E-Professionalism for Early Care and Education Providers

Wondering how to use technology in a more professional manner? Follow these recommendations to make wise choices with electronic media use.

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Teachers of young children work hard to be professional and to be viewed by others as professionals. These efforts to maintain professionalism must include e-professionalism. E-professionalism involves behavior related to professional standards and ethics when using electronic communication (Evans & Gerwitz, 2008).

Cellular telephones, social networking sites, video-sharing sites, online forums, electronic mail (email), wikis, blogs, and a range of Web 2.0 technologies allow for sharing of personal and professional information in a variety of ways with an extended audience. With any of these forms of communication, it is important to consider professionalism and what it entails.

Unprofessional incidents dealing with social media have influenced the public perception of certain professions, including educators, lawyers, and doctors (Greysen, Kind, & Chretien, 2010). While social media, such as Facebook, may be the focus of some less-than-professional episodes, simple daily communications through electronic mail must also be handled with the utmost professionalism (see sidebar for an example).

Email allows for nearly instantaneous sharing of information and documents. It has enhanced and expanded opportunities for efficient and immediate communication. Both personal and professional emails can easily be forwarded to people other than the intended recipient and can go viral almost instantly. After the information is out there, it cannot be retrieved (Carter, Foulger, & Ewbank, 2008). Double check before sending every email message to ensure it is

- professional,
- free of errors, and
- is going only to the intended recipient(s).

One Click Undoes Years of Professionalism

Miss Christine arrived home after an exhausting day of teaching. She had several challenges in her classroom, including Kevin. After a recent meeting with his mother and learning more about social-emotional development and challenging behaviors, things seemed to be going better.

Today she had many positive interactions with Kevin. He did not hit, spit, bite, swear, or run in the classroom. Miss Christine read books about emotions with the class, used music and finger plays to smooth transitions, and built on Kevin's interest in animals to keep him engaged. Before circle time, she read a story about the expectations for behavior in circle time, and Kevin participated actively. Later, when Kevin drew on the window with a marker, the logical consequence was to have him to clean it off. She then redirected him to the easel and sat with him as he filled the paper.

Happy and tired, Miss Christine sat down at her computer to check her email. She thought about contacting Kevin's mom to let her know about how hard he worked. Instead, she found an email from Kevin's mom. She complained that her son told her he cleaned the windows in the classroom. She felt that was inappropriate because he is not a custodian, but this task had reflected the teacher's expectations of her son. Kevin's mom then accused Miss Christine of mistreating her son.

Miss Christine was devastated. She thought the day had gone so well. She also noticed that her director was copied on the email. Frustrated, she forwarded the email to several friends and co-workers, including an introduction in which she insulted Kevin's mother. She then logged on to Facebook and updated her status: "Parents of children at Cheery Child Care are awful and ungrateful. They drive me crazy!"

After a couple of hours, Miss Christine calmed down and thought about contacting Kevin's mother to explain what happened at school. Unfortunately, the forwarded email already made its way back to several parents of children in her class. Her center director was not happy about the Facebook posting.

While Miss Christine had worked so hard to be a reflective practitioner, furthering her professional development, and collaborating with families, in her anger she had unintentionally undone much of what she had worked so hard to do. Years of professionalism were erased by a few moments of unprofessionalism.

These simple steps may also prevent mistakes such as hitting "reply to all," especially when it is not desired (Evans & Gerwitz, 2008). Professionals are urged to be very conscious of what they send and to whom. In addition to communication via email, there are a variety of ways to communicate and connect online, all of which must be handled with professionalism by early childhood educators.

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Benefits and Challenges of Technology

Teachers sometimes use Web sites to enhance school programs, share information, provide a forum for students, or improve their own professional development (Carter, Foulger & Ewbank, 2008). Professional organizations often provide online opportunities for members to engage in discussions or network with other members.

Teachers of young children may also use professional online networking sites such as LinkedIn, which allow individuals to post resumes and connect with others in their field to extend a job search or obtain information, for example.

Social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, allow participants to connect, maintain contact, and communicate with others (Cain, 2008). Members can share comments, videos, and photographs. Unfortunately, some users do not

establish privacy settings, resulting in access by unintended audiences outside of their peer group, such as future employers. These unanticipated viewers may well have different norms and expectations and may misinterpret the content posted (Cain, 2008).

> ## Balance the benefits of social networking with its disadvantages.

The benefits of social networking must be balanced with its disadvantages. Negative consequences can result when inappropriate

postings are identified, such as denial of a degree for students, disciplinary actions, or job loss, and convey a negative reflection on a profession overall (Carter, Foulger & Ewbank, 2008; Foulger, Ewbank, Kay, Popp, & Carter, 2009; Manning, 2010).

