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## Short Article

# A reflexive relational model for ethical decision making in child and youth care

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### Abstract:

Situations with important and often complex ethical dimensions arise daily in child and youth care, the professional umbrella under which residential child care is located in some countries, including Canada, parts of the United States, South Africa, and Australia. Consideration of these ethical dimensions requires deliberation, that includes consideration of both internal and external factors, which can be difficult given that the situations involved often evoke intense feelings for the practitioner. This article presents a model for ethical decision making that is rooted in the core child and youth care values of reflexivity and relationality.

## Introduction

Consider the following situations that can commonly arise in child and youth care:

- You work in a school. A student confides in you that she plans to run away from home on Friday but insists you tell no one.
- You work in a group home. Your supervisor insists that you hold a resident back from his family visit this weekend because of his aggressive behaviour toward other youth.
- You work in an addictions program that has strict rules about socialising and substance use. Your colleague arrives at a team meeting with a list of young people in the program who posted on Instagram at a party where drugs and alcohol were being consumed.

These situations are typical of those encountered routinely by those working in child and youth care, the professional umbrella under which residential child care is located in some countries, including Canada, parts of the United States, South Africa, and Australia. The kinds of situations listed above are complex, demand



consideration at multiple levels, and ultimately involve tough choices about how to respond. Situations such as these may evoke intense feelings in the professionals involved because they raise questions about the possible harms or benefits of an intervention. They demand attention to the ethical dimension of the situation at hand. What would a correct child and youth care response look like? Finding useful answers to this question requires a process of ethical deliberation. In this article, we offer some guidance, a model, and some food for thought in relation to the regular and sometimes extra-ordinary ethical decision making you must practice in your child and youth care practice.

## **Ethical deliberation and ethical dilemmas**

Ethical deliberation is integral to good child and youth care practice for many reasons. Central to our mandate is the promotion of just outcomes for children, youth and families (Sercombe, 2010). It can be easy to forget this and focus solely on meeting practical and bureaucratic requirements. Yet we are constantly confronted with questions of right and wrong as we formulate responses to those in our care or reflect on our own actions and those of colleagues and supervisors. Even the most mundane decisions must be considered in light of their ethical issues, because when we work with others we need to be clear about whether we are being fair to them in relation to the goals that we are promoting and the means we are employing to meet those goals. Our values are particularly relevant to this endeavour. Values constitute preferences in relation to what is important to us that we develop from childhood onwards; they influence both our personal ideals and the objectives that determine our behaviour (Beckett et al., 2017). Collective values develop in groups and organisations, and the shared values of a profession are known as its ethos (Sercombe, 2010). Both personal values and the ethos of child and youth care influence how we work because the decisions we make about what benefits to prioritise will determine how we conduct ourselves (Gharabaghi, 2010).

Day-to-day ethical considerations in child and youth care can be relatively straightforward. They involve decisions such as whether to assert authority over a young person or allow them to choose for themselves, such as what to eat or what to wear. They may also involve decisions about what behaviours should or should not be permitted, like staying out late or opting out of an activity. This straightforwardness may cause you to take for granted the way things are done in your service. When this happens, you may not consider or even recognise the ethical dimensions of daily decisions. The guidelines below can help bring those ethical dimensions to light.

Other ethical considerations are more complicated, such as those reflected in the examples offered at the beginning of this article. These situations can constitute ethical dilemmas for the professionals involved. Ethical dilemmas involve conflict between two or more possible courses of action, when it is unclear which is the best (or most ethical), usually because of tensions between underlying values (Banks, 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon & Cowden, 2012). Sometimes no course of



action actually feels 'right', and you are faced with choosing which choice feels the least 'wrong'. Ethical dilemmas, by their very nature, can be emotionally triggering and they often elicit impulsive responses because of the pressure on a child and youth care professional to deal with a tricky and morally complex problem.

Child and youth care, like most other professions, has crafted a code of ethics to help guide us when we face ethical dilemmas (Eckles & Freeman, 2021). These codes outline principles that reflect other field-specific priorities, such as the importance of promoting the well-being of those we work with and the requirement that we manage our boundaries to maximise those benefits. At the same time, these codes are not prescriptive. They provide general guidelines but are not specific enough to address the nuances of a situation in the real world. This leaves room for each worker to engage in independent action that takes the unique features of each practice event into account. Novice workers who look to a code of ethics for answers are often disappointed because codes do not provide 'an answer key to ethical dilemmas' (Eckles & Freeman, 2021, p.16). We have found it most helpful to consult the codes as a subsequent step, after the core elements of reflexivity and relationality have already been considered.

## Reflexivity and relationality

Our contention is that the ethos of child and youth care distinguishes it from other approaches to helping (Anglin, 2001) and that the core values of the field can serve as a starting point for ethical deliberation. We have found it especially useful to focus on two core values: reflexivity and relationality. Utilising these values as the core elements in ethical deliberations can help us to make better practice decisions as child and youth care workers. It is important to note that Garfat and Ricks (1995) first identified the potential for child and youth care to develop a self-driven approach to ethical problem solving. The ideas we share here are an elaboration on their pivotal paper which introduced the importance of the self in ethical deliberation. We have built on these ideas and developed a model outlining how you might utilise this approach to making ethical decisions in your own child and youth care practice.

