Ethics: A tool for decision making

How would you respond to the following?

- Mrs. Hill, whose daughter is in your class of 2-year-olds, asks you to testify on her behalf in court to help her win custody in a divorce.
- The lead teacher in another class announces that she will resign in January to move to another state. To replace her, the director wants your assistant, who's highly competent but young.
- Mr. Jones insists that you stop letting his 4-year-old boy dress up in female clothes.

Situations like these have no easy answer. Child care facilities and schools, like all organizations, occasionally have situations that feel awkward, unfair, or just plain wrong.

What guides our decisions?

Many decisions require moral judgment. We know not to lie, cheat, or steal, for example, because that would violate our most deeply imbedded standards of behavior.

Some decisions are subject to law. For example, we don't ask an aide who's paid an hourly wage to stay late without paying overtime because that would violate labor laws.

Some decisions require ethical judgment. Ethics, while rooted in morality, refers to making responsible decisions as professionals. It involves what's right and wrong for us as individuals and as members of our group. It's how we respond, for example, when a book seller gives us $10 too much in change.

Some decisions, like using federal grant money to travel to the Bahamas or hiring a friend over a more qualified person of a different race, can involve all three—morals, law, and ethics.

Of the three, ethics may be a new or obscure concept, especially for young staff. Other professions, such as law and medicine, have a long history of ethical principles. Three-quarters of U.S. business firms have formal ethics codes, and most offer ethics training (Dessler 2006). Ethics codes also guide educational groups and government agencies. See, for example, www.nea.org/aboutnea/code.html, for the code of the National Education Association.

For the early childhood education profession, the National Association for the Education of Young Children developed a code of ethics in 1989. See www.naeyc.org/about/positions/PSETHO5.asp. NAEYC reviews the code every five years to keep it current.

Texas licensing standards don't mandate ethics training, but it can count toward annual training requirements. NAEYC's accreditation criteria require programs to include ethics in the orientation of new staff (6.A.03) and in the professional development plan (10.E.12).

What determines ethical behavior?

Having an ethics code doesn't by itself guarantee ethical behavior, as recent scandals in business and government can attest. Ethical behavior depends upon several factors, including the influence of peers ("Everybody does it") and the sense of right and wrong that employees bring to the job as individuals.

Clearly important is the ethical tone set by the employer. A manager's behavior, pressure to beat the competition or earn bigger profits, attitudes toward ethics training, and compliance can all affect employees' ethical behavior (Dessler 2006).

"You can't just read ethics," says Carol Armga, director of the child development laboratory, University of Texas at Austin. "You have to be socialized into it." She believes ethics belongs in the staff handbook and in the orientation and training of caregivers and teachers.

How to train in the NAEYC code?

Armga recommends five or six training sessions, each of which introduces content from the NAEYC code and engages staff in discussion of real or potential ethical dilemmas.

The first session would focus on the six core values stated at the beginning of the code. Two of these values, for example, are "appreciating and supporting the close ties between the child and family" and "respecting the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual…."

The next four sessions would address the four different relationships staff have as professionals, as spelled out in the code. These relationships are to 1) children, 2) families, 3) colleagues, and 4) community and society. Under each relationship are two lists: ideals and principles.

The ideals are "aspirations" that point the caregiver or teacher "in the direction of exemplary behavior" (Feeney and Freeman 1999). One ideal (I-3B) in the colleagues section, for example, is a responsibility toward employers: "To assist the program in providing the highest quality of service."

The principles, by contrast, are intended to guide staff conduct and help resolve ethical challenges on the job. The principles address such matters as confidentiality of children's records, family access to their child's classroom, and concerns about behavior of co-workers. Principle P-3A.1, states, for example: "When we have a concern about the professional behavior of a co-worker, we shall first let that person know of our concern in a way that shows respect for personal dignity…and attempt to resolve the matter collegially."

A fifth training session might consist of a review as well as an invitation to all staff to make a commitment to adhering to the code.

Using the code

Training and discussion about ethics helps staff in several ways. First, they begin to recognize everyday situations that have ethical implications. Something clicks in their minds, and they begin to think about a situation instead of reacting automatically.

Second, when confronted with a dilemma, they are less likely to look the other way or take the easy way out. In some cases, they can draw directly on what they've learned.

When asked by a parent to testify in a custody hearing, for example, a teacher can explain that she is guided by the ethical principles of the early childhood profession. In this instance, it's P-2.10, relating to family members in conflict: "We shall refrain from becoming an advocate for one party."

The ethics code "gives you the language for discussing ethical issues," says Armga. Situations that once felt awkward or muddled now can be put into words that express shared values and professional conduct.

In more complicated situations, staff can consult with others to reach a resolution. The example of moving an assistant into a vacant lead teacher position suggests consequences that seem positive for some people but detrimental to others. For the director, the move allows a savings in time and money. For the assistant teacher, the move is a promotion with more pay and prestige. But is she ready for the added responsibility? What will be the impact on children she's already bonded with and on those in the new classroom? Is it fair to force the lead teacher in the current classroom to start all over again in training an assistant?

An ethical response might be for the director and lead teacher to consult first with each other and then with the assistant. In the process, they would study the code to find applicable ideals and principles. They would reflect on the situation and consider the consequences of possible solutions. The resolution may not please everyone, but it will demonstrate that decisions are made on the basis of values and what's considered best for everyone at the time.

What about the example of the father who objects to his boy dressing up in female clothes? One part of the code (I-2.4) states that we "respect families' childrearing values and their right to make decisions for their children." Yet, another part (I-1.2) says we "base program practices upon current knowledge in the field of child development," which includes giving children the opportunity to play out gender roles.

In this case of contradictory principles, an ethical response would be to listen respectfully to the father, ask for clarity on his request, and refer to the ethics code as the basis for program practices. The teacher can explain the stages of gender identity in early childhood and the need for children to learn by exploring. She might invite the boy's mother, the director, and perhaps a counselor into the discussion. The result may be the father's continued insistence to disallow dress-up, but at least the teacher has stood up for what she believes to be in the best interest of the child and the program.

"A code of ethics doesn't necessarily give easy answers to an issue," says Armga. "But it does give guidelines and ways to talk about it."

References

Feeney, Stephanie and Nancy K. Freeman. 1999. *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code.* Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Dessler, Gary. 2006. *A Framework for Human Resource Management, 4th ed.* Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall.