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## **THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE CURRENT CRISIS OF “OFF THE *DERECH*” ADOLESCENTS: DARE WE DISCUSS IT? CAN WE AFFORD NOT TO?\***

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*The frum community has been struggling with the problem of rebellious adolescents. Many factors have been cited as possible causes for this problem. A prominent therapist recently stated at a professional conference that we currently do not know what causes this problem. This paper will seek to demonstrate that it is deficiencies in the parent-child relationship that lie at the root of adolescent rebelliousness. The impact of other risk factors is mediated via their effect on the parent-child relationship. The resistance to acknowledging the central role of parents in this problem, and the repercussions of this resistance, are discussed.*

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The problem of rebellious adolescents has become a major area of concern for the *frum* community. Many articles have been written on this subject and it is rare for a community organization to hold a conference without workshops devoted to this topic. While accurate statistics are not available, most educators and activists feel that the problem is growing at an alarming rate. Many knowledgeable activists use the term “epidemic.”

This paper will review the items commonly mentioned as risk factors in *frum* children becoming rebellious (“going off the *derech*”). I will demonstrate that there is a strong tendency - albeit with the best of intentions - to downplay the role of parents in this problem. The reasons for this avoidance and how it can impede efforts to alleviate the problem will be explored.

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\* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a conference of educators in Monsey, NY on November 25, 1999 and at the NEFESH conference, Baltimore, MD on December 26, 1999. A “secular” version of this paper was published in *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 30 No. 1, Summer 2002, pp. 29-53 as “The denial of history: Clinical implications of denying child abuse.” An abbreviated Hebrew version was published in “Issues in Psychology, Psychotherapy and Judaism,” Seymour Hoffman, Ed., Nefesh Israel: 2008, pp 18-51 and in “Psychotherapy and Judaism,” Seymour Hoffman and Leah Rossman, Eds., NY: Golden Sky Books, 2012, pp. 127-151.

The author wishes to thank the many psychotherapists and *mechanchim* who have commented on, agreed with, challenged and disputed earlier versions of this article. A special thanks to my patients who trusted me enough to tolerate the pain of looking into dark, hidden alcoves of their memories.

It is axiomatic when dealing with complex social issues, that these problems are multi-determined. It then follows that the interventions also have to be multi-pronged. However, acknowledging the multi-factorial nature of a problem does not preclude us from recognizing that some factors are more significant and crucial than others are.

## **RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH REBELLIOUS ADOLESCENTS**

Among the general public, the most common causative factors mentioned in regards to rebellious adolescents are distant environmental ones. The vulgar and decadent media, the Internet and western culture in general, are portrayed as being too appealing for many contemporary teenagers to resist. The assumption is that the pull from the outside is so strong, that even well adjusted, happy youngsters who have positive relationships with their parents can easily be influenced to abandon their family's way of life.

### **Exposure to the media**

It is undeniable that exposure to the media negatively impacts our moral standards and sensitivities. The question of what is an optimal or acceptable level of exposure to the outside world is, therefore, an important one (see e.g., the February 1995 special issue of the *Jewish Observer* on "The world around us: The risk of exposure, the cost of insularity") but it is not directly relevant to our topic.

The question we are addressing is not what has caused a lowering of moral sensitivities. Rather, the specific issue we are dealing with at the moment is why children rebel against their parents' way of life. To the best of my knowledge, the relative number of "off the *derech*" teens among Orthodox families that permit higher levels of exposure to the media is no higher than in families that strictly insulate their homes from outside influences. This should serve as conclusive evidence that exposure to the media is not a major causative factor in the "off the *derech*" phenomenon, although it can certainly have other negative consequences. (We will return to the Internet issue below).

