

What is the difference between being a professional and acting in a professional manner?
Discover the lifelong path that early childhood leaders take—and take steps to act professionally.

What Do Early Childhood Professionals Do?

Kathryn Castle

Professionalism is typically defined as acting in accordance with agreed-upon professional standards or ethical codes. For entry into many types of careers, a professional needs a credential such as a license, certificate, or degree. To actually **be** professional requires that one accept and follow the ethical code adopted by the field.

In nearly every field, many people hold credentials, but fewer act professionally. Professionals exhibit sound decision making and routinely engage in appropriate performance. “When people become professionals, they are expected to embody the characteristics that are common to the group of professionals for which the term is reserved” (Bergen, 1992, p. 3). Bergen identified three characteristics of being professional:

1. an extensive understanding of the body of **knowledge** that composes the area of professional expertise,
2. a high level of **competence** in the practice of the skills identified as essential for effective professional performance, and
3. a conscious **commitment** to the ethical standards embraced by the group of professionals who comprise the field. (p. 3, emphasis added)

Being professional is a lifelong project.

To accomplish all three requires time and a commitment of energy and resources. The body of knowledge in early childhood draws from many disciplines including child development, curriculum, pedagogy including learning theory, human/family relations, health care, and psychology. One document that reflects this multiple-discipline approach is the National Association for the Education of

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Young Children’s (NAEYC) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). This document reflects the breadth and depth of knowledge in the early childhood field.

Early childhood practitioners are hard at work every day, engaged in professional activities such as providing “essential services related to an area of social need” (Feeney, Fromberg, Spodek, & Williams, 1992, p. 416). Competency in effective professional performance takes time, practice, development, and refinement. That is why professional progress is a developmental process. Being professional means that early childhood practitioners and leaders are constantly in the process of reflecting on and rethinking what they do in order to make improvements.

Reflection on the *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment* (2005) is one way to work toward continuous improvement. This ethical code describes core values, ideals, principles, a conceptual framework, and ethical

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Subjects & Predicates

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responsibilities to children, families, colleagues, employers, employees, the community, and society. It is a helpful reference, particularly in resolving real-life ethical dilemmas.

How Do Early Educators Become Professional?

Professional knowledge, competence, and ethical conduct can be actively developed through a systematic approach to one's career. Professionals working with or for young children and their families plan for their professional growth including setting goals for continued training and education. Being professional is a lifelong project.

Grow From Within

Professional knowledge comes both from outside sources and from inner reflection on what is important. External pressure for professional development may come from many sources, including research studies

whose results indicate that changes are necessary, programs that are seeking accreditation, and state licensing requirements.

One example is a recent study which found that preschool teachers hold different beliefs about children based on their families' socioeconomic status (Lee & Ginsburg, 2007). These researchers called for teachers to deepen their knowledge of developmentally appropriate instructional strategies and assessment methods that promote literacy and mathematics learning.

A continuous loop of planning-action-reflection-assessment can lead to more professional performance.

Growth from within occurs when practitioners reflect on research and best practices derived from that knowledge, are motivated to reexamine their own beliefs and practices, and then make necessary changes. Reflection on professional lives means

thinking about what practitioners do and how that affects children and other adults. Professionals then can identify what needs to change to improve.

For example, at the end of the day teachers typically wonder what needs to be done tomorrow to build on children's learning. They may decide to critically examine their beliefs and expectations for children in the group and make necessary changes in their teaching practices. Through such reflection, teachers decide on ways to improve their teaching with positive results for children.

Reflection often occurs during a quiet moment at a break, while driving home, or just before going to sleep. Teachers who systematically keep journals find these written documents to be a helpful approach to reflection. This systematic strategy helps teachers avoid making the same mistakes again—or they may point out the positive effects of change. In reviewing a written journal, teachers may recognize their own strengths and opportunities for professional growth.

Most professionals find it most useful to select just one thing at a time to change and plan for that change. For example, in reviewing his teacher journal, Kyle, a first grade teacher, consistently observed that few children in his class were actively engaged in writing. Instead of merely encouraging them to write, Kyle chose to start a compelling small group project over the course of several weeks to naturally generate children's interest in writing about their experiences.

Sara, a child care worker, was not happy with the beginning of the day's activities. She regularly saw children running around out of control and unengaged. She decided to implement a group time to plan the day with

children shortly after they arrived. Sara kept anecdotal notes about each group time and children's behavior. After 2 weeks of systematic note taking, she reflected on her notes and looked for patterns in children's behavior. Based on her reflections, she decided to continue the beginning group time because she had evidence that children become more purposefully engaged in their activities following their planning time.

