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# Ethical Thinking and Practice for Parent and Family Life Educators

Ethics Committee of the Minnesota Council on Family Relations

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# Ethical Thinking and Practice for Parent and Family Life Educators

Developed by the Ethics Committee of the  
Minnesota Council on Family Relations  
(MCFR)

An Affiliate of the National Council on Family Relations



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Minnesota Council on Family Relations

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## Minnesota Council on Family Relations (MCFR)

### Introduction

Parent and family life educators face difficult ethical issues on a daily basis. These issues may include observing parenting practices that may be harmful to children, responding to parent remarks about their partners, or sharing information about a family with a professional in another agency. Some of these situations may be resolved by reviewing general principles of good practice with a colleague, while others may reveal a true ethical dilemma.

Parent and family life educators are working with complex family systems, diverse belief and value systems, and a variety of social institutions and agencies. Many face these issues in relative isolation and with limited guidance from an emerging field. This document was developed to offer a thoughtful and balanced approach to understanding ethical principles and a concrete process for using them to address difficult ethical issues and dilemmas.

### History

The information on ethics described here was developed by the Ethics Committee of the Minnesota Council on Family Relations. This group has studied ethical thinking and behavior for parent and family life educators since 1992. This journey has involved an initial needs assessment of Minnesota parent and family life educators, several workshops to develop and field test an inductive process for identifying guidelines and virtues for parent and family life educators, and consultation with professionals from other fields. The process led to new understandings and the development of a multi-perspective approach to ethics. The blending of the traditional ethical principles approach with virtues ethics and relational ethics was an outcome of meetings with Dr. William Doherty, Professor in Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, who has adapted virtues and relational ethics to the field of family therapy. These three different approaches provide different, but compatible, lenses for understanding ethical practice. Together they provide a unique approach to ethics for parent and family life education.

A second set of workshops was developed to test and refine the integration of the three approaches and fine tune a case study process for generating ethical thinking and solutions. The guidelines and case study process

presented here are a result of several workshops during 1995-1997, where practitioners applied the guidelines to case studies. The Ethics Committee used input from these workshops to edit and refine the principles. The ethics process has been shared with both state and national audiences since then through workshops at local and national conferences. NCFR has published this information as part of a resource booklet for family life educators.

In 2007 the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) program went through a transition with the initiation of an exam as a new criterion for certification. The question about adopting an official code of ethics for CFLEs came up during this time, and the revision of the original MCFR document as a working code of ethics was proposed as a way to meet this need for CFLEs. A code of ethics provides an additional indicator of professionalism as the CFLE program continues to evolve and gain recognition. In 2009 NCFR adopted the MCFR *Ethical Principles for Parent and Family Life Educators* as the foundation for an official Code of Ethics for the Certified Family Life Educator designation. All certification applicants must now sign a statement verifying that they will adhere to the ethical principles.



The *relational ethics approach* provides a starting place for understanding relationships as the context for making ethical decisions. This perspective allows for a careful examination of the multiple relationships that parent and family life educators encounter as a step towards applying principles. Parent and family life education professionals also see it as a guide for action. Striving for caring relationships in all professional interactions is the goal of relational ethics. Relational ethics provides a clear understanding of the immediate state of a relationship as well as goals for establishing a caring relationship. It provides both process and content for ethical behavior. General principles for developing caring, respectful relationships with family members are outlined in the section on Relational Ethics.

The *principles approach to ethics* has been linked to the relational ethics approach by organizing principles around the concept of relationships. This allows parent and family life educators as a group to articulate important principles that can guide interactions with different populations. The principles are intended to guide parent and family life educators in everyday decisions and actions.

The third approach to ethical thinking involves the more individual lens of *virtues ethics*. It attempts to fill in a gap in our current way of defining professional behavior that tends to focus more on technical competence than on moral character. Good practice in family life education should be tied to internal standards of excellence as well as external behavior. Virtues are “dispositions to do the right thing for the right reason.”

Virtues can be defined on two different levels. The first level identifies core virtues that are necessary for every profession. These include virtues such as justice, truthfulness, and courage. Their implementation varies over time and in specific professions. The second level includes those virtues that are essential for ethical practice in the current social context for parent and family life education.

