

Practice Guideline



September 2017

Dual Relationships

Registered early childhood educators (RECEs), by virtue of their professional role and responsibilities, hold positions of trust and responsibility with regard to children under their professional supervision. RECEs understand the importance of maintaining professional boundaries with children, families and colleagues. They are aware of dual relationships and identify and declare conflicts of interest when they arise and take action to prevent harm to children or their families.

Standard V: A, Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2017

Standard V from the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) gives equal attention to three important practice issues: professional boundaries, dual relationships and conflicts of interest. Although these issues are interrelated, this practice guideline focuses on dual relationships. Review your Code and Standards and the [Professional Misconduct Regulation](#) for more information on professional boundaries and conflicts of interest.

The College of Early Childhood Educators has developed this practice guideline to help you, an RECE, understand your ethical and professional responsibilities, use your professional judgment to regularly reflect on your practice and inform your decision-making to either avoid or manage dual relationships.

This practice guideline:

- Explains dual relationships
- Highlights the importance of relationships to the profession
- Describes professional judgment
- Addresses the risks of dual relationships
- Includes steps to take to manage dual relationships
- Provides reflection questions and scenarios for reflective practice and discussion.

About this Publication

Practice guidelines communicate certain expectations of registered early childhood educators (RECEs) as outlined in the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Guidelines also highlight how those expectations may be applied in practice. They include recommended practices and provide opportunities for self-reflection and professional learning. The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, current research and related legislation should be consulted when considering practice guidelines. Practice guidelines support the College's role to promote high standards and continuous professional learning and govern the conduct of RECEs.

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Explaining Dual Relationships

The *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* defines a dual relationship as occurring “whenever RECEs, in addition to their professional relationship, have one or more other relationships with a child under their professional supervision, the child’s family, a **colleague** or a **supervisee**. These other relationships may occur prior to, during, or following the professional relationship” (Standard V: B.5).

When you have a dual relationship it means that you have another relationship, beyond your professional one, with a child, a child’s family or a colleague with whom you work. A dual relationship is simply two relationships that you have with one person.

Colleague: Any person who an RECE works or collaborates with in their place of employment or professional network, including RECEs, co-workers, employers, students, volunteers, other professionals and community partners (*Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, 2017).

Supervisee: Any person who is under an RECE’s direct supervision including, but not limited to, other RECEs, staff, students or volunteers (*Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, 2017).

Three Common Types of Dual Relationships

1. Familial

A common dual relationship type is one where an RECE’s own child or family member is part of their workplace setting. This means the RECE has two relationships—professional and familial—with a child, a colleague or supervisee in their workplace. There are many ways a familial relationship can occur. Sometimes the RECE’s own child is enrolled in the child care centre in which they work. Other times, the family relation at the workplace could be a co-worker or placement student, for example.

2. Business

Another type of dual relationship is when an RECE has a business relationship with a child’s family member, a colleague or supervisee outside of the workplace setting. In this case the RECE has both a professional and business relationship with that individual. Business relationships involve the exchange of money or services between an RECE and a child’s family member, a colleague or supervisee. Examples of business dual relationships that may happen in the early learning and child care sector are providing care after work hours, direct selling or when an RECE hires a child’s family member for contract work outside of the workplace.

3. Personal

The third type of dual relationship is a personal relationship. The dual relationship exists because the RECE has two relationships—professional and personal—with a child’s family member, a colleague or supervisee. Personal relationships exist when an RECE has a friendship or romantic relationship with a child’s family member, a colleague or supervisee outside of the workplace.

There may also be overlap between the three types. For example, a mother and her daughter are both RECEs who work together in a child care centre. They also run a small business together providing after hours care to children on the weekends. They are family members who have a professional relationship working together as RECEs in the child care centre and they also maintain a business relationship outside of the centre.

When and where do dual relationships take place?

Dual relationships can happen at any time during your professional practice and in any work environment.