It is true that youngsters who rebel often become heavily involved in "on the edge," "cultural" activities. However, this is the effect of rebelliousness rather than the cause. It is very doubtful that exposure to the media, in itself, can make it worthwhile for children to abandon their parents' way of life. The price they pay in feelings of guilt, rejection and failure, to say nothing of the loss of approval of parents, would prevent such a step. Rather, it is only after a buildup of feelings of hurt, resentment, anger, rejection and alienation from family and community that they feel that they have nothing to lose by dropping out. As Rav Matisyohu Salomon recently stated, "it isn't accurate to call them 'dropouts,' rather, they should be called 'pushed-outs'"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rav Matisyohu Salomon, *With Hearts Full of Love* (Mesorah, 2009): It is not an easy thing for anyone to sit through a whole day of school, especially a child, and the mother has to be waiting to shower him with *rachmanus* when he comes home. If, however, the home to which he returns is stressful and judgmental, if he goes to sleep with resentment and frustration his resentments will be directed toward his parents, his brothers and sisters, his



positive behavior more difficult for him and raising him properly a more challenging (but not impossible) task for his parents.<sup>3</sup>

There is an interesting phenomenon I have observed with those who explain a child's negative behavior by attributing it to an unusually powerful *yetzer hora*. The belief that a child was born with a factor making it more difficult for him or her to behave properly doesn't seem to mitigate the anger parents feel toward the child. The belief seems to serve the sole purpose of avoiding a more thorough (and perhaps painful) search for the true causes for the child's behavior. In contrast, when Rav Dessler speaks of *Eisav* having a more difficult temperament, he also makes it clear that less was expected of him as a result (at least initially).<sup>4</sup>

### Other factors

A recent report from a professional conference of *frum* therapists dealing with children in crisis speaks of "child risk factors" such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), hyperactivity, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, learning disabilities, poor academic abilities and poor social skills. Another factor noted under child risk factors is the depressed child, which includes anxious and perfectionistic children.<sup>5</sup>

The second basic category listed is the "family risk factors" which includes lack of family cohesiveness, poor parenting skills and families with "high expressed emotions" (i.e., criticism and hostility) and marital conflict. The third category listed is "environmental risk factors" which includes families with major medical and or economic problems and children with a history of sexual and/or physical abuse. My impression from reading the above-mentioned report and from a conversation with one of its editors is that poor parenting skills is not considered the major contributing factor in most cases of at-risk children.

## THE ROLE OF PARENTING

My own view is that in the vast majority of cases of acting-out adolescents, the major causative factor is deficits in parenting and the resulting deficiencies in the parent-child relationship. (As discussed below in the "Parental Attitudes" section, the problem is usually with parental attitudes more than with parenting skills). The many risk factors noted in the above-mentioned report certainly contribute to the problem. In my opinion, however, they do so mainly by making it more difficult for the parent to maintain a positive and supportive attitude toward their children. In addition, many of the symptoms noted in the report (e.g., anxiety, perfectionism, Oppositional Defiant Disorder), are most often themselves **reactions** to poor parenting practices. The necessary ingredient that actually causes a child to rebel is the anger and frustration resulting from feeling unaccepted and rejected, by his or her parents.

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ó 458 ' , " מכתב מאליהו, <sup>4</sup>  
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.See Blumenthal & Russel, 1999 <sup>5</sup>





## Range of parenting deficiencies

It needs to be emphasized that when I refer to poor parenting practices, I am referring to a wide range of phenomena. At one end of the spectrum, are the overtly abusive parents, either physically or emotionally. This includes parents who believe that their children's purpose in life is to fulfill their own, often immature, emotional needs. They do not hesitate to manipulate their children's emotions to this end. Even this type of overt abuse is not always obvious to others, since these same parents are often very pleasant to other people as they have a strong need to gain the approval of others.

In the midrange of the spectrum, are parents who are not initially abusive. However, they are rigid and inflexible and so tend to over-react to their children's difficulties resulting from learning problems, lack of motivation, or even normal childhood misbehavior. They tend to see these problem behaviors in a very negative light, and even more significantly, they often attribute malicious **intent** to the child (Strassberg, 1997). These parents can often be identified by the negative and disparaging manner in which they refer to their children: "He's a self-indulgent truant;" "She's a free loader;" "He's using his learning disability as a convenient excuse for his laziness," etc. (This issue is discussed in more detail below in the section "Parental attitudes").

At the other, more positive end of the spectrum, are parents who are very caring and giving to their children and rarely have negative interactions with them. However, they are mostly focused on their children's behavior and cognitive development with little attention paid to their emotional life. Research has shown that a dismissive attitude on the part of parents to their children's emotional life has far-reaching negative implications for their later adjustment (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996).