Sometimes even more than a lapse in professionalism in person, a lack of professionalism displayed online can result in negative consequences for the individual and the profession over time, because each posting leaves behind a "digital footprint" visible to a wide audience (Greysen, Kind, & Chretien, 2010). Social networking sites can serve as a mirror, reflecting both the best and the worst for all to see (Greysen, Kind, & Chretien, 2010).

Subjects & Predicates

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participation (Kist, 2008). The lines between personal and professional lives can easily be blurred. Teachers must constantly make informed decisions about what to share and how, weighing the benefits and risks, with an awareness of professional responsibilities (Carter, Foulger & Ewbank, 2008; Manning, 2010).

> ## *Make informed decisions about what to share and how.*

Ethical Responsibilities

Early childhood professionals make a commitment to the standards of the profession, its code of ethics, and the profession overall (Castle, 2009). For teachers of young children, this commitment to the practice of professionalism begins with utilizing the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct as a resource for developing professional partnerships with families and colleagues as well as trusting, respectful relationships with young children (NAEYC, 2005).

Families, Children, and Colleagues

Professionalism is a lifelong process that involves enhancing knowledge and skills while managing ethical responsibilities to children, families, colleagues, employers, and society (Castle, 2009). As professionals, teachers must be **diligent** in their efforts to be competent practitioners as well as **dedicated** to adhering to ethical guidelines. In any of early childhood's diverse roles—child care

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Whether the forum is a professional networking site or a social networking site, users are urged to carefully consider what information and photographs are available to others. Teachers of young children should reflect on their responsibilities as professionals before posting anything.

Professional Responsibilities

Professional responsibilities apply to every online persona (Cain, 2008). Posting careless comments and questionable images online can magnify less-than-professional behavior. While individuals in the United States have freedom of expression, this may sometimes conflict with another person's right to privacy and can breach confidentiality. For example, if a message contains the name of a school, it

may imply the school condones the opinions or images presented (Farnan et al., 2009).

The rules that apply to face-to-face professional relationships also apply online. These rules are grounded in trust and respect (Farnan et al., 2009). Teachers may find it helpful to be proactive, engaging in a dialogue with colleagues about the risks of posting online and exploring ethical dilemmas specific to social networking (Foulger et al., 2009). Considering the challenges that are inherent in participation in social networking, some teachers choose not to participate at all.

Lack of participation online may not be the answer for everyone, however. Pre-service teachers who were cautioned against participation struggled with feelings of isolation versus fear of the consequences of

providers; family child care providers; public or private preschool teachers; primary school teachers; and students or faculty in higher education—two resources serve as guides in making decisions as professionals:

- NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Guidelines (2009) and
- the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (2005).

According to DAP guidelines, effective teachers are skilled decision makers (NAEYC, 2009). Systematic reflection enables teachers to make informed decisions about a variety of topics and strategies (Castle, 2009). Decisions made about online practices ought to involve the same depth of reflection as other professional topics. These choices are not to be taken lightly.

Developmentally appropriate practice guidelines call for teachers to create caring communities of learners in which they model responsibility in communication with colleagues and families (NAEYC, 2009). Connecting families to resources as well as engaging in frequent two-way communication are also important components of developmentally appropriate practice. All of these interactions should involve mutual respect with families as partners (NAEYC, 2009).

Electronic resources and communications can be part of facilitating this community of learners. Use of media must be guided by the same standards as other areas of professional practice. Among the core values of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct are "relationships based on trust and respect" and respect for the "dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual." Avoid making any

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statements or postings online that violate those core values.

Among educators' ethical responsibilities to children is the need to avoid any harm, including doing or saying anything that may be disrespectful. Status updates on a social networking site can unwittingly reveal unprofessional attitudes. For example, one educator posted comments stating she was not looking forward to another school year. She referred to her students as "germ bags." Although she was joking, thought her statements were private, and never intended for students or parents to see her post, they did see them, and she was asked to resign (CBS, 2010).

A teacher's ethical responsibility to families and co-workers is to maintain confidentiality and respect everyone's privacy. Comments and photographs posted online violate this ethical tenet.

For co-workers, one principle is particularly relevant to what is posted online: "**P-3A.1**—We shall recognize the contributions of colleagues to our program and not participate in practices that diminish their reputations or impair their effectiveness in working with children and families" (NAEYC, 2005).

Before sharing information or pictures, ask if the content will affect any colleague's reputation. Much of what teachers do to ensure professionalism online deals with one's own professional reputations. But the professional reputation of co-workers can also be tarnished by decisions about what to include on a social networking site.

