

To further illustrate how it is possible to be caught in an ethical dilemma, consider the following example:

You are interning as a school social worker, and on your first day in the school your field instructor is out sick. The principal is juggling several crises and asks you to help out by meeting with a nine-year-old who has been crying since arriving at school that morning.

The child is very reluctant to talk, but you coax and encourage. Finally, the child says that she'll tell you, but only if you promise to tell no one else what she reveals. In your haste to learn what has been troubling her, you agree. The child then divulges a history of abusive treatment by her stepmother.

By law you are required to report known or suspected incidents of child abuse. Furthermore, the principal and the child's homeroom teacher are both interested in her welfare and want you to share what you have learned. However, you made a promise. Do you break your promise and inform the child protection authorities and the principal? If you break your promise, will that destroy the rapport you have established with the child? If the abuse cannot be substantiated by child protection services (CPS), will the nine-year-old receive worse treatment at home as a result of your reporting the stepmother?

### CAN ETHICAL DILEMMAS BE AVOIDED?

The social work intern in the previous scenario created a difficult situation by promising to hold the nine-year-old's story confidential. The dilemma could have been avoided if the social work student had not promised to safeguard the nine-year-old's account. A better way to have handled this would have been to show concern, reiterate to the child that no one has a right to hurt or threaten her, and communicate that you want to help *but* that the law requires you to share information with other people under certain circumstances. In other words, you would inform the client early on, before anything important has been revealed, of your professional obligation to report child abuse.

At the same time, it is entirely possible that informing a child of the necessity to report any abuse may result in the child clamming up and not talking any further with you. The child may need to meet with you on several occasions before she trusts you enough to reveal anything important.

So, while the ethical dilemma might have been avoided in this first example, it is very unlikely that you will be able to practice social work without encountering others. For instance, suppose you are running a self-esteem group in a high school. During an especially productive session, a 16-year-old student reveals that since he broke up with his girlfriend, he has been smoking pot and doing other drugs. He wants help, but he also does not want his parents to know. His father is the chief of police.

Is the student the only client? Should the parents also be viewed as the client system? Should they be informed that their son is breaking the law? Does the principal have a right to know that the student is bringing marijuana onto school property and may be selling it to classmates?

Because most students are minors, it is unclear in many situations whether information about a child should be transmitted to the parents or kept confidential. In this second scenario, however, the intern should urge the client to stop bringing illegal drugs onto campus and to disclose to his parents his need for substance abuse counseling. Many social workers feel that confidentiality should extend to minors as well as to adults; they also

believe that advising them to disclose important information is consistent with the social work value of client self-determination.

Because of advances in technology and its ability to sustain life of those in poor health, social workers in medical settings can also expect to have to deal with complex ethical problems. In these settings the social worker may discover conflicts when multiple parties (the patient's family, the hospital, and even society—which wants scarce medical resources justly allocated) each have different visions of what is best for the patient.

A study of hospital social workers (Proctor, Morrow-Howell, & Lott, 1993) found that the majority of ethical conflicts they reported consisted of a clash between the client's self-determination and what social workers judged not to be in the client's best interest. For example, the patient wants to be discharged, but he or she would not accept the amount of in-home help needed to live independently. In 61 percent of the social workers' cases, there was some disagreement among parties about discharge destination.

Can ethical dilemmas be completely avoided? Probably not. It is best to prepare yourself for them by examining your own values from time to time and learning all you can about how past ethical problems in your practicum setting were resolved.

### HOW DO I AVOID RUSHING INTO ETHICAL DILEMMAS?

Two actions are helpful in keeping ethical dilemmas at arm's length: First, develop a working knowledge of the NASW Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics provides general guidelines for ethical behavior. These standards may not, however, suggest what you should do in every instance. By necessity they cannot be specific to every possible ethics violation. At the same time, some behaviors will almost always be viewed as unethical. These include such behaviors as:

- ✦ Sexual intimacy with clients
- ✦ Libeling or slandering a client
- ✦ Sharing confidences without compelling professional reasons
- ✦ Assaulting, causing physical injuries, or placing clients in danger
- ✦ Dishonesty, fraud, or misrepresentation
- ✦ Discriminatory practices
- ✦ Withdrawing services precipitously (abandoning a client)
- ✦ Failure to warn and protect the victim of a violent crime
- ✦ Failure to exercise reasonable precautions with a potentially suicidal client
- ✦ Promising "cures" for problems

Second, you can avoid ethical dilemmas by anticipating likely trouble spots before they occur. If, for instance, your practicum is in a school, you should give prior thought to how you would respond if a child reveals abuse or neglect. Find out how your field instructor wants you to handle these situations. What information does the school expect you will share with concerned teachers? The principal?

Additionally, be alert to areas where your values may collide with the clients' best interest. For example, if you believe that keeping families together is the most important thing you can do as a social worker, you may not be as

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