

# Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues

*In a caring, cooperative workplace, human dignity is respected, professional satisfaction is promoted, and positive relationships are modeled. Based upon our core values, our primary responsibility in this arena is to establish and maintain settings and relationships that support productive work and meet professional needs. The same ideals that apply to children are inherent in our responsibilities to adults.*

— Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment

**T**he third section of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct focuses on the relationships among the adults in early care and education settings and spells out ethical obligations to colleagues, including co-workers, employers, and employees. This section is based on the assumption that supportive and collegial work environments are good for early childhood educators and enhance their ability to provide good education and care for children.

## *Ideals*

The Code's nine Ideals relating to our ethical responsibilities to colleagues tell us that we should aspire to establish and maintain positive relationships and be fair, respectful, and trustworthy in our relationships with the other adults in the early childhood workplace.

**Excerpt from Feeney, S. and Freeman N., 1999, *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator*. National Association for the Education of Young Children**

The thirteen principles (or rules of professional conduct) in this section of the Code address ethical responsibilities to co-workers, employers, and employees. With respect to co-workers, these principles address our obligations to exercise care in expressing opinions and to share concerns about troubling behaviors with the person who is the source of the problem. With regard to employers, the Code emphasizes our obligations to speak and to act on behalf of the program only when authorized to do so and to follow laws and regulations designed to protect children.

Principles for employers include the obligation to consult with staff in decisions concerning children and programs. Principles pertaining to employers also spell out the need for safe and supportive working conditions, comprehensive personnel policies, fair and objective hiring and promotion guidelines, objective evaluation measures, and fair procedures for communicating concerns about an employee's performance.

***Typical ethical dilemmas involving colleagues***

Ethical concerns regarding relationships with colleagues are experienced frequently by early childhood educators. The following are of particular concern: hearing a colleague discuss a child or family in a nonprofessional setting, observing a colleague disciplining children harshly, observing colleagues providing activities for children that are not worthwhile or appropriate, having colleagues leave the classroom to conduct personal business, being required to implement policies that are not good for children, and experiencing unfair employment practices.

The following are two dilemmas that describe ethical responsibilities to colleagues. Each case involves mixed obligations-conflict between what an early childhood educator believes is in the best interests of children, families or community and what she believes will preserve a good relationship with a colleague. Each case calls for the person involved to make a decision about which of the conflicting obligations should be accorded the greatest weight. Specific sections of the Code applied to each case help us think about what we must do, what we can do, and what we cannot do as we consider defensible solutions

## **CASE ONE: PERSONAL BUSINESS**

**Barbara and her co-teacher Vanessa work with 3-year-olds in a group of eight (one has special needs) in a child development center. Their classroom is a portable building, one of three units clustered around a small, central courtyard. Several times recently Vanessa has left the classroom for periods of up to 30 minutes to conduct personal business.**

What is your first reaction to this case? To whom does Barbara have obligations? What considerations should she take into account in deciding what to do? What actions might she take?

### **What should the ethical early childhood educator do?**

Barbara knows that the program needs to be fully staffed at all times to adequately meet the needs of the children. The dilemma that exists from her perspective involves maintaining the quality of the program for children without jeopardizing the good relationship she has with her co-teacher.

**Explore the issue:** Consult the NAEYC Code to gain insight into how she might address this situation.

**Make an initial effort to resolve the problem:** how will she communicate her concerns to Vanessa in a respectful and nonaccusatory way?

**Decide on a course of action:**

***Have you ever experienced a situation in which a colleague did not live up to her responsibilities? What did you do? Was the resolution satisfactory?***

## **CASE TWO: SEPARATION**

**Whenever the mother of 2 ½-year-old Aaron leaves him at his child care center, he expresses his feelings about the separation through aggressive behavior toward the other children. Pat, the assistant teacher in Aaron's room, is dismayed by the teacher's response to his behavior. Sylvia, the teacher, makes him sit on a stool for long periods of time. Pat feels that discipline should be constructive and reflect an understanding of the circumstance triggering the behavior. She wants to give Aaron a safe outlet for expressing his feelings, such as pounding playdough or redirecting his energy in positive ways.**

What is your first reaction? To whom does Pat have obligations? What things should she take into account in deciding what to do? Think about some things she could do to resolve this situation.

### **What should the ethical early childhood educator do?**

The focus in this instance is on classroom management. Pat needs to balance the best interests of a child with her relationship with a colleague.

**Explore the issue:** Consult the Code to gain insight into how she might address the situation.

**Make an initial effort to resolve the problem:** How could Pat approach Sylvia with her concerns? Should she give "advise" or refer to resources?

**Decide on a course of action:**

***What makes a difference of opinion about classroom management an ethical dilemma? When should a director become involved? Should the fact that Sylvia is Pat's supervisor affect her decisions regarding this dilemma? What ethical Principles from the Code might Pat use to justify her decision?***