It is a common misconception that dual relationships can only take place while you are working directly with a child, family member or a colleague or supervisee with whom you have two relationships, one of which is professional. However, they can happen as a result of familial, business or personal relationships that take place **prior to**, **during** or **following** your professional relationship. For example, a dual relationship can happen as a result of your previous business relationship with a colleague or with a parent whose child is now under your professional supervision.

Dual relationships can also happen in any environment—rural or urban, in a multi-site child care agency or home child care, in a family support program or in a kindergarten program. It may be extremely difficult or impossible for those working in certain small communities or remote locations to avoid dual relationships. In these communities, early years services and child care may be limited and those who support the community in their professional practice may know families and colleagues personally or provide services to their own family members. RECEs in these environments may be community members as parents or neighbours, as well as professionals and leaders.

For similar reasons, dual relationships may occur in programs that are designed to support specific religious, language or cultural groups where communities may be small or closely connected.

Relationships and the Profession

“As [professionals], we are caring and nurturing individuals, and part of what makes us good at our jobs is developing relationships with parents and caregivers.”

– *Registered early childhood educator*

Developing positive relationships is so fundamental to the practice of RECEs that Standard I of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* is entirely devoted to it. Your work as an RECE is built on caring and responsive relationships that are necessary to support children’s well-being and learning. As part of a profession in which relationships are essential, you may often find yourself in situations where there is a potential for developing dual relationships. For this reason, it is important that you maintain your professional boundaries and think about whether the relationships you may have outside of your professional practice are in the best interest of the children under your professional supervision. Relationships also change and grow over time and it is your responsibility to assess and regularly re-assess your dual relationships.

Developing appropriate, caring and responsive professional relationships with children and families should not suffer as a result of excessive worry or concern about entering into a dual relationship. Your ability to use good professional judgment, assess risks and take action will support you in maintaining high quality professional relationships.



Using your Professional Judgment

Using your professional judgment is an important part of your daily professional practice and one of the ways in which you are responsible and accountable for your practice. Using sound professional judgment is also an essential component of your professional identity and integrity as an RECE.

When it comes to dual relationships, you will need to rely on your professional judgment and the important concepts that inform it. The College defines professional judgment as being informed by three key areas below.

1. Ethical and professional standards

RECEs have a legal, ethical and professional obligation to practise according to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. The Code and Standards not only reminds you of the professional knowledge, skills, values and expectations of your practice, but also supports your communications with others and in making daily, ethical practice decisions. Applying the Code and Standards regularly helps to support the development of appropriate professional judgment.

2. Professional knowledge and experience

The professional knowledge and experience you have as an RECE work together to help shape your professional judgment and decision-making in your practice. Your knowledge may come from your education, ongoing professional learning and awareness of current research, policies or changes in the sector. Your experience is the sum of all of your practical experiences throughout your training and career. Both your knowledge and experience are largely influenced by your interactions with children, families, colleagues and mentors. In some situations, additional expertise, research and resources may be required to support the development of good professional judgment.

3. Reflective practice

Reflective practice also plays a key role in the development of your professional judgment. When you think critically about your daily practice and the impact of your choices and actions on children, families and colleagues, you are better able to understand your practice and act to improve it. By using reflective practice to plan, evaluate situations, assess risks, make informed decisions and take steps to create change or build on your existing knowledge, you are increasing your capacity to use your professional judgment effectively.

As an RECE you should be aware that failing to consider your ethical and professional standards, your professional knowledge and experience and to regularly reflect on your practice will negatively impact your professional judgment and your ability to manage dual relationships.

Exercising good professional judgment means that you are taking responsibility and holding yourself accountable for your practice decisions and behaviour. It also means you are making decisions in the best interest of the children under your professional supervision.

Understanding the Risks

Dual relationships are not necessarily prohibited by the College, as long as the risks are appropriately managed.

The Code and Standards warns that the greatest risk to maintaining a dual relationship is the potential for it to impair your judgment or lead to a risk of harm to children (Standard V: C.5, 6 and 7).

How can a dual relationship lead to impaired judgment?