Self-awareness has been one of the hallmarks of child and youth care since the beginning (Garfat, 1994; Maier, 1987). **Reflexivity**, then, takes self-awareness to a more active, advanced level of practice. It can be defined as the skill of processing and using the information that derives from self-awareness (Gardner, 2014). It involves active, intentional consideration of the impact of our/ves on the impact of our interventions, both after the fact and while we are in the midst of a practice moment (Gardner, 2014; Schon, 1983). This self-examination extends to our feelings (and what elicits them), our values (and what evokes or violates them), and our social location or identity and level of privilege (and how it influences our perceptions of events) (Mann Feder, 2021). Reflexivity is transformational because it builds on self-knowledge as a basis for formulating responses to the children, youth and families we work with. The more insightful



we become about ourselves, the more insightful and effective we are able to be with others.

**Relationality** is a second value that characterises a child and youth care ethos. Unlike other approaches to the human services, child and youth care stresses relationships in the here and now as the central ingredient in an intervention. Some even argue that the youth or family's experience of the relationship *is* the intervention (Ruch, 2018; Stuart, 2013). It is through the medium of relationships that child and youth care professionals work with children, youth and families. The relationship is the major vehicle for building on strengths and making meaning (Garfat, 2004). Other distinguishing features of a relational approach include working with others as partners and collaborators rather than 'clients', with an emphasis on talking and a focus on empowerment and non-coercion (Garfat et al., 2018).

### **A reflexive relational model for ethical deliberation**

How can reflexivity and relationality serve as core elements in ethical deliberation? We have found it useful to break these values down into key questions that can guide you in thinking through situations in practice, especially those that challenge your sense of what would constitute the best child and youth care response. An added benefit of using this questioning technique is that it can slow you down. Slowing down is important because it supports us to resist our very human tendency to respond impulsively under conditions of stress (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

Here are suggested guidelines for reflexive-relational ethical deliberation:

**Step 1.** Consider the situation broadly:

- What is happening here?
- Is there further information needed for a more complete understanding of what is transpiring?

**Step 2.** Consider the situation from a reflexive standpoint:

- How does this situation make you feel? Is it triggering any of your own personal issues?
- What values are at stake here? Are any of your personal values being violated and what child and youth care values are most relevant? Are two or more of your values in tension with one another?
- How does your social location (i.e. your place in society in terms of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, membership in oppressed groups and aspects of privilege) influence how you are experiencing this situation? How might you view the situation differently if you were looking at it from a different social location?
- How can you respond in a way that minimises personal bias and builds on your best understanding of the ethos of child and youth care?



**Step 3.** Consider the situation from a relational standpoint:

- What is your current relationship to the child, youth or family who is your client in this situation?
- What does this event or situation tell you about your relationship and what might the impacts be on other relationships? Are you aware of, and have you asked the child, youth or family their views about the situation and their preferred course of action? What should their involvement be in deciding a course of action?
- How can you respond in a way that honours your relationships with the person or people with whom you are directly working?

**Step 4.** Consider other elements that may be relevant.

- Are there social justice issues involved that require examination of elements of the macrosystem, such as the child's, young person's or family's experiences of discrimination based on their ethnicity or poverty?
- Are there any legal ramifications, such as youth protection considerations or consent issues?
- How do organisational policies impact on this dilemma?
- And finally, can consideration of theoretical models of ethical decision-making help with formulating a response, such as an examination of how to maximise benefits to all or how to act on the basis of respect for those involved?

