Developing Professional Ethics for Child and Youth Care Work: Assuming Responsibility for the Quality of Care

Martha A. Mattingly
University of Pittsburgh

ABSTRACT: Child and youth care in North America is actively engaged in a process of "doing ethics." This paper presents the context for this current ethics work, gives a brief history of ethics in the culture as it impacts on helping professions, and describes the function of professional ethics. The ethics work of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Child Life Council (CLC), and organized child and youth care in North America are detailed. The plan of action includes the process that has led to the completed draft of the Code of Ethics of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals, an outline for a process of "doing ethics," and the formulation of research questions to enhance the understanding of ethics in practice.

Child and youth care practitioners are responsible for a non-enfranchised, vulnerable population dependent on the integrity of the service providers. In a very dramatic sense practitioners are periodically made aware of scandalous situations of child/youth maltreatment. More commonly, less dramatic but important situations call into question the attitudes and behavior of staff, agency policy, and governmental policy and regulation. In addition, there are situations that present troubling and challenging conflicts in the core values and standards of child and youth care. Our early childhood education colleagues have described themselves as in an ethical crisis (Feeney & Sysko, 1986). Child and youth care is surely in a similar situation.

Therefore, sophisticated and differentiated ethical discussion by individual practitioners and by the profession as an organized entity must play a major part in child and youth care assuming responsibility for standards of practice and having a significant influence on

Address correspondence to Martha A. Mattingly, Program in Child Development and Child Care, School of Social Work, 1717 Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, e-mail to <mattgly+@pitt.edu>. An earlier version of this paper was presented in May 1992 at the 39th International Congress of the International Federation of Educative Communities (FICE) in Luxembourg.

Child & Youth Care Forum, 24(6), December 1995
© 1995 Human Sciences Press, Inc.
the legislation, policies, and services that impact children, youth, and families. Professional ethics is not synonymous with personal morality or governmental regulation; it is the organized and systematic articulation of child and youth care values and their application to the issues encountered in practice. Ethical discussion is an active process of "doing ethics" (Kipnis, 1987). For some problems answers are clear. In some instances the practitioner, along with the profession, must struggle for resolutions. For other situations ethical analysis can identify the values and issues to be considered and their implications.

It is often a shock to those beginning to engage in ethics discussion that this process makes participants uneasy. Ethics work challenges a core identity of helping practitioners as good and caring persons dedicated to the welfare of children, youth, and families. It challenges personal moralities and preferences. If discomfort does not occur we are not really "doing" professional ethics but merely confirming our pre-existing views.

This paper presents a description of child and youth care work in North America, a brief history of ethics work as it frames the development of child and youth care ethics, and describes the nature and function of professional ethics. Finally, the current ethics work in child and youth care in North America is described with a plan of action.

Description of Child and Youth Care Work in North America

Professional ethics can be thought of as representing the values of child and youth care to which the field holds a common commitment. It then becomes necessary to describe the scope and focus of the field, which in turn serves as the foundation for establishing the potential constituency for an ethics code. In North America this process began at the Conference Research Sequence Project at the University of Pittsburgh from 1979-1982.1

At that time the major constituencies of child and youth care work in North America contributed to a Task Force on the Scope of the Field. Their report was reviewed by the Academy of Child and Youth Care Professionals in November of 1991, reviewed and revised by the Child and Youth Care Education Consortium in January, 1992, and further reviewed in March, 1992 at the meeting of the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care in North America and by the Board of Directors of the National Organization of

---

1This project was supported by Grant #5T 24MH15869 awarded by the National Institute of Mental Health, 1979-1982.