

## Teaching Children With Different Learning Profiles

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## STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH REBELLIOUSNESS

Every year, as we read the passage about the Four Sons, we often find it accompanied with a *dvar Torah* or a conversation about dealing with rebellious children. For many, this conversation is theoretical — but for some it is very real. In recent years, there has been an unfortunate increase in the number of adolescents from observant Jewish families who have become seriously disruptive, rebellious and defiant. This essay will help us appreciate the challenges involved and provide a summary of recommended interventions.

When dealing with a child who is already overtly rebellious, it is

important for parents and educators to keep in mind that since the key dynamic underlying such behavior is feeling alienated and set apart from the mainstream, parents and teachers can play a pivotal role in helping a child or adolescent feel connected. Perhaps the most potent antidote to feeling angry and alienated is feeling appreciated and understood. When parents and teachers make harsh or belittling remarks or treat a child in a manner that the child perceives as unfair, the child's downward spiral may accelerate. Conversely, a combination of time, support and understanding can go a long way toward bringing a rebellious adolescent back on the path of more

productive and meaningful behavior. The following recommendations can be considered:

### Limit Setting

A rebellious child does best with a balance between love and limits. Research (Barkley, 1998) indicates that the following consequences work best with disruptive children and adolescents: First, punishments are consistent and not overly harsh, and are administered briefly, unemotionally and clearly. Second, they stem logically from the misbehavior and make sense to the child. Third, they are viewed as being delivered in the context of a child

feeling liked and appreciated, in spite of the punishment.

The verse in Mishlei states:

יִסֵּר בְּנֵךְ כִּי יֵשׁ תִּקְוָה וְאַל הִמִּיתוּ אֶל תְּשׂוּעָה נִפְשָׁךְ.

*Discipline your son while there is still hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction.*

### **Mishlei 19:10**

The midrash deduces from this verse:

כָּל הַמֵּיִסֵּר אֶת בְּנוֹ מוֹסִיף הַבֵּן אֶהְבֵּה עַל אָבִיו וְהוּא מְכַבְּדוֹ.

*If one disciplines his son, the son will have greater love and respect for his father.*

### **Shemos Rabbah no. 1**

When a parent or teacher shows that he or she doesn't take the child's misbehavior personally and disapproves of the behavior and not the child, consequences tend to be far more effective. A parent once told me that he always wondered why his child bristled at the slightest criticism from either parent, but was able to take even the toughest and most demanding direction from his basketball coach. I explained that when children know that everybody is "on the same team" they will accept even the most demanding set of rules willingly. They are most likely to rebel when they feel that their parent or teacher isn't with them on the same team.

However, even when following these discipline guidelines, children tend to engage in negative persistence. They won't accept the logic and keep nagging about the consequences. An effective way of dealing with negative persistence is illustrated in a d'var Torah by R. Henschel Leibowitz, *Chiddushei Halev*, Bereishis pg. 103. He quotes the midrash that when Avraham Avinu was on his way to

the Akeidah, the Satan approached him and tried to convince Avraham that Hashem didn't really command Avraham to slaughter his son. First, the Satan said, "How could it be that you waited 100 years for this son and now you are going to slaughter him?" Then he said "How could it be that Hashem commanded you to commit murder?" Each time, Avraham responded "*al menas ken*" — I am doing so despite what you just said. Avraham's response is somewhat puzzling. Why didn't he just respond to the Satan, "You are lying. Hashem did command me to slaughter my son"? R. Leibowitz answers that there is no point in debating the Satan. Avraham didn't want to get sucked into an argument that would give credence to the other side. The same could be said about negative persistence. When a child is given a consequence, the logic should be explained at the outset. If the child then persists, he or she should be told "we are no longer discussing the reasons for the consequence," and after the third time the child nags, the conversation should be ended completely.

### **Methods of Discipline**

Greene (2000) at Harvard Medical School has developed a set of strategies to guide parents and teachers in dealing with disruptive children in the classroom. These include:

- Try to see the child's behavior as coming more from the child's wiring rather than from willful misconduct. Most of these children's behavioral difficulties are either fueled by neurological factors (i.e. frontal deficits) or stressors at home that make it difficult for them to regulate

their affect. While this does not mean that limits and consequences are not necessary, it does mean that the parent or teacher can respond calmly as he or she would to any misbehavior that is coming more from a child who "can't" rather than "won't" behave properly.

- Respond to child before he or she is at their worst.
- Anticipate and modify situations that will likely trigger defiance by cueing in to specific factors that fuel explosiveness.
- Use of distraction, logic, empathy may work if employed before meltdown.
- Choose only worthy battlegrounds.
- Address recurring patterns by identifying specific situations that routinely cause significant frustration.

How do we choose worthy battlegrounds? How do we know which acts of rebellion require consequences and which can be ignored? The *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayechi* no. 6, provides numerous examples of how the Avos handled conflict. They didn't respond at the beginning of the conflict, but instead waited for the right moment to respond — *nasnu makom l'sha'ah* — they gave space for the moment and walked away from the conflict until there was a moment that they could respond in a way that would be effective. When dealing with rebelliousness, there are situations that are dangerous and we can't just ignore what is going on. However, there are situations where we can give space and make a strategic withdrawal. When the relationship is not only about dealing with negative behavior, we can form a positive relationship.

### **Addressing the Spiritual**

Whenever possible, address the spiritual. Rebellious adolescents often describe feeling alienated from spirituality, yet at the same time, being thirsty for greater spiritual understanding and connection. An at-risk child who returned from a summer program that emphasized spirituality with growth through *musar* explained the reason for his dramatic improvement after the summer. “Until now,” he explained, “I never knew who God was. God was always about what I couldn’t do. Don’t watch TV on Shabbos, don’t go to inappropriate movies. Nobody ever told me who God was until this summer. Now that I understand what God is about, Judaism makes more sense to me, and for the first time, I’m interested in what Judaism has to offer.”

