

## doing what is right: ethical perspectives on child abuse

by Stephanie Feeney

Families trust early childhood educators to care for their young children. They expect us to keep children safe, meet their physical and psychological needs, support their development and help them learn. In other words, what they want is for us to care for their children as if they were our own. And what every one of us would want first and foremost for a child who was placed in the care of another, is that he or she be kept safe from harm. Every profession has a covenant with society that spells out its mission and promises that it will conduct itself with acceptable moral standards.

Early childhood educators have committed ourselves to the care and education of young children, and though it is not enforced, we have a code of ethics that communicates our ethical responsibilities. The *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct*, first adopted in 1989 after a long process of consultation with NAEYC members, is based on the distinctive values of the field of early childhood education and care. It spells out our responsibilities to children, families, colleagues and community and society, and provides guidance for dealing with ethical issues that arise in early childhood programs. The Code has been updated three times, most recently in 2005. A supplement for administrators that addresses their unique ethical issues was developed and adopted in 2006.

A code of ethics is crucial for early childhood educators because we care for children who are young, vulnerable, and unable to protect themselves. In any profession, the more powerless the client, the more important it is to insure against the abuse of power. We must behave ethically because children lack power and the damage we can do is so great.



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Nowhere is our commitment to ethical behavior more important than in protecting the children in our care from any form of abuse, including sexual abuse.

Situations that involve child abuse are of great concern to early childhood educators and they are explicitly addressed in the NAEYC Code.

Following are some real situations relating to child abuse that have been reported by teachers and directors in early childhood programs.

- A child in a group of three year olds got excited and bit another child. The child apologized and seemed to be genuinely sorry. The child's mother asked the teacher how he had been behaving because she and her husband wanted to punish him if there were any problems. The teacher knew that they were harsh in the discipline they used.
- A four-year-old boy was being sexually abused. He cried with pain when using the bathroom, had bruises on his upper legs and around his rectum, and was unable to focus on school tasks. He told a teacher what was happening at home and she said she would help. The teacher told the director who said that she would report it. But she kept putting it off.
- Twice in six weeks a child came to school with welts on her upper legs and back. In the past, when the child protective agency has been called in, they had intervened much too vigorously, often damaging what seemed to be a basically positive relationship between the child and the parents. You are worried whether it will do more harm than good to contact the authorities.
- A child in a preschool program has been abandoned by his mother and is living with the mother's brother and his girlfriend. School personnel suspect that they are drug dealers. Staff members document numerous instances of neglect and emotional abuse, which they report to the local child protection agency. Nothing changes.

- Teachers noticed that a five-year-old boy in their class seemed to have a preoccupation with sexual matters. His drawings focused on male and female sexual organs, he knew a good deal about sex, and often got into suggestive positions during play with other children. He spoke of having seen X-rated movies on his parents' television.

When dealing with these kinds of issues, the NAEYC Code can help you to understand your moral responsibilities and find wise resolutions to dilemmas (predicaments that involve conflicting responsibilities and require a choice between alternatives each of which has some advantages and some disadvantages). For example, the dilemma of the biting child calls for balancing your obligation to the child with respecting a family's wishes and child-rearing practices. The next case deals with reporting abuse and involves balancing the welfare of the child with maintaining a positive relationship with a program administrator. The next two cases, also involve reporting abuse, focusing on relationships between a child care program and a child protective agency. These dilemmas raise the issue of how to meet your legal obligation to report abuse when doing so might have negative consequences for the child or family. The final situation, in which a child shows inappropriate knowledge of sex, is not a dilemma. It is clear that something is going on that is cause for concern, and the educators who work with the child have a responsibility to gather more information in order to find out what is happening and, if necessary, to protect the child. These are all difficult situations.

The *Code of Ethics* can help you to seek resolutions to them, but it does not provide immediate or easy answers. The more challenging the situation, the more you must combine the guidance found in the Code with your best professional judgment. In the case of child abuse situations the well-being of the child always takes precedence over other considerations. The primary commitment embraced in the *NAEYC Code* is P1.1 which states that above all we shall not harm children. For every decision ask yourself if this decision could possibly cause children harm now or in the future?

Early childhood educators need to make every effort to protect the children in our care. We need to be alert to dangers outside of our programs, and we also need to look carefully at our own practices to ensure that we don't unwittingly do anything that is abusive or might enable abuse to occur. Following are some barriers that might prevent an early childhood educator from behaving ethically when faced with the possibility of child abuse:

- Sometimes it is tempting to do what is easy and that pleases others instead of doing what is right.
- You might not be sure what the best action would be.
- You may be uncomfortable with confrontation or with displeasing families, colleagues, or administrators.

- You might think it would be easier just to ignore something.
- She or he may feel that it isn't your place to get involved.
- If you are a director, you may fear that enrollments could be affected by confronting a family member(s).

If early childhood educators wish to do the right thing in their practice, and if they want to be regarded as professionals and respected for being competent and trustworthy, we must put our ethical commitments to children before convenience or comfort. Our moral commitment to children and their families is at the core of our work. And nothing is more important than insuring that children in our care are protected from abuse.

The large number of provisions in the *NAEYC Code of Ethics* that relate to child abuse underscore the tremendous responsibility we have to protect children from any form of abuse or neglect. These obligations are a part of our solemn covenant with our society that is expressed in our code of ethics.

Most early childhood educators enter the field because they care deeply about children and are committed to their welfare. Nothing is more disturbing and challenging than encountering a situation in which we have reason to suspect that a fragile and dependent young child is being abused, and even more horrifying, abused sexually. Situations that involve abuse call for strength, compassion, the weighing of obligations, and responsible action. A code of ethics can help us honor our obligations and keep our moral compasses pointed at what is best for young children.

