“But, could you just do me this one favor?”: Professional Relationships, Ethics and Morals
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Law, Regulation, & Agency Policy
- Ethical practice
- Agency policy
Thinking
- Solving problems
- Exercising sound judgment
Reflection
- Self-awareness

“We have a small community – so it’s not only okay to break a rule sometimes, it is necessary. Especially because when one family really needs my help, I just could never say no!”

Discussions about ethics in Home Visiting and Early Childhood are often practical, yet complex. They are practical because they help guide our work. They are complex, because humans are complex. The reality is that differences exist in beliefs and values about situations. So it isn’t unusual that families may have very different beliefs and expectations about how we are in relationship with them. To be fair, if given one scenario to assess, it would not be surprising if two home visitors disagreed about whether the same practice or decision was ethical! A family may hope or expect that you would be willing to do a favor for them, such as watch their child while they ran to fill a prescription, buy formula or diapers, or provide a reference for a loan. Our own values, morals and ethics will impact the decision we make, but might be very different than what our families hope or expect.

Ethics and morals impact our decisions about how we act (or not act). To clarify, “[m]orals are a personal characteristic, while ethics define a social system” (Parents as Teachers, 2009, pp.57). A code of ethics is, generally speaking, the overarching,
agreed upon rules that provide some guidance for the kinds of behaviors that are expected of us as professionals. Codes of ethics are usually formal, written guides for our decisions about how we should act towards all involved: the babies, the families, the agencies, the communities, and ourselves. A code of ethics is sometimes included in our job description and our agencies often have written codes of ethics. From a professional perspective, it is our responsibility to make sure we are familiar with our agency/organization’s code of ethics, if one exists. Our agency code of ethics might clearly spell out that it is not acceptable to provide childcare, to be unsupervised with a client’s child, to purchase items for a client or family with our own funds.

Our morals can impact our personal responses to events when we are in the moment. Although ethics plays a part in our decisions about how to respond to a situation, our moral or personal characteristics also come into play. Let’s look at an example. A mom asks you to watch her kids for 15 – 20 minutes so she can run to the pharmacy for a prescription. Sometimes “doing the right thing” may seem really clear in the moment. Without reflecting on our choice of actions, asking ourselves what is influencing our decision given the circumstances, what was driving it, and then taking a look at the possible consequences of our actions (both positive and negative) we may not discover the best options.

When I pause and think of possible reasons why I should or should not watch the child I may realize that I wanted to “babysit” for Mom for a few minutes because I am afraid that saying “no” would impact our relationship that we’ve worked so hard to build. Or, maybe my first decision to say “Sure!” came because I believe I am a competent caregiver. If I respectfully ask more questions, I may discover that the mom just wanted a break from the baby and house for a bit or that she has enough of the prescription until my home visit with her is done. Being ethical requires that we are clear and honest to ourselves about why we are choosing a certain path or response. Developing this skill takes a lot of experience, support from co-workers and supervisors, and a willingness to honestly look at our own morals and how they influence the work we do.

In the world of ethics, the situations often live within “shades of grey.” It is difficult to say that you should never do something or always do something. The fact that part of our role within the helping professions involves building relationships with people, complicates things. Similar to the families that we work with, we all bring our own individual morals and related beliefs and values to this work. There are no easy recipes for what being ethical and moral means. Usually ethical considerations are complex because life is not always clearly “right” or “wrong” and in some situations, we don’t often have a lot of time to ponder our options. However, we hope this article will encourage you to explore some of these issues with a sense of discovery before you are in the heat of the moment. Our ethical and moral responses are part of our work. Being professional includes being mindful of our behaviors as part of - not apart from - our ongoing commitment and relationship-building with families.
Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- What are the facts about this situation? What has actually happened?
- What are the relevant standards and practical considerations? Does your program have a code of ethics to guide you?
- What are 3 options for this situation?
- What are the pros and cons of each of the options you chose?
- Evaluate. How can this situation be handled in the future?

References/Additional Resources
Points from Office of Victims of Crimes Presentation