Three essential virtues have emerged from the discussions between Ethics Committee members and practitioners:

- 1. Caring:** A disposition to enhance the welfare of family members as agents in their own lives.
- 2. Prudence/Practical Wisdom:** The ability to understand competing needs and decisions based on reflection and consultation.

**3. Hope/Optimism:** A disposition to look at the strengths of family members and other individuals and to see positive potential in situations related to family life.

These dispositions provide family life educators with internal strengths to think and behave in an ethical manner.

The strengths of a multi-perspective approach depend not only upon the richness of having different perspectives but also the dynamic tensions that keep a balance between absolutism and relativism. The creative tensions in this approach include: (1) a balance between the dynamic nature of relationships and the more static nature of principles; (2) a balance between the individual in the context of a relationship and the group in thoughtful reflection of important principles; and (3) a balance between wisdom of the past, lessons of the present, and striving to be good in the future. These tensions provide a dynamic balance to ethical thinking as it continues to evolve through reflection and refinement.



The use of relational ethics is critical to work with families. The principles of relational ethics form a basis for understanding specific ethical dilemmas and guide practice first and foremost towards the development of caring and respectful relationships with all family members. Some of the important principles that assist family life educators towards this end are:

1. The parent and family life educator's relationship with individual family members, peers, and the community is both the context and the point of contact for our ethical thinking and actions. This means that parent and family life educators will focus on relationships in understanding ethical issues and depend upon the development of caring relationships to guide movement towards ethical actions.
2. Parent and family life educators bear the primary responsibility to initiate a relationship built on trust, caring, and understanding. All relationships are two-way interactions and parent and family life educators cannot assure that all their relationships will be positive. However, parent and family life educators will model acceptance, caring, and understanding towards family members and peers while pursuing a mutually respectful and caring relationship.
3. All relationships have predictable stages of development. Parent and family life educators will adjust their practice to their understanding of the state and stage of a relationship.
4. Parent and family life educators will bring a knowledge base of general principles about children and youth, parenting, family, and community systems to share with family members. Parent and family life educators will work in collaboration with parents to understand how these principles apply to individual family members and situations.
5. Parent and family life educators will set boundaries on their relationships with family members and be responsible for potential negative influences of care taking beyond these limits. The intensity of relationships will vary but the good family life educator will be vigilant of his/her responsibility to nurture interdependence between family members and other community systems.

In many ways the caring and respectful relationships that parent and family life educators build with family members are analogous to healthy



parent-child relationships. Parent and family life educators need to take the major responsibility for initiating healthy relationships and must work to maintain these relationships. In many cases relationships with adults quickly assume a stance of mutual respect and understanding. In other cases there may be a number of barriers that make this relationship more difficult to build into an egalitarian and respectful relationship. Parent and family life educators must continue to develop an understanding of the relationship process and how to best facilitate healthy relationships among family members, colleagues, and themselves.



## I. Relationships with Parents and Families

1. We will be aware of the impact we have on parents and family relations.
2. We will strive to understand families as complex, interactive systems where parents have the primary responsibility as educators, nurturers, and limit-setters for their children.
3. We will respect cultural beliefs, backgrounds, and differences and engage in practice that is sensitive to the diversity of child-rearing values and goals.
4. We will help parents and other family members recognize their strengths and work with them to set goals for themselves, their children, and others.
5. We will respect and accept parents and other family members for who they are, recognizing their developmental level and circumstances.
6. We will support and challenge parents to continue to grow and learn about parenting and their child's development.
7. We will communicate respectfully and clearly with all family members.
8. We will communicate openly and truthfully about the nature and extent of services provided.
9. We will support diverse family values by acknowledging and examining alternative parenting practices that support healthy family relationships.
10. We will include parents and other family members as partners in problem solving and decision-making related to program design and implementation.
11. We will be proactive in stating child guidance principles and discipline guidelines and encourage non-violent child rearing.
12. We will create data privacy and confidentiality guidelines respectful of family members and protective of their legal rights.
13. We will provide a program environment that is safe and nurturing to all family members.
14. We will ensure that all family members have access to and are encouraged to participate in family life education.

15. We will support family members as they make decisions about the use of resources to best meet family needs.
16. We will support healthy interpersonal relationships among all family members.
17. We will encourage parents and other family members to reflect upon their values regarding sexuality and promote the healthy sexual development and well being of each family member.

