



# Essential Ethics for Early Career School Psychologists

Legal, ethical, and professional practice is a foundational pillar of school psychology service delivery (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2010). Ethics are the principles that guide the practice of an individual, and applied professional ethics refer to the application of broad ethical principles and specific rules to address problems in one's field (Jacob, Decker, & Hartshorne, 2010). Ethical guidelines, such as the American Psychological Association's (2010) *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* or NASP's (2010) *Principles for Professional Ethics* (PPE) are intended to (a) protect individuals receiving services from school psychologists, (b) help school psychologists reflect on and monitor their own professional behavior, and (c) provide standards to prevent and resolve issues related to unethical conduct.

## NASP'S PRINCIPLES FOR PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

While school psychologists are guided by the same ethical principles as all psychologists, NASP's (2010) PPE is specifically applicable to school psychologists, and takes into account the distinct context of school based practice. The PPE is organized around four broad aspirational themes which subsume 17 ethical principles. Each principle contains standards of conduct specific to school psychologists. The following includes the four broad ethical themes in the PPE, and a brief description of each.

**1. *Respecting the dignity and rights of all persons.*** School psychologists respect the autonomy, self-determination, and rights of those with whom they work. This includes attaining informed consent for services, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and engaging in practice that is fair and just.

**2. *Professional competence and responsibility.*** School psychologists deliver services that benefit others, including practicing within their boundaries of competence, applying knowledge from the fields of psychology and education, and maintaining responsibility for the work in which they engage.

**3. *Honesty and integrity in professional relationships.*** School psychologists accurately represent themselves in professional promises, qualifications, and services delivered. Relationships that may be conflicts of interest or diminish professional effectiveness should be avoided.

**4. *Responsibility to schools, families, communities, the profession, and society.*** School psychologists work to promote healthy school, family, and community environments, and to maintain the public trust. This includes engaging in lawful and ethical practice, monitoring one's own practice and the practice of colleagues, and contributing to mentoring, teaching, supervision, and research in the field of school psychology.

## DEVELOPMENT OF ETHICAL COMPETENCE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR EARLY CAREER SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Ethical competence is theorized to develop in stages over time, from that of novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert (Dreyfus, 1997). During each progressive stage, the school psychologist trainee or practitioner more effectively identifies and analyzes complex situations, and makes ethical decisions with increasing intuitiveness and automaticity. It is reasonable to assume that upon exiting their graduate training programs, many beginning school psychologists are at the novice to advanced beginner stages of ethical development, not yet having reached the competent stage.

***Graduate training does not necessarily translate into ethical practice.*** School psychology trainees are likely to take at least one course in law and ethics during their school psychology training. Although this foundational coursework may introduce key concepts to school psychologists-in-training, legal and ethical issues are often not explicitly discussed or integrated throughout the training sequence (Jacob et al., 2010). As a result, completion of legal–ethical coursework alone does not necessarily translate into ethical practice when one enters the field as an early career school psychologist (Tryon, 2001).

***Achieving expertise commences during the early career.*** Ericsson and Williams (2007) conjectured that expertise in ethical practice is achieved through a combination of supervised practice early in one’s career coupled with deliberate practice over an extended period of time—usually 10 years. Early career school psychologists should pursue opportunities to engage in ethical practice, including (a) referencing professional guidelines, (b) applying a decision-making model (e.g., Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998), and (c) requesting ongoing support from mentors and supervisors while engaging in ethical decision-making.

## HOW TO DEVELOP AN ETHICAL PRACTICE

The following points may assist early career school psychologists in developing an ethical approach to practice:

- Keep up-to-date regarding developments in ethics and law by reading professional publications and participating in other professional development activities. Lifelong learning is essential to achieve and maintain expertise in applied professional ethics (Armistead, 2008; Dailor & Jacob, 2010; Ysseldyke et al., 2006).
- Be ethically proactive by anticipating and avoiding ethical and legal problems, and engaging in preventive actions in practice.
- When difficult situations arise, apply a systematic decision-making model to choose the best course of action. Describe the problem situation; define potential ethical–legal issues involved; consult ethical–legal guidelines; consult with supervisors and colleagues; evaluate the rights, responsibilities, and welfare of those affected; consider alternative solutions and consequences of making each decision; and finally, make a decision and take responsibility for the decision that is made (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998).
- Develop a positive approach to ethics; that is, strive for excellence rather than meeting minimal obligations outlined in codes of ethics and law (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006).

- Discuss confidentiality and its limits with each student, his or her parents, and other clients at the outset of establishing a school psychologist–client relationship, and maintain confidentiality as promised.
- Define the school psychologist role to encompass advocacy for evidence-based practices and the freedom to adhere to the NASP and the APA codes of ethics.
- When advocating for changes in school policies or practices, emphasize the potential positive effects of new practices or services rather than simply criticizing existing practices.
- Work to build the capacity of systems to better address the academic, wellness, and mental health needs of children (Ysseldyke et al., 2006).
- Take care to clarify your identity as a professional or as a citizen when you are speaking about public school policies and practices.
- Regardless of personal feelings and frustrations, engage in conduct that is respectful of all persons at all times.

In sum, like all psychologists, school psychologists' professional practice is guided by legal and ethical parameters. However, the educational context in which school psychology is embedded presents numerous unique ethical implications. Therefore, the NASP *PPE* provides guiding themes, principles, and standards to support the ethical practice of school psychologists. Early career school psychologists are in the beginning stages of developing ethical knowledge and applied decision-making skills. By taking a proactive stance, being knowledgeable about legal–ethical guidelines, following ethical decision making models, and seeking support from mentors and supervisors early in their careers, school psychologists can begin to develop competence, and eventually expertise, in ethical practice.

## RESOURCES

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This handout was developed by Daniel Newman, PhD, NCSP; Susan Jacob, PhD; and the NASP Early Career Workgroup. Daniel is an assistant professor in the school psychology program at National Louis University in Illinois. His research interests include school-based consultation practice and training, and supervision. Susan is a professor of psychology at Central Michigan University. Her primary area of scholarship is ethical and legal issues in school psychology and she is coauthor of *Ethics and Law for School Psychologists* and *Professional Ethics for School Psychologists: A Problem-Solving Model Casebook*. Susan is also cochair of NASP's Ethical and Professional Practices Committee.

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