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in people's lives

CODE OF ETHICS

Practice Guidelines & Guidebook

Introduction

The NADSP Code of Ethics Practice Guidelines & Guidebook reflects an important step forward in defining ethical, professional, and person-centered direct support practice. As the role of direct support professionals grows in complexity and importance, the ethical guidance that supports their work must also evolve.

This guidebook builds on the NADSP Code of Ethics and reflects the realities of today's practice. These include the use of technology, the growing diversity of people and communities served, and the recognition of direct support professionals as skilled professionals with ethical responsibilities. Its purpose is to turn the Code's principles into clear, practical standards that guide direct support professionals in providing support that honors dignity, rights, choice, and well-being.

This guidebook is designed to support direct support professionals, supervisors, organizations, and educators. It shows how ethical principles apply to everyday work. Topics include technology use, confidentiality, documentation, continuing education, supervision, cultural competence, and person-centered support in home and community-based settings.

Guidebook Sections

1. Technology in Direct Support Practice
2. Continuing Education for Direct Support Professionals
3. Supervision in Direct Support Practice
4. Direct Support in Residential Settings
5. Direct Support Considerations in Cultural Competence

Most importantly, this guidebook emphasizes that ethics is not just about following rules. It is about making thoughtful, respectful, and informed decisions that help people with disabilities live self-directed lives. Using this guidebook can strengthen professional judgment, improve the quality of support, and uphold the values of the profession.



Technology in Direct Support Practice

Ethical Use of Technology

Direct support professionals must use technology in ways that protect and promote the dignity and well-being of the people they support. This means balancing innovation with respect for rights and privacy. When used well, technology can improve supports and outcomes.

Here are several key aspects to consider:

- **Informed Consent**

People must understand how technology will be used, including data collection and sharing. Direct support professionals must get clear, informed consent before using technology that affects a person.

- **Confidentiality**

Direct support professionals must safeguard personal information using secure systems. Access to data should be limited and clearly defined. All HIPAA rules must be followed.

- **Equity and Accessibility**

Technology must be usable by people with different abilities. It should be simple, accessible, and inclusive.

- **Cultural Sensitivity**

Technology should match a person's language, culture, and preferences. Direct support professionals should learn from a person's family, friends, and community members to better understand their unique needs, preferences, and desires.

- **Empowerment**

Technology should support independence, not control or restrict. Direct support professionals should gather feedback and adjust tools to meet individual needs.

- **Accuracy of Information**

Accurate documentation is essential to quality direct support. Direct support professionals must clearly and truthfully record relevant details about a person's situation, needs, and supports. Information should be as complete as necessary and checked for accuracy whenever possible. Using clear and consistent language helps ensure others can understand the information and respond effectively. Timely and well-organized documentation also supports continuity of care and better decision-making.

- **Respectful Documentation**

Respectful documentation is equally important. Using person-centered language supports dignity and recognizes the value of each individual. All records must follow legal and ethical standards for privacy and confidentiality, including HIPAA. Documentation should also reflect awareness of a person's cultural background and perspective.



- **Confidentiality in the Use of Technology**

Direct support professionals must protect confidential information when using technology. This includes limiting access to authorized individuals and using secure systems such as passwords and user authentication. Passwords and access codes must never be shared, and staff should be prepared to recognize common security risks, such as phishing.

Only information necessary for providing support should be collected and stored. This reduces the risk of harm in the event of a breach. Sensitive information must also be properly disposed of, whether in digital or physical form.

All practices must follow local, state, and federal laws, including HIPAA. Protecting confidentiality is both an ethical responsibility and a legal requirement.

Social Media

Direct support professionals must use social media responsibly to protect privacy and maintain professional boundaries. They should never share identifiable information or details about the people they support.

Direct support professionals should not accept friend requests or engage in personal social media relationships with the people they support. Keeping personal and professional accounts separate helps maintain trust.

Employers should provide clear guidance on appropriate use. All social media activity should use respectful, person-centered language and demonstrate professionalism and integrity. This includes:

- No sharing of confidential information about people supported.
- Encourage sharing positive organizational news while adhering to confidentiality rules.
- Prohibit inflammatory or discriminatory comments that could reflect poorly on the direct support workforce, the organization or people with disabilities.

Use of Personal Technology for Work Purposes

Personal devices can help direct support professionals work more efficiently, but they must be used in an ethical and secure way. Smartphones and tablets can support communication with team members, people supported, and others involved in care. Direct support professionals must keep personal and work information separate and ensure employers are aware of any work-related use and can access needed information.

Personal technology can also help with daily tasks. Scheduling and task management apps can track appointments, medications, and routines. If personal devices are used for documentation, the information must be secure, follow privacy rules, and be available to the employer. Only approved apps should be used.

These devices can also improve safety and independence. Features like GPS and emergency alerts can help in urgent situations. Tools such as speech-to-text and reminders can support people in daily activities. When using personal devices for video calls, telehealth, or meetings, privacy must always be protected. Used responsibly, personal technology can improve both efficiency and quality of support.