Baumrind (1978) proposed a very helpful distinction in parenting styles, between "Authoritative parenting" and "Authoritarian parenting." An authoritative parent is demanding and responsive. Authoritative parents understand how their children are feeling and help them to regulate their feelings and solve their problems. They encourage their children to be independent but still place limits on their actions. The parents encourage discussion and try to be warm and nurturing. They allow their children to explore more freely, thus having them make their own decisions based upon their own reasoning. Authoritative parents tend to produce children who are more independent and self-reliant. An authoritative parenting style mainly results when there is high parental responsiveness coupled with age-appropriate parental expectations. Authoritarian parenting, in contrast, is demanding but not responsive. It is characterized by high expectations of conformity and compliance to parental rules and directions, while allowing little open dialogue between parent and child. Authoritarian parenting is a restrictive, punitive parenting style in which parents make their children follow their directions. Authoritarian parents expect much of their child, but generally do not explain the reasoning for the rules or boundaries. Authoritarian parents are less responsive to their child's needs, and are more likely to ground their child rather than discuss the problem. The children of authoritarian parents often are less socially competent because the parent generally tells the child what to do instead of allowing the child to choose by him or herself. Some children of authoritarian parents may develop insecurities and display anti-social behavior.

Children whose feelings are neglected or negated respond by neglecting their own emotional needs and focus instead on being well behaved (Miller, 1996). Many become perfectionistic, striving to please their parents at all costs (Sorotzkin, 1985, 1998, 1999a). Eventually and inevitably, it becomes clear to them that they cannot be perfect, and so they give up their quest and become depressed and/or act out their resentment and frustration. It is easy to see that when a rebellious child comes from such a family, it would be difficult to perceive the connection to his or her family life, since these families are indeed high functioning, "good families."

*One acting-out youngster had been a well behaved, "A student." His parents were very giving and attentive to him. However, whenever he did something for the sake of fun (e.g., bowling) or dressed informally (e.g., wearing a sweatshirt to an amusement park) he felt he was disappointing his father who was very low-keyed and straight-laced. The father never told his son that he has to be a carbon copy of his father, but that is exactly what the son felt that he had to do in order to win his father's approval. Since his personality was very different from that of his father – he was gregarious and outgoing - he constantly experienced a deep sense of shame for not being as serious as his father. Since the parents never overtly demanded it, I searched for the source of his perceived need to be exactly like his father. After speaking to the father a number of times, he acknowledged that both he and his wife were ultra-sensitive to the opinion of others and have always felt a great need to please others and fit in. When his son spent time in fun activities the father felt very critical, to a large degree, he acknowledged, because he imagined the disapproval of neighbors. While at first he protested to me that he most often didn't verbalize these negative reactions, he did concede that it was unlikely that his son was unaware of his feelings. Clearly, these parents did not value their own sense of individuality and so it isn't surprising that their son felt the same way.*

### **The pressure to bring *nachas* to parents**

A less obvious form of less-than-adequate parenting is the subtle pressure to bring *nachas* to parents. Many children in our community grow up with the idea that their main purpose in life is to bring their parents *nachas*, rather than to be successful in their service of *Hashem* etc. To them, the problem with doing something wrong is not because of its inherent wrongness, i.e., it negates the *rotzon Hashem*. No! The main issue is that it will aggravate and disappoint their parents. In fact the most common *brocho* given to a *bar mitzvoh bochur* is that he bring *nachas* to his parents.

What's wrong with a child trying to bring *nachas* to his parents? Don't they want what's best for him? From a *hashkofo* perspective there is serious problem with parents feeling that their child's purpose in life is to bring them *nachas*. Rabbi Yissocher Frand (1999) recounts the following story that he heard from Rav Moshe Shapiro.





neither logical nor according to the Torah, for why should their children not be included in the commandment of "love your neighbor as yourself"? The truth is that if one is punished more severely for hurting a relative, and therefore one who unjustly causes pain to his own child will be punished more harshly.<sup>12</sup>

(This issue is discussed at length in my article on "Honoring Abusive Parents.")

