

Ethics: a part of everyday practice in child care

by Dr Anne Kennedy

Ethics is at the heart of every day practice in children's services. Dahlberg & Moss (2005) claim that ethics is a practical matter which involves thinking about every day actions and decisions either individually or collectively and then responding with respect for all concerned. When values underpin our responses and choices, ethics is at work. In some instances our decision making is difficult because there can be different solutions or responses to a situation, each of which may seem appropriate. We call these situations ethical dilemmas, and they may require considerable negotiations by all concerned to achieve an ethical outcome. The ethical nature of working with children and families is often recognised in services by the adoption of a professional code of ethics.

ECA Code of Ethics

Early Childhood Australia adopted its first *Code of Ethics* in 1990. After extensive national consultation a revised edition was published in 2006¹. The Code's preamble states that it is 'a framework for reflection about the ethical responsibilities of an early childhood professional.' The *Code of Ethics* is best used by child care professionals as a supporting document for reflecting on practice or for guidance on difficult issues that may arise in child care settings.

While the *ECA Code of Ethics* was developed primarily for practitioners working with children aged from birth to eight years, the principles are relevant for professionals who work in outside school hours care programs. Core values which underpin the Code including respect, integrity and honesty, can be regarded as important for every service and every person working with children and families. The commitments in the Code concerning children, families and colleagues may be used by professionals working in outside school hours care programs as a way to reflect on their practices with the aim of continuous improvement. Providing new staff with a copy of the *ECA Code of Ethics* in their induction package can help to convey the importance of working in child care and the high level of professionalism which is required to do it ethically.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1 - 1.5, 3.1 - 3.7, 5.3 and 6.1 - 6.4

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1 - 1.3, 2.1 - 2.3, 3.1, 4.1 - 4.4, 5.1 - 5.4 and 8.1 - 8.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1 - 1.6, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1 - 3.3, 4.1 - 4.6, 7.1 and 7.2

Service philosophies

A service philosophy is similar to a Code of Ethics as both are concerned with the values and beliefs which underpin policies, decisions and practices within a service. The most useful and meaningful philosophies are developed in consultation with all service stakeholders, including management, child care professionals, families and children. Consultation helps support a sense of ownership for the philosophy as well as shared intentions about the service and the ways it will operate to support children's education, care and wellbeing in partnership with families.

What is an ethical response?

One of the important matters to consider when thinking about difficult issues is the need to distinguish between an ethical and a legal issue, and to identify whether an issue has both legal and ethical implications. There are legal responsibilities in children's services which are mandated by legislation such as practitioners' duty of care to children as identified in regulations or mandated requirements to report suspected child protection issues.

Some ethical issues do not have legal implications. For example, it is ethical to be honest with colleagues but there are no legal requirements for this professional behaviour. The following scenarios reflect typical ethical dilemmas that can arise in children's services.

Ethical practice scenarios

At a staff meeting in a child care centre, a staff member makes the comment, "It would be much easier for us if we worked with the children and didn't have to think about their parents." Several other staff members laugh at this comment and say they agree with him. No one challenges this opinion.

¹ Available from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

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In this example, the staff member expresses his frustration with the need to work with parents. This suggests that he holds particular values or beliefs about parents which seem to conflict with the rights of families to work in partnership with the professionals who care for and educate their children. The agreement by some staff and the silence of others also reveal value positions in action.

Dee, a family day carer is at her scheme's network meeting. While they are waiting for the guest speaker to arrive, several of the carers start to talk negatively about another carer who is not present. Dee listens for a few minutes and then questions the appropriateness of making these types of comments publicly. Dee suggests that if they have a real concern the carers should raise this matter in private with the scheme's coordinator.

While it would be easier for Dee to ignore the negative comments about a colleague and to not contribute anything further to the conversation, she decides to act in accordance with her values about respect for colleagues and the need for confidentiality. By challenging others and making a suggestion for a more ethical course of action, Dee acts as a model for ethical practice.

- What professional and personal qualities does Dee demonstrate in this example?
- Can these qualities be developed or fostered or are people born with them?

Mai's mother gives Kellie, one of the staff in the 2-3 year old's room, a set of alphabet cards and suggests that Kellie could introduce the alphabet to the other children as Mai is learning her alphabet at home - and she is very good at it. Kellie smiles politely and says, "We don't teach the alphabet in this room". After Mai's mother has left, she puts the cards away in the store room.

