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## THE IMPACT OF MARITAL DISHARMONY ON CHILDREN

### Through the Eyes of a Frightened Child<sup>1</sup>

*Mishpacha Magazine*, 08/29/07 p. 64

By: Rabbi Yakov Horowitz

**[Introductory comment by Rabbi Yakov Horowitz:** *Recently, I posted a comment on my website inviting teens-at-risk to submit essays to my private email address sharing their thought and perspectives on why we are losing so many of our children. Shortly thereafter, I received a riveting email from a bachur vividly describing his home life and the challenges that it posed to his emotional development. Here are his actual comments, which I edited for publication.*

*Reading these lines reminded me of the words of our great rebbi, Rabbi Avrohom Pam, who would often remark that the formula for success with one's children is 50% tefila, prayer, and 50% shalom bayis, marital harmony.]*

### Building a Life on Quicksand

**By: An anonymous bochur**

The feelings of shame started when I was a little child. My parents didn't express any joy at being with each other. They criticized each other harshly, and they always found something to criticize about me. My parents would argue in my presence in loud voices, often yelling at each other in anger. Terrified of what might happen, I would withdraw to stunned silence. When I was finally able to speak, I would plead with them to stop fighting, but they were still trying to prove themselves right in my eyes which seemed to me like they were expecting me to solve their problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *Living & Parenting: A Down-to-Earth Guide* (2008, Mesorah, pp. 233-240) by Rabbi Yakov Horowitz.

I would desperately want to cry during those times. However, the only people who could console me, my parents, were frightening me to death. I would frantically try to get my Mommy and Tatty back, because I needed them to reassure me that everything is all right, to calm me down from my terror.

I began to live my entire life trying to make people think I was good, so that I will stop feeling this shame, which was so painful to me. I became a perfect student who always got high marks, and an ideal child who always behaved and did his chores. Over the years, I got lots of compliments for the good things I did but they went right past me since they were all addressed to the fake me. The real me was my feelings of shame.

If only my parents had seen my pain then, when I was a little kid who needed soothing. If only they would have realized that their bickering and fighting was making my life miserable, and that destroying their beloved child's happiness was far too high a price to pay for the feeling of having won an argument. Maybe then they would have stopped and made peace with each other so they can together focus on their vulnerable little boy who needed his Mommy and Tatty so much. Maybe then, they could have been at my side to help me grow up happy and healthy. Maybe I would not have lived with such deep shame and loneliness for so many years, thinking I had been forsaken by everyone, certain that nobody cared about me.

I tell my mother that I had a tough time as a teenager; she is shocked and disappointed that I never shared anything with her about my life. She deeply regrets not having been able to give me support. My father tries so hard to make me happy, and he also cares about me, but I never shared anything with him either. I am currently a regular yeshiva bachur of 19, so I did not get any support from people, as I might have if I had gone off the derech.

Baruch Hashem, I have found people in my life who are giving me support and guidance. I speak to therapists and to my sister whom I feel close to, and they tell me I am really a good person, and that I should focus on all the good that I do. I wish I could do that, but this is not something I can switch on at will. Now and then I feel hopeful that maybe I will change, and that gives me the courage to continue. I am also beginning to see that there are people who care about me, and that I am not all bad. I am starting to think that maybe, just maybe, I deserve to be happy and to be cared for.

I am so lonely, and I wish I would get married already to someone who will be my friend. But I keep thinking about my parents' lives and their marriage, and I am petrified of repeating the unstable environment in which I spent my painful childhood years. So I am working on changing the way I feel, in order that I can prepare to start a healthy home of my own.

Parents, please take a good look at your children. Somewhere there is a little boy or girl who is wondering why his/her Mommy and Tatty sometimes just leave him/her alone with his/her pain, as if he/she does not deserve to be held when he/she cries. If you do not act now, then later nothing you do will make a difference, and you will have to helplessly watch your teenager struggle with more pain than he can possibly carry on his young shoulders. Just ask my parents how it feels to know you have been unable to help your child with the struggles of growing up. Ask them how it feels to know that they were the cause of my struggles. Please realize that when

you are in conflict with your spouse, you are taking away your kid's Mommy and Tatty. Realize it now, before it is too late.

## A Clinical Analysis of Building A Life on Quicksand

By: Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin<sup>2</sup>

[Introductory comment by Rabbi Yakov Horowitz - *My previous column focused on a searing letter that I received from a 19-year-old bachur vividly describing his stressful home life and the challenges that it posed to his emotional development.*

*In order for our readers to gain perspective on this letter through the eyes of a mental health professional, I asked Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin, an outstanding clinical psychologist, to share with our readers his analysis of the bachur's letter – and its ramifications for all parents. Here are his comments:]*

The bachur's letter describing his struggle growing up in a home with no *sholom bayis* touched me deeply. While I have always known that the lack of parental *sholom bayis* deeply wounds their children, reading the heart-felt, eloquent words from the victim himself really brought the message home.

Common sense would suggest that children who are exposed to parental conflict over a prolonged period of time would get used to it. But many studies show that this is not the case. The reason for this is because children's exposure to parental conflict increases their feelings of emotional insecurity, thus decreasing their capacity for regulating emotions and behavior, leaving them more prone to feelings of fear, distress and anger.