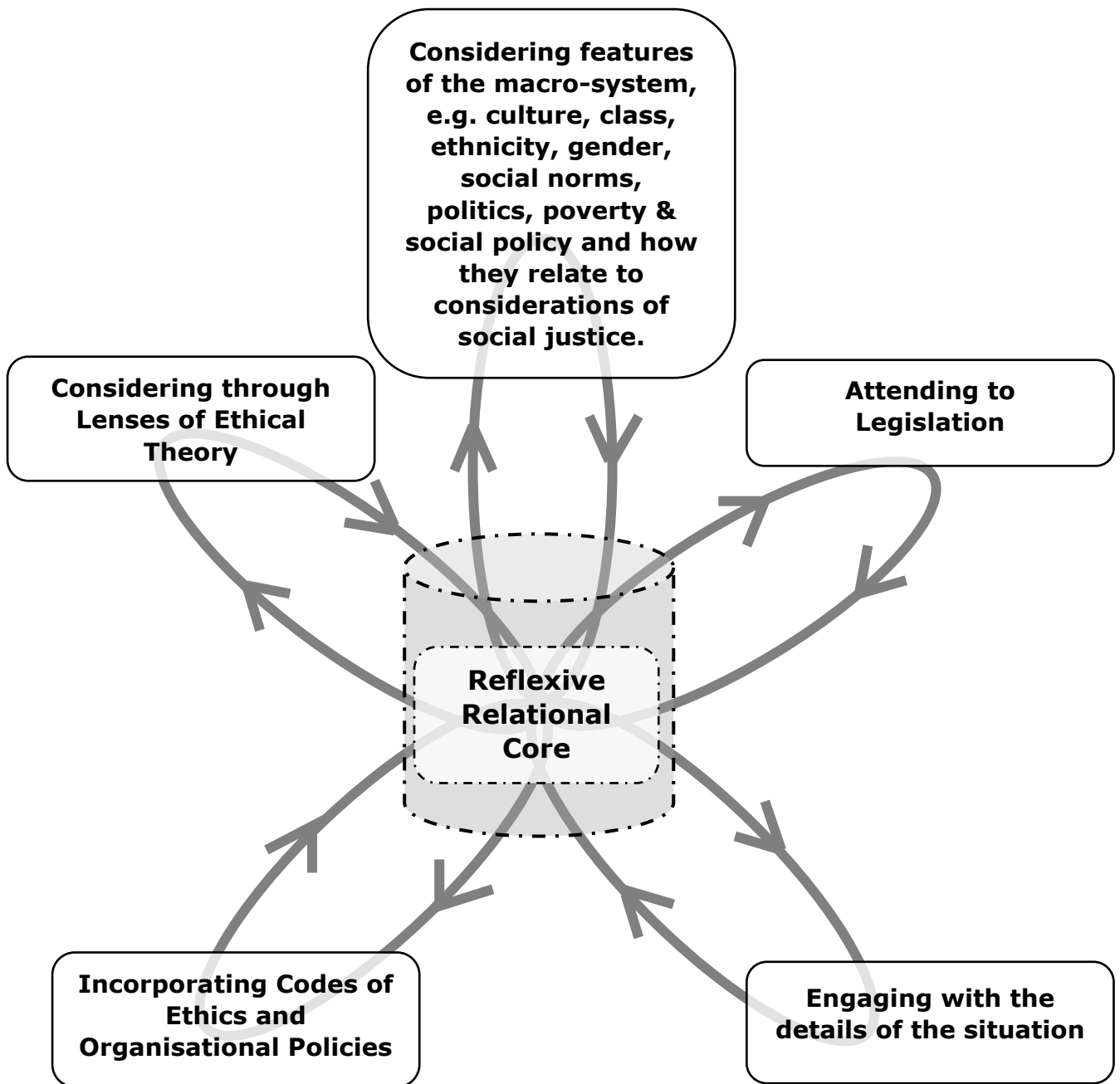
**Step 5.** Consider the elements in step 4 from a reflexive relational perspective. For example, are there social issues that you tend to overestimate or underplay?

- What related assumptions might you be making?
- How might explicitly acknowledging a relevant social issue as part of your response impact on your relationship(s) with a young person, family, colleague, or team?
- Does a potential legal ramification make you anxious and therefore more likely to rush to (or delay) a decision without proper deliberation?
- How might upholding a legal or organisational requirement change your relationship with a child, young person, family, colleague or team?

We have described this model in more detail elsewhere (see Mann-Feder & Steckley, 2021), and have mapped it out in the following diagram:



**Figure 1: The Reflexive Relational Model of Ethical Decision Making for Child and Youth Care**



Rather than a linear process, the ovals spiralling back and forth between the outer considerations and the inner core of reflexivity and relationality reflect a reiterative process of deliberation. Part of considering the outer elements involves repeated return questions about how those elements are impacting the self and relevant relationships, but also, importantly, how the self may be influencing one's perceptions of those elements.

## Conclusion

We are proposing that to work through ethical problems, child and youth care workers develop facility in using this structured model of ethical deliberation, particularly in situations where a difficult choice is involved. The key element of the model is a focus on reflexivity and relationality, not just as core values of good child and youth care practice, but as the major screens for interpreting ethical questions and dilemmas. Using this model may feel clumsy or even daunting at first. It needs to be practiced over and over in order to become familiar and habitual enough that even in moments that are emotionally fraught, you as a worker can identify your best courses of action based on the core values that inform our sector. They are also likely to be values that brought you to this work in the first place.

In closing, it should be mentioned that facing ethical dilemmas, even when using this model to support your ethical deliberation, rarely leaves the child and youth care worker feeling good. This is because there are rarely absolute right answers, and you often cannot judge the adequacy of your decision making until much later, when events unfold to their natural conclusion. However, using a model such as the one suggested here can assist you to think more clearly and maximise your problem-solving ability under difficult circumstances.

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Varda Mann-Feder has been a full-time faculty member in applied human sciences since 1992. She taught as a sessional instructor in psychology at Concordia between 1984 and 1992 and worked as a consulting psychologist in the child welfare system in Montreal from 1976 until 2004. From 2004 until 2007, Dr Mann-Feder served as chair of applied human sciences, and she was also the founding program director for the Graduate Diploma in Youth Work. From 2000 until 2007, Dr Mann-Feder served as editor of the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*. She is known across Canada for her advocacy on behalf of youth aging out of care.

Laura Steckley started her career in residential settings serving young people in 1990 and has worked in both the United States and Scotland in direct practice, management and training positions. In 2003, she took up a teaching and research post at the University of Strathclyde. There, she leads up the MSc in





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