



Ethics in Testing: A Personal Responsibility

A Guide for Review Course Instructors to Share



PEDIATRIC NURSING
CERTIFICATION BOARD

Everyone wants to be successful when taking a board certification exam.

Those individuals in roles supporting testers, like review course instructors, faculty, supervisors, or mentors, want a passing outcome too.

But do you know what you can and can't say about exam content?



Purpose

The Pediatric Nursing Certification Board (PNCB) offers this presentation for review course instructors to present and clarify what specific behaviors and practices are allowed or prohibited when it comes to sharing information about exam content.

You will walk through policies and see specific examples.

This presentation is just one tool in [PNCB's Ethics in Testing: A Personal Responsibility Toolkit](#).

Please tell peers and colleagues about PNCB's toolkit—even if they are not taking a PNCB exam—since ethics in testing apply to ***all*** types of examinations.



After viewing this presentation, review course attendees will be able to:

1. Explain why exam ethics are important
2. Describe acceptable and prohibited behaviors and practices
3. Define brain dumping
4. Access strategies to stop or redirect questionable or prohibited conversations
5. Discuss exam security measures
6. Uphold exam ethics before, during, and after testing
7. Cite ways to report an exam ethics violation
8. Describe consequences for violations



The Importance of Exam Ethics

Certification's Reach Extends Beyond Nursing Professionals

Each of us has a personal commitment to uphold exam ethics.

Employers, patients, and their families count on the integrity of nursing care and the credentials that validate specialized practice knowledge.

Exam ethics violations impact the certification board, you, other students, the profession, and public trust.



The Faculty Voice

PNCB surveyed RN and PNP faculty in 2020 and asked:

If you could communicate one statement related to exam ethics to students, what would you say?

Faculty strongly believe that upholding exam ethics...

- Ensures the integrity of the profession
- Is indicative of an honest, safe, competent clinician
- Ultimately protects patients
- Is a personal responsibility





Code of Conduct

**Acceptable and Prohibited
Behaviors and Practices**

Understand PNCB's Code of Ethics

All exam applications, and each annual recertification application, require an attestation to uphold [PNCB's Code of Ethics](#).

The Code of Ethics states:

Acting dishonestly or unfairly to personally *gain advantage or provide advantage* to someone planning to test is strictly prohibited and can jeopardize certification status or eligibility to test status for any involved parties.

Do Not Disclose

All candidates and certificants attest that they agree not to disclose or communicate information about exam questions with others.

- It is forbidden under federal copyright law to copy, reproduce, record, distribute, or display examination questions by any means, in whole or in part. Doing so may subject you to severe civil and criminal penalties.
- As an exam candidate, you agree not to share information about test questions and answers in any way.
- This includes talking about questions with your colleagues, review course instructors, supervisors, mentors, or faculty.
- Violation of this confidentiality agreement can jeopardize your certification or opportunity to become certified in the future. Protect yourself, your colleagues, and the credential by not discussing test questions with anyone.

The Content Outline

First, it's important to understand the role of the content outline for your credential's exam.

- PNCB conducts Job Task Analysis research every 3 to 7 years.
- The study asks nurses with the credential to validate what is most prevalent and/or most important in practice for the role.
- Study results are then used to develop the content outline, also known as the test blueprint.



The Content Outline continued

- Major domains of knowledge are identified from the data and used to determine the number of questions on the exam by content topic areas.
- Volunteer subject matter experts write questions for the different content topic areas. For a detailed look at the full process of vetting questions and creating an exam form, visit PNCB's [exam development webpage](#).
- Each exam's content outline is posted on the PNCB website. It's an essential part of an exam candidate's study plan.



