

Smartphones and Social Media

Ethical Implications for Educators

Stephanie Feeney and Nancy K. Freeman

SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITES SUCH AS FACEBOOK, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest—as well as the use of smartphones—have become a significant part of our lives. It is not surprising that they have found their way into early childhood programs, where they are widely used by educators. As with any new technology, they bring both rewards and challenges.

In the early days of Facebook, Stephanie learned that one of the student teachers she was supervising had posted pictures on Facebook of children she was working with. This led to a class discussion about confidentiality and a new course policy about appropriate ways to use social media. When we ask early childhood educators about the challenges they are experiencing in their workplace, we hear similar issues related to the use of smartphones and social media.

To gather more information about the issues that early childhood educators encounter in the workplace, we made educators' use of smartphones and social media the topic of an ethics session at NAEYC's 2014 National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development in Minneapolis. We asked participants to identify issues that they encounter in their programs and how they handle them. Some of their concerns are listed below.

- Smartphones distract teachers, who are tempted to answer calls and read and write emails or text messages when they should be focusing on children's learning, safety, and well-being.
- Adults use the cameras on their phones inappropriately. Parents and teachers take pictures of children at school and on field trips and post them on social media, without parental permission.
- Parents ask to "friend" or "follow" their children's teachers on social media, which could blur the line between professional and personal interactions.
- Teachers and family members post inappropriate or critical comments about programs and teachers on social media sites.

We had hoped that the Institute session would help us identify an ethical dilemma for this issue's column, but we found that most of these concerns were not *dilemmas* (situations with more than one defensible resolution) but *ethical responsibilities* (situations involving issues of right

and wrong, duties and obligations that require early childhood educators to behave in ways that are prescribed in the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct). The session participants were well aware that early childhood educators have responsibilities related to the use of technology and were eager for guidance about policies and best practices.

Our experience at the Institute led us to conclude that in this column, instead of presenting a dilemma, we would share some ideas about how smartphones and social media might be treated in early childhood programs and make some recommendations to the field.

Guidance from the Code

The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/ethical_conduct) is an excellent place to begin in considering the responsible use of smartphones and social media. The guidance that it provides begins with our responsibilities to ensure children's safety and well-being. This ideal addresses these responsibilities:

I-1.5—To create and maintain safe and healthy settings that foster children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development and that respect their dignity and their contributions.

Issues related to early childhood educators' responsibilities to families to maintain confidentiality and privacy generated a great deal of concern. These responsibilities are the focus of two principles in the Code:

P-2.12—We shall develop written policies for the protection of confidentiality . . .

P-2.13—We shall maintain confidentiality and shall respect the family's right to privacy . . .

Additionally, among the Code's responsibilities to families, this item supports policies advising teachers to avoid friending children's family members on Facebook.

P-2.11—We shall not . . . enter into relationships with family members that might impair our effectiveness working with their children.

Responsibilities related to coworkers include these two relevant items:

I-3A.1—To establish and maintain relationships of respect, trust, confidentiality, collaboration, and cooperation with coworkers.

P-3A.3—We shall exercise care in expressing views regarding the personal attributes or professional conduct of coworkers . . .

Issues raised by smartphones and social media are addressed in two items describing our responsibilities to employers:

I-3B.2—To do nothing that diminishes the reputation of the program in which we work . . .

P-3B.2—We shall speak or act on behalf of an organization only when authorized. We shall take care to acknowledge when we are speaking for the organization and when we are expressing a personal judgment.

After considering guidance from the Code, early childhood educators can work to develop guidelines that will protect the interests of children and adults in the program and clarify staff and family responsibility with regard to technology.

Policy development

We identified three areas in which program policies regarding the use of technology may be helpful. The first type of policy is designed to protect children's safety and preserve privacy. This involves addressing the risks of posting recognizable photos online. Students at Portland Community College and Kay Heidrich, a preschool program director, stressed the importance of policies that apply to staff and families, college practicum students, and observers and other classroom visitors. In Kay's program, for example, the parent handbook includes statements asking parents to commit to refraining from posting any child's picture on a social media site without explicit permission from that child's family. And if the center wants to use a child's photograph for publicity purposes or on the program's website, the parents must sign off on that request.

