The Birthday Cake

Balancing Responsibilities to Children and Families

The response

In November, we presented a dilemma faced by the director of a child care center. The situation gave readers the opportunity to apply the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and the Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators. It provided another opportunity to emphasize the Code's 2011 reaffirmation and update, which is intended to sharpen our focus on two-way communication between program personnel and families. It also emphasizes the importance of striving to achieve congruency between children's homes and early care and education programs.

Olivia, a program director, is committed to serving nutritious foods and providing healthy choices for children. For that reason her center does not regularly serve cookies, cakes, or other foods full of sugar, fats, or preservatives. The program's family handbook describes these policies. It states clearly that birthday cakes are not allowed. Policies strongly encourage families to celebrate special events with healthy foods such as sliced fruit, vegetable plates, and veggie pizza.

Another important part of the program's philosophy is developing close relationships with all the families. Olivia strives to warmly welcome children and families each day. One morning a mother who is new to the center, who has been shy about participating, and whose mastery of English is limited, arrives with a large, elaborately decorated cake to celebrate her child's birthday. On one hand Olivia wants to avoid violating the center's policies, but on the other she wants to strengthen her relationship with this mother and make her feel that she and her family are important members of the program community.

What do you think a good early childhood program administrator should do in this situation? How can Olivia use the NAEYC Code and the Supplement for Program Administrators to guide her thinking and decision making?

Resolving this dilemma

We were fortunate to have the opportunity to work through this case with several groups of early childhood educators. Teachers and directors in ethics workshops led by Stephanie in Nashville, Tennessee, and Columbia, South Carolina, provided feedback to a version of this case, as did Nancy’s students in a graduate course on advocacy and leadership. We also appreciated the thoughtful responses submitted by Sally Mowers, academic specialist/head teacher at the Michigan State University Child Development Lab, and Karen VanderVen, professor emerita at the University of Pittsburgh. We have incorporated their feedback into this discussion.

The process for resolving this dilemma

We followed the steps below to arrive at a well-thought-out resolution that systematically applies the Code and Supplement for Program Administrators.

1. Identify the problem and determine if it involves ethics.

Those who responded to this case agreed that the issue is very clear. Olivia needs to decide if she will follow the center policy designed to promote healthy food choices and refuse to serve the birthday cake, or disregard the policy and serve the cake. If she refuses, the mother...
is likely to be offended at having her well-intentioned offering rebuked. If she serves the cake, the children will consume an undesirable amount of sugar, but it might strengthen her relationship with a mother whom staff have had difficulty engaging with. Additionally, serving the cake might upset family members who agree with and follow the program policy. Everyone who reviewed this case agrees that it presents an ethical dilemma because it involves choosing a right and fair course of action and has two possible defensible resolutions.

2 Identify the stakeholders affected by the situation.

Those with an interest in an ethical situation are referred to as stakeholders, to suggest that they have a stake in the outcome. Olivia realizes she needs to balance her responsibilities to this mother, Mrs. Chang; to Mrs. Chang’s daughter, Mei-Zhen; and to the children in the center whose health she is concerned about. She also has responsibilities to uphold center policies and to apply program policies consistently so as not to offend families who agree with and follow the policy.

The early childhood educators who responded to this case had widely divergent views about what Olivia should do. Some of them strongly embraced the position that, while Olivia might be tempted to accommodate Mrs. Chang by serving the birthday cake, she had a clear responsibility to uphold the center’s healthy food policy and to respectfully decline. Other respondents held an equally strong conviction that Olivia should make an exception and serve the cake in the service of building a good relationship with the mother.

3 Brainstorm possible resolutions.

Those who believed that Olivia’s responsibilities to children’s health and center policies should take precedence suggested that Olivia

- Acknowledge and thank Mrs. Chang for her contribution, respectfully say “no thank you,” and explain that the cake could not be served because of program policy regarding healthy food.
- Invite Mrs. Chang to join the class to celebrate Mei-Zhen’s birthday and share the center’s healthy snack (perhaps with a fancy celebratory presentation).

Those who believed nurturing a good relationship with Mrs. Chang should take precedence thought that Olivia should warmly thank the mother and serve the cake. They did some creative thinking about how Olivia could approach this decision.

- Advise Mei-Zhen’s teacher to serve the cake, but limit the size of the pieces.
- Take responsibility for explaining to Mei-Zhen’s classmates’ families that their children had a serving of birthday cake today; that she now realizes she had not communicated policies clearly enough to all families; that she felt confident all families now understand the center’s emphasis on healthy food; and that the existing policies would continue to be followed.
- Make the policy clear to Mrs. Chang and explain that she will need to follow the policy in the future. This might mean Olivia would need to have an interpreter when she meets with Mrs. Chang, or to translate the family handbook for the family.

