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**VICTORIAN CURRICULUM F-10: ETHICAL CAPABILITY**

**SELECTION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES**

# Victorian Curriculum F-10: Ethical Capability

## Selection of ethical principles

The Ethical Capability curriculum requires students to understand and apply ethical principles.

Often this is part of the analysis and evaluation of an ethical issue. For more information on analysing and evaluating ethical issues see the [Teaching Ethical Issues: Planning Tool](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/viccurric/ethics/Ethical_Planning_Tool.docx).

This resource answers the following questions:

* What are ethical principles?
* What are some examples of general principles?
* How might this work in practice?
* What are some challenges?

### What are ethical principles?

Ethical principles are in a *general* way concerned with the right way to achieve act. They can be used to help justify a particular response.

They build on something that is valued to create a general guide to action. For example if authority is valued, then obeying authority could be a guiding ethical principle that follows from this.

So when faced with a situation where the right thing to do is unclear, someone might look to their general principle of obeying authority to help guide them.

Whether to use a principle/s in a *specific* situation requires some extra thought, for example about consequences in a particular case or duties or obligations that exist. It also requires thinking about what a general principle might mean in a specific case – following the obeying authority example, does it mean in this case obeying a particular law, or parents or..?

Ethical principles can be derived from cultural norms and other forms of socialisation, philosophical thought, or religious and non-religious world views.

### What are some examples of ethical principles?

Examples of commonly encountered ethical principles that may be useful in analysing and evaluating ethical issues are listed below, with variations shown for some of them.

Common ethical principles include:

1. People should be treated as ends not means (that is, their autonomy should be respected)
2. Treat others as you would want to be treated (this recognises their equal status to you)
3. Act justly (for example distributing costs and benefits as deserved)
4. Actions are right in so far as they promote happiness or pleasure and wrong in so far as they produce unhappiness or pain – associated with ‘do no harm’ and ‘do good’
5. Act in a way that protects human rights

A range of other ethical principles, some of which are derived from the major ones above, include:

1. Do not lie/steal… (and so on)
2. Be generous/kind/charitable…(and so on)
3. It is always important/not always important to obey authority
4. It is acceptable to contravene an ethical duty (such as not lying or respecting human rights) as long as: the person is not caught/no rules or laws are broken/harm is minimised/it is culturally acceptable; or, it is never acceptable
5. it acceptable to act in a way that brings cost (e.g. unhappiness, or harm) to the self or group as long as: the outcome is ultimately good/the other group or person reciprocates/the significance of the outcome is not great/it is repairing a wrong/is consistent with an authority/it is culturally acceptable; or, it is never acceptable
6. How something is done/intention is more important/less important/equal to the outcome
7. There is no difference/some difference between rules/laws and what it is to act ethically

### How do these general ethical principles work in practice?

The general ethical principles above may need to be nuanced for a particular context or issue. For example fair play is explored in the Health and Physical Education learning area.

Ethical principles specific to fair play could be developed, based on a selection of general ethical principles. For example:

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| **General ethical principles** | **Specific context: Fair play** |
| How something is done/intention is more important/less important/equal to the outcome  There is no difference/some difference between rules/laws and what it is to act ethically  It is always important/not always important to obey authority  It is acceptable to contravene an ethical duty (such as not lying or respecting human rights) as long as the person is not caught/no rules or laws are broken/harm is minimised/it is culturally acceptable; or it is never acceptable | Succeeding is more important/less important/equal to winning  In sport, there is no difference/some difference between written rules and what is fair play  It is important/not important to obey the coach/captain/the crowd  It is acceptable for a player to play unfairly as long as they are not caught/the team still wins/it is still within the written rules/no-one is seriously harmed/the crowd likes it/it is never acceptable |

These contextualised ethical principles can then be used to help analyse and evaluate an ethical issue related to fair play, such as contradicting an umpire decision that a ball is out in a game of tennis.

### What are some challenges in working with ethical principles?

* Their meaning can be contested. For example ‘act justly’ is a common principle but there is disagreement about what exactly it is to act justly
* Principles can conflict with each other, creating a dilemma
* People might disagree on the importance of various principles generally or in a particular situation
* People might disagree on who these principles apply to, for example should children be treated as persons with full autonomy?

Note that the Ethical Capability curriculum addresses these challenges.