Continuing Education for Direct Support Professionals

Direct support professionals have an ethical duty to participate in advanced continuing education beyond regulatory or mandated training. A commitment to continuing education is also grounded in an ethical principle stated in the NADSP Code of Ethics: Professionalism, Accountability and Growth — “As a direct support professional, I will support people in leading the lives they choose. I will build strong partnerships with them, their families, support networks, other professionals, and the community. I recognize that these partners rely on me to bring my best self to this profession and to be accountable for my actions. I will pursue lifelong learning, professional development, and collaboration to strengthen my knowledge and skills.”

Continuing education further provides the direct support professional with the opportunity to learn new information, develop and strengthen qualifications for certification, meet changing direct support career challenges, and explore new careers and leadership roles in the direct support profession or human services in general.

Continuing Personal and Professional Education beyond Required Training

Direct support professionals have an ethical responsibility to continue learning beyond required training. Ongoing education helps them strengthen their skills, respond to changing needs, and provide high-quality support.

Continuing education allows direct support professionals to gain new knowledge, improve their qualifications, and prepare for new challenges or roles. They should seek learning opportunities that relate to their work and the people they support, and consult with supervisors when they need additional training or guidance. When they feel unprepared to meet

a person’s needs, direct support professionals must communicate this and request further support or education.

Commitment to Voluntary Credentialing and Certification

Although direct support is not a licensed profession, credentialing and certification are becoming more common. These opportunities help demonstrate competence and strengthen the field. Direct support professionals are encouraged to explore certification options and discuss them with supervisors or employers.

Leadership Training and Advancement

Direct support professionals also play important leadership roles, regardless of title. They are expected to act with integrity, promote human and civil rights, and model respectful support in their communities. Seeking leadership training, exploring career advancement, and developing areas of specialization can support both professional growth and better outcomes for the people they serve.

Mentorship is another important part of professional development. Direct support professionals can benefit from learning from others while also sharing their own knowledge and experience. Leadership often develops through these everyday professional relationships.





Supervision in Direct Support Practice

Direct support professionals need guidance to understand their role and provide quality support to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. They are responsible for seeking supervision and asking for help when needed. Because many people enter this field without full training, supervision should begin at hire and continue over time. Ongoing support helps build skills, strengthen practice, and improve outcomes.

Supervisory Practice

Effective supervision is built on collaboration, trust, and respect. Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that direct support professionals follow ethical standards and provide competent support. They should offer constructive feedback and create opportunities for professional growth, while direct support professionals are expected to be open to feedback and committed to improving their skills.

Regular communication is important. Whenever possible, supervisors and direct support professionals should meet in person, or virtually when needed, to discuss concerns and improve practice. Supervisors should also be aware of workplace stress and provide support or resources when needed, recognizing the challenges of the role.

Supervisors must maintain confidentiality in supervisory discussions and avoid conflicts of interest, such as supervising family members or individuals with whom they have a close personal relationship. Both supervisors and direct support professionals share responsibility for addressing ethical concerns and using the Code of Ethics as a guide.

Clinical Support

In clinical settings, direct support professionals should support, but not replace, communication between the person and the clinician. During clinical appointments, they should encourage the person to speak directly with the clinician and take an active role in their own care.

Direct support professionals must ensure privacy during appointments, including virtual visits. They should also work collaboratively with case managers, mental health providers, and other professionals, sharing information only with proper consent and maintaining confidentiality at all times.

Case Management Support

Direct support professionals should work closely with case managers, support coordinators, and service brokers to ensure effective service are provided. They should share updates on progress while protecting confidentiality.

All information must be shared with the person's consent and handled according to privacy rules. Working as a team helps ensure consistent and quality support.





Direct Support Delivery in Residential Settings

Words matter in this work. Terms like “community-based programs” or “supported living” reflect a more positive, person-centered communication, health and safety, relationships, skill-building, and documentation. Each role requires different skills, and ongoing learning is an important part of the job.

Expect Transition

Change is a normal part of residential support. People’s needs, living situations, and relationships can shift over time. Direct support professionals must be flexible and ready to adjust their support as needed.

The goal of support is to help people build skills and grow, not to assume fixed outcomes. Supports should be individualized and focused on possibility, not limits. As services continue to evolve, more community living options are available. Direct support professionals must respect and support each person’s choices about where, how, and with whom they live.

Building Everyday Skills

Direct support professionals should always support growth in independence and community participation. Every day offers chances to teach and learn skills, both in planned ways and during regular routines. These moments help people build skills for the life they want, not just the life they have now. Ideally, programs are the journey, not the destination.

Some skills can be taught fully. Others may need to be adapted, such as using tools or breaking the task into smaller steps. In some cases, direct support professionals may need to do most of the task, but the person should still be included and involved as much as possible. Being present

and part of the activity still supports learning and connection.

It is also important to recognize all forms of communication, including “yes” and “no,” whether spoken or not. Respecting these choices helps ensure that control stays with the person and supports their right to make decisions.