Professionals plan for change.

Professionals plan for change, including when the change will begin and what to use to measure improvement. Observation and reflection follow to assess the effects of changes. A continuous loop of planning-action-reflection-assessment can lead to more professional performance.

Participate in Professional Associations

The field of early childhood is rich with international, national, regional, and state professional associations to join and lead. These groups are committed to members' professional development. "The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) is committed to improving the quality of care and education for young children and their families through advocacy and professional development" (SECA, 2009).

SECA offers professional development activities in which members can participate to update their knowledge including

- annual conference

- the journal *Dimensions of Early Childhood*
- committee work
- advocacy efforts
- community service projects

Membership and involvement in professional associations such as SECA have a wide array of professional benefits. Many groups, including SECA, have state and local affiliates. Professional associations produce publications and refereed journals such as *Young Children* (NAEYC), *Childhood Education* (ACEI), and *Dimensions of Early Childhood* (SECA).

Professional service and leadership opportunities in educational organizations include

- presenting at conferences
- joining committees and task forces
- holding elected offices
- volunteering to write or review journal manuscripts or conference program proposals

Many beginning early childhood leaders start with service on a local or state committee such as a Week of the Young Child committee to plan events focused on young children and families. Next might come running for an elected office and serving as a board member to guide the future of an association.

Many leaders start with committee service.

Several other associations focus on specific early childhood issues including Head Start and the National Association of Child Care Professionals. Content discipline associations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics include subgroups focused on early childhood.

Early Childhood Education Professional Websites

- ◆ Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.org
- ◆ Association for Childhood Education International: www.acei.org
- ◆ Child Care Exchange: www.childcareexchange.com
- ◆ Heads Up! Network: National Head Start Association: www.heads-up.org
- ◆ National Association for the Education of Young Children: www.naeyc.org
- ◆ National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: www.nbpts.org
- ◆ National Writing Project: www.writingproject.org
- ◆ Southern Early Childhood Association: www.southernearlychildhood.org
- ◆ The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education, Wheelock College: www.wheelock.edu/ccd/ccdearlychildhood.asp

Work With Others

Practitioners often learn and grow best in their professional development within their own work communities (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Discussing professional topics, publications, and ideas for improving programs with colleagues is not only a convenient but a very practical way to grow professionally. Good-quality programs set aside time for colleagues to meet, discuss relevant topics, and make important program decisions. Working toward mutual goals with well-informed colleagues can be a powerful professional development activity.

One study documented the professional development benefits of



Nancy P. Alexander

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participation in a teacher study group on literacy (Socol, 2007). Socol and other teachers met regularly to discuss a book and encouraged one another to begin implementing literature circles in their own classrooms.

Vesay (2008) studied staff development opportunities in community-based, nonprofit child care centers and found that the practitioners surveyed wanted further professional development in areas where they already had some experience and a certain level of knowledge. They preferred an onsite short workshop format. Such a format helps participants become better acquainted with and connected with colleagues with whom they can discuss issues and plan changes.

Developing relationships with colleagues helps practitioners who are new to the field get to know other professionals and their approaches to leadership opportunities. It is important to spend time with colleagues who have a positive attitude toward their work, are enthusiastic, and relate well with others. Positive people can be very uplifting role models. Negative people

can quickly lower the professional level of the work climate and create a tense and unpleasant environment for teachers, children, and families.

Good leadership role models are active participants in their programs. They take initiative and contribute to program decision making including setting goals and conducting assessments. Leaders share their knowledge and experiences when program decisions must be made. They collaborate with colleagues in making joint decisions and take responsibility for outcomes.

Professionals who have been mentored and have had positive role models usually want to extend their leadership roles by mentoring others. Effective mentors assist those preparing to work with young children and families as well as those who are just beginning their careers.

Mentoring encourages both the mentor and the mentee to grow professionally. Both are motivated to sharpen their skills and keep up with the profession's knowledge base. Mentors become more knowledgeable

about a subject when they share it with someone else. Mentors often begin by actively listening to a colleague, sharing a professional publication on a topic of mutual interest, or sponsoring the membership of a beginning practitioner in an early childhood professional association.