Maintaining a dual relationship can impact your professional judgment and, therefore, may affect your decision-making in your work setting. For example, if you have a close friendship with an early childhood education student that you are supervising in your professional practice setting, you may find that you are unable to provide impartial and critical feedback that would support their learning. In this case, your personal relationship with the student interferes with your ability to use appropriate professional judgment to effectively guide, direct and mentor this student.

It is important to examine your dual relationship to determine whether your professional judgment and decision-making is being compromised by this relationship. Reflect, assess and re-assess your practice decisions and behaviours. End the dual relationship if your professional judgment has become impaired. Using poor professional judgment compromises the quality of your professional practice, your professional integrity and identity as an RECE.

How can your dual relationship lead to a risk of harm to children?

Ethic A. of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* states that “RECEs make the well-being, learning and care of children their foremost responsibility.” Your ethical obligation should be kept in mind when considering dual relationships.

There is the potential for a dual relationship to lead to a risk of harm to children. For example, if you are working directly with your own child in the centre in which you work, you may find yourself focussing most of your attention on your child. In this case, favouring your own child may mean you are not meeting the needs of all of the children in the group.

It is your responsibility to ensure that any dual relationship you are maintaining does not put children at risk of harm, even if unintended. Use your professional judgment to avoid this risk. End the dual relationship if the potential for harm is a concern.

What about the risk of professional misconduct?

Besides the serious risks of impairing your professional judgment and leading to a risk of harm to children, dual relationships can also create other unwanted and unintended consequences. The Code and Standards states that “dual relationships may lead to, among other things, violation of professional boundaries or conflicts of interest” (Standard V: B.6).

Violations of professional boundaries happen when RECEs do not clearly establish and maintain “clear and appropriate boundaries in professional relationships with children under their professional supervision, their families and colleagues” (Standard V: C.1). Examples of blurring of boundaries could include emotional, physical, social or financial relationships. Boundary violations may constitute professional misconduct.

Conflicts of interest can happen when “RECEs have a personal, financial or other professional interest or obligation that gives rise to a reasonable concern that the interest or obligation may influence how they carry out their professional responsibilities” (Standard V: B.7). If your dual relationship becomes a conflict of interest, you must take appropriate steps to address it. Practising the profession while in a conflict of interest could be considered professional misconduct.

Are there other risks to maintaining dual relationships?

Yes. There are other risks to maintaining a dual relationship and some of these risks could include, but are not limited to those below.

- Employment related issues like challenging staff dynamics, misunderstandings or communication problems with colleagues or your supervisor. Employment issues that arise as a result of a dual relationship could also lead to workplace stress and negatively affect your well-being and mental health.
- The failure to uphold any workplace policies and procedures, if applicable, that may not permit you to maintain certain dual relationships.
- Relationship problems in your personal life, especially if you are maintaining a dual relationship with a family member or a friend.
- The development of multiple dual relationships. One dual relationship often leads to other dual relationships forming in the workplace. If your child attends your workplace, you need to be aware that while you have a dual relationship with your child, your colleagues now also have a dual relationship to manage due to their new parent-professional relationship with you.

Taking Action: Managing Dual Relationships

If you have a dual relationship, you need to take proactive steps to manage it.

- Identify the facts of your dual relationship (e.g. what, when and where the dual relationship may be occurring).
- Use your professional judgment to ensure you are placing the best interest of children and families first by:
 - Regularly reviewing the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*
 - Examining your professional knowledge and experience
 - Engaging in ongoing reflective practice to assess and regularly re-assess emerging risks.
- Review written policies for both avoiding certain dual relationships and managing other dual relationships, where applicable.
- Communicate with others and document your dual relationships, including the steps taken to address identified risks.
- Take steps to end a dual relationship if it could lead to the following:
 - Impairment of your professional judgment
 - Risk of harm to children
 - Boundary violation
 - Conflict of interest.

Sometimes a dual relationship is easily managed at first but, just like any relationship, it can change due to unforeseen factors and life events. The Code and Standards says that you must evaluate, acknowledge and communicate to others about the nature of the dual relationship and take steps to address the risks (Standards V: C.5 and 6). Take the time to reflect upon, assess and re-assess whether the relationship is still working, needs to change or end altogether due to emerging risks and the potential for professional misconduct.