A similar guideline exists for teachers' responsibilities to employers. "**I-3B.2**—To do nothing that diminishes the reputation of the program in which we work unless it is violating laws and regulations designed to protect children or is violating the provisions of this Code" (NAEYC, 2005).

Table 1. Ethics and E-Professionalism

Ethical Guideline	Examples of E-Professionalism	Examples of the Absence of E-Professionalism
Responsibilities to Children "P-1.1—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)	Kim takes pictures of children in her class on a field trip. She has permission from all parents before taking pictures. She uses the photos for portfolio assessment and documentation panels. She uses a photo-sharing site that requires a login to share photos with families of children in her class. Any comments included describe children's learning.	Kim has a page on a social networking site that is open to the public. She posts pictures of children in her class, wearing T-shirts with the name of the school on it, on a field trip. She makes comments under each photo, some of which mock the children.
Responsibilities to Families "P-2.11—We shall not engage in or support exploitation of families. We shall not use our relationship with a family for private advantage or personal gain, or enter into relationships with family members that might impair our effectiveness working with their children." (NAEYC, 2005)	In an effort to communicate with families frequently and in a variety of ways, Taneka asks parents for their preferred methods of communication. For those who choose to provide email addresses, Taneka uses email to send classroom updates and positive messages about children to families. She does not send any confidential information or forward any emails.	Taneka asks all families of children in her class for email addresses. She emails solicitations for sales for her other job, selling cosmetics and jewelry. She also uses the email addresses to search for families on social networking sites and asks them to connect with her there as a "friend".
Responsibilities to Co-workers "P-3A.1—We shall recognize the contributions of colleagues to our program and not participate in practices that diminish their reputations or impair their effectiveness in working with children and families." (NAEYC, 2005)	After a fun evening out with a co-worker, Sally waits until the next day to ask before posting ANY pictures on her social networking site. She avoids any photos or comments that could in any way damage her own or her co-worker's reputation.	Sally does not consider her co-worker's reputations. Immediately after arriving home from a night out with co-workers, Sally posts pictures and comments on her social networking site, "Miss Betty sure knows how to party!"
Responsibilities to Employers "P-3B.1—We shall follow all program policies. When we do not agree with program policies, we shall attempt to effect change through constructive action within the organization." (NAEYC, 2005)	Michelle is concerned about practices she observes that seem inconsistent with the program's stated philosophy. She is overwhelmed by challenging behaviors in her classroom. She avoids airing her frustration online. She meets with the director, expresses her concerns, and asks for opportunities for professional development.	Michelle posts complaints on her blog and Twitter feed, alleging that her employer, Sunshine Child Care, does not care about appropriate practices and has driven her to drink. She posts pictures of herself wearing a T-shirt with the school logo while drinking alcohol.
Responsibilities to Community and Society "P-4.2—We shall apply for, accept, and work in positions for which we are personally well-suited and professionally qualified. We shall not offer services that we do not have the competence, qualifications, or resources to provide." (NAEYC, 2005)	Shannon uses online resources for professional development to enhance her knowledge of child development. She is honest about her current level of expertise and continually looks for ways to build her skills and qualifications.	Shannon posts a resume on a professional networking site that misrepresents her experience and education in working with young children.

Professional Development

Pursuit of professional development is part of every teacher's ethical responsibility to community and society (NAEYC, 2005). Participation in professional organizations, studying professional literature, and collaboration with colleagues are key components of professionalism (Castle, 2009). Online forums, Web sites, and Facebook pages of professional organizations such as the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) and NAEYC encourage communication, collaboration, and education that are essential for professional practice. Table 1 includes illustrations of e-professionalism, and the absence of e-professionalism, with regard to ethical guidelines.

Strategies for Maintaining Professionalism

In order to be professionals when using electronic media, the first step is to **PAUSE**. Stop and think before sending an email or posting any information online. Remember that regardless of disclaimers put on emails or privacy settings on social networking sites, the opinions or photos shared are **not** private and cannot be taken back. Ask how people might feel, or what the implications might be, if the information or images were broadcast on television.

The next step is to use the **PRIVACY** settings provided on social networking sites. While this does not ensure complete privacy, it does help limit who can access information that is posted.

The next step is to be **PROACTIVE**. Talk to colleagues and friends about professional expectations and the importance of maintaining professional reputations. Colleagues can

agree to check with each other before posting any pictures or comments. Directors may find it helps to add a policy about the use of media messages and images.

Finally, be **PROFESSIONAL**. Before accepting a "friend" request from a social networking site, ask if the relationship should be that of a friend. Think about the boundaries of the relationship in person. What expectations are there for relationships with parents, students, and colleagues? Be sure to maintain the same guidelines online. See Table 2 for examples of these strategies for success.