Take a Stand

Taking a stand on professional issues is a natural step in acting on one's beliefs. It is an important stage of career development. One recurring issue in early childhood education is the effort to implement developmentally appropriate practices. Early childhood teachers who are mandated to use instructional practices that are not developmentally appropriate often find themselves facing an ethical dilemma. They must weigh the consequences of their actions and make decisions based on the best interests of all involved, especially children.

Take a stand on issues.

As a result of such dilemmas, many early childhood teachers have chosen to take a stand in favor of developmentally appropriate practice. The ability to articulate to others a rationale for the many values of developmentally appropriate practice can be convincing in resolving ethical dilemmas about teaching strategies and content.

It takes time to learn to articulate a rationale for what early childhood educators do in working with children (Cowhey, 2006). Cowhey suggests talking through ideas with a trusted colleague or mentor to reflect on the educational benefits of sound teaching

practices. Think about the reasons why developmental appropriateness is so essential. This process helps teachers better understand and communicate the basis for their actions to others.

Participation in advocacy means taking a stand on issues and is a hallmark of professional leadership. Advocacy is necessary to improve conditions for children and families. One example of a widespread advocacy movement was the professional response to inappropriate academic pressures on young children. NAEYC's document on developmentally appropriate practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) continues to evolve as new understandings about children's brain development and other issues are reached.

Many early childhood practitioners advocate for developmentally and culturally appropriate practices to counter the climate of high-stakes testing. Advocacy also includes tackling issues of diversity (race, gender, class, ethnicity), educational equity, and adequate funding for high-quality early childhood programs.

A current advocacy initiative focuses on play in early childhood programs. Time for dramatic play, art explorations, and outdoor recess has declined in many settings. Advocates justify the many values of play to families, policy makers, and even other educators. Joining a play advocacy group is a form of leadership and community service.

Advocacy can be as simple as posting information on a program's Web site for families or writing letters to representatives to voice opinions on an issue or pending bill. Many professional associations, such as SECA, have advocacy agendas and



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committees that members can join in order to stand up for what is best for young children and their families.

Renew Professional Knowledge

The knowledge base of the early childhood profession is constantly growing. To keep up, read professional literature at least once a week. Choose articles in respected professional journals, program documents, or information from a credible Web site such as SECA's, which offers journal articles from *Dimensions*, position papers, and other information on important issues.

NAEYC's Web site is also continuously updated with information about early childhood events, professional publications including

Young Children, Teaching Young Children, Beyond the Journal, and Early Childhood Research Quarterly, position papers, and related resources.

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Professional renewal may also take the form of further education, such as studying to earn a degree, or movement into a different level or position in the field. Education opportunities are available onsite, at conferences, professional development institutes, workshops, college campuses, and online.

An additional means of professional renewal comes through practitioner inquiry, also called teacher research, practitioner research, or action

research. Informal studies enable teachers to systematically analyze practices and their effects on children. NAEYC's *Voices of Practitioners*, part of *Beyond the Journal, Young Children on the Web*, provides an opportunity to share results of inquiry in a contemporary journal format. Acting on the results of teacher inquiry is yet another form of professional development (Johnson, 2008).

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Professionalism is an ongoing process that requires time and commitment to deepen one's **knowledge** of the field, develop **competence** in professional performance, and to demonstrate **commitment** to ethical standards. Kay, a teacher for many years, thinks it is very important to continue to learn and develop professionally. What does she do to keep up with the field?

- She values the role that mentors have played in her life and continues this passion by mentoring others.
- She attends professional development opportunities offered by her program and the professional associations to which she belongs.
- She seeks out professional books and readings to inform her teaching.
- She engages in teacher inquiry in collaboration with other teachers.
- She completed a master's degree program and certification from the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

Even with these credentials, she continues to look for ways to develop professionally because she thinks it is important to improve her work with young children. She says, "My fear is

that I'm going to fall short somewhere. I don't have all the answers yet" (Brown, Castle, Rogers, Feuerhelm, & Chimblo, 2007, p. 15).

No one has all the answers yet. That is why professionals are always in the process of becoming more professional. Given the variety of career paths and diverse levels of expertise and education in early childhood, some continue to debate whether the field is a true profession in the same way as medicine, for example (Freeman & Feeney, 2006).

Professionalism in early childhood may be close to what Maxine Greene describes as "a matter of awakening... a matter of keeping open to what we can imagine as possibility" (Liebermann & Miller, 2001, p. 11).

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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

What Do Early Childhood *Professionals* Do?

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- Grow from within
- Participate in professional associations
- Work with others
- Take a stand
- Renew professional knowledge

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Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.