## A guide to ethical behavior relating to child abuse

Here are some things that you can do to help ensure that you behave ethically in situations that involve child abuse and neglect.

- Get a copy of the *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct* and read it carefully. Get acquainted with the core values, the four sections, and the ideals (aspirations) and principles (rules of professional conduct) found in each section.
- The well-being of children is the primary commitment called for in the Code. Pay special attention to Principle 1.1 which says that above all we shall not harm children. For every decision involving children ask yourself if this decision could possibly be harmful to children? If the answer is yes, don't do it.
- Be sure that you know your state's laws and the signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect.

## Beginnings Workshop

- If you suspect that a child in your care is being abused, review the Code with special attention to the items that relate to abuse. Share your concerns with your program administrator or staff member designated to deal with reporting suspected abuse.
- Work hard to maintain confidentiality. Sharing information about children and families with people who do not have a need for it erodes trust and diminishes professional credibility. This is a responsibility that early childhood educators often neglect. Information about suspected abuse that is shared inappropriately can be particularly harmful to families.

- Read the Statement of Commitment at the end of the *NAEYC Code* – a personal acknowledgment of your willingness to embrace early childhood educator's values and responsibilities. Ask yourself how you are doing with regard to each of the items.

### For Directors

- Commit your program to following the guidelines set forth in the *Code of Ethics*.
- Give copies of the Code to all teachers and families in your program. State in your handbooks for staff and families that the Code is available (online or in pamphlets that you will provide) and that your program will follow it.
- Make sure that new and continuing staff members receive regular training in recognizing signs of abuse and neglect, their responsibilities as mandated reporters, and reporting procedures.
- Provide caring leadership and create a support network among program staff to assist them in processing difficult situations that involve actual or suspected child abuse.
- Encountering an abuse situation may trigger memories in a staff member who experienced abuse as a child. If this kind of information is disclosed, be prepared to provide support and referral for counseling if it appears necessary.
- Make parents aware (verbally and in writing) of program policies, the legal requirements on teachers to report suspected

child abuse, the program philosophy about discipline of children, and what steps the program has taken to protect the children enrolled from abuse (e.g., hiring practices, criminal checks, supervision, safety procedures, and *Code of Ethics*).

- Create an atmosphere of acceptance of parental concerns and teacher concerns. Be sure to follow up immediately if a teacher tells you of a suspicion of abuse.
- When a teacher suspects abuse, offer to support her in making a report or suggest that you can make the report together.
- Maintain positive daily contact with parents and hold regular conferences. Take time to get to know parents and find out what their needs are. Learn to recognize parents under stress, and how to refer them to resources that can help them cope.
- Welcome parent involvement in the program. Use these opportunities to model constructive approaches to handling difficulties with children.
- Be supportive of a parent suspected of abuse, but be clear that your first priority is to protect the child.
- Provide special supports to parents who are at particular risk for abuse or who have a past history of abuse. Help them get the help they need.

### Resources

Feeney, S., & Freeman, N. K. (2005, 2000). *Ethics and the early childhood educator: Using the NAEYC Code of Ethics*. Washington DC: NAEYC.

Feeney, S., Freeman, N. K., & Moravcik, E. (2000). *Teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct*. Washington DC: NAEYC.

NAEYC. (2005/1997/1989). *Code of Ethical Conduct*. [www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/ethical\\_conduct](http://www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/ethical_conduct)

NAEYC. (2006). *Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for early childhood program administrators*. [http://208.118.177.216/about/positions/pdf/PSETH05\\_supp.pdf](http://208.118.177.216/about/positions/pdf/PSETH05_supp.pdf)

The *Code of Ethics* is available in English & Spanish brochures and online: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org) -> publications -> position statements

## NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct: Items Relating to Child Abuse

### Ethical Responsibilities to children

Ideal 1.4 – To appreciate the vulnerability of children and their dependence on adults.

Principle 1.1 – Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.

Principle 1.8 – We shall be familiar with the risk factors for and symptoms of children abuse and neglect, including physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse and physical, emotional, educational, and medical neglect. We shall know and follow state laws and community procedures that protect children against abuse and neglect.

Principle 1.9 – When we have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, we shall report it to the appropriate community agency and follow up to ensure that appropriate action has been taken. When appropriate, parents or guardians will be informed that the referral will be or has been made.

Principle 1.10 – When another person tells us of his or her suspicion that a child is being abused or neglected, we shall assist that person in taking appropriate action in order to protect the child.

Principle 1.11 – When we become aware of a practice or situation that endangers the health, safety, or well-being of children, we have an ethical responsibility to protect children or inform parents and/or others who can.

### Ethical Responsibilities to families

Principle 2.1 – We shall not deny family members access to their child's classroom or program setting unless access is denied by court order or other legal restriction.

Principle 2.12 – We shall develop written policies for the protection of confidentiality and the disclosure of children's records. The policy documents shall be made available to all program personnel and families. Disclosure of children's records beyond family members, program personnel, and consultants having an obligation of confidentiality shall require familial consent (except in cases of abuse or neglect).

Principle 2.13 – We shall maintain confidentiality and shall respect the family's right to privacy, refraining from disclosure of confidential information and intrusion into family life. However, when we have reason to believe that a child's welfare is at risk, it is permissible to share confidential information with agencies, as well as with individuals who have a legal responsibility for intervening in the child's interest.

Principle 2.15 – We shall be familiar with and appropriately refer families to community resources and professional support services that support families. After a referral has been made, we shall follow-up to ensure that services have been appropriately provided.

*NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, 2005 revision.*