



acycpjournal.pitt.edu

ISSN: 2641-3450 (online) and 0741-9481 (print)

DOI 10.5195/jcycw.2025.479

Vol. 31, 2025

Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals

Association of Child and Youth Care Practice

The Code of Ethics was last reviewed and approved by ACYCP in 1995, over 28 years ago. Over the span of two decades, it has been used as a central component in the certification process of the Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB) as well as circulated by the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations (CCCYCA). It is used as a primary ethics foundation for a number of provinces and states in North America and referenced around the world. It has served its time well as a guiding foundation of ethical Child and Youth Care practice.

The lead architect in the formation of this code of ethics was Martha Mattingly at the University of Pittsburgh (Mattingly, 1995). Her commitment and spirit of ethical practice is honored and present in the 2017 revision. The code, as it was developed under the leadership of Martha Mattingly, was intended as a living document that reflects the growth and development of the Child and Youth Care field. Most recently, the ethics code was closely examined and applied to the online dimension of the life space of children and young people (Kamps, Kavanagh & Mayhew, 2017).

In 2017, an ad hoc committee formed by ACYCP conducted the first revision of the code. The update was submitted to the ACYCP board of directors for approval at the June 2017 board of directors meeting. Part of the 2017 revision, several revisions were proposed and adopted. Two of the five areas of responsibility were renamed: the phrase 'child, youth, and family' replaced the term 'client' and the word 'community' replaced 'society'. Text edits were made where there was opportunity to express a standard in more clear or direct language. Areas of content revisions included: (1) strengthening the importance of supervision and mindfulness of self, (2) clarifying language describing self-determination, personal agency, and advocacy, (3) acknowledging the virtual/online dimension of everyday life, (4) emphasis on necessity of equity and inclusion, (5) expansion of topics to include social justice, racial equality, and cultural humility. During the ratification of the 2017 code revision, the ACYCP board set an initiative to review the code every five years to ensure that the field's ethical standards remain in line with the current sociocultural and sociohistorical context.

Since the 2017 revision, much in the world has changed—so much that the ethical challenges facing the Child and Youth Care profession are both more numerous and significantly more complex. Social media and information communication technologies have evolved exponentially, with much of all communication manifesting in virtual spaces. The young people we work with are at the forefront of these shifts. Not only are the modalities

they use constantly changing, their communication processes in and of themselves are transforming. These developments challenge our traditional notions of relational practice and push the field to constantly recalibrate notions of consent, confidentiality and boundary management. As practitioners, we must examine our own cyber presence to ensure that we are ethical and professional, all the while assisting the children, youth and families in our care to act in ways that are safe and responsible.

The onset of the global pandemic in 2020 and the continuing concerns about emerging variants have altered our practice contexts in ways that may not be reversible. More and more Child and Youth Care practice is happening virtually, and beyond learning to work in virtual spaces, we need to attend to the ways in which limiting face-to-face contact compromises the relationships that are foundational to what we do. Even more concerning is that poverty, unemployment, marital conflict, domestic violence and compromised mental health have all increased during the pandemic, and the children, youth, and families we engage with are struggling more than ever. This both increases the urgency and magnifies the importance of our ethical responsibilities to provide respectful, empathic, and empowering care that is responsive to the needs and the contexts of those we serve.

Lastly, the intensification of social problems across North America has sparked intensified demands for social justice, personified by the growth of protest movements such as Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter. The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic have highlighted the legacy of racism and oppression everywhere, and across the continent, protests have led to the destruction of monuments to the founders of residential schools, slave traders, and white supremacists. Perhaps now more than ever, Child and Youth Care practitioners have an ethical responsibility to engage in anti-oppressive practice and undertake advocacy that promotes a better world for all.