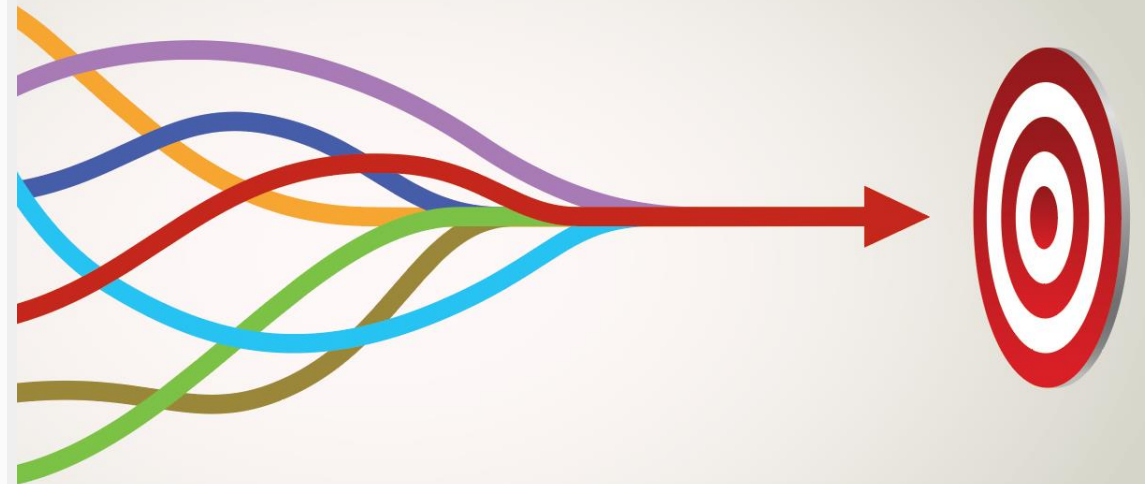
Did you know? A certification board with 4 exam programs like PNCB must spend approximately **\$1.5 million dollars annually** for on-going exam development activity as well as exam delivery and seat fees for candidates. Other associated costs related to ongoing accreditation, copyright efforts, and PNCB staff time are not included in this number.

Before we explore examples of acceptable and prohibited conversations, keep in mind the difference between the content outline and the exam itself.



The content outline represents the big picture categories of what knowledge is tested. It's the road map that provides direction as you study.

The exam represents the specific, targeted questions to validate your personal knowledge compared to the content outline.





Example 1

“Expect a lot of respiratory content. It’s the number one clinical problem on the exam content outline.”

Is this acceptable?

Example 1 Answer

Yes, this is acceptable.

- **This information is clearly noted on a PNCB exam content outline.**
- **No specifics are mentioned.**





Example 2

“What kinds of respiratory issues were on your exam?”

Is this acceptable?

Example 2 Answer

No, this is not acceptable. This conversation is prohibited because:

- **Specifics are being requested.**
- **Someone is asking for exact exam question content.**





Example 3

“Make sure you brush up on growth and development since you work in a hospital now.”

Is this acceptable?

Example 3 Answer

Yes, this is acceptable.

- **This information is clearly noted on a PNCB exam content outline.**
- **No specifics are mentioned.**





Example 4

“Make sure you remember when a baby starts pointing at objects.”

Is this acceptable?

Example 4 Answer

No, this is not acceptable.

- **This information is too specific and goes beyond the broad exam content outline topic areas and task statements.**





Example 5

“I had a question about acute renal failure, potassium levels, and arrhythmias. Make sure you look that up.”