In fact, there is overwhelming research and clinical evidence on the association between chronic marital conflict and children's adjustment difficulties. There are numerous factors, such as the child's temperament and the specific circumstances of each situation, which will shape each child's response to parental conflict. For example, the degree of **perceived threat** (the extent to which children believe that the conflict will escalate, result in harm to oneself or family members, or threaten the family's existence), and **self-blame** (the degree to which children hold themselves personally responsible for parents' quarrels) are all important factors in shaping children's internal and external reactions to parental conflict. Children who are pulled into their parents' conflict are at risk for becoming targets of parental hostility, which might heighten perception of threat.

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<sup>2</sup> Reprinted, with some minor editing, from Rabbi Yakov Horowitz's Chinuch Column in *Mishpacha Magazine*, 09/24/07 p.144.

Parents often exacerbate the negative impact of their conflicts on their children by actually telling them that they are responsible for the parental conflict and by undermining their children's confidence in their own coping skills by constantly criticizing them.

A serious obstacle to helping children deal with parents who lack *sholom bayis* is the pervasive denial common by both parents and their children regarding the seriousness of the marital conflict. Even when the therapist uncovers a picture of serious spousal conflict, including verbal and physical aggression (it is important to note that parents who are abusive to their spouse are also likely to be abusive to their children), the parents will confirm the details but will vigorously dispute the characterization suggested by the therapist (i.e., a home with no *sholom bayis*). "No one has a perfect marriage!" they will protest, as if a loveless and hostile marriage is equivalent to a good and loving, but imperfect marriage. The denial becomes particularly strident if someone suggests that the child's difficulty may have something to do with the conflicted and hostile environment he grew up in.

Ironically, the same parents who very readily blame their children's negative behaviors on the influence of "bad friends" or an inadequate teacher will bristle at the suggestion that their children's development is strongly influenced by the home environment they grew up in!! No one protests when parents are complimented for their role in their children's successes but many will react with indignation if lack of success is also attributed to home influences. Many in our community are very eager to attribute teenagers' deviant behaviors to the influence of outside influences, (e.g., the Internet) but react with accusations of "parent bashing" if the suggestion is made that parental conflict may play a decisive role.<sup>3</sup>

Let us return to the *bachur's* letter, where the theme of shame runs throughout his comments. There is research and clinical evidence that when parents are unable or unwilling to be attuned to their children's emotional and developmental needs, they create fertile grounds for the development of pervasive shameful feelings in their children. This is especially true if children are a focus of parental conflict and certainly when they are the targets of chronic criticism. The child develops the unconscious feeling that his unmet developmental yearnings are

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<sup>3</sup> [Rav S. R. Hirsch, in contrast, does not hesitate to make this connection: In his commentary in Ki Seitzei (21:18) regarding a "*ben sorer umoreh*" and the *halacha* that he is only liable for the death penalty if his father and mother have similar voices, Rav Hirsch states: Only if the parents work harmoniously together and completely hand in hand can the parental task of educating their children be achieved and the fault can be assumed to lie in the incorrigible nature of the son. Under a truly better system of education on the part of father and mother the child might perhaps have been different....

Likewise, Rav Chaim Pinchus Scheinberg, in *Heart to heart talks*. Brooklyn, NY: Artscroll/Mesorah, 200, pg. 139 states: I agree with the educator who said that a child constructs his picture of the world through the experience he has with his mother. According to whether the mother is loving or unloving, the child will feel that the world is loving or unloving. When he is not loved, he fails to learn to love. Such children grow up finding it extremely difficult to understand the meaning of love. Show me the juvenile delinquent and in almost every case I will show you a person resorting to desperate means to attract the emotional warmth and attention he failed to get, but so much wants and needs. Aggressive behavior, when fully understood, is in fact nothing but love frustrated. It is a technique for compelling love, as well as a means for taking revenge on a society that has let the person down, leaving him disillusioned, deserted, and dehumanized. The best way to approach aggressive behavior in children is not by aggressive behavior toward them, but with love. If you find rebels in society today, it is because they were never given proper love.]

manifestations of a loathsome defect or an inherent inner badness. The *bachur's* reactions of emotional withdrawal and trying to stop his parents' fighting are both typical reactions. He also well articulates the horrible dilemma of children whose parents induce terrible fear in them but they can't turn to the very people *Hashem* designated to give them solace, comfort and reassurance.

The *bachur's* reaction to the shame, i.e., trying to become perfect and the development of a false self, and his fear of marriage are, sad to say, common and very understandable reactions to his experiences growing up in a home lacking *sholom bayis*.

I am glad to read that he has at least found people who are providing him with the support that his parents never seemed to be able give him. One can only hope that all parents who read his letter take his heartfelt plea seriously so as to avoid these preventable tragedies.

### Sources

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{After these two articles were posted on Rabbi Yakov Horowitz's website ([www.RabbiHorowitz.com](http://www.RabbiHorowitz.com)) the following comment was posted on 10/14/07:

**I wrote the original article, and Dr. Sorotzkin seems to be reading my thoughts; that is exactly how I was feelingí ..}**

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