### The over-valuing of external behaviors

Associated with parental neglect of children's emotional life, is the exaggerated importance given to external behavior. Many parents (and educators) believe that positive external behaviors are guaranteed to become internalized. This view seems to be supported by the statement of *chazal* that *metoch shelo leshmo bo leshmo* (one who develops the habit of doing a positive act for extrinsic reasons will eventually come to do so with intrinsic motivation). Often quoted too are the words of the *Chinuch* (*Mitzvah* 16) that *achrei hapeulos nimshuchim halevovos* (a person's heart follows his actions). These *divrei chazal* would indeed seem to justify an emphasis on superficial positive behaviors without any need to concern ourselves with the internalization of the values associated with these behaviors. We can just sit back and let nature take its course, as the positive behaviors are magically internalized.

This, unfortunately, is not the case. The late *mashgiach* of the Ponevich Yeshiva, Rav Chaim Friedlander *zt"l*, for example, clearly states that it is obvious that the *Chinuch's* *yesod* that a person's motivations follow his actions can only apply when the person identifies with the ideals associated with those actions. He relates that Rav Yisroel Salanter made this same point citing evidence from the Cossacks. The Cossacks were the elite troops of Europe. They were drafted at a young age and served for 30 years before retiring on a government pension. During their many years of army service these troops were highly disciplined, energetic and productive. However, after retiring, these soldiers spent the rest of their lives in a drunken stupor. What happened to the good habits that they practiced for 30 years?! Since they never identified with these values, answers Rav Yisroel, their external behaviors could not have the power to influence their internal values. Contrast this with the common, naive belief that forcing someone to behave in a certain way will automatically cause him to internalize the values associated with that behavior!<sup>13</sup>

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שכאשר האדם אינו מזדהה עם המעשה החיצוני, אזי אין שום יכולת השפעה פנימית לאותו מעשה.

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involved attitudes toward the patient” (p. 631). Note the reluctance of researchers to be honest and open about the fact that they are speaking about a critical family. Instead, they camouflage this information behind the euphemism “expressed emotion.”

The above-mentioned researcher, after noting the powerful effect of EE on the relapse rate of psychiatric patients, adds: “These data do not, of course, mean that families cause schizophrenia.” I wrote to this researcher and asked if there was any research evidence that high EE does not cause schizophrenia? She replied that “the appropriate studies have not been done [but] because of the past tradition of blaming families for causing schizophrenia, it is important that researchers in this area don’t go beyond the science in making any unwarranted inferences.” To me it seems highly improbable that high EE should have such an impact in causing relapse of schizophrenia and yet not be involved in causing the condition in the first place. The truth is that contrary to this researcher’s assertion, there **is** evidence that children in high EE families are more likely to suffer from serious mental illness in adolescence (see studies cited in Karon & Widener, 1994).

There is more recent evidence of the connection between an emotionally unhealthy childhood home environment and the development of schizophrenia. A recent review of schizophrenia research in the prestigious journal *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* - described by many as “earth shattering” - provides evidence that at least two-thirds (in some studies up to 97%) of the individuals suffering from schizophrenia suffered childhood physical or sexual trauma.

The authors of this study (Read, van Os, Morrison, & Ross, 2005) cite many studies that point to a significant overlap between the diagnostic constructs of schizophrenia, dissociative disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Since many contemporary clinicians are biased in their perception of schizophrenia as a biological disease - in my understanding, a bias reflecting the emotional resistance in the community at large to acknowledge the trauma that many children suffer in their own families - they don’t ask the questions that would uncover the history of abuse that would allow the diagnosis of PTSD. This bias has serious clinical implications as effective, evidence-based psychosocial treatments for psychosis are abandoned for exclusively psychopharmacological treatments. The authors report on “a large, multi-centre study [that found] that psychological approaches are more effective than medication for psychotic people who suffered childhood trauma”. For some, simply making a connection between their life history and their previously incomprehensible symptoms may have a significant therapeutic effect [p. 344]. Unfortunately, the traumatic history underlying the psychosis is so often left undiscovered, depriving the patients of needed psychological treatment.

