ethics.



Ethics Forum members Freeman and Feeney have developed a Code of Ethics Survey, now posted on the NAEYC Web site in the Ethics Online Community (and also available on Beyond The Journal under the title “Ethical Dimensions of Program Administration” at

<http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200411/FreemanEthics2.pdf>),

to get additional reactions to the ideas developed to date and to determine interest in the development of a supplement to the Code for directors and administrators. If there is sufficient interest in this issue, the Ethics Forum will ask the NAEYC Governing Board to appoint an ad hoc group to develop a supplement that, like the supplement for adult educators, gives more focused guidance to administrators of early childhood programs as they consider the question “What would a good early childhood program director do?”

Future directions

NAEYC members can be proud of our organization’s work to make professional ethics a part of the field’s core knowledge. NAEYC stands out not only for addressing professional ethics but also for developing and widely distributing resources to help members learn the Code and how to apply it.

All who have taken part in the work thus far hope that the Code’s usefulness will continue to expand, and that the supplement for adult educators and the possible future supplement for directors will further the role of the Code as a living document.

Much work on professional ethics has been done under the auspices of NAEYC, but there are still important issues to be discussed. One issue has to do with our responsibility as a field to respond to initiatives that lead to policies and practices that we know are not in the best interests of children. More discussion about our collective ethical commitment to children is called for. Enforcement of the Code might be a future discussion topic as well.

Finally we need to encourage NAEYC to continue its commitment to professional ethics and provide structures to support this work. A focus on ethics must be a visible aspect of the growing professionalism of the field of early care and education.

A call for commitment

The authors hope that you will make the Code of Ethics a part of your professional repertoire; that you will share your knowledge and enthusiasm for the Code with colleagues and families; and that you will join conversations related to professional ethics in your school or center, in your community, and nationally either online or at NAEYC’s conferences. It is NAEYC’s goal to keep the Code alive, to be certain it guides early childhood educators no matter where or how they serve young children and their families.



The development of this supplement represents successful collaboration between three early childhood professional organizations.

References

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Join the Discussion

Any NAEYC member can participate in the Ethics Forum by attending meetings at NAEYC conferences and by visiting www.naeyc.org/members. Enter the Member Account Login, choose NAEYC Interest Forums/Virtual Community, then follow the directions to join the Ethics in Early Childhood Education Community.

Forum members can use the NAEYC Online Communities pages to post announcements, respond to polls and surveys, take part in chat room conversations, and e-mail other community members. We hope everyone interested in ethics will take full advantage of this new Web-based communication tool.

Complete the Survey

NAEYC members are invited to complete the Survey of Directors/Administrators: Considering a Supplement to the NAEYC Code of Ethics online by logging into the Members Only section of the NAEYC Web site (in Online Communities, Ethics Forum). Members and nonmembers can also print out the survey from “Ethical Dimensions of Program Administration”

(<http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200411/FreemanEthics2.pdf>), also in the November 2004 Beyond the Journal.