

CODES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT AND THE EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA CODE OF ETHICS 2006

Early childhood communities ought to be spaces and places where practices such as responsive listening and dialogue can build connections and relationships which sustain and advance individual and collective wellbeing.

(ECA 2006)

Every now and then, education and care services for children face dilemmas that do not have laws, policies or procedures to guide their resolution. When this occurs, ethical analysis and debate begins to inform what happens next.

The Education and Care Services National Law requires education and care services for children to have 'an agreed code of conduct/code of ethics that applies to management, educators, coordinators and staff members that clearly explains the responsibilities of all parties in relation to one another and to children and families using the service.' (ACECQA 2011, p. 111)

A code of professional conduct in education and care services for children should include a system of ethical inquiry to provide a basis for reflection on how to relate to and contribute to the education and care community in which they actively participate. It becomes a reference tool for the thought processes that inform pedagogy, including actions and reactions regarding an educator's professional conduct and relationships, views, influence and position within communities and society. It is not a set of 'how to' instructions, rather it implies that there is a 'trust in the ethical capabilities of individuals [and] their ability to make judgements rather than simply applying rules.' (Dahlberg & Moss 2005, p. 69)

Newman and Pollnitz (2001) discuss an 'ethical response cycle' as a tool for educators to reach sound ethical judgements during times of ethical inquiry. 'Because ethical analysis is a complex process, it would be unwise to advise strict adherence to a specific step-by-step process for the resolution of all problematic situations. Rather, what is recommended is that the ethical response cycle is used as a framework to support and validate systematic, humane and sensitive reasoning.' (Newman & Pollnitz 2001, p. 11). The ethical response cycle begins with recognising what the issue is and considering any enforceable legal actions. If there are none, the next step is to refer to any core values, codes of ethics, principles of professional practice, and service policies and guidelines to help guide ethical analysis. Education and care services for children commonly have in place a set of policies and procedures for service operation and delivery that can be referred to at these times. They also have a statement of philosophy often with a related set of goals to guide the overall delivery of the program offered to the community. However, there can be times where none of these documents offer guidance to the decision-makers, so a code of ethics is a reference point to guide any judgements that are made.

In compliance with the National Law, education and care services for children are asked to commit to a code of ethics that outlines ethical principles and professional standards that guide decision making and practice. In recognition of the impact of globalisation and global sustainability, the ECA Code of Ethics identifies ethical responsibilities to work with children and families in order to address global issues locally.

The ECA Code of Ethics is referred to widely within the education and care sector, and is highly respected. The Code of Ethics is owned by the field, rather than imposed upon it.

(ECA 2006)

'The protection and wellbeing of children is paramount, and therefore speaking out or taking action in the presence of unethical practice is an essential professional responsibility.' (ECA 2006)

The Code of Ethics explores the ethical principles and professional standards of conduct towards children, families, colleagues, communities, students, your employer, yourself as a professional, and in the conduct of research. The Code provides the service with: a basis for critical reflection; a guide for professional behaviour; and principles to inform both individual and collective decision making.

Formally acknowledging the code in a documented meaningful way will demonstrate how the principles of the code are recognised as an integral part of the service you provide. For an education and care service for children that chooses to incorporate the Code of Ethics, there are formalities that will need to be processed to ensure that the code becomes an agreement on duties and expectations that uphold the balance of rights and responsibilities of ethical conduct.

Reviewing your current code of professional conduct and highlighting the strengths of your existing document will help you assess its usefulness for reflection and shared decision-making. Reflecting on whether your current code is an instructional tool on how to behave (e.g. being punctual and presenting yourself in a neat and tidy manner) or deciding it is visionary in the way that it provides a basis to guide critical reflection and inspire the growth of a learning community. Incorporating the use of the Code of Ethics into these discussions as a team will assist in ensuring that your professional code of conduct relates to a framework for ethical analysis and that the code is agreed to and consistently implemented.

Consider the following strategies to encourage a wide understanding on the practical use of the code:

- ▶ Discuss how the Code of Ethics can be used to provide a framework for reflection about the ethical responsibilities of early childhood professionals, and document strategies in your unique service context you might be able to use to measure these as a team. This might include practising critical reflection on ethical issues that may have arisen in the past.
- ▶ Develop a policy or advance your professional code of conduct to address the recognition of how the Code of Ethics will be acknowledged as an integral part of the service.
- ▶ Assess how the planning and delivery of the program will reflect the Code of Ethics by looking at your current planning format and linking aspects of your planning strategies to the principles of the code to which they relate.
- ▶ Develop procedures that discuss the practical application of ethical decision-making. For example, when an ethical issue arises, there are ways in which you can use the code to work out what to do when faced with an ethical dilemma. Barblett, Hydon and Kennedy (2008 p. 9) discuss a process based on the Newman and Pollnitz's ethical response cycle whereby you work through a process of: identifying

facts, legal aspects and service/community values; identifying the principles of the Code of Ethics that are relevant to the issue; forming an opinion based on professional knowledge of the code and the specific contexts for the issue; and discussing opinions with others to decide on how to respond to the issue. Reflecting on the outcomes will guide the service in developing consistent ways of responding to the issue if it arises again, and will inform further development of policies and guidelines for the service that are fair and equitable.

- ▶ Developing a communication plan documenting strategies to promote the code will assist you to determine where the code will be displayed at the service and how the code will be made available to families.

Early childhood professionals are expected to work in partnerships with children and families which require considerable professional skills and understandings. Ethics are involved in these partnerships because the relationships are based on value choices. Values such as being respectful in the development of partnerships with families are embedded in the ECA Code of Ethics which confirms their importance to the profession and families.

(ECA, 2005, p. 2)

Early Childhood Australia welcomes the use of the Code of Ethics and has allowed the reproduction of the document in this edition of EYE for use and display in education and care services for children.

You can view online and/or download a printable version of ECA's Code of Ethics 2006 from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au > Code of Ethics

For a free copy of the Code of Ethics brochure, contact the ECA National Office staff on (freecall) 1800 356 900 or email eca@earlychildhood.org.au

ECA welcomes you to copy and distribute the Code among staff and friends.

REFERENCES

- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority 2011, 'Guide to the National Quality Standard', retrieved 10 February 2012 www.acecqa.gov.au
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