It is interesting to note that almost every article or book on *chinuch* written by a contemporary Rov or *mechanech* emphasizes the importance of a positive and warm parent-child relationship, acceptance of a child’s individuality, and a reduction of excessive pressure and criticism, as the surest means of avoiding rebellious children.<sup>16</sup> Yet, when children do rebel, we

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<sup>16</sup> For example, see Rav Shlomo Wolbe's *Planting and Building in Chinuch: and Chinuch in Turbulent Times: Practical Strategies for Parents and Educators* by Rabbi Dov Brezak,(ArtScroll, 2002); and *The Heart of Parenting: Understanding What It Takes to Raise Successful Children in Today's Challenging Times* by Rabbi Moshe Don Kestenbaum (Menucha, 2013).

hesitate to draw the logical conclusion that the parents probably did not follow this advice. A few years ago, at a conference of *frum* professionals, a prominent *mechanech* confided to me that he was not going to publicly state his opinion that parents play the major causative role in the problem of rebellious adolescents. He was concerned with the anticipated negative reaction of the audience.

Likewise, when a prominent *frum* periodical published a series of articles addressing the topic of teen dropouts, it published the viewpoints of all parties involved except those of the children themselves. At the encouragement of his former *mashgiach*, a young adult wrote a very moving and eloquent letter relating how the difficulties he had with his parents led him to abandon *Yidishkeit*. At first, the periodical rejected the letter. After some pressure was brought to bear on the editor, the letter was indeed published, but only in a censored and heavily edited manner, which portrayed the letter writer in a very negative and distorted light. In fact, the editor implied, without any evidence, that the writer had a serious problem with his perception of reality. It was a classical case of trying to deny the message by killing the messenger. When the young man's therapist wrote a letter to the editor in order to set the record straight, the editor refused to publish the therapist's letter because of his concern of "causing additional pain" to the parents of rebellious children. Similar concern for the feelings of the unjustly maligned youngster was sadly missing!

Another *frum* publication once asked a noted *mechanech* to write an article highlighting the dangers of the Internet. This *mechanech* spent a great deal of time researching the issue. He then wrote an article based on his research. After methodically documenting all the dangers associated with the Internet, he noted under the heading of "The necessity of identifying risk factors" that:

Ultimately, restricting Internet access is a **necessary but insufficient** solution. What is needed is healing the personality weaknesses that virtually guarantee some individuals will fall victim to Internet temptations. **Studies show that those most likely to get into trouble are not deterred by limits on Internet access.** Therefore, a key challenge to parents and educators is identifying the risk factors. Researchers describe **four pre-existing conditions that put an individual at high risk for getting into trouble on the Internet. They are lack of family bonds; low self-esteem; inability to express opinions and questions; and inability to socialize.** [Emphasis added]

A prominent Rosh Yeshiva read the article and said that he felt that the article should be printed. When the article was, in fact, printed, the section on "The necessity of identifying risk factors" was mysteriously missing!

These incidents reflect the need of some people to externalize the blame for the difficulties many of our youngsters face onto external factors rather than to honestly face the reality of what some children face in their own homes. Some may justify this distortion as a means of prompting parents to do more to protect their homes from the indisputable corrosive influence of the media. What harm is there to some "scare tactics," even if it distorts the facts, if it is for a good cause?



## The myth of “It happens in the best of families”

In the context of understanding why a child rebels, the term “good family” would have to be limited to parents who have a positive and emotionally healthy relationship with their children, in addition to whatever other fine qualities they might have. The fact that parents are well-known in the community, support worthy causes, are prominent educators and the like does not, by itself, qualify for “good family” in the context of discussing possible parental influences in a child going “off the derech” if, in relation to their children, they are also overly demanding, punitive and rejecting. When people say that the problem of “off the derech” children happens in the “best of families” they are almost always referring to the family’s public persona. They usually have no idea of what goes on within the family. They simply assume that such parents “must be” wonderful parents.

