

Case 4 ♦ Professional Love?

It is two o'clock in the morning and Maria has just violated both her professional code of ethics and the law. Maria is a foster care counselor and she has just taken Bethany, an eight-year-old foster child, into her home for the evening. The situation is an emergency, but it is not especially uncommon. Bethany's foster parents received a late night call about a dying relative and chose to leave immediately. Bethany is not family, so she needed to be relocated while her foster family is away. Unfortunately, most foster homes are full and the only facility available to take Bethany in the middle of the night is a group home called Interface. Interface is meant for troubled older teens and Maria could not bear to place Bethany there, so she took Bethany home to sleep in her guest bedroom.

It is fairly common for social workers to use their own resources to supplement the services they are able to offer others. Many children of older social workers have stories of sharing their rooms with foster children or of developing family relationships with their parents' clients. Today professional guidelines restrict the sorts of personal relationships social workers develop and generally restrict "dual relationships" such as caseworker and family friend, because the relationships may present a conflict of interest.¹ However, when asked, many foster children describe their best caseworkers as those who best connected with them and their families on a personal level.²

Maria rejects many of the modern protections against conflicts of interest as an "idealistic" personal/professional distinction. According to Maria having a personal relationship with some foster children has helped to boost their sense of being loved. Research suggests that children's self-esteem is strongly linked to the sense that they are loved and some have argued that children have a right to be loved.³ Maria has bonded with Bethany and wants to support their relationship. She has taken Bethany to visit Bethany's mother in prison and has comforted her about the death of her father. At this point Maria feels that the right thing to do is to take Bethany home for a decent night's sleep and begin looking for a temporary placement in the morning.

One implication of Maria's decision is that she must lie in her official incident report. Because Maria is not a licensed foster parent, Bethany cannot legally spend the night at her home. Officially Maria reports keeping Bethany in her custody at work overnight while unsuccessfully looking for a placement. For many in the office this report has a clear and unproblematic implied meaning, but some of Maria's colleagues would disapprove if they knew. Some might worry that Maria is getting too close to a client for her own good; others might worry mostly about a detrimental interaction between Maria's twelve-year-old son and eight-year-old Bethany. Finally, some might worry that Maria's behavior, combined with her habit of hugging the children with whom she works and kissing them on the head or cheek, will be misunderstood or potentially resented by the children's parents.⁴

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¹ "Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, Sec. 5.02," National Association of Social Workers, 2008, <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp>

² John McMahon, "What Do Children Look for in Social Workers?" *Fostering Perspectives*, 2004, 9(1) http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp_vol9no1/sw.htm

³ Matthew Liao, "The Right of Children to be Loved" *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2006, 14(4): 420-40.

⁴ Page Jools, "Do Mothers Want Professional Caregivers to Love Their Babies?" *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 2011, 9(3): 310-323.