4 Consider ethical finesse.

As we have pointed out in previous columns, ethical finesse (finding a way to meet the needs of everyone involved without having to make a difficult decision) can be considered in addressing many ethical dilemmas. Some of our respondents suggested ways to finesse this dilemma, including serving very small portions of the cake or sending pieces home with the children for families to choose whether to serve it. If Mrs. Chang and the staff could agree on one of these alternatives, the dilemma could be resolved without Olivia having to make a difficult decision.

5 Look for guidance in the NAEYC Code and the Supplement for Program Administrators.

The respondents carefully reviewed the Core Values, Ideals, and Principles. They listed the relevant items in the Code and Supplement and indicated how they prioritized their importance.

This scenario led respondents to focus on a number of Core Values from the Code related to their responsibilities to children and the importance of nurturing positive relationships with all families:

- Base our work on knowledge of how children develop and learn.
- Appreciate and support the bond between the child and family.
- Respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague).
- Respect diversity in children, families, and colleagues.
- Recognize that children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust and respect.

This Core Value from the Supplement for Program Administrators also applies:

- Recognize that we have many responsibilities—to children, families ... and that the well-being of the children in our care is our primary responsibility, above our obligations to other constituencies.

Some respondents focused on Mei-Zhen’s reaction and thought she would be disappointed, and perhaps embarrassed, by having her birthday cake sent home. They relied on P.1.1 from the Code to explain their position:
Focus on Ethics

6 Identify the most ethically defensible course of action.

Those who analyzed this dilemma were divided in their recommendations. While either serving or not serving the birthday cake can be justified using the NAEYC Code and Supplement for Program Administrators, we (the editors of this column) believe that honoring the relationship with the mother and serving the cake would have greater long-term benefits than strictly adhering to the program policy.

Karen VanderVen’s thoughtful and common-sense analysis puts this dilemma in a different perspective. She challenges the “no birthday cake” policy and observes “the rationale for ‘no birthday cake’ is not a sound one … [and fails to take into account] ethical principles such as respect for family and culture.” She also questions the assumption that “to have birthday cake or an ‘unhealthy’ food on a special occasion is somehow going to set the children on a pathway to obesity and poor health.” These are important reminders about the importance of implementing policies only after serious study and consideration. We agree with her advice to not “make a ‘bigger deal’ out of this than it needs to be” and to consider modifying the strict policy.

Of course if you were to face this kind of dilemma in your workplace, the decision would be influenced by specifics of the situation, such as your relationship with the mother and your sense of whether the mother had been informed of the policy and whether she had understood it.

There was, however, strong consensus among the respondents to the case that, in spite of Olivia’s good intentions and regardless of whether she decided to serve the cake, she had not successfully communicated with all families as the Supplement for Program Administrators calls on her to do:

- **P-2.3**—We shall make every attempt to use two-way communication to convey information in ways that are accessible by every family served.
- **P-2.4**—We shall establish clear operating policies and make them available to families in advance of their child entering the program.

This difficult situation could have been avoided if all policies in the handbook had been very carefully considered and had been fully explained, and translated if necessary, prior to Mei-Zhen’s enrollment.

This dilemma points out how clear adherence to the Code, and in this instance the Supplement for Program Administrators, could have avoided a difficult situation. It also suggests that sometimes the best decision is to put a higher priority on relationships than program policies.

New Ethical Issue—Testing in Preschools

We have been aware for some time of the proliferation of standardized tests in kindergarten and primary grade classrooms and their potentially negative impact on children, teachers, and programs. More recently we have been hearing from readers of Young Children and other preschool teachers, administrators, and adult educators who are concerned that standardized tests are increasingly being required in preschool classrooms by a variety of agencies and funding sources. They report that programs use the results of standardized tests as required measures of accountability.
This month, instead of presenting a case we are asking for your input on the issue of testing. Is your program required to administer standardized tests to young children? What age group do you serve? Who is requiring the tests? How are they being used? What are the effects on children, teachers, and your program? Do the assessments raise ethical issues for teachers and administrators in your program? How have you addressed the implementation of required testing? (Specific examples would be helpful.) What do you think teachers and directors in preschool programs, teacher educators, policy specialists, and professional organizations (such as NAEYC) should do in response to the current demand for tests to evaluate children and the programs that serve them?

We think that it is a good time to learn more about the nature of assessment requirements that programs are facing. We would like to hear from the readers of Young Children who can help us better understand these issues, with a focus on ethical issues that they present. Increased understanding may help us consider desirable ethical responses to assessment policies and help us identify things that we, as individuals and as a field, can do.

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