

Living Our Commitments: A Pledge to All Children and Families

by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards

We, Louise and Julie, are long-time early childhood educators committed to our field's code of ethical conduct and to anti-bias, pro-diversity principles. In the current sociopolitical climate, we are very concerned that policies and actions, at both the federal and state levels of government, threaten our ability to implement those values in our work with children, families, and students. In programs across the country we are seeing intensified levels of fear, hostility, and anxiety in children, staff, and families — about immigration status, racial identity, family structure,



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Co-author with Louise of *Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Julie began in ECCE as a Family Child Care Home Provider as a way to be at home with her young children. She has taught in and directed programs for infants, toddler, play years and Elementary School children and was the founding director of the Children's Center at Cabrillo College where she has taught for over 45 years. A writer and activist for children, families and teachers, Julie also served on the Governing Board of NAEYC.

and economic security. As Rhian Allvin, executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, explained in a letter to NAEYC members on February 3,

“In this country, there are 5.8 million children under age 5 with at least one immigrant parent. They are in our classrooms and homes. Some of them already live in fear and anxiety that their parents will be taken away from them. As a result of policies included in recent executive actions, these fears are made worse, and the most essential relationships between these children and the caring adults in their lives are put at risk. The impact, which could deepen children's stress, disrupt their brain development, and negatively impact their short- and long-term health outcomes, will make the jobs of early childhood educators and parents — who already bear enormous responsibility to promote the development and learning of each child — that much harder.”

Heartbroken and angry about the harm already being done to innocent people — from infants through elders — and fearful of what the future might hold, we looked to the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for wisdom. One of his declarations stood out for us: “Injustice anywhere is a threat

to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (King, 1963, p. 189).

Although there are rightfully many different perspectives and opinions on public policies, the early childhood profession has clear responsibilities and professional commitments to the well-being of every child. The NAEYC “Code of Ethical Conduct” (2005) states:

P1.1: “Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code” (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3).

The “Code of Ethical Conduct” further spells out what “we shall do no harm to children” specifically means. Here are a few especially pertinent items for our current times:

Principle 1.2: “We shall care for and educate children in positive emotional and social environments that are cognitively stimulating and that support each

child's culture, language, ethnicity, and family structure (p. 3).

Principle 1.3: "We shall not participate in practices that discriminate against children by denying benefits, giving special advantages, or excluding them from programs or activities based on their sex, race, national origin, religious belief, medical condition, disability, or the marital status/family structure, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs or other affiliations of their families (p. 3).

Principle 2.13: "We shall maintain confidentiality and shall respect the family's right to privacy, refraining from disclosure of confidential information and intrusion into family life" (p. 4).

In addition, Ideals 2.2 and 2.5 of the Code call on us to develop relationships of mutual trust with all families, and to respect the dignity and preferences of each family about its structure, culture, language, customs, and beliefs.

Taking Action

One beginning step to meeting our professional responsibility at this time can be to publicly name and display a commitment statement in our ECCE programs, classrooms, agencies, and organizations. The statement affirms our professional principles to teach, nurture, and protect all children. A commitment statement is also a way to let families and colleagues know where we stand and to connect with those who stand with us. It brings a message that not all Americans support the overt racism and Islamophobia being injected into our public discourse. Nor do we support governmental policies that tear families apart and cause children to experience hurtful anxiety and fear. Knowing that we are not alone in our desire to maintain our ethical principles and responsibilities to all children and families brings strength to our purpose.

Our hope is that ECE programs, along with individual educators and other staff, will embrace this commitment statement, display it in their classrooms, and act on it in everything that they do. As ECCE director, teacher, and consultant Luis Hernandez noted,

"We [must] resolve to remain vigilant to any action that can ultimately harm any one child. As new political administrations in Washington and state capitals deliberate and implement policies impacting children and families, we need to affirm our vital professional values. As citizens, we need to remain steadfast to the highest moral and ethical standards in our professions.... We must not allow the legal status of children and families or their ethnicity or their religion to be used to deny basic services like education, health, nutrition; or to escalate fear, anxiety, and insecurity" (e-mail, February 28, 2016).

Our work begins in our classrooms, our centers, our colleges, our agencies, and our organizations — but it doesn't stop there. We also must join with others in our communities and country to work to embrace diversity, fairness, and social justice. Again, the NAEYC "Code of Ethical Conduct" speaks to our ethical responsibilities to community and society, asserting, "Because of our specialized expertise in early childhood development and education and because the larger society shares responsibility for the welfare and protection of young children, we acknowledge a collective obligation to advocate for the best interests of children within early childhood programs and in the larger community and to serve as a voice for young children everywhere" (p. 6).

On the adjacent page you'll find a Commitment Statement, which you can remove and post in your classroom or center. We urge you to download it, print it, and post it in your classroom or center. Both English and Spanish versions are

available for download on the Exchange website:

www.childcareexchange.com/issue.

We are in this together — working for a world where every child is honored and protected as exactly who they are.

References

- Allvin, R. E. (February 3, 2017). "Dear NAEYC Members," email, p. 1.
- Hernandez, L. (November 28, 2016). Personal email.
- King, C. S. (Ed.) (1983). *The words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (p. 24). New York: Newmarket Press.
- King, M. L. (1963). "Letter From Birmingham City Jail." In J. M. Washington (Ed.), *The essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1986, pp. 289–302). San Francisco: Harper.
- NAEYC (2005). "Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment: A Position Statement." Washington, DC: NAEYC.



All Children Belong Here This is Our Promise to You

- We will build an open, safe, and mutually respectful school community in which each child and each family is an important and equal member.
- We will never allow differences of any kind to be an excuse to make fun of, exclude, or hurt you.
- We will listen carefully and lovingly to what worries you and give you thoughtful, age-appropriate information and support.
- We will nurture you to feel strong and proud about yourself and your family.
- We will facilitate your skills to be friends with classmates who are alike and different from you.
- We will honor your family's importance to you by building respectful partnerships with them.
- We will provide support to you and your family when they feel stress, anxiety, or fear because of current events or acts of prejudice or hate.
- We will learn about and help your family use legal and community resources to keep you safe.
- We will work to uproot our own personal biases as adults and will speak out against prejudice and bias wherever we encounter it.
- We will mobilize our courage and become active with others to resist and change any policies and practices that threaten to hurt you or your family.

We are in this together — working for a world where every child is protected and honored, exactly as they are.