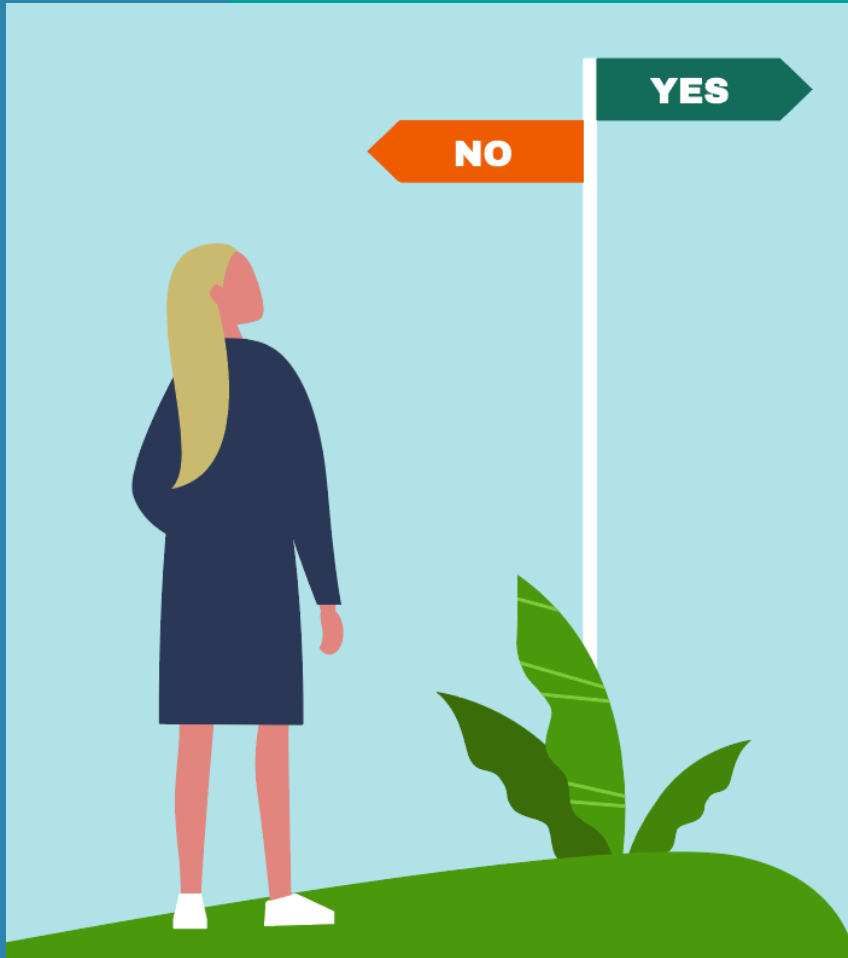
Is this acceptable?

Example 5 Answer

No, this is not acceptable.

- **This information shares details of an actual question. All exam content must remain confidential.**





Example 6

“Renal issues are a clinical problem listed on the content outline. Be prepared for those since we don’t see that in our unit.”

Is this acceptable?

Example 6 Answer

Yes, this is acceptable.

- This information stays within the safe confines of what is on an exam content outline.





Example 7

“Skin wounds are on the exam content outline, including burns, so you need to study that.”

Is this acceptable?

Example 7 Answer

Yes, this is acceptable.

- Again, this information stays within the safe confines of what is on an exam content outline.





Example 8

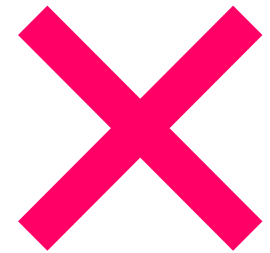
“I didn’t expect a burn question asking about fluid replacement. I think the right answer had to do with capillary refill.”

Is this acceptable?

Example 8 Answer

No, this is not acceptable.

- **This is a violation because the information intends to reveal both an actual question and its answer.**