We can avoid making this unwarranted assumption if we note the comment of my uncle, the late Telzer Rosh HaYeshiva, Rav Boruch Sorotzkin. In his *sefer* on *Chumash* he notes that negative character traits exist, to some minimal degree, even in great people. They would be most vigilant to not give expression to these traits in the company of their students or colleagues. Rather, these traits are more likely to find expression within the family.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Rav Eliyahu Lopian comments that if you want to know if someone is a “*kapdon*” (impatient, hot-tempered) you have to observe his behavior with his wife and children, over whom he may feel a sense of ownership and expect them to jump at his every command, and not his behavior with non-family members.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from these comments that one cannot know, with any degree of certainty, that people who have reputations as “the nicest people” in the public arena necessarily act in the same manner in the privacy of their homes. In fact, there are enough instances of the opposite being true to cause the Ari z”l to state that someone who does *chesed* with the public at large but not with his family members, his acts of *chesed* are not considered as *zechusim* and he is not rewarded for them.<sup>21</sup>

I find it somewhat surprising that even experienced therapists, who should know better, make this mistake, claiming that it isn’t unusual for children from “good families” to “go off the derech.” The implication is that since it’s a “good family” there cannot be parental factors involved in the child rebelling. Experienced therapists should certainly be aware that parents in “good families” sometimes act in bad ways within their families. (Our community’s experience with the problem of spousal abuse should have at least taught us that much). Every experienced therapist in the *frum* community has encountered incidents of undisputed emotional and physical abuse of children in families that are highly respected in the community. The strict rules of

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confidentiality tie the therapist's hands when he hears that very same family being mentioned as an example of the tragedy of rebellious adolescents happening in the "best of families."

In spite of the above, the myth persists, even among therapists, that it is common for children who are loved, respected and treated with sensitivity for their emotional needs by their parents, to rebel against these very parents to the point of rejecting their way of life. It seems that it is less threatening to believe that something bad can happen to a "good family," (e.g., when a child rebels) than to acknowledge that a person who is looked up to in the community can be abusive to his or her children. After all, it isn't only children who have a need for idealization (Kohut, 1987; Lee & Martin, 1991). The fact that parents who are perceived in our collective unconscious as the prototype of the loving and caring individual can be abusive to their children can be difficult for us to accept. Consider, for example, the years of denial that sexual abuse could actually occur within the *frum* family. Therapists are not immune to these feelings and it is not surprising, therefore, if, at times, they unconsciously collude with patients and/or parents in denying this reality. As Gartner (1999) states:

Therapists frequently experience the impulse to reel back from the shock and deny the horror of the material being described. This is a natural reaction in any therapist who is empathically attuned to the patient. Like the patient, the therapist may try to keep the experience unformulated and unsynthesized. After all, trauma by definition is an event that seemed impossible in the patient's worldview, and may seem equally impossible to the therapist. The dilemma is that it is in experiencing the therapist's struggle to listen to the impossible that the patient gets freed from it. [p. 257]

There have been times that I have also been convinced that I had encountered an example of a youngster from a "good home" (in both the public persona and within the family, emotional-health sense) that "went off the derech." But inevitably it turns out that my initial conclusion was premature. It was only because I found it difficult to believe that a youngster from a loving home would have a sufficient reason to take such a drastic step that I kept asking questions (while being careful not to be suggestive) until I was able to indeed understand why it happened.

*I once treated a young man from a highly respected family who had gone "off the derech." During the first months of therapy he reported that there had not been any difficulties in his relationship with his parents before he became irreligious. His father was a highly respected religious figure with a reputation for gentle kindness to all those who came to him for advice and guidance. At one point, the patient's mother came for a consultation (with the patient's consent) regarding another sibling. In our conversation she related that my patient wasn't as bright as his brilliant father or his other siblings and as a result, he didn't perform in yeshiva as well as his father expected him to. His father would become so angry that he would get into physical confrontations with his son. As the mother described these fights I became overwhelmed with a discomfoting feeling. The image of a man revered by the community (including myself) for his piousness and gentleness rolling on the floor in a physical altercation with his son just because he wasn't making his father proud was almost too painful to tolerate.*

## The negative impact of the myth

The need to uphold the myth of the all-loving parent can be a source of tremendous hurt and damage to the abused children of these families. How do adolescents understand their own rebelliousness if they are led to believe that their parents treated them in the most loving and caring fashion, even while they were actually maltreated?