This 2022 revision of the Code of Ethics is thus extremely timely given the many changes since the last revision. Child and Youth Care has never been more in need of a moral compass, so that individually and collectively we can continue to maintain an ethical stance and remain true to the core values of the field. The ad hoc review committee—formed under the oversight of Jody Rhodes (President of the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice)—was chaired by Christina Scanlon (Board Vice President and contributor to the 2017 revision of the Code; University of Chicago). The full committee consisted of the following:

Chair:

Dr. Christina L. Scanlon, University of Chicago

Canadian Liaison:

Dr. Varda Mann-Feder, Concordia University

Committee Members:

Jeriann Chandler-Ochoa, Sycamores

Dr. Dale Curry, Kent State University

Frank Eckles, Academy for Competent Youth Work

James Freeman, Training Grounds LLC

Tammy Hopper, National Safe Place Network

In this version of the code, we have revised the language to be more and reflective of our commitment to ethical practice. We have also expanded the code to include guidelines for (a) ethical practice surrounding virtual/online spaces and (b) indirect care practitioners. Perhaps the most exciting element of this revision has been the collaboration between U.S. and Canadian child and youth workers, as ACYCP worked alongside the Canadian Council during the revision process. It is our hope that the spirit of Martha Mattingly is continued in this revision, that ethical practice is accelerated across the field, and that future generations will take ethics as seriously as this revision committee has in our present day.

Preface

These principles and standards provide a framework to guide ethical thinking and decision making across the various settings and roles in which Child and Youth Care Professionals serve. Professional Child and Youth Care is committed to promoting the well-being of children, youth, and families in a context of respect and collaboration. This commitment is carried out in a variety of settings and with a broad range of roles including direct practice, supervision, administration, teaching and training, research, consultation, and advocacy. In the course of practice, Child and Youth Care Professionals encounter many situations which have ethical dimensions and implications.

As Child and Youth Care Professionals, we are aware of and sensitive to the responsibilities involved in our practice. Each professional has the responsibility to strive for high standards of professional conduct. This includes a commitment to the centrality of ethical concerns for Child and Youth Care practice, concern with one's own professional conduct, encouraging ethical behavior by others, and consulting with others on ethical issues.

This ethical statement is a living document, always a work in progress, which will mature and clarify as our understanding and knowledge grows. The principles represent shared values deeply rooted in our history. They are intended to serve as guidelines for conduct and to assist in resolving ethical questions. For some dilemmas, the principles provide specific or significant guidance. In other instances, the Child and Youth Care Professional is required to combine the guidance of the principles with sound professional judgment and consultation. In any situation, the course of action chosen is expected to be consistent with the spirit and intent of the principles.

Principles and Standards

I. Personal Commitment to Ethical Practice

- a. Demonstrates high standards of integrity and professional conduct
- b. Develops knowledge and skills necessary for engaging children, youth, and families, including trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive practices
 - i. Participates in education and training for ongoing professional development
 - ii. Engages in ongoing supervision and/or counsel as appropriate
 - iii. Actively engages to the best of their capacity in research opportunities to advance knowledge in the CYC field
- c. Recognizes the impact of conscious and unconscious biases, beliefs, and values and works to intentionally reduce personal bias
- d. Recognizes sources of power and privilege so as not to misuse them and engages in anti-oppressive practice
- e. Maintains physical and emotional well-being
 - i. Aware of personal values and their implication for practice
 - ii. Mindful of self as a growing and developing practitioner
 - iii. Understands the importance of self-care
 - iv. Seeks guidance, counseling, and support when necessary

II. Commitment to Ethical Practice with Children, Youth, and Families

- a. Does not cause harm
 - i. Encourages safe, ethical, trauma-informed practices
 - ii. Does not disrespect, exploit, or intimidate others
- b. Maintains privacy and confidentiality within in-person and virtual settings
- c. Identifies and addresses inequities related to race, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, mental or physical capacity/ability, citizenship status, political views, socioeconomic status, and the intersectionality of these and other sociocultural identities.
- d. Ensures services are culturally sensitive, decolonizing, and non-discriminatory

