

When Don't You Tell The Teacher?

Is it ever right to tell only half a truth?

Ordinarily, Lara would say no. As a multinational corporate executive, she's seen too many deceptions and spin cycles.

But then her son Troy turned 11.

When he had been diagnosed with a mild case of attention deficit disorder (ADD) four years earlier, Lara (not her real name) and her husband had put him on Ritalin. Over the next four years, his schooling progressed well. His energy seemed nothing more than the rambunctiousness of youth. As a result, they never changed the original dosage even as his body grew. Finally, over a summer, they took him off the drug. He was fine.

As fall approached, Lara faced a tough ethical choice. It wasn't about whether to go back to the drug; that was behind them. It was about whether to tell his teachers. He was heading into a new school where nobody knew his past. Should she share it?

On the one hand, she felt an obligation to tell. "When you are dealing with people who are educating your children," she said, "they need to understand your child." For her, schooling is a 'two-way street' that requires cooperation among parents and teachers.

On the other hand, she was keen to protect his identity as a healthy, vigorous individual rather than a child with ADD. "You read about people whose kids get labeled," she said, "and you say, 'I can't believe that happened so fast!' But children do get labeled pretty fast."

Why was her dilemma so tough? Because it pitted her core ethical values against each other. It was right to honour the community of educators – and right to defend her son's individuality. Truth-telling required her not to mislead the school – yet loyalty made her protect Troy from harmful profiling. With individual needs confronting community benefits, and with truth up against loyalty, there were powerful moral arguments stacked up on each side. Both were right.

Which should she choose?

In the end, she and her husband remained silent. At her first parent-teacher conference, Lara heard a glowing report. Troy was doing well in class, the teacher told her, adding that "his grades are good, and we love having him here." Case closed, Lara thought with enormous relief. So as she got up to leave, she told his teacher they had taken Troy off Ritalin that summer.

And within seconds, Lara told me, everything changed. The teacher "shook her head and said, 'Oh, now I understand why I'm having so many problems with your son!'" From that point forward, Lara says, he was "immediately labeled" and "everything went downhill."

To this day, Lara says, "I'm convinced that she just decided to label him. It didn't matter whether he was just being a typical kid. In her mind he wasn't being typical, he was 'that kid with ADD who needs to get on his medication again!'"

Troy is now 14. He's changed schools again. Since that time, Lara admits, "I have not told the school system a thing." Troy occasionally loses his concentration, but he's learning to handle the challenge without using drugs – or going public. "It was a tough fight going forward," she concludes.

But was it an *ethical* fight? Was this a wise defense of his dignity – or an irresponsible disobedience of expectations?

Lara's dilemma reminds us that our toughest moral issues are not right-versus-wrong but right-versus-right. Is it right to take a firm stand against the all-too-human tendency, even among well-meaning educators, to see caricatures instead of individuals? Many would say "yes". For them, ethics is about consequences: If things turn out well (as ultimately happened in Troy's case), you did the right thing.

But isn't it also right to share pertinent details with teachers, so they can better care for their students? Yes indeed. Many think Lara should have engaged in full disclosure, despite the risk of a teacher unable to resist stereotyping. For them, ethics is about universal laws: Stick to the principles you want everyone to obey

without exception (transparency, in this case), and you usher in a more ethical world.

Consequences versus principles – or, in philosophical terms, John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism versus Emanuel Kant's categorical imperative. Across that see-saw are balanced the world's toughest ethical issues. Every reader of Lara's dilemma, I suspect, sees the rightness on both sides – yet intuitively feels that one right is higher. Grasping the simple fact that ethics is about much more than good and bad, we're ready to replace 'I'm-right-you're-wrong' arguments with right-versus-right dialogue – for ourselves, for our students, and for their parents.

Anything less misrepresents the moral intricacy of our world. |

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