

Theoretical Grounding for the “Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators”

September 2025

Introduction

Throughout the 2022–2025 revision process, the “Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators” workgroup drew upon a diverse set of thinkers to both structure the Code and to provide a range of theoretical perspectives to consider for those facing ethical dilemmas.

Structuring Ethical Responsibilities Within the “Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators”

Each section of the current version of the Code includes a brief introduction, followed by a list of essential ethical responsibilities. With the exception of **Responsibilities 1.1** and **Admin 1.1**, the responsibilities begin with practices that are positively required (what you must do) and move to those that are prohibited (what you must not do).

A good deal of thought and care was put into the ordering of items in the Code. The rationale for the approach taken is rooted in the idea of a “yes set” from positive psychology (De Shazer et al. 1986) and expanded upon in the developmental model of liberation put forth by Nieto (2010). When individuals experience affirmation early in a learning process, they are more likely to participate authentically, reflect critically, and move toward deeper understanding. Individuals’ experiences are affirmed, fostering empowerment.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas: Applying Theories of Moral Philosophy

Although not all issues educators confront have an ethical component, early childhood educators do face daily ethical challenges, often without sufficient support and resources. Early childhood educators navigate hard decisions that may conflict with

personal beliefs or well-being while also working within systems that can be inequitable or unjust.

The “Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators” outlines the essential ethical responsibilities for the early childhood education profession. This means it speaks to a set of professional ethics—the moral responsibilities that go beyond personal beliefs and that guide decision making and behavior in a workplace.

Like other professional codes of ethics, the “Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators” is grounded in moral philosophy. This is the branch of philosophy concerned with what it means to do right or wrong. Moral philosophical lenses can be useful tools in defense of ethical conduct and decision making, especially when navigating complex dilemmas that require professional judgment. The purpose of these deliberations is not to get everyone to agree; rather, it is to use these lenses to engage in professional reflection (Schön 1983), to celebrate differences, and to face challenges and dilemmas more mindfully.

Following is a brief exploration of a non-exhaustive selection of traditions intended to help early childhood educators evaluate potential resolutions to ethical dilemmas (Kidder 2009; Freeman & Feeney 2016).

The Relational Lens

“Is this the way I would want others to treat me?”

“Is this resolution respectful of people, contexts, and relationships?”

Relational ethical approaches advise individuals to evaluate their actions based on the extent to which they promote the interests of others and preserve the fabric of relationships. Below are some of the traditions that are part of relational ethics. The **ethics of care**, or **feminist ethics**, recognizes dependency and interdependence as foundational to the human condition. Described by Carol Gilligan (1982, 1993) and Nel Noddings (1984, 2013), the ethics of care frames caregiving as a relational practice shaped by empathy, attunement, and responsiveness to the needs of others. While

influential in education, the ethics of care has also been adopted and applied to other disciplines and expanded by different strands of critical thought (Held 2005; Tronto 2013). Although the study of care ethics has been legitimized in academia by scholars since the 1980s, an ethos of care has been a central and ancient aspect of many Indigenous cultures.

- In **Ubuntu**, mutual respect and the recognition of interconnectedness are central. In Ubuntu, the well-being of the individual is closely linked to the well-being of the community. The philosophy is best captured in the aphorism *kunzi munhu vanhu* (Shona) or *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Zulu), which translate, “a person is a person through other persons” (Shutte 2001, 46).
- The **ethics of the encounter**, rooted in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas 1969), emphasizes the responsibility that arises in face-to-face relationships. Rather than relying on abstract principles, this approach sees ethical obligation as emerging from the presence and vulnerability of the other person. The “face” of the other calls us to respond with care, humility, and responsibility without expectation of reciprocity.

Criticism:

Because responses are context-dependent and involve emotions, critics argue that relational ethical approaches can lead to biased or inconsistent judgments based on personal feelings rather than objective principles. *What are the implications and unique challenges that this lens poses for early childhood educators?*

The Lens of Community

“Does this action align with the values and expectations of my community?”

“Am I fulfilling my roles and responsibilities within this social or cultural context?”

Ethical approaches grounded in the ethic of community encourage individuals to consider how their actions support collective well-being, uphold social roles, and

strengthen shared cultural values. The Ubuntu tradition (referenced above) can also fit within this lens as it has a dual focus on both interconnectedness (relational) and social obligation (community). The commonality throughout the models outlined below is an emphasis on mutual obligation, duty, respect for tradition, and the importance of maintaining harmony within the group. There are many traditions dating back thousands of years that emphasize community. A couple of examples are provided below:

- Schweder and colleagues' (1997) **ethic of community** articulates this lens within cross-cultural psychology, contrasting it with more individualistic, autonomy-focused models. They argue that moral reasoning in many non-Western societies centers on duties, roles, and respect for community norms rather than personal rights.
- Native Hawaiian concepts of **mālama** (a reciprocal relationship with people, place, and the environment) and **kuleana** (a responsibility, duty, or obligation) align with the ethic of community where one has relational accountability to others, to the community, to ancestors, and to future generations (Chinn 2014).

