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Working with Fathers...Working with Fathers & Ethical Issues

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Working with Fathers & Ethical Issues

Key Words



fathering, ethics (in parent education), advocacy (& fathers), parent education (as a profession)

Fathering programs are emerging in a variety of settings, from job services programs to preschools to hospitals and churches (Levine & Pitt, 1995). The rapid development of new services/programs for fathers has stimulated a new sense of advocacy for fathers. When I talk to a young, unmarried father who doesn't know his rights and is uncertain how to handle the new responsibilities of fatherhood I want to support him. I also know that my involvement in fathers' lives is not always guaranteed to have positive impacts on others. At first glance the support of men in becoming more involved in their children's lives seems to be an obvious good. The diversity and complexity of family situations, the wide range of goals in fathering programs and the variety of backgrounds of practitioners involved with fathers, create an environment that is complex and potentially harmful to both fathers and family members.

A few situations will help to illustrate the potential ethical issues that are likely to emerge in working with fathers.

Ken is an older, divorced dad of two young children. He suffers from a mental illness and his attendance at a parenting program is sporadic. Some days he is very tuned into his children, other times he is clearly unable to attend to the needs of his active young son and daughter. He has begun to attend more regularly and asks the program to document that he is a good parent for an upcoming custody hearing.

Reggie is a 24-year-old father of three young children from three different women. He

would like all of the mothers to allow the children to visit each other and to know each other as siblings. The mother of his oldest child wants nothing to do with Reggie or his other children. Reggie asks for your help in trying to get this mother to cooperate in making his family feel connected.

Frank is a 34-year-old father of two boys ages 9 and 11. He has recently moved here from another state where "spanking was legal." He has heard that spanking is sometimes considered child abuse in this state. He has told you that his boys need "the belt" once in a while to keep them in line. He complains in a parent group how state laws don't protect his right to raise his children the way he wants to.

These situations depict complex ethical issues and should alert us to the end of an age of innocence in working with fathers. Practitioners working with fathers need to increase their awareness and skills in identifying and managing difficult ethical issues. This article will begin to identify the need for ethical practice and describe a framework and process for managing ethical dilemmas.

The Need for Greater Ethical Awareness

The need for ethical thinking in working with fathers is based on a number of important factors. First, the level of family complexity has increased over the last 10-20 years. Families are often characterized by more complex systems than the traditional nuclear family. In considering family life and child-rearing there may be several different perspectives that must be considered. To advocate for fathers without knowing the mothers' version of family issues could be dangerous. The child as he/she grows older develops his/her own version of family life. Families have never been simple but the

increase in divorces and the birth of children to unmarried mothers makes family life even more complicated while fathers' roles are less clear and more tenuous.

Practitioners working with fathers have also realized through experience that the work they do to involve and support fathers may have unintended negative impacts for mothers and children. Practitioners can do harm if they advocate for father involvement when fathers are not able to make commitments to their children or have not learned to control their anger towards the child's mother. The field has matured to the point that it must face the difficult dilemmas that are raised in working with all fathers (Palm, 1996).

Some practitioners as well as fathers are skeptical about the trappings of professionalism that go with parent and family education. Ethics as a component of professionalism has sometimes been neglected. The situations that practitioners face are fraught with uncertainties. Do we really know who will be good fathers and who will be harmful to children? The complexity of family life and parenting makes predicting father behavior very difficult. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of practitioners working with fathers and families may create additional confusion. There may be codes of ethics for teachers or social workers that do little more than provide protection and guidance around legal issues. Paraprofessionals in the field have even less guidance about how to identify or manage ethical dilemmas. The need for ethical practice in working with fathers and families is apparent. How should family educators working with fathers address ethical issues? The next section describes an integrated framework for constructing guidelines for ethical thinking and practice (Palm, 1994).

An Integrated Approach to Ethical Practice

The Ethics committee of the Minnesota Council on Family Relations over the past six to seven years has developed an integrated approach to ethical



practice that melds together three distinct ethical traditions. The traditional ethical guidelines approach is integrated with virtues ethics and relational ethics (MCFR, 1998). The three approaches provide different lenses for viewing ethical practice and a unique holistic approach to ethics for parent and family education.

Below are listed some of the key strengths/contributions of each approach to ethical thinking. The strengths of using three different perspectives depend not only upon the depth of different perspective but also from the dynamic tensions that keep a balance between absolutism and relativism. The creative tensions in this approach include: a balance between the dynamic nature of relationships and the more static nature of principles; a balance between the individual in the context of a relationship and the group in thoughtful reflection of important principles; and the balance between the wisdom of the past, the learnings of the present and striving to be good. These tensions provide a dynamic balance to ethical thinking as it continues to evolve through reflection and refinement.

