



Ethics as the Compass of Child and Youth Care in a Changing World: An Introduction to the Special Edition

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* marks the publication of the 2022 revision of the *Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals*. Ethics remain the compass of child and youth care, guiding practitioners through rapidly changing contexts shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic inequities, and the rise of virtual practice. Opening with the revised *Standards*, the issue brings together a wide tapestry of contributions that illustrate the diverse ways ethics are enacted in training, leadership, cultural practice, Indigenous community work, virtual engagement, and responses to poverty. Articles range from conceptual and empirical analyses to applied training models and reflective commentaries, highlighting the field's plurality and richness. The issue concludes with a sociohistorical account of the past, present, and future of CYC, underscoring what stands to be lost without sustained vision and collective action. Together, these contributions reaffirm the ethical commitments of the field while charting pathways for its continued professionalization, responsiveness, and advocacy.

Keywords: child and youth care, ethics, standards of practice, diversity and inclusion, professionalization

Ethics have always been the cornerstone of child and youth care (CYC), guiding practice through moments of complexity, vulnerability, and profound responsibility. The 2022 revision of the *Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals* arrives at a time when the contexts of practice are shifting rapidly—shaped by the reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing impacts of systemic racism and colonialism, and the digital transformation of young people’s social worlds. This special issue of the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* takes the revision as its point of departure, examining the evolving ethical terrain of the profession and highlighting the responsibilities, dilemmas, and opportunities that define youth work today.

We begin with the revised *Standards* themselves, which reaffirm the profession’s core commitments while extending them to new domains, including virtual practice, equity, and anti-oppressive advocacy. This foundational article sets the stage by reminding us that the code is not static but a living document—one that reflects the collective responsibility of CYC practitioners to recalibrate their moral compass in changing times.

From this anchor, the subsequent articles explore how ethics are enacted, contested, and embodied in diverse contexts. Curry and colleagues present a model of ethics education that emphasizes “doing ethics” rather than merely knowing them, offering practical training activities that bring the standards to life in daily practice. Hopper and Smith-Miller build on this by introducing a decision-making framework for emerging leaders, showing how intentional processes can embed ethical considerations into organizational leadership.

Several contributions address the intersection of ethics with pressing social issues. Childs situates the standards within the intertwined imperatives of diversity, equity, and inclusion, highlighting how ethical pluralism can guide practitioners confronting systemic inequities. Forrester and colleagues extend this discussion by examining the cultural ethics challenges community-based youth workers face in U.S. programs, revealing how practitioners navigate tensions between organizational structures and their commitments to equity and authentic relationships with marginalized youth.

Others bring forward perspectives too often marginalized in professional discourse. Picard and her co-authors center Indigenous youth workers’ voices, offering a powerful commentary on relational ethics, cultural responsibility, and the re-framing of practice beyond colonial categories. Inwood and Onyewuenyi address another emergent frontier—virtual engagement with socially marginalized youth—by proposing ethical guidelines for online program and research practices that safeguard dignity and agency in digital spaces. Similarly, Korsmo and Korsmo explore the ethical imperatives of youth work with poverty in mind, underscoring the role of practitioners in fostering socio-economic mobility and agency for young people navigating systemic barriers.

Together, these articles reflect the wide tapestry of approaches to CYC work, varied in format, method, and focus. They range from conceptual frameworks to empirical studies, from training models to personal reflections, from leadership tools to community-grounded narratives. This diversity is not incidental—it speaks to the richness of the field and to the multiple vantage points required to grapple with ethics in practice. Importantly, the issue also models intergenerational collaboration by encouraging authors to pair with novices in the field, particularly direct care practitioners, ensuring that emerging voices are heard alongside more established perspectives.

The issue concludes with Scanlon and colleagues’ sociohistorical account of the past, present, and future of CYC. This sweeping reflection situates today’s ethical commitments within decades of professional struggle, innovation, and advocacy, reminding us of what has been built and what stands to be lost without sustained vision and coordinated effort. It challenges us to consider the generations of work that created a shared code of ethics and a recognized profession, and to carry that legacy forward in an era of privatization, automation, and digitization.

As guest editors, we invite readers to approach this special edition as both a celebration and a call to action. The revision of the *Standards* is not an endpoint but a renewed commitment—a reminder that child and youth care must continue to evolve ethically if it is to remain responsive, equitable, and true to its core mission: empowering young people to thrive.