Take steps to end dual relationship if it is leading to: impairing your professional judgment, a risk of harm to children, a boundary violation or a conflict of interest.

Appendix A: Reflection Questions

“Self-reflection is big. You need to be aware of what you are doing and why. If you are able to look at your choices with a constructive lens then you are able to be more aware of the effects of dual relationships.”

– *Registered early childhood educator*

The following questions are designed to get you thinking about your own professional practice, support reflective practice and inform future decision-making. Use these questions to think about any past dual relationships you may have managed. They may also be useful when considering dual relationships you are currently managing.

Think about the facts of a past dual relationship.

- What type of dual relationship have you experienced and who was involved?
- When did it take place?
- Where did it take place?
- What factors led to the development of the dual relationship?
- Were there written or unwritten policies to address dual relationships in your workplace? If so, what were they?
- What were the outcomes?
 - Did your judgment become impaired?
 - Did the relationship lead to a risk of harm to children, a boundary violation or conflict of interest?
 - Were there any other consequences or challenges?
 - How were others (e.g. children, families, colleagues, supervisees) affected?
 - Were additional dual relationships created as a result of your primary one? If so, what happened?
 - Was your professionalism or professional identity impacted? If yes, how?

Think about the factors you considered when using your professional judgment and the risks you considered.

- How did you use the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* in your decision-making and communications?
- How did you use your professional knowledge and experience to help make decisions about the dual relationship?
- How did you use reflective practice to assess and re-assess the dual relationship?
- Did you consider the potential risks prior to and during the dual relationship? If so, what were they?

Think about what actions or steps you took to manage the dual relationship.

- How did you take action to continually assess and re-assess the risks?
- How did you communicate or collaborate with others?
- How did you document the relationship, your communications with others and the steps taken to lessen risks?
- How did you, your colleagues and your employer develop written or unwritten policies to address the dual relationship?
- In retrospect, could or should the relationship have been avoided?

Appendix B: Scenarios

RECEs from across the province, and from a variety of employment settings and roles, shared their dual relationship stories with the College. This practice guideline on dual relationships and the following scenarios have been inspired by their stories, challenges and problem-solving. The scenarios provide you with an opportunity to reflect and apply your professional judgment and decision-making to either avoid or manage dual relationships.

Consider using the previous questions to help you reflect upon, evaluate and discuss the scenarios with your colleagues. How would you use your professional judgment to inform your decision-making and how would you act if these were your own scenarios?

After Hours Care

Jean is an RECE working in a child care centre in a large city. She graduated two years ago and has been working with toddlers ever since.

Six months ago, Jean was approached by a family of one of the children in her group. They were desperate for a “babysitter” and asked if she could help. Jean knew they had no one to turn to. Jean said she needed to think about the request and connect with her supervisor and colleagues. Jean wondered: *Was there a centre policy about providing after hours care? Did anyone else provide after hours care for families?*

Jean sat down with her supervisor and some of her closest colleagues. There weren't any written policies but Jean's supervisor did request that she proceed with caution and talk with the family about professional boundaries. Jean's colleagues thought Jean could manage it well.

Jean agreed and took time to review Standard V of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. She called the family and discussed the parameters of the new business relationship. The family was thrilled.

Over the next few months Jean felt that the business relationship allowed her to develop a deeper bond with the family and the child. She learned more about their home life, culture and parenting approaches. Jean shared with her colleagues that the experience was helping her to become a better RECE by allowing her to plan and provide opportunities for this child that she would not have otherwise considered.

During that time, another parent approached Jean hoping she could also provide the same service for her family. Jean wasn't sure if this additional relationship would complicate her work life. But, since she was managing one dual relationship so well, she agreed.

Shortly thereafter, things got complicated. The family she was originally working for expressed their frustration with her reduced schedule during pick-up one day. They had heard she was dividing her time with another family. Jean tried to clarify the importance of keeping the business relationship outside of her professional practice at the centre but the family was not happy and wanted to end the business relationship.

