

DAD,

Can I Have a Pair of Those Shoes?

By Bob Kenny

Sometimes, ethical dilemmas come in small packages, no bigger than the size of a shoebox. As a parent I sometimes wonder: How do I engage my son in discussions on ethical issues without imposing my values, yet prepare him to recognize and make ethical decisions on his own? Let me give you an uncomfortable example.

Earlier this year my then-thirteen-year old son, David, led me around the mall on a quest for a pair of athletic shoes that he wanted. When I saw the brand name and the excitement on his face (not to mention the \$110 price tag), my heart sank. I had

“I wanted my son to have the shoes he wanted—but I also wanted to do the right thing.”

been reading about the labor practices of that particular shoe manufacturer and told David that I was not keen on buying shoes made by a company that reportedly exploits children for cheap labor. I knew from research I had done that there are shoe manufacturing companies that do not exploit children—but David did not want any of those companies’ shoes. So he took me into all the stores, comparing shoe prices, even though I had told him that my main concern wasn’t about the cost. He *really* wanted those shoes and, like so many parents, I wanted to give my son what he wanted. As we walked around the mall, I became increasingly upset by the possibility that someone else’s son, on the other side of the world, might be working in horrible conditions to produce those shoes for my son. By the time we arrived at the last store, I began to express my frustrations to the clerk. I asked him if other parents were voicing similar concerns. The clerk said no. At that point, David stormed out of the store in full adolescent anger. He had had enough of me embarrassing him. In the car, he angrily claimed that I was being cheap and simply did not want to buy him shoes. That was not true. I wanted him to have the shoes he wanted—but I also wanted to do the right thing. I was not sure that buying shoes from a company that was exploiting children was the right thing to do. For me, it was an everyday ethical dilemma of how to use my money.

David and I resolved the dilemma the best way we knew how. We bought the shoes, did some research on the Internet, and then made a donation to an international organization that addresses the root causes of child labor exploitation. It was not perfect. Life rarely is.



Bob Kenny, Ed.D., is the executive director of More Than Money. For more than 20 years, he has worked with individuals, communities, and organizations to identify and address the gaps between their stated values and the reality of their lives.

This shoe-shopping experience posed an ethical dilemma for me because of some competing concerns. First, I wanted my son to have personal choices, and not feel as if his father was dictating what he could wear. Second, I struggled with whether or not I had the right to impose my worries and concerns about the ethical problems of the world on my son. Third, I did not want to support people who were being unethical.

During a recent conversation about ethics with the Reverend Professor Peter Gomes of Harvard University (see his interview, p. 12), I found myself thinking about the way I had handled this situation and the way I might address ethical dilemmas in the future. Professor Gomes said that people want to be good, but sometimes lack the courage to act on their convictions. I think he’s onto something. Sometimes we are just lacking the conviction; and sometimes we are not sure if something is “good” or not.

The parent’s familiar remorse is, “What could I have done differently?” As I have talked with other parents about this issue and reflected on my actions, I have become increasingly convinced that I could have handled the situation better. Maybe I should have just said: “This is what I believe in, but if you really want the shoes, then I will get them for you.” Maybe it would have been better to inform David of my thoughts and concerns, but then buy him the shoes if he still really wanted them.

I also realized—too late—that I never asked David the reasons for his opinion. Perhaps he knew the issues I was complaining about and didn’t care. Maybe he heard my arguments but sincerely disagreed. The question remains: Is it my role to make decisions for another human being (even if it is my son), or is it simply to provide him with the information he needs to make his own decisions? This is not an easy question. It is, in fact, a dilemma that has been debated for centuries by parents who want to raise their children to be ethical.

The everyday ethics of wealth do not apply just to decision-makers at Enron. They exist for each of us individually. The everyday ethics of wealth force us to take the time to ask ourselves, and those we live and work with, basic questions. We need to talk about everyday ethics in ways that are thoughtful, but not judgmental; informative, but not prescriptive. It isn’t easy. ■