## **II. Relationships with Children and Youth**

1. We will treat children and youth with respect and sensitivity to their needs and rights as developing persons.
2. We will strive to understand children and youth in the context of their families.
3. We will do no harm to children and youth and insist on the same from others.
4. We will advocate for children and youth and their best interests at the same time that we work with the parents and other family members.
5. We will provide environments that are respectful of children and youth and sensitive to their developmental and individual needs.
6. We will support the right of all children and youth to have access to quality education, health, and community resources.

## **III. Relationships with Colleagues and the Profession**

1. We will value and promote diversity in staff.
2. We will provide staff with policies and support systems for addressing difficult situations with family members, colleagues, and others.
3. We will follow data privacy policies that meet legal standards and are based on respect for family members.
4. We will follow the mandatory reporting of abusive family behavior in a respectful and prudent manner.
5. We will define our role as parent and family life educators and practice within our level of competence.

6. We will recognize the difference between personal and professional values in our professional interactions.
7. We will support the ongoing development of a knowledge base that guides us towards ethical and effective practice.
8. We will be committed to ongoing professional development to enhance our knowledge and skills.

#### **IV. Relationships with Community/Society**

1. We will be knowledgeable about community resources and make and accept informed, appropriate referrals.
2. We will be aware of the boundaries of our practice and know when and how to use other community resources for the benefit of family members.
3. We will communicate clearly and cooperate with other programs and agencies in order to best meet family needs.
4. We will advocate for laws and policies that reflect our changing knowledge base and the best interests of parents, families, and communities.
5. We will respect and uphold laws and regulations that pertain to our practice as parent and family life educators and offer expertise to legal authorities based on professional knowledge.



## Introduction to Process:

This process is provided as one concrete way for small groups of parent and family life educators to carefully examine an ethical dilemma using the approaches described earlier. It is critical to practice ethical thinking in this concrete manner to become familiar with both the principles and the process. This process can be done in approximately one hour as a part of staff meetings.

## Process Steps:

Steps 1 through 3 focus on ethical thinking. This is important; give it plenty of time. Practitioners tend to leap to brainstorming possible actions/solutions before thoroughly engaging in the process.

**Step 1. Identification of Relationships:** Identify important relationships in the situation using the educator role as the primary focal point.

- a. What is the relational field – what are all potential relationships in the case?
- b. What is the primary caring relationship the educator needs to address in this case? (Examples: educator to family member, educator to group, educator to another staff person)
- c. What do we know about this relationship – quality, stage of development, etc.?

**Step 2. Identification of Principles:** Look over the list of principles to identify those that apply to the important relationship(s) in this situation. Decide which principles may be relevant to guiding ethical behavior. Are there any additional principles that might apply? Which are the three or four most relevant principles? Why? (Spend some time alone to select principles before discussing in small group.)

**Step 3. Identification of Contradictions/Tensions:** What are some potential/actual contradictions or tensions among or between relevant principles?

**Step 4. Identification of Possible Solutions:** Brainstorm possible actions by the parent and family life educator – keeping in mind the relationship(s), the relevant principles, and the virtues.

**Step 5. Selection of Actions:** Select one action or combination of actions to use that reflects adherence to the ethical principles. All of the principles are important and should be addressed in a thoughtful and respectful manner.

# APPLICATION OF THE PROCESS TO REAL LIFE DILEMMAS/CASE STUDIES

The following real life ethical dilemma was discussed by a group of parent and family life educators, early educators, and administrators using the case study process. This scenario illustrates how the case study process can be applied to make thoughtful decisions about ethical challenges.

## **CASE STUDY EXAMPLE:**

### **Culture and Gender Issues in the Early Childhood Classroom**

A mother and her son attend an Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) class for four year olds. They are from Somalia. The mother has limited English but participates well in the parenting class by listening and talking at length when asked a question. She is quietly involved with her son during parent-child interaction time. Her son loves the children's room. He is eagerly involved in most areas of the room, with a clear preference and a strong interest in the housekeeping area. During parent-child time, mom steps back when her son enters the kitchen area.

At the home visit, the parent educator meets the father and siblings. It is clear that only the father is going to speak with the parent educator, with only a brief "hello" from the mother. The parent educator is treated respectfully and positively. The father says he is thankful that his son is in the class and he hopes his son will continue to learn English, letters, and numbers.