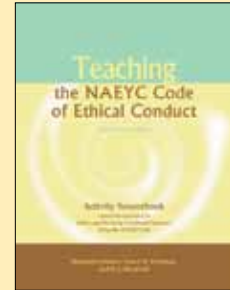
The second type of policy concerns social media. Some centers have policies advising staff members how to politely decline if family members ask to friend them or if family members begin following them on social media sites or ask for their personal cell phone or home phone number. These policies are designed to emphasize the professional nature of teacher-family relationships, which are different from personal friendships. Programs committed to partnering with families might find that this approach gets in the way of establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships.

Some programs take advantage of the popularity and familiarity of Facebook by creating center or classroom Facebook pages. This approach makes it easy for program personnel and families to share information and could help to build community. However, unless express written permission has been given in advance, it is important to avoid posting recognizable pictures of children on these sites.

If programs establish accounts on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media sites, maintaining them can be time-consuming. It is helpful if the director creates clear expectations about who will monitor the center's accounts, who will post for the center, how often and what kinds of information the

Updating Teaching the NAEYC Code

NAEYC's book *Teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct* is being revised to reflect changes in the Code and new insights into how to teach professional ethics to early childhood educators. If you have used the book in your teaching, please take a few minutes to give us some feedback.



- What content has been most helpful in your teaching?
- Which activities have you used?
- Which activities worked well? Which didn't?
- What additions/changes would you recommend?
- Do you have some content or activities you have used that you would like to share with us for possible inclusion in the revision?

We greatly appreciate your input. Please send your comments by April 10, 2015, to Stephanie Feeney: feeney@hawaii.edu.

center will post, and how the center will respond to critical comments or if controversial issues arise.

The third policy arena addresses the use of smartphone cameras. Some centers prohibit all cell phone use in classrooms and prohibit taking children's pictures on any personal device. Other centers ask staff to leave their phones in the staff lounge when they are on duty. (In those instances employees are reminded to provide the center's phone number to anyone who may need to contact them in an emergency.) We do recognize, however, that smartphones and tablets can be used appropriately in the classroom. Teachers can work with children to find useful information, such as the name of the unusual bird they saw on the playground, and they are a valuable tool for documenting children's activities and accomplishments to share with family members. Risks involved when teachers use their personal devices in the classroom can be avoided if programs provide tablets with Internet access (both of which have recently become more affordable) for classroom use. Centers can also make cameras or phones with cameras available for staff use.

Participants in the discussion at the Institute agreed that, rather than creating policies in a vacuum, they would welcome guidance from a best practices document. A number of people mentioned that it would be helpful if NAEYC were to develop a document describing appropriate

use of technological tools for educators in programs for young children. Until such guidance becomes available, we recommend that programs develop policies that are tailored for their particular circumstances and that are based on guidance from the NAEYC Code.

New Ethical Issue— A Difficult Working Relationship

Joy and Terry are coteachers of a group of 20 3- and 4-year-olds in a private preschool program. Joy is in her second year of teaching, and Terry has worked in the program for more than 20 years. Joy taught successfully by herself the previous year, and Terry's many years of teaching were either by herself or with an assistant. They have been assigned to work as coteachers because the group is larger than it has been in recent years, and the director believes this arrangement will best meet the needs of this particular group of children. Before the start of the school year, the two teachers met to discuss their roles in the classroom.

After the first month of school, Joy is clear that the collaboration is not going well. In her view, she is not treated like a full partner in planning the daily program and has concerns about the way that Terry teaches. Terry expects them to teach from the unit plans she has

always used in her classrooms. Joy thinks that some of the topics could be taught in more engaging ways, but Terry doesn't update the materials or try to relate them to the needs or interests of the children in the group. Joy is also concerned about how Terry interacts with the children. She doesn't listen to the children, sometimes loses her temper and yells, and often shames children as a disciplinary technique.

Terry often arrives at school late. She keeps her phone in her pocket and talks and sends text messages in the teachers' classroom work area while on duty. Joy does not know the nature of the calls, but they appear to be personal and unrelated to Terry's responsibilities at the center. When Terry is preoccupied with phone calls, Joy is left alone with the children.

Joy is committed to providing high-quality educational experiences and cannot work effectively in this situation. She meets with Terry to share ideas about curriculum and guidance and to discuss her concerns about having full responsibility for the classroom when Terry is late or on the phone. Terry seems to listen to Joy's concerns, but nothing changes. Moreover, after this discussion Joy learns that Terry has been gossiping about her with families and other staff members and has posted unfavorable remarks about her on Facebook.

