

Focus on the Principles

Summary

Through short skits and discussion, students are introduced to the biomedical ethical principles. A graphic organizer is provided to help them consider how these principles might apply to an ethical question.

Student Handouts: Background – Bioethical Principles, Focus on the Principles, Background on Principles (from the Ethics Background portion of the Primer) may also be used.

Teacher Instructions

Many teachers prefer to focus on the bioethical principles when first introducing ethics to students or when teaching about bioethics for the first time, rather than using all five ethical perspectives included in our Ethics Background section.

Students are already aware of ethical principles, even though they may not have the vocabulary to explain it as such. Before explaining what the ethical principles are, choose pairs or small groups of students to come to the front of the class to improvise 30-second role-plays. Have them demonstrate ethical principles by simulating an interaction between a parent and a child, such as:

- Parent respecting the privacy of child’s bedroom. (respect for persons, autonomy)
- Parent refraining from belittling a child out of anger. (nonmaleficence)
- Parent helping child with their homework. (beneficence)
- Parent being fair between siblings. (justice)

A compare/contrast method could be used, where a student playing a parent could demonstrate what it looks like when the principle is being honored and when it is not. It is also helpful for a student to ‘give voice’ to the ideas inside a person’s head by saying them out loud.

After each dramatization, elicit the idea of ‘ethical principles’ from the class and briefly discuss how the sketches might reflect such principles. Point out that these scenarios themselves bring up other issues:

- What if the child is hiding something in their room that could harm others?
- What if the parent is doing too much of a child’s homework?
- Does treating siblings fairly mean treating them equally?

Provide students with the ‘Background-Bioethical Principles’ sheet and review the Principles with students. Be sure to emphasize that other values or principles (such as the importance of strong and caring relationships) are often important to a case in addition to these!

Lastly, use the ‘Focus on the Principles’ sheet to examine an ethical question of your choosing through the lens of the principles. Not all principles will apply to a question equally.

Note that if you are asking your students to propose a solution to the ethical question and justify their position, you will want to ensure that they have considered the FACTS of the situation as well as the stakeholders involved. The ‘Focus on the Principles’ sheet can be used in combination with the Decision-Making Framework to help students come to a well-reasoned decision.

Background - Bioethical Principles

'Respect'

This principle focuses on respect for individuals. Part of respecting an individual has to do with respecting their autonomy. The word autonomy comes from the Greek *autos* (self) and *nomos* (governance). Autonomy emphasizes the responsibility individuals have for their own lives. Individuals have the right to self-determination and to make their own decisions and choices. The rules for informed consent in medicine derive from the principle of autonomy. In medicine, there is also a special emphasis on respecting individuals from vulnerable populations.

'Do Good' / 'Do no harm'

'Do Good' (beneficence) stresses directly helping others, acting in their best interests, and being a benefit to them. It requires positive action.

'Do No Harm' (nonmaleficence) relates to one of the most traditional medical guidelines, the Hippocratic oath (First of all, do no harm). It requires individuals to not intentionally or directly inflict harm upon others.

Justice- 'Be Fair'

This principle relates to 'Giving to each that which is his due' (Aristotle). It dictates that persons who are equals should qualify for equal treatment, and that resources, risks, and costs should be distributed equitably.

Some ethicists also add:

Care

Focus on the maintenance of healthy, caring relationships between individuals and within a community. The principle of care adds context to the traditional principles and can be used in a complementary way alongside them.

Focus on the Principles

Consider how the principles apply to the ethical question.
Some principles may apply more than others for a particular situation.