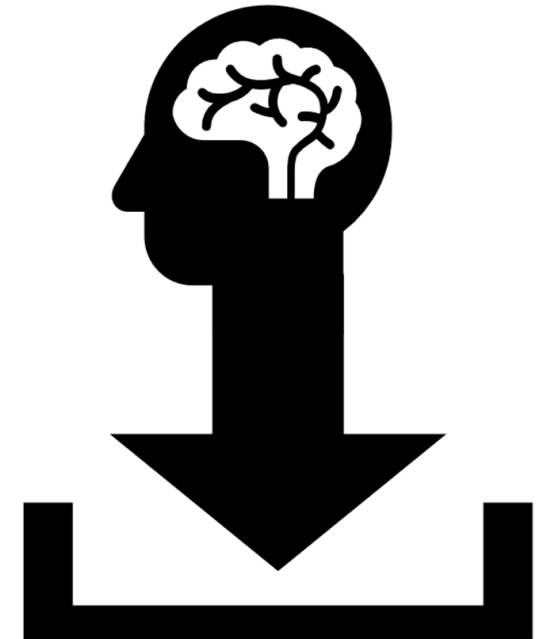
Brain Dumping Is Prohibited

Brain dumping is usually defined as an intentional effort to record questions/answers during an exam... or remember questions/answers and document them afterwards.

The list of questions is then used to gain advantage on future test attempts. The list might be shared with others, such as peers/colleagues planning to test or an influencer who supports others in testing. A group of people may be involved to gather as many questions as they can.

You may even be approached by others to try to remember questions and share what you witnessed on the exam.

Brain dumping is a significant ethical violation and must be reported.





If in doubt, simply don't discuss.

Discussing exam questions can jeopardize your future exam attempt or lead to revocation of your credential and other consequences.

But what if you witness others engaging in prohibited information sharing?



Strategies to Stop or Redirect Questionable or Prohibited Conversations

You hear someone talking about specific exam content. Let's walk through some scenarios to learn five ways to stop and/or redirect. **Note** that while we aim to be specific, we cannot predict every possible scenario, so this list is not inclusive of all red flags needing action.



Your peers are talking about preparing for their exam. They begin to discuss specifics beyond the published exam content outline. They may or may not mention something seen when testing or that they heard from someone else.

Context is important here. For example, ethical review course instructors will use the exam content outline to write their own original practice questions or offer a deep dive into textbook-based subject matter.

YOUR FIRST OPTION IS TO SIMPLY ASK FOR A PAUSE.

Just as operating room nurses can call a time-out for patient safety, feel empowered to **call a time-out** on the conversation. Share your opinion that the discussion feels very specific. Bring others into the pause. Ask where they heard this information. Ask if they are aware of PNCB exam ethics. Direct them to the [PNCB toolkit](#) which gives examples of prohibited discussions and outlines consequences.

Red flags in conversations include phrases like:

- This question was on my exam.
- I was surprised this topic was on the exam.
- Be sure to remember XYZ for [specific topic].
- I heard this from a recent tester.
- I wrote down what I heard from other testers.
- Do you want to see a document we're all sharing with what we remembered?

Any red flags mean a full stop to the conversation. Tell those discussing the content that they must stop. At this point, you are ethically obligated to report this experience to PNCB. You can choose between calling or emailing PNCB or using the anonymous [tip reporting form](#). You can additionally recount the incident to a supervisor, clinical educator, or faculty member.

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You recently tested and passed. You felt confident in your study plan and presented your plan during a hospital review course. Colleagues look to you for advice and mentoring. One of them asks what questions you remember or if something specific was on your exam.

REDIRECT AND EDUCATE PEERS. MAKE SURE EXAM ETHICS IS A TALKING POINT.

- The **content outline** is the essential resource as they prepare. Point colleagues to it if asked about specific exam topics. Ask them if they've reviewed the content outline, line by line, to identify their personal knowledge gaps. Suggest that they look up all topics areas, and especially areas of weakness, in a textbook on PNCB's reference list. They can also consider completing CE on those topics.
- Ask what they have done to prepare beyond the content outline. Compare notes on **study practices and habits**. Are they using smart goals? What practice tests and review materials have they used? Have they sought out or initiated a study group?
- If red flags arise, pause the conversation and refer to [PNCB's toolkit](#) to help them stay on the right side of exam ethics.
- If problem conversation continues, use the firmer tactics below.

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A questionable or flagrant conversation does pause and redirect appropriately... then starts again. Or perhaps the conversation is fast-paced and difficult to de-escalate. You feel very certain the conversation is unethical.