Levels of Support

Direct support professionals should understand that support can be provided in different ways. This may include physical assistance, verbal or visual prompts, or simple cues. Allowing time for a person to respond or to start a task on their own helps show what they are learning and what they are able to do.

No matter the level of support, the goal is to encourage the highest possible level of participation. Support should help the person stay involved and build skills over time.

Team Roles and Collaboration

Direct support professionals are key members of a team or circle of support. They often know the person well through daily interaction and can offer valuable insights.

Other team members also bring valuable knowledge and expertise. Direct support professionals should understand the roles of these team members and work collaboratively with them. Working together helps ensure better support and outcomes for the person.





Direct Support Considerations in Cultural Competence

Direct support professionals work in increasingly diverse communities and must be responsive to cultural differences. This diversity is seen in both the people who provide support and the people who receive it. Direct support professionals must grow in their understanding of cultural differences and show respect in all interactions. They should also understand how racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and other forms of bias can harm people by creating barriers and limiting opportunities.

Cultural competence is not something a person fully achieves. It is a lifelong process of learning through new experiences, relationships, and perspectives. Direct support professionals must stay open to learning and improving for the benefit of the people they support.

Self-Awareness and Cultural Humility

Direct support professionals must respect the values of others without imposing their own. They should reflect on their personal beliefs and biases and make sure these do not affect the support they provide. Understanding fairness, respect, and the impact of identity—such as disability, race, gender, and religion—is an important part of this work.

Support should match each person's cultural preferences and honor their dignity and worth. Cultural humility also means recognizing when you do not have all the answers. In those moments, direct support professionals should seek guidance from supervisors or others in their organization.

Family Values and Traditions

Direct support professionals should take time to understand the person and their family. Family traditions and values often shape what is important in daily life. Respecting these values helps provide more meaningful and effective support.

Religion and Spirituality

Everyone has the right to practice their own faith or spiritual beliefs. Direct support professionals should support access to these practices and respect different beliefs. No single belief system applies to everyone.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identification

Direct support professionals must respect and support each person's gender identity and personal preferences. This includes using the correct name and pronouns and supporting choices related to personal care, relationships, and self-expression. They should also be aware of possible differences in access to healthcare and services.

Advocacy

Direct support professionals must recognize when someone is being treated unfairly and take action to support them. They should act as allies and help stop discrimination when it occurs. They should also support people in building confidence, making decisions, and speaking up for themselves.

Advocacy may also take place within the organization. Direct support professionals have an important role as mentors and role models, showing respect and promoting dignity in the community.



Understanding History and Change

Many people with disabilities have experienced trauma, abuse, or exclusion. Direct support professionals should understand this history and recognize that these experiences can shape how people view others and the world around them.

Language and practice have changed over time. Today, the focus is on person-centered support that values choice and inclusion. Direct support professionals should use respectful, current language and focus on supporting people as they are, rather than trying to “fix” them.

Conscious and Unconscious Bias

Bias means having a belief or preference about a person or group that is not based on facts or the individual. These beliefs often come from our experiences, culture, and what we have learned over time. Some biases are conscious, meaning we are aware of them. Others are unconscious, meaning we may not realize they affect how we think or act.

Direct support professionals should think about their own biases and how they may affect their work. They should make sure they treat people fairly and with respect. If they are concerned that bias may affect their support, they should ask for help or guidance.



Power Structure

Direct support professionals have influence and must use it responsibly. They should support people in making their own choices and speaking for themselves. The person supported is the expert in their own life.

Real choice means having more than one option. Direct support professionals should help people explore options, understand outcomes, and learn from their decisions. Making mistakes is a normal part of growth and learning for everyone.

Diverse Workforce

Direct support professionals work as part of a team and should treat coworkers with respect. They should value different perspectives and learn from one another's experiences. Working together helps achieve better outcomes.

Culturally Sensitive Communication

Communication should always be respectful, clear, and person-centered. Direct support professionals should listen carefully, use appropriate language, and avoid judgment. They should use problem-solving skills such as calming situations, offering reassurance, and supporting informed decisions.

Whenever possible, communication should match the person's preferred style, whether that is spoken, written, or through other methods.

Conclusion

This guidebook is meant to be used, not set aside. The next step is to put these standards into practice each day. Direct support professionals should use this guide to reflect on their work, make informed decisions, and respond to real situations with care and professionalism. Supervisors and organizations can use it to support training, guide conversations, and strengthen team practices.

There will be times when the right choice is not clear. In those moments, this guidebook can serve as a reference point. It can help direct support professionals slow down, think through options, and act in ways that respect the rights, dignity, and goals of the people they support.

Putting these standards into practice will strengthen the quality and consistency of support. It will also support the growth of direct support professionals as skilled and respected members of an essential and valued workforce. Over time, this leads to better outcomes: people having more control over their lives, stronger relationships, and greater inclusion in their communities.

The work of direct support is important and has real impact. By using this guidebook in daily practice, direct support professionals help ensure that their work reflects the values of respect, choice, and full participation for all people.

We wish you the very best in your work.



Learn more
about the Code.