Kellie's response to Mai's mother is influenced by her values and beliefs. This is a good example of an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, Kellie is expected to base her practice on research evidence combined with her professional experience and knowledge, which might confirm that it is inappropriate to teach the alphabet to toddlers. At the same time, Kellie has an ethical responsibility to listen to parents' requests and to incorporate their ideas into the program where possible. Kellie is also expected to be able to explain the reasons for her program decisions to others, including parents. Kellie's response

to this mother's request could be considered appropriate from an early education perspective. However, while Kellie was polite to the mother, she didn't explain the reasons behind the decision not to teach the alphabet which left the mother unsure why her request was ignored, even though Mai has enjoyed learning the alphabet at home.

- Can you think of different ways Kellie could have responded to Mai's mother which would have shown respect for the parent's request without compromising her beliefs about appropriate literacy practices for toddlers?

Bobbie and Sasha are playing a board game at their after school program. Jai, who has been playing near them, starts talking to the girls and asks if he can join the game. Bobbie shakes her head and says, "No way, we don't like boys." Jai stares at Bobbie and after a few moments he walks away to find something else to do. A staff member overhears this exchange but says nothing.

A child care professional overhearing this remark could choose to respond in several different ways, with each response considered as being appropriate and professional practice. For example, the child care professional might choose to ignore Bobbie's remark on the basis that Jai didn't seem worried about the remark and that it is best to let children resolve their own conflict issues where possible. Alternatively, the child care professional could have challenged Bobbie's remark as he believed it was unfair and discriminatory and by ignoring it he was giving the remark tacit approval.

- Can you identify the kinds of questions that a staff member could use to challenge Bobbie's comments?

Identifying values and beliefs

When thinking about how to respond to issues in an ethical manner, it is important to start by identifying the values and beliefs held by everyone involved. Identifying different value positions:

- demonstrates respect for everyone involved
- uncovers shared value positions
- helps those involved to understand that people may hold different but equally valid points of view
- supports finding more than one solution to an issue.

A parent of a child in the 3-5 year old children's room asked staff not to allow her child to join in the singing of Happy Birthday to other children as this practice conflicted with the family's religious beliefs. The parent was shocked to see a photo of the group displayed on the notice board which included her child singing Happy Birthday to her child's best friend. She complained to the centre's director about this matter.

In the scenario above each individual has some different and some shared values and beliefs:

- **The parent** - holds religious beliefs that regard non-religious celebrations as inappropriate and values the centre's parent partnership philosophy.
- **The child** - respects the family's religious values and values being a member of her group and her friendship with another child.
- **The child care professionals** - value the parent's right to make requests and value supporting children's sense of belonging, fostering friendships and social inclusion.
- **The centre director** - values parents' rights to make requests in accordance with the centre's philosophy and values the need to be supportive of her staff.

Possible ethical responses to this scenario include:

- acknowledge the parent's right to feel shocked and concerned
- discuss with the staff the reasons why they allowed the child to participate in the singing of *Happy Birthday*. When the birthday cake was brought out, the child had cried when she was asked to go to another part of the room to read books while the celebrations took place. They decided not to exclude the child as they didn't want to upset her further.

- identify possible ethical responses. For example, be prepared by developing a calendar of when these celebrations are likely to occur. Use this child's interest in babies to arrange for her to visit the babies' room with a staff member before the celebrations begin and until they are concluded. Use a digital camera to document a photographic story about her visit with the babies to be shared with the group and with her family.
- the director will ensure there is a staff member available to accompany the child to the babies' room or she will be available if needed
- discuss these strategies with the parent and the child and, with their approval, adopt them as the ethical response to this parent's request.

Conclusion

The challenge of sustaining continuous improvement in the quality of services provided to children and families can be supported by thinking about the nature of child care work as involving ethical issues rather than technical matters to be 'fixed' quickly. There is much discussion about the significance of the early years and therefore the importance of quality in children's services, but at the same time there is recognition that the child care profession is undervalued.

In addition, child care professionals often face time and resource constraints which can make it difficult to reflect critically, individually and collectively, on practices and policies. Understanding and responding to the ethical nature of child care and conveying that message to families, governments and the wider community will help the child care sector's advocacy claims for greater recognition as professionals engaged in important work ■

References and further reading

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