Halfway through the school year, Joy realizes that she needs help. She meets with the director, who assures her that Terry has taught in the school for a long time, is well liked by families, and is doing a good job. She tells Joy that, as a professional, Joy should be able to find ways to work things out with Terry.

About the Authors

Stephanie Feeney, PhD, is professor emerita of education at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. She has served on the governing boards of NAEYC and the National Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE). She has written extensively about professionalism and ethics, and since the 1980s she has been involved in developing and teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct.
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Nancy K. Freeman, PhD, is professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She has served as president of NAECTE and served on its board for many years. Nancy has written extensively on professional ethics since the 1990s, and has been involved in the Code's revisions and in the development of its supplements for program administrators and adult educators.
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The authors wish to thank the participants in their Institute session for their engagement with this topic and their valuable input. They also appreciate the feedback provided by students in Christyn Dunderf's professionalism class at Portland Community College, and the guidance provided by Kay Heidrich, director of Trinity Lutheran Church Preschool in Moorhead, Minnesota; Cindy Sobel, coordinator of professional development for the Bergen County Office for Children in Hackensack, New Jersey; and Eva Moravcik, professor of early childhood education and director of the Leeward Community College Children's Center in Pearl City, Hawaii.

Focus on Ethics is available at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

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Respond to this dilemma

This column is designed to involve the readers of *Young Children*. Email your proposed resolution to Joy'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 April 28, 2015. Our analysis will appear in the September 2015 issue.

... or send us one from your experience

We hope you will share with us an ethical dilemma you have encountered in your workplace to be considered for presentation in this column. Send a short (400–500 words) description of the situation to the coeditors. Be sure to use the subject line "NAEYC ethics."

Contact the coeditors by email: Stephanie Feeney at feeney@hawaii.edu and Nancy K. Freeman at nkfusc@gmail.com.

Joy is increasingly stressed and unhappy about the situation. She is thinking about quitting and finding a job in a more congenial program, but she does not want to give up. She has good relationships with the children, some of whom are very attached to her. Joy does not want them to feel abandoned, and she does not want to leave them behind with Terry.

To resolve this dilemma, follow the six-step process we outlined in our March 2014 column (available at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns/focusonethics): (1) Identify the problem and determine whether it involves ethics. (2) Identify the stakeholders affected by the situation and Joy's responsibilities to each one. (3) Brainstorm possible resolutions. (4) Consider ethical finesse. (5) Look for guidance in the NAEYC Code. (6) Identify the most ethically defensible course of action. When you have completed your analysis and come up with a course of action for Joy, send an email to the coeditors that includes your recommendation and a brief description of how you combined the Code and your professional judgment to reach your resolution.

Resources

Freeman, N.K., C.A. Decker, & J.R. Decker. Forthcoming. *Planning and Administering Early Childhood Programs*, 11th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson.

Texas Workforce Commission. 2013. "Social Media: What's Your Ethics Policy?" *Texas Child Care Quarterly* 37 (3). http://childcarequarterly.com/pdf/winter13_business.pdf.

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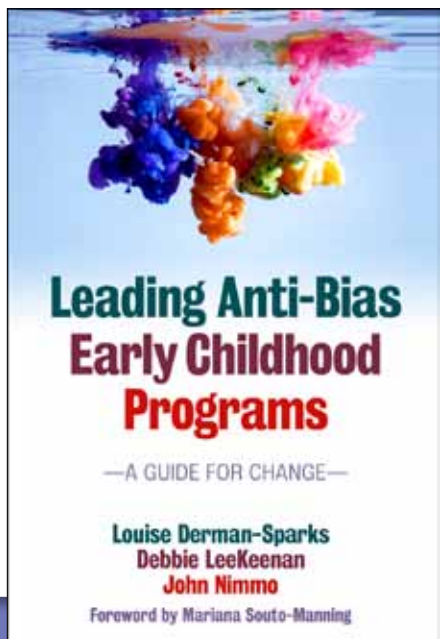
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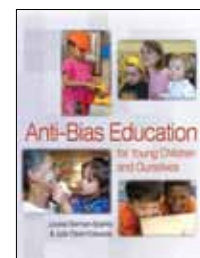
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