

Working with Children and Families: Professional, Legal and Ethical Issues
Linda Newman & Lois Pollnitz
(Pearson Education Australia)

Reviewed by Dr Sue Knight and Carol Collins

Working with Children and Families is a study of professional ethics within the field of early childhood education. The authors make a strong case for the central role of ethical judgements in the work of early childhood educators, illustrating their general claim with numerous useful examples of ethical issues likely to arise on a daily basis in early childhood settings, ranging from the more general ('Whose interests should be given priority – the child or the family?'), to the more specific ('Should I lie to parents about how quickly their child settles?'). Their aim is to develop a framework to guide early childhood professionals in the making of good ethical judgements.

This work is set apart from other contributions to the field by on the one hand, the authors' insistence that the making of good professional ethical judgements must necessarily go beyond a mere appeal to the authority of a set of legal or professional standards of conduct, and on the other, their recognition of the dangers of moral relativism, or the idea that in ethics "anything goes". This idea is frequently encapsulated within educational writing as the insistence that all values be respected and valued equally. While the authors' arguments against ethical absolutism and relativism are somewhat thin, it is nevertheless encouraging to find recognition of the need for such discussion. Newman and Pollnitz (p. 42) go on to argue that objective ethical justification is possible; that the ground for such justification lies in the idea that '...all humans beings can be caused certain harms ... [regardless of culture, race or nationality], and that these harms ought not to be caused...'. It is suggested that these harms are codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But of course, an action or policy designed to prevent some harm (for example, hunger) befalling one group of people, might well cause further harm (for example, loss of freedom in the form of increased taxes) to some other group. Clearly we need a procedure for weighing up harms and interests and, importantly, the authors claim (rightly) that we must turn to philosophical ethics to find such detailed justificatory theories. Newman and Pollnitz warn that moral theories do not form a 'grab bag' to be dipped into, and themselves opt for an '... ethic of care [based on the work of Noddings] as a philosophical framework for policy and practice in early childhood education'. Although an attempt is made to provide philosophical justification for this stance, there are other theories which quite readily suggest themselves here, notably Nussbaum's capabilities approach to ethical justification. Yet we find little if any discussion of these approaches.

This book, written with both practicing early childhood educators and those studying early childhood education within tertiary institutions in mind, makes a welcome contribution to the task of encouraging these educators in particular to reflect on the ethical underpinnings of their professional decision making, although, perhaps surprisingly given their emphasis on ethical justification, the authors do not buy into the current debates about moral or values education. On the whole *Working with*

Children and Families is written clearly and would prove useful in early childhood teacher education courses. At least one qualification is needed however. While arguing against appeal to authority as rational justification, the authors all too often justify their own claims by mere citation, by merely offering a name and date in brackets, rather than by providing an account of the relevant arguments. This practice is common in educational writing, and we would argue, undermines efforts such as those of the authors to encourage educators to engage in the rational justification of beliefs and actions.