After a few weeks, the father sends a message indicating that his son is not to play in the kitchen area. Household work is not for boys and Somali males have nothing to do with such activities. There was no discussion of the housekeeping area at the home visit.

## **Staff Discussion**

The group began the discussion by jumping immediately to suggesting strategies, but they were directed back to the process. It is common when staff members discuss an ethical dilemma that they want to solve the problem and look for an immediate solution or action. A true ethical dilemma does not have a quick and easy resolution because important ethical principles are in conflict or tension with each other.

## **Step 1: Identify Important Relationships**

The group identified that the important relationships were with the mother, father, and child. The relationships with the mother and child are

more established through their regular attendance at the ECFE class. The relationship with the father has been positive but limited to one home visit. The father appears to be the decision-maker in the family and maintaining a positive relationship with him will be important.

### **Step 2: Identify Relevant Ethical Principles**

The staff identified the relevant principles for this situation in Part I: Relationships with Parents and Families:

- I.2. We will strive to understand families as complex, interactive systems where parents have the primary responsibility as educators, nurturers, and limit-setters for their children.
- I.3. We will respect cultural beliefs, backgrounds, and differences and engage in practice that is sensitive to the diversity of child-rearing values and goals.
- I.10. We will include parents and other family members as partners in problem solving and decision-making related to program design and implementation.
- I.13. We will provide a program environment that is safe and nurturing to all family members.

In Part II: Relationships with Children and Youth, three principles were identified.

- II.4. We will advocate for children and youth and their best interests at the same time that we work with the parents and other family members.
- II.5. We will provide environments that are respectful of children and youth and sensitive to their developmental and individual needs.
- II.6. We will support the right of all children and youth to have access to quality education, health, and community resources.

### **Step 3: Identify Contradictions/Tensions between Principles**

The first proposal was that Principle I.3, respect for cultural beliefs, would be most important. Several people murmured agreement. It then became apparent that this principle was in conflict with Principle II. 5, providing environments sensitive to a child's/youth's developmental and individual needs. No one approved of removing the kitchen area from the environment

or of restricting the child when others had free choice. Important questions were raised during this discussion of principles.

- Is this family living here permanently or just for a year or two?
- Could we leave it to the mother to restrict the child?
- Is the housekeeping area important and a cultural value for other families?
- What other dramatic play areas could there be?

There was also discussion that males should be taught to cook and clean as a matter of self-sufficiency and gender equality. Children learn a great deal through the dramatic play in the housekeeping area. In this situation the staff could help the father to see the benefits of learning that the kitchen play area provided for his son.

The staff struggled with the concept and boundaries of cultural respect. Should families from other cultures adapt to American culture and respect the housekeeping area as an important part of the American preschool environment and curriculum? If American children were attending a Japanese school, would we expect them to remove their shoes out of respect for the culture? It was noted that at U.S. military child care centers, the sand table often contains tanks, planes, and “Army guys.” This type of play is culturally relevant, yet when asked, most of the staff members involved in this discussion would not enroll their child in a program that had a “gun corner” or a learning center that included guns. Cultural values embedded in the environment and activities of a preschool became apparent in the discussion. It was clear that some values were important to the staff such as equality, respect for household tasks, and respect for cultural differences and that they were in conflict or tension in this particular situation.

These questions helped the group see the potential contradictions and tensions between principles. Many staff members wanted to say that protecting culture was the most important principle. They were sensitive to the issue of people being asked to deny their culture. They valued diversity and respected families’ differences. However, when they had to defend the strategies that using only Principle 1.3, respect for cultural diversity, would entail, they realized that their primary goal was to provide a diverse and responsive environment for children. This included allowing children free choice, responding to children’s interests, and teaching children



about “real life.” Understanding the tensions between these two principles set the stage for considering possible solutions.

#### **Step 4: Identify Possible Solutions**

As the staff discussed strategies and implications, the following question arose: If we are unable to assist the family in becoming comfortable with our curriculum, is taking the stance we have chosen worth the risk of losing the child from the program?

