Focus on Ethics

The Birthday Cake: Balancing Responsibilities to Children and Families

The dilemma

Olivia, a program director, is committed to serving nutritious foods and providing healthy choices for children. For that reason her center does not regularly serve cookies, cakes, or other foods full of sugar, fats, or preservatives. The program’s family handbook describes these policies. It states clearly that birthday cakes are not allowed. Policies strongly encourage families to celebrate special events with healthy foods such as berries, watermelon, sliced fruit, vegetable plates, and veggie pizza.

Another important part of the program's philosophy is developing close relationships with all families. Olivia strives to warmly welcome children and families each day. One morning a mother who is new to the center, who has been shy about participating, and whose mastery of English is limited, arrives with a large, elaborately decorated cake to celebrate her child’s birthday. On one hand Olivia wants to avoid violating the center’s policies, but on the other she wants to strengthen her relationship with this mother and make her feel that she and her family are important members of the program community.

What do you think a good early childhood program administrator should do in this situation? How can Olivia use the NAEYC Code and the Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators to guide her thinking and decision making? Remember, the Supplement is to be used in conjunction with the Code, never alone. These important documents work together. The Supplement addresses some of the unique responsibilities of program administrators, including directors.

Resolving the dilemma

You might use this case as the focus of a staff meeting or as an assignment for undergraduate or graduate students. You might mull it over on your own or with a friend or colleague. We recommend following these steps to avoid jumping to an intuitive response instead of arriving at a resolution that systematically applies the Code and Supplement.

1. Identify the problem and discuss why it involves ethics.

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2. Identify to whom Olivia has conflicting responsibilities. What does she owe to each of the stakeholders? (In doing an ethical analysis it can be helpful to summarize the conflicting responsibilities as a choice between alternatives. “Should Olivia __________, or should she __________?”)

3. Brainstorm possible resolutions.

4. Consider ethical finesse, a way to resolve a problem that is satisfactory to everyone involved and that avoids having to make a difficult decision.

5. Look for guidance in the NAEYC Code and the Supplement for Program Administrators. Carefully review their Core Values, Ideals, and Principles, particularly those that apply to responsibilities to children and families. List the relevant items in the Code and the Supplement and indicate how you prioritized their importance.

6. Based on your review of the Code and Supplement, and using your best professional judgment, describe what you think is the most ethically defensible course of action for Olivia.

Respond to this dilemma

This column is designed to involve the readers of Young Children. Please e-mail your proposed resolution to Olivia’s situation to the coeditors. Be sure to use the subject line “NAEYC ethics.” Responses should be no more than 500 words and must be received by December 10, 2012.

. . . or send us one from your experience

We hope you will share with us an ethical dilemma you have encountered in your workplace that you would like to be considered for presentation in this column. Send a short (400–500 words) description of the situation to the coeditors.

Contact the coeditors by e-mail: Stephanie Feeney at feeney@hawaii.edu and Nancy Freeman at nfreeman@sc.edu.

When you have completed your analysis and come up with a proposed course of action for Olivia, send an e-mail to the coeditors (feeney@hawaii.edu and nfreeman@sc.edu). Include your recommendation and a brief description of how you combined the Code and Supplement and your professional judgment to reach this resolution.

Correction

The September 2012 print version of Focus on Ethics failed to list guest editor Rabbi Meir Muller, PhD. Meir earned rabbinical ordination, and is a clinical assistant professor of early childhood education, at the University of South Carolina. He is the principal of Columbia Jewish Day School. Meir was awarded the Scholastic Early Childhood Educator of the Year award in 2006 and has served on the Council for NAEYC Accreditation. He has lectured across the United States and in Israel for the International Research Group on Jewish Education in the Early Years. meirmuller@sc.rr.com

This error was corrected in the online digital version of this column at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns/focusonethics/response-differing-faiths-in-faith-based-program.