Table 2. Strategies for Successfully Maintaining a Professional Image

Strategy	Example
PAUSE	Krysia **pauses** and reads through all emails and potential postings on social networking sites. Before sharing information or photos, she asks herself these questions: Why am I sharing this? What response do I hope for? What might the response be? Who are the intended recipients? Who else might see it? Is there anyone who should not see this? Only after stopping to think about the responses to all of those questions does she share information or images.
PRIVACY	Cheryl uses the **privacy** settings on her social networking site, limiting those who can view her page to family and close friends. She is sure to check the privacy settings in each area including applications, her comments or updates, photos she posts, photos others post of her, and comments others make. She checks the settings periodically in case the site has changed the default privacy settings.
PROACTIVE	Being **proactive**, Anya works to prevent possible issues with professionalism through dialogue. Anya reminds friends, family, and co-workers whenever they take pictures of her to please not post them online without checking with her first. Anya does not post any pictures on her social networking site that she would not want her mother to see.
PROFESSIONAL	Heather receives a friend request for a social networking site from the parent of a child in her class. She does not accept the request and is sure to communicate to all parents her policy on use of social networking with families in order to maintain a **professional** relationship.

Use the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct as a guide. Be aware of the expectations that supervisors, families, or funders may have. Employees, students, faculty members, and others are urged to find out whether their employer or school has written guidelines about social networking, technology use, or e-professionalism. If not, recommend that pertinent policies be developed.

Early childhood professionals use electronic communication and online resources to build professional knowledge and skills as well as connect with others in the field. The benefits of online interactions come with responsibilities. Part of being a professional is being aware of these responsibilities and making informed decisions in all practices.

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Extend
These Ideas With a Professional Book

Meir Muller
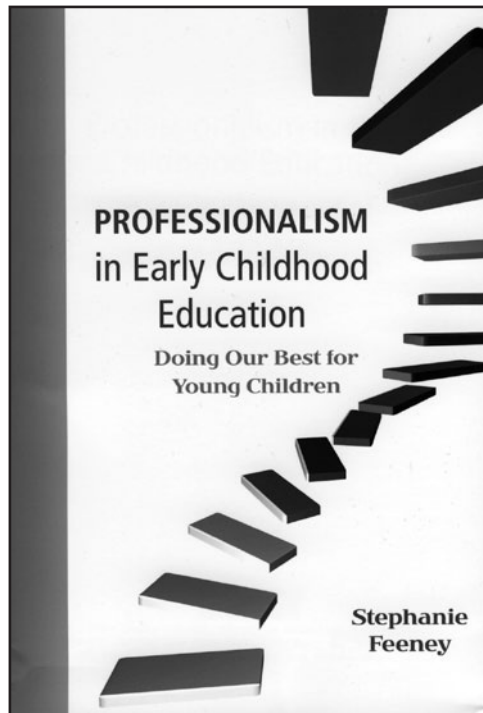
Professionalism in Early Childhood Education: Doing Our Best for Young Children

By Stephanie Feeney. (2012). 144 pp. $15.99. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Professionalism in Early Childhood Education is a guide to understanding and applying professionalism to the field and to individual practitioners. The author prefaces the second chapter with a quote from Lewis Carroll's, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?" In this short book, Feeney answers Alice's question by offering the reader a road map to navigate this large subject.

The first two chapters of the book look at professionalism from a broad perspective. Feeney provides historical, popular, and scholarly definitions of professionalism. Based on these definitions the author applies eight criteria to measure whether the field of early childhood education is meeting the goals of professionalism. Feeney remains upbeat and provides instructive models that early childhood leaders and advocates can use to move the field forward.

The bulk of the book addresses the components needed for early childhood educators to exhibit the principles of professionalism in day-to-day work with children and families. Feeney explores professional ideals in the areas of knowledge and skills, behaviors, and personal attributes. These chapters include helpful tools such as nine core knowledge areas, three essential components of behavior, and a systematic overview of three categories of personal attributes that support success.

The final chapter of the book calls for teachers to reconfirm their commitment to their profession. Feeney seems to suggest one method to reach this goal is to connect to the past, present, and future. The past connection is the rich legacy of early childhood education. The present is depicted by the voice inside each educator calling to make a difference in the lives of children. For the future, she suggests that educators find or become mentors and strive to be lifelong learners.

The text concludes with four practical appendices including the Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment, recommended resources, a self-assessment scale, and a professional development plan.

When Alice asks which way she ought to go, the Cheshire Cat replies, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." Feeney brings her experiences including NAEYC Board service and publishing seven books to this project, where she clearly shows teacher educators, school administrators, and those who work with young children "where they need to go" if the goal of the journey is to be a professional early childhood educator.

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