The next day, Jean told her supervisor what had happened and she already knew. Several other families had dropped into her office that morning to let her know that Jean was providing after hours care and they were concerned about what that might mean for their children. Others had commented that they had wished the service was also offered to them. Staff had also approached Jean's supervisor to give her warning that the situation had caused tensions and there might be family complaints.

Jean was devastated. She thought she had reflected and taken all the necessary steps to evaluate the risks. She thought that she had used her professional judgment appropriately and communicated clearly about her boundaries.

Strained Friendship

Simone, an RECE, lives in a small rural community and runs a home-based child care. She has lived in the community for 20 years and is actively involved in town halls, fundraisers and regularly attends her local church. For the past 10 years, Simone has supported her community by providing child care to many of the children of her friends and neighbours.

Recently, Simone's close friend texted her to see if Simone had space for her child. Simone had the space in her program and accepted the request immediately. Simone had known this child since he was an infant and was looking forward to seeing his mother regularly. They had been friends since high school and went to the same church.

Several weeks into the new professional relationship, Simone noticed that she was getting hourly texts from her friend to check-in on her child. Simone didn't mind sharing updates but now found she was constantly checking her phone and felt pressure to respond immediately. She also found that her friend had a number of specific food requests for her son and Simone felt ill-equipped to meet these needs.

Simone brought up the texting and the food requirements with her friend one day. Simone suggested that they connect and share about her child only at drop-off and pick-up times. She also asked for more clarity and support on preparing food for her son. Simone's friend apologized about the texting but said she didn't understand

why Simone couldn't accommodate her child's food requirements. She said Simone, after all this time as friends, should know what to do.

Later that week after work, Simone met up with her friend at a town function and realized there was tension between the two of them. Her friend wasn't relaxed. She tried to ask what was wrong but her friend was cold and distant.

The next day, Simone's friend called to say that she wasn't sure what to do. She felt like the friendship wasn't the same and she wanted to know more about her child throughout the day and make sure he was eating what he eats at home. Simone agreed and offered to resume her daily communication updates with her friend over text. Simone wondered if that would help. She didn't know what to say about the food requirements. She decided she would figure that out later and didn't bring it up.

Parent and Professional

Farah is an RECE and supervisor of a child care centre that is part of a multi-service agency in a medium-sized city. Farah has worked at the centre for 10 years and loves her job and the community.

The agency and centre’s philosophy recognizes the importance of supporting families, especially families of the staff. RECEs are not only permitted but encouraged to enrol their children at the centre. Farah believes, like her employer and the board of directors, that when RECE parents are confident in their choice of child care, they are more productive in their work—happier, supportive and responsive to children and families.

Farah feels strongly that the centre offers a quality early learning environment and it is important that both her children and the children of other staff have the same opportunities as the children and families from the community. She also thinks that families from the community like knowing that the RECEs choose to enrol their own children at the centre. She believes it adds to the safe and positive atmosphere and contributes to the family-focused workplace culture.

The staff work well together and respect Farah’s wishes as a parent just as they do with other families. Challenges have been respectfully addressed and resulted in collaborative problem-solving over the years. Everyone seems to support the centre’s approach to including children of the staff in the program.

Farah has worn “two hats” for much of her career. Two of her children attended the centre and transitioned well into the environment. Both children entered the centre as infants and happily remained until they began school. Farah recently returned from maternity leave with her third child and her 13-month-old started at the centre three months ago. It’s different this time. Her child cries for long periods of time after drop-off and every time he sees her throughout the day. Farah has started to hide out in her office and is not visiting the other rooms regularly in an effort to avoid every infant room transition. She is really struggling with her decision but feels passionately about the centre philosophy.

Staff members have decided to schedule a meeting. They are concerned with whether Farah’s child will adjust. This issue has come up before with other staff and their children, but it is different now. Farah is their supervisor.



Resources Consulted

The following resources were consulted in the development of this practice guideline.

Blake, P. (Spring/Summer 2005). [Practice Notes: Dual Relationships – Approach with Caution](#). *Perspective*. Toronto: Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers.

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