ASK FOR A PAUSE. INFORM THOSE INVOLVED ABOUT THE BIGGER IMPLICATIONS OF EXAM ETHICS VIOLATIONS.

Possible talking points include:

- Exam ethics violations have a big impact. A certification board can stop an exam nationwide for everyone.
- This is against what we stand for as nurses.
- Ethics violations like this can hurt our profession (or specialty).
- This kind of discussion can jeopardize our future certification chances.
- **For advanced practice:** Passing this exam allows us to diagnose and treat children. To practice safely for our future patients, we can't earn certification unethically.

At this point, you are ethically obligated to report this experience to PNCB. You can call or email PNCB or use the anonymous [tip reporting form](#). You can additionally recount the incident to a supervisor, clinical educator, or faculty member.

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There may be times you don't feel comfortable speaking up. Maybe the person talking is a supervisor or person with influence. In this scenario, you may need to remove yourself from the situation unfolding, but you still have a responsibility to act.

YOU MUST STILL REPORT THE INCIDENT.

You can call or email PNCB or use the anonymous [tip reporting form](#). You can report the incident to a supervisor, clinical educator, or faculty member too.

Strategies to Stop and Redirect Conversations

You hear someone talking about specific exam content.

Use PNCB's [infographic](#) to stop or redirect questionable or prohibited conversations.

It includes red flags to help you recognize unethical discussions.

Any red flags mean a full stop to the conversation. Tell those discussing the content that they must stop. At this point, you are ethically obligated to report this experience to PNCB. You can choose between calling or emailing PNCB or using the anonymous [tip reporting form](#).

Speaking Up Is Hard

There may be times you don't feel comfortable speaking up. Maybe the person talking is a friend, supervisor, or person with influence.

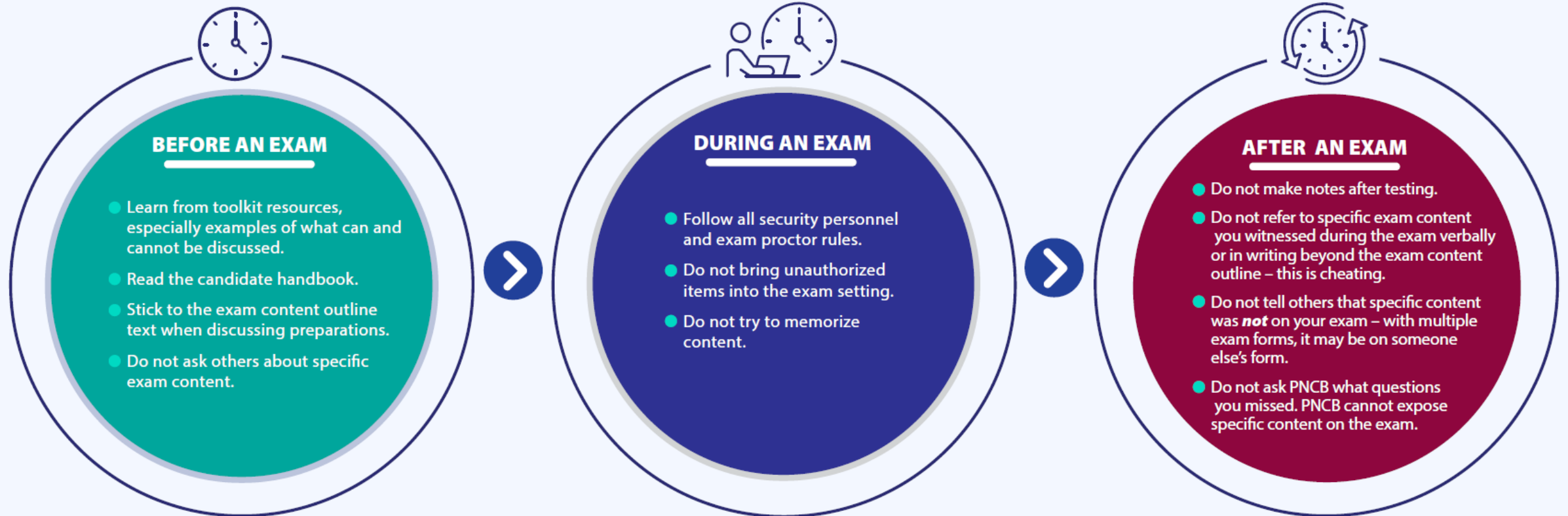
In this situation, you may need to remove yourself from the situation unfolding but you still have a responsibility to act.