Criticism:

The emphasis on conformity and duty can, in some contexts, reinforce oppressive hierarchies or suppress dissent. When community norms are unjust or exclusionary, prioritizing harmony and tradition over individual rights can hinder social progress and perpetuate inequality.

What are the implications and unique challenges that this lens poses for early childhood educators?

The Justice Lens

“Is this the way I think all early childhood educators should act?”

“Is this action the best one for the field as a whole?”

Ethical approaches grounded in the ethic of justice emphasize fairness, consistency, and adherence to universal principles in decision making. These models focus on evaluating whether actions align with established rules, rights, and duties rather than considering emotions, relationships, or outcomes.

Deontological ethics, rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, is a key tradition within this lens. Kant argued that moral actions must follow categorical imperatives, or principles that apply universally and unconditionally. Individuals are expected to act according to maxims they believe should become universal laws, promoting justice through consistency, rationality, and duty-bound behavior ([1785] 1993). Rightness, in this view, is determined by the integrity of the action itself, not by its consequences.

Criticism:

The emphasis on rules and universality can be overly rigid, suppressing individual creativity and ignoring cultural or contextual nuance. In some cases, principles may conflict, and strict adherence to codes may prioritize compliance over critical reflection. The approach is also critiqued for being impersonal and often rooted in Western, legalistic traditions (in contrast to Indigenous understandings of morality, for example) that may not account for systemic injustice or the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

What are the implications and unique challenges that this lens poses for early childhood educators?

The Consequentialist Lens

“Does this decision help more people than it hurts?”

Based primarily on the nineteenth-century writings of British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the ethic of **consequentialism** (or **utilitarianism**) can be summarized by the advice “do what’s best for the greatest number of people” (Kidder 2009, 152). Those who embrace this approach maintain that the best action is the one that benefits the most people and would result in the most good (Driver 2014).

Criticism:

It is impossible to foresee the consequences of an action: Even if a large number of people would benefit from an action, others may be hurt by it. What's more, it is very difficult for an individual who has a stake in the outcome of a difficult situation to be impartial about identifying the best resolution (Frey 2013).

What are the implications and unique challenges that this lens poses for early childhood educators?

The Lens of Critique

"How have I/we come to understand things this way?"

"Who benefits from this action, and who might be disadvantaged by it?"

Approaches grounded in the ethic of critique invite individuals to question power structures, challenge injustices, and examine the deeper social, political, and historical forces that shape decisions. This lens emphasizes the importance of identifying who benefits from a given action and who may be marginalized, with particular attention to inequities based on race, class, gender, and ability (Bloch et al. 2018). MacNaughton (2003) provides a framework of critical questions for early childhood educators to ask themselves to reflect upon and identify these issues.

- Robert J. Starratt (1991) introduced the **ethic of critique** as a way of framing ethical behavior around the pursuit of justice and equity. Rather than relying solely on universal rules or evaluating outcomes in isolation, this model interrogates the systems and assumptions that produce inequality. It is often used to uncover hidden biases or norms that disadvantage particular groups and to advocate for more just alternatives.
- **Critical theory and social justice traditions**, attributed to thinkers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks, among others, more broadly align with this perspective. These include approaches that draw on critical pedagogy, anti-racist education, feminist theory, and postcolonial thought—all of

which emphasize the role of ethics in confronting oppression and transforming society.

Criticism:

This lens can be overly deconstructive or paralyzing, offering little practical guidance for ethical decision making. Without a clear framework for what should replace unjust systems, this approach may lead to ambiguity or disagreement about what constitutes a just alternative.

What are the implications and unique challenges that this lens poses for early childhood educators?

Conclusion

Considering ethical guidance from these traditions may be a useful way to think about the impact of the resolutions to dilemmas you are pondering. They can give you a better understanding of the consequences of your actions and help you develop a well-reasoned rationale. The more difficult the ethical dilemma we face, the more we need to rely on discussion with others to identify a course of action. Tough ethical choices are made better by careful exploration of the problem, aided by the insights and different perspectives of others. You can further reflect on the validity of a proposed resolution by asking yourself, ***“Could I justify this decision to my community if a news reporter asked me to?”***

Note: This is expanded upon and adapted from page 26 of "Applying Theories of Moral Philosophy," 2018. In *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code*, eds. S. Feeney & N.K. Freeman. 3rd ed. NAEYC.

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