The following strategies were proposed:

- Discuss with the family about what children learn through the housekeeping area. Indicate that this is the area that consistently has the most social interaction. This may be particularly good for their son’s development of language.
- Make a strong statement that one of our goals is to be respectful of family culture. Let the family know that staff would never insist that the child play in that area.
- Ask the parents if they had ideas on how to resolve this situation.
- Inform the parents that their son would be observed to see what aspect of the housekeeping area he seemed to be most interested in and then try to offer different play settings that would address those interests.
- Inform the parents that the kitchen area would not always be part of the classroom. The staff said they could be comfortable with the kitchen area being absent one-third to one-half of the year.
- Thank the parents for bringing this dilemma to staff and giving them the opportunity to consider the issue. Explain that this was a learning experience for all the staff in understanding different cultural values.

#### **Step 5: Select an Action(s)**

This case led to selecting a number of the identified options to implement. The first was to talk to the parents about the issues and see if they had ideas for resolving the situation. The early childhood teachers would add new dramatic play props to transform the housekeeping area into a variety of different dramatic play opportunities for the children. Discussing with the parents about what children learn through the dramatic play and why the housekeeping area is part of the environment was the final action the staff would take.

The following case studies are presented as examples for practitioners to use to practice the process on their own.

## **Case Study 1: Mother, Daughter, Father Dilemma**

In one mother-child pair in your class for toddlers and their parents, the toddler has several developmental delays and the mother has some, too. The mother alludes to the father being abusive. In talking with others who deal with the mom, you have been made aware of the dominance of the father and his family. How can you support the mom and daughter without causing upset in the family relationships? You have been told that the father will pull the family from any support if he feels threatened. What does the “good” family life educator do?

## **Case Study 2: Twin Dilemma**

As a parent educator for an Early Childhood Family Education class you meet with colleagues in early childhood special education who tell you about a family with twins. One of the twins is a child with typical developmental needs; the other is a child with Down syndrome. The early childhood special education staff feels that the child with Down syndrome would be best served at home with services provided by special education staff. The staff is focused on best practices for the child in need of their expertise, special education. The special education staff recommends the mother bring only the typically developing child to class.

You agree that the child with Down syndrome would be best served with in-home services. You also think the mother should be allowed to bring both children to the regular ECFE parenting class. The special education staff does not think that is necessary. However, you see that the family is a system and recognize that this is a mother of two children and a family of four to consider. What does the “good” family life educator do?

## **Case Study 3: Father and Child Custody Dilemma**

A father who has attended your parent education program for eight weeks calls to talk to you about his children and their mother. He and the children's mother are not married, and he has recently moved out after living together with the children and their mother for five years. He wants you to testify on his behalf at a custody hearing. He tells you that his children's mom works late hours and is rarely home. She pieces together the care for the two-year-old and four-year-old with her friends. He worries about the

children's safety and does not think that she is a fit mother. He attended your program faithfully with both children and appeared to be a warm and caring parent based on your observations of his interactions with his two children. You have never met the mother and only know about her from the father's description. What should the "good" family life educator do?

#### **Case Study 4: Early Intervention and Culture Dilemma**

An early interventionist begins working with an 18 month old infant who was born two months early and has qualified for services because of developmental delays. Both parents are deaf and communicate through sign language. The early intervention team is concerned about language delays and wants to provide a speech and language therapist for the child. The parents are refusing these services because they want their child, who is not hearing impaired, to grow up in the deaf culture that they value. They are requesting that the early intervention staff only communicate with their child through sign language. The early intervention practitioner is concerned that the child may miss the opportunity to develop spoken language if the child has such limited exposure to oral language during this critical period for language development. What should the "good" family life educator do in this situation?

#### **Case Study 5: Gay Couple Participation in Pre-marital Education Course Dilemma**

As many couples are signing in just before the first session of a six-session premarital education course, a gay couple walks in. After registering all of the couples, you proceed with the course that evening. All couples participated appropriately and indicated that they were very pleased with the content and will be returning the following week. In a discussion with the director of the agency where you work the next day, you describe the couples who are attending the program. The director tells you that the funding for this course comes through the federal government's Healthy Marriage Initiative and programs funded by this money must fall into one of the "allowable activities" that include "Pre-marital education and marriage skills training for engaged couples and for couples or individuals interested in marriage," and must follow Public Law No. 104-199, 110 Stat. 2419 that defines marriage to mean "only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word 'spouse' refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife." The director tells you that you must "de-enroll" the gay couple. What does the "good" family life educator do?

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