

# Ethical Dilemmas: Feeding Children in Early Care and Learning Settings

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**E**ating is an important part of any child's day, whether in their own home or during their time spent in early care and learning settings. As early childhood educators we spend a lot of time during training learning about healthy balanced nutrition. Licensing provides us with regulations and guidelines that direct us to offer safe and nutritious food. Some settings provide all of the child's daily intake, some just the snacks with lunch from home, and others, all food is from home. We often develop policies such as no sugary drinks, or no candy. Educators may bring their own rules into the program, often based on how they were raised, such as the order in which children may eat (healthy food before dessert, for example), how much they need to eat before they leave the table, or when they can eat.

Each of us are also influenced by our values and beliefs on a diverse range of food-related issues such as the use of pesticides, supporting local food and fair trade, food security, food waste, excessive food packaging, and corporate marketing of highly processed foods and infant formula. Early childhood educators often report challenges and disagreements with parents about the feeding of their children, and it can be one of the most contentious topics of discussion with parents, colleagues, and children. The feeding of children is one of the most obvious ways that parents show

care and nurturing for them and can be an extremely sensitive topic for families.

## Policies

Well-developed policies can help guide our practice and the critically important role we play in children's nutrition. These policies will reflect centre budgets and licensing regulations, but do they also reflect ethical practices? Do we find a balance between staying within our budget and ensuring good nutrition? Do we have policies that support family choices for their children, taking into account their family budget, their cultural and religious practices, their family preferences, and their values, beliefs, and worldview in relation to how they feed their children? Do we have comprehensive breastfeeding policies for both the families that we serve and the staff we employ? Are all staff well trained and supported to implement these policies?

It's easy to see how ethical dilemmas related to food may arise. Do we respect families' choices and remain non-judgmental if their choices differ from ours? Do we respect the child's own autonomy in making choices about when, what, and how much they choose to eat?

## ECEBC Code of Ethics

When we are conflicted and have trouble making decisions about a course of action, our Code of Ethics

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offers clear guidelines to assist us. Feeding children is a critical part of their healthy development, and perhaps one of the most important responsibilities of the educator. On looking at the principles of the ECEBC Code of Ethics, we see that a number of them can be applied to feeding children:

- Early childhood educators promote the health and well-being of all children.
- Early childhood educators demonstrate caring for all children in all aspects of their practice.
- Early childhood educators work in partnership with parents, supporting them in meeting their responsibilities to their children.
- Early childhood educators work in ways that enhance human dignity.

- Early childhood educators pursue, on an ongoing basis, the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to be professionally competent.

### Case Studies

Below are some case studies to show some ethical dilemmas.

#### Case One

A parent comes to register her child at the centre. She has been off work for nearly a year and is anxious about returning to work after her maternity leave. She tells you she is trying to wean her baby before she returns to work, but it is not going very well, and both baby and mother are spending a lot of time crying. You don't know much about breastfeeding, so you try to comfort her and tell her you are sure the baby will adjust.

**Reflection:** Our Code of Ethics guides us to “pursue the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to be professionally competent.” In this case, the educator does not know enough about breastfeeding to provide solutions to this mother, such as information and encouragement about how to continue to breastfeed after she returns to work rather than to feel she must do this at such an emotionally challenging time, when she will be leaving her baby for the first time. The educator's lack of knowledge may have unintended negative consequences for the physical and mental health of both mother and child. Well-developed centre policies for breastfeeding support both families and educators. See the fact sheet “Supporting Breastfeeding in Child Care,” published by the Canadian Child Care Federation ([www.cccf-fcsge.ca/wp-content/uploads/RS\\_57-e.pdf](http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/wp-content/uploads/RS_57-e.pdf)).

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#### Case Two

A parent sends juice in a bottle with their toddler every day. The child asks for the bottle constantly. When you talk to the mother about it, she says that the juice has vegetables in it and that is the only way she can get him to eat vegetables. Meanwhile, you are concerned about the child's teeth, the child's appetite, and the many wet diapers throughout the day. You decide to start a no-juice policy.

**Reflection:** The parent thinks she has found a good solution to her concern about her child's nutritional intake. Although the educator's solution will help to address the problem while the child is in care, the educator is avoiding an opportunity to work in partnership with the parent, supporting her in meeting her responsibilities to her child. Our Code of Ethics tells us that “Early childhood educators work in partnership with colleagues and other service providers in the community to support the well-being of families.” In order to work in partnership, the educator could ask the parent for her thoughts on resolving the dilemma, provide information, and ensure that centre policies are presented with clear rationales and at appropriate times such as at enrolment. The educator can ensure that dietary informa-

tion is displayed in the centre, such as the article “The Juicy Story on Drinks” from a website published by the Dietitians of Canada ([www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Child-Toddler-Nutrition/The-Juicy-Story-on-Drinks.aspx](http://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Child-Toddler-Nutrition/The-Juicy-Story-on-Drinks.aspx)).

#### Case Three

A low-income parent sends white bread and bologna sandwiches every day and rarely includes vegetables or fruit. You know a lot about nutrition, and you know this is not a healthy lunch. You talk to the mother about providing a healthier lunch, and she gets angry, telling you she grew up eating this and she is fine. What do you do, knowing that the parent feels everything is okay, but the child's nutrition is not adequate?

**Reflection:** The ethical dilemma is that the educator feels she needs to respect the parent's stated viewpoint, but the educator still has an obligation to ensure the child is provided with a nutritionally adequate food while in her care. There may be issues of poverty and lack of education. Our Code of Ethics says that ECEs “work in ways that enhance human dignity” and they “promote the health and well-being of children.” The educator can address this ethical dilemma by ensuring that the centre is stocked with extra fruits and vegetables in a sharing

basket so that the parent can retain their dignity and the child has the opportunity to be exposed to new foods. For some statistics about poverty and how it affects health and nutrition, see *Canada Without Poverty* at [www.cwp-csp.ca](http://www.cwp-csp.ca).

#### Case Four

A parent of a picky eater has instructed you to make sure her toddler eats three-quarters of his food before he can leave the table. You know through your training that children's appetites vary from day to day and that following Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility technique helps children to become more competent eaters. This technique recognizes that parents or care providers are responsible for what, when, and where food is offered and that the child is responsible for how much and whether they eat from the foods offered. How do you handle this conflict between what you know is best practice and the parent's instructions?

**Reflection:** "Early childhood educators work in partnership with parents, supporting them in meeting their responsibilities to their children." Recognize your role in

helping this parent receive information that may be new to them. Healthy Families BC has some great information that you can share with families ([www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/home/articles/topic/healthy-eating-0](http://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/home/articles/topic/healthy-eating-0)).

Early childhood educators do not have all the answers about this complex topic. They know a lot about child development and working with groups of children. Parents know a lot about their own child. Although early childhood educators are required to have a relevant level of knowledge about the healthy feeding of children, they are not dietitians. When developing policies or when faced with ethical dilemmas about feeding children, there are community resources to help and to refer families to. Many communities have a public health dietitian or licensing officer who may be able to offer resources. As well, educators can talk to a registered dietitian at HealthLink BC by dialing 811. See [www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian-services](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian-services) for more information, including how to email them.

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#### Resources

Some wonderful resources that focus on supporting positive eating experiences include

Ellyn Satter Institute website [www.ellynsatterinstitute.org](http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org)

Laurie David and Kirstin Uhrenholdt's *The Family Dinner: Great Ways to Connect with Your Kids, One Meal at a Time* (2010)

Appetite to Play website [www.appetitetoplay.com](http://www.appetitetoplay.com)

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