Three Approaches to Ethics: Unique Strengths

Principle Approach — Strengths

- ☆ *Adds clarity to social values and expectations related to practice with fathers*
- ☆ *Provides concrete guidelines to assist decision-making about good practice*
- ☆ *Is an opportunity for building consensus in the field about ethical practice*

Virtues Ethics: Character of the Practitioner — Strengths

- ☆ *Helps to describe the moral character, not just the technical skills of good practitioners*
- ☆ *Helps to identify critical moral qualities that underlie good practice*
 - ☆ *May add clarity about what kinds of people make good practitioners*
 - ☆ *Provide standards/qualities to strive towards*

Relational Ethics: The Caring Professional — Strengths

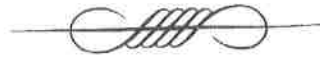
- ☆ *Focuses on relationships and the present state of practitioner relationships as the context*
- ☆ *Allows for the exploration of networks of relationships that support good practice*
- ☆ *Provides a grounded notion of situation ethics where the foundation is a caring relationship*

Application of Ethical Thinking and Practice: The Next Steps

The framework outlined above provides a useful starting place for developing an approach to ethical thinking and practice. Some of the lessons learned from studying other groups that have recently developed ethical guidelines (e.g., AEYC, 1988, MCFR, 1998) outline some next steps that practitioners working with fathers can take. First, the process of developing ethical guidelines must be a long-term commitment that is sponsored by a professional organization. The process must engage large groups of practitioners in delineating the specific principles that should guide practice as well as the key virtues that practitioners need in the current social context. In the MCFR process, workshops that used case studies of ethical dilemmas generated an initial list of important ethical principles/guidelines. Several virtues were also suggested in the initial round of workshops. It became apparent that a long litany of virtues was not very helpful and a short list of three to four key virtues (caring, prudence, hope/optimism) was identified.

While the process of creating a document that identified guidelines and virtues is an important step, it is not enough. Practitioners have to understand and embrace ethics as practical — they can inform and improve practice. Ethical thinking and practices must be integrated into programs in an ongoing manner that allows practitioners to bring difficult ethical issues to staff meetings to process as a group. The process developed by MCFR (1998) to be applied at the program level is described in *Ethical Thinking and Practice for Parent and Family Educators* (see

M&M p. 23-24). NAEYC has kept ethics “alive” by publishing common ethical dilemmas in the field of early education in their journal **Young Children**. Examples of the application of ethical principles by two or more practitioners illustrate how to use ethical principles to guide practice.



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Ethical Thinking and Practice for Parent & Family Educators



Step 1: Identify important relationships in the situation using the practitioner role as the primary focal point.

- ◆ *What is the relational field? What are all the possible relationships that the practitioner needs to consider?*
- ◆ *What is the primary caring relationship the educator needs to address in this case?*

Step 2: Application of principles: Look over the list of Ethical Principles (that follows) that apply to this kind of relationship. Decide which principles may be relevant to guiding behavior in this situation. Are there any additional principles that might apply? Which are the three to four principles most relevant to understand this case? Why?

Step 3: What are some of the potential contradictions between the principles?

Step 4: Application of virtues: Consider the virtues (caring, prudence, hope/optimism). Which is most relevant? Are all relevant to some degree? Why? Spend some time alone to consider virtues before discussing in small groups.

Step 5: Brainstorm possible actions by the family educators, keeping in mind the relationship, the relevant principles and the virtues.

Select one to act upon or do. Ethics to be successful has to move from an abstract level to a practical level that speaks to practitioners' concerns. Parent and family educators who work with fathers have extended practice to include all family members and diverse family systems. This extension of practice has exposed practitioners to new ethical issues that should be approached in a thoughtful, direct manner. The support and insight of a larger group of practitioners is necessary to move the field forward and improve practice. The ideas outlined in this article provide some next steps in the long term process.

Ethical Principles —

Relationships with Parents & Families

1. We will be aware of the impact/power we have on parents and family relationships.
2. We will strive to understand families as complex, interactive systems where parents have the primary responsibility as educators, nurturers, and limit-setters for 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 recognize their strengths and work with parents to set goals for themselves and their children.
5. We will respect and accept parents for who they are, recognizing their development 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 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 to support healthy family relationships.
10. We will include parents as partners in problem solving and decision making related to program design and implementation.
11. We will be proactive in stating program child guidance principles and discipline guidelines and encourage non-violent child-rearing.

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12. We will create data privacy and confidentially 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 education.

Other:

Relationships with Children

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

Other:

Relationships with Colleagues & 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 upon 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 family 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 toward ethical and effective practice.
8. We will be committed to ongoing training and professional development to enhance our knowledge and skills.

Other:

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 to use other community resources for the benefit of family members.
3. We will communicate clearly and cooperate with other programs/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 family educators and offer expertise to legal authorities based on professional knowledge.

Other:



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