Parents and children alike should be aware that there are multiple pathways to spiritual connection. Some children are in a setting that favors one type of spiritual connection and they may thrive in a setting that favors another.

*Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz once said to his teacher, the rabbi of Lublin: “Show me one general way to the service of God.” The zaddik replied: “It is impossible to tell people what way they should take. For one, the way to serve God is through learning, another through prayer, another through fasting and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him to, and then choose his way with all his strength.”*

*Tales of Hasidim* (Buber, 1961) pg. 313

## **The Parent-School Partnership**

Promoting effective parent-school partnerships are an essential part

of any program for addressing the needs of the at-risk child. Research has consistently shown that at-risk children do better when they perceive their parents as being actively involved in their education (Henggeler et al, 1998). Parents overtly supporting teachers, monitoring homework assignments and grades and supporting extracurricular school activities have all been found to help children develop the kind of prosocial behavior that is an antidote to the influence of acting-out peers. Educators can help promote this type of partnership by providing parents with regular feedback regarding their child’s academic and behavioral progress, and scheduling parent-teacher conferences in a manner that is flexible enough to accommodate parents’ work schedules.

Ongoing teacher and parent training on strategies for dealing with at-risk children, supported by school administrators, can be valuable both for addressing and preventing problem behavior. Some yeshivot have implemented mandatory teacher and parent training to help deal constructively with defiant and disruptive behavior and to maximize the chances of creating a strong parent-school partnership. Such programs tend to be most effective when schools create in-service days for teachers that do not require the teachers to attend sessions on their own time. Teacher-training content should include classroom management strategies for defiant students, strategies to identify high-risk situations, when to refer, and how to talk to parents. Scheduling programs as part of parent-teacher conference nights has proven effective for maximizing parent attendance.

## **Expelling a Rebellious Child**

Expelling a child from a school should be considered only as an extreme step when all alternatives have been exhausted. Yeshivot that are quick to expel rebellious adolescents have unwittingly exacerbated the problem for the entire community by creating a growing group of such children on the streets. This fosters the kind of “deviancy training” that can contaminate more mainstream adolescents in the community (Dishion et al, 1999). Successful alternatives to expulsion include programs that allow adolescents to work part of the day and attend school part of the day. In this way, adolescents remain part of their peer group and find success in non-academic areas where they are more likely to achieve.

Some schools have experimented with “exchange” programs where they “trade” a disruptive child in one school for a disruptive child in another school. When children are given a totally fresh start in a new school, they often experience success that isn’t possible in an environment where they are perceived by teachers and peers as troubled.

Finally, although many high schools frown on early graduation, when

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rebellious adolescents are allowed to graduate after their junior year, they often thrive. Success can come as a result of many factors: kids get a fresh start in an environment where they aren't viewed in a preconceived way; they have the opportunity to make more appropriate friends; and they enjoy the greater academic flexibility present in post high school environments.

The Gemara makes the following comment about the ketores:

כל תענית שאין בה מפושעי ישראל אינה תענית שהרי חלבנה ריחה רע ומנאה הכתוב עם סממני קטרת.

*Any fast that does not include the sinners of Israel [in its prayer services] is not a fast. Because the galbanum had a foul smell and was nevertheless included in the spices of the ketoret.*

#### Kerisos 6b

Children actually benefit from having a little “galbanum” in their social circles. I once heard R. Moshe Meir Weiss express the following idea: When Hashem told Avraham to kick his son Yishmael out of the house, the Torah (Bereishis 21:11) records that Avraham was very distressed “*al odos b'no*” — about the welfare of his son. Which son? It would seem that he was distressed about what would happen to Yishmael. However, R. Weiss suggested that he was distressed about what would happen to Yitzchak. Yishmael was supposed to serve as an inoculating influence so that Yitzchak could better handle the dangers of the outside world. Now that he was gone,

how would Yitzchak learn to deal with those challenges?

The following story is told about R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, the Chazon Ish. A student was once caught going to an inappropriate venue on Shabbos. The rosh yeshiva wanted to remove him from the yeshiva. The Chazon Ish heard about this and confronted the rosh yeshiva, saying “Now you are on the level to be a judge for *dinei nefashos* (capital punishment)?” The Chazon Ish suggested that the rosh yeshiva learn *b'chavrusa* (one-on-one) with this student. When the rosh yeshiva claimed that he couldn't learn with this student, the Chazon Ish offered to personally learn with this student. The student later became a Torah teacher. (*Ma'aseh Ish* Vol. VI pg. 52)

#### Concluding Remarks

The Gemara tells us that when dealing with children, we should use the following rule:

לעולם תהא שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת.  
*One should always use the left hand to push away and the right hand to bring closer.*

#### Sanhedrin 107b

The left hand represents the weaker hand. When we discipline or set limits, we should do so with the proverbial “weaker hand” while at the same time drawing them close to us with our greatest strengths — love and compassion. R. Simcha Wasserman added the following explanation: Imagine putting both of

your hands on your child's shoulders and pushing with your left hand while pulling with your right hand. What would happen? The child would actually turn around! Finding the right balance between limits and love can be a challenge, but with perseverance and patience, it can be very effective in helping the rebellious child turn around and head in a different direction.

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Parts of this article are adapted from Pelcovitz, D (2004) “The At-risk Adolescent in the Orthodox Jewish Community: Implications and Interventions for Educators,” Azrieli Papers. available at:

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