- e. Provides protection and advocacy
 - i. Recognizes, respects, and advocates for the rights of the children, youth, and families
 - ii. Supports individuals in advocating for their own rights and safety
- f. Fosters self-determination and personal agency
- g. Encourages children and youth's participation within family and community, and facilitates the development of social networks
- h. Recognizes that the life spaces of individuals and families involve physical, emotional, mental, and virtual domains (including social media, messaging, gaming, virtual work/school platforms, etc.)
- i. Respects the diversity of life patterns and expectations
 - i. Affirms that there are differences in individual and family needs and meets these needs on an individual basis
 - ii. Ensures interactions reflect developmental age, status, understanding and capacity
 - iii. Adapts to individual needs when designing and implementing plans and programs (including developmental, intellectual, psychological, physical, social, cultural, and spiritual needs)
- j. Values collaboration with colleagues and those from other disciplines
 - i. Makes referrals to other professionals as necessary and seeks assistance to ensure access to needed services
 - ii. Observes, assesses, and evaluates services/treatments prescribed or designed by other professionals
 - iii. Supports effective, respectful communication and engagement within and across systems (e.g., mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, social services, education, etc.)
 - iv. Envisions youth, caregivers, and families as actors within systems of care
- k. Maintains appropriate boundaries between professional and personal relationships to ensure wellness for service providers and recipients
 - i. Recognizes and adjusts for dynamics related to power, authority, and position
 - ii. Does not engage in harassment or sexual misconduct with a child, youth, or family member
 - iii. Clarifies expectations around social media connections and interactions
 - iv. Plans and prepares for transitions or conclusion of services

III. Commitment to Ethical Practice within Organizations

- a. Responds to employer in a professional manner and seeks to resolve differences collaboratively
- b. Treats colleagues with respect, courtesy, and equity
- c. Models flexibility and inclusiveness in working with others
- d. Respects the commitments made to the employer or employing organization
- e. Alerts employer to knowledge of organizational or systemic barriers or inequities
- f. Engages in data collection efforts and advocates for data-driven practice

IV. Commitment to Advancing the Field of Child and Youth Work

- a. Acts in a professional manner toward colleagues
 - i. Seeks arbitration or mediation with colleagues as appropriate
 - ii. Reports ethical violations to appropriate individuals or boards when informal resolution is not appropriate or sufficient
- b. Advances collaboration among professionals, children, youth, families, and communities to share responsibility for outcomes
- c. Promotes professional practice in training and research activities to the degree that their role permits

- i. Participates in education and training programs that are competently designed, implemented, and evaluated
- ii. Participates in research that is of high quality and is designed, conducted, and reported in accordance with quality and ethical standards
- d. Encourages newly hired and experienced practitioners to become knowledgeable of and able to apply the Code of Ethics as outlined in the Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals
- e. Contributes to the capacity of child and youth care professionals (e.g., practitioners, supervisors, administrators) to lead programs according to high-quality, ethical, trauma-informed practices
- f. Contributes to the integrity of the profession
 - i. Upholds values and ethics, including responsible criticism of areas in need of improvement
 - ii. Participates in data collection efforts and dissemination activities designed to advance the CYC field (e.g., conference presentations, publications, etc.)

V. Commitment to Ethical Representation of the CYC Profession in the Community

- a. Promotes awareness of the profession and advocates for the needs of children, youth, and families to the community
- b. Models ethical behavior in relationships and interactions within in-person and virtual life spaces
- c. Intentionally builds respect and appreciation of diversity, racial equality, social justice and cultural humility
- d. Acknowledges and takes action to address systemic oppression and disparities related to gender, sexuality, race, and other intersectional aspects of social and political identities
- e. Encourages informed participation by the public in shaping local, state, and national policy decisions affecting children, youth, and families

VI. Ethical Commitments of CYC Leadership

CYC supervisors, administrators, and other indirect practitioners have the responsibility to make the Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals a living document in their organizations in a variety of ways including:

- a. Recruiting and hiring the best available applicants
- b. Orienting child and youth care practitioners to the Standards and providing ongoing training pertaining to ethical practice
- c. Developing, reviewing, and adapting organizational policies that are consistent with the Standards
- d. Implementing strategies to integrate the Standards into the organizational culture
- e. Supporting direct and indirect child and youth care practitioners in their efforts to engage in ethical practice at all times
- f. Acknowledging the role of the organization in promoting self-care and personal wellbeing
- g. Advocating actively and continuously for equitable wages and working conditions

References

Kamps, C., Kavanagh, H. & Mayhew, A. (2017). Let's Get Over Ourselves! Cyber-Space is Life-Space: A Consideration of CYC Ethics Online. Toronto, CA: Ryerson University.

Mattingly, M. (1995). Developing professional ethics for child and youth care work: Assuming responsibility for the quality of care. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 24(6), 379-391.