You must still report the incident. You can call 1-888-641-2767 or email exam@pncb.org or use the anonymous [tip reporting form](#).

In addition, you can recount the incident to a faculty member, supervisor, or clinical educator.



Especially as an exam candidate, be sure to understand and practice ethical behaviors throughout the testing process.



A Note about Quizlet and Other Preparation Tools

There are many ways candidates prepare or form study groups for their exam, such as Quizlets, social media groups, video conferencing, and face-to-face gatherings.

No matter the format, do not use any PNCB exam materials **or** content, including content from our copyrighted **practice tests**.

You cannot duplicate all **or** part of any PNCB practice test module or exam. Content found in PNCB's practice tests is for single copy, personal use only once purchased (copying, distributing, or posting publicly to any website is prohibited).

The creator of the Quizlet, for example, is responsible for the content—even if the content was contributed by others.

If you share information, it's your responsibility to ensure the information does not come directly from PNCB exams, practice tests, or other modules. If information is contributed by others, ask them about the origin of the content.



PNCB Security Measures

PNCB is serious about upholding test security and protecting its intellectual property.

Exam ethics violations impact the organization, you, other nurses, the profession, and public trust.

PNCB test security measures include but are not limited to:

- Data forensics consultants
- Web patrols that search for copyrighted exam material
- Anonymous online [tip reporting form](#)



Don't Risk the Consequences

If an exam candidate or certificant violates PNCB's Code of Ethics or engages in unethical behaviors related to exam content, PNCB may:

- Stop an in-progress exam
- Suspend exams for all testers of that exam type
- Delay release of score results beyond advertised timeframe
- Invalidate exam scores
- Suspend or revoke certification
- Prohibit future exam attempts for the individuals involved
- Take legal action against individuals themselves
- Report lapse of certification to state boards of nursing



Reporting Recap



Need to report an exam ethics violation or have questions?

Call PNCB at
1-888-641-2767



Or email PNCB at
exam@pncb.org

Or use PNCB's
anonymous online
[reporting form](#)



Thank you!

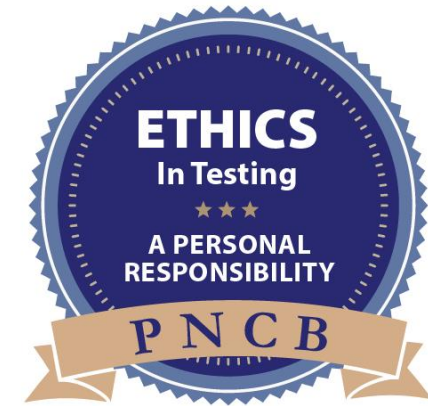
You chose the pediatric specialty to be able to provide care for one of the most vulnerable patient populations.

Whether your certification exam is linked to PNP entry-to-practice, validation of specialized RN or APRN expertise, or RN licensure, you play an important role in upholding and supporting exam ethics.

Visit www.pncb.org for all [Ethics in Testing toolkit resources](#) and PNCB's list of study resources for each exam. You can even earn a free accredited contact hour for our Ethics in Testing CE module.

[Contact PNCB](#) with any questions about exam ethics or the application or recertification process.

We wish you success in testing!



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