First of all, the tendency of all children to prefer to blame themselves for being "bad" rather than see their parents as abusive (Gartner, 1999, p. 38) is greatly intensified by this societal denial.<sup>22</sup> They will therefore, be compelled to see themselves as particularly evil and ungrateful to be so problematic when they were treated so wonderfully. Abusive parents are especially prone to constantly reiterate this message to their children. This is consistent with the general tendency of aggressors to portray their victims as the persecutors (Grand, 2000, p. 94). A typical example is when parents are overly harsh and punitive with their children. Not surprisingly, the children become less than honest in their dealings with their parents. The parents, in turn, then criticize their children for the grave offense of lying, often commenting to them in anger that they can't imagine how they picked up such a terrible character trait.

Even more insidious is the corrupting effect this myth can have on the thought process of its victims. When youngsters experience abuse yet are told that, in fact, they are being treated with the utmost kindness and sensitivity, they begin to distrust their sense of reality. As a result, many of these children, even if they are fortunate enough to escape the ravages of a serious thought disorder, suffer from cognitive disabilities, seriously impacting their academic abilities (in addition to their other emotional problems).<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that Grand (2000) emphasizes:

The establishment of the actual historicity of trauma is particularly necessary with child abuse. Child abuse is a trauma uniquely characterized by the falsification of reality; it has invariably occurred secretly, in family systems that deny its very existence. Survivors of other forms of malignant trauma, such as war or violent crime, all received the profound support of consensual validation from survivor cohorts and the larger culture. The child abuse survivor has been robbed of reality and of history; cure requires its restoration. [p. 42]

Likewise, Orange (citing Alice Miller) explains why some people who were abused as children suffer less long-term psychological damage than others:

[T]he crucial difference in the outcome of severe child abuse depends on the presence of someone in the child's life who witnesses, and thus gives the child the opportunity and ability to experience, the child's pain. Without such a witness

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<sup>22</sup> George Bernard Shaw was hard hit by his father's alcoholism, but he tried to make light of it, writing: "If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance" (cited in Aronson, 1999).

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the child cannot experience the abuse as abuse. Instead it is torture that must be endured. The child often feels she or he deserves treatment that an observer would see as cruel and outrageous. In the presence of some, even minimally, validating witness, the child can experience the abuse as mistreatment and, thereby, find ways to express it [p. 136]

It is for this reason that, paradoxically, the trauma a person went through that everyone knows about is often the lesser of his or her problems. A young man I once worked with suffered from a number of emotional difficulties. It was commonly assumed that these difficulties were the result of the trauma of losing his parents at a young age in an auto accident. In fact, since he received a great deal of validation and emotional support from his family and community for this trauma he was able to successfully get past it. In contrast, for the abuse he suffered at the hands of the family that was "kind enough" to take in an orphan, he never received any recognition for and that was a trauma he was never able to process.

Minimizing the extent or unfairness of abuse (in the attitude of observers and by extension, in the mind of the victim) is also the single most significant factor in a victim of abuse becoming an abuser. Briggs (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996) conducted extensive research to try to determine what it was that allowed some molested children to not go on to molest other children, unlike the great number of victims of molestation who do become molesters. She found that the most prominent difference distinguishing those molested children who went on to be molesters from those who didn't was the degree of their recognition of the terribleness of what was done to them. The ones who minimized the injustice and damaging effect (I wasn't forced, He was nice to me, I enjoyed it, etc.) were much more likely to become molesters. It's as if the victim tells himself "If what was done to me was not so terrible then it's alright if I also do it."

### **Why only one sibling?**

The most common "evidence" cited to prove that parenting practices are not significant factors in causing adolescents to rebel, is that often only one of many siblings rebels. As one *mechanek* challenged me, "If the parents were cold and distant how did they manage to succeed with their other children?"

The assumption that parents succeeded with their other children is often based on superficial criteria, for example, the fact that the other children didn't rebel against *yidishkeit*. It is often the case however, that the other children have also been hurt, but in less obvious ways. Perhaps the other children lack self-confidence or suffer from low self-esteem. Sometimes some of the other children are quite depressed, but not to the point that it is obvious to other people. Even more misleading is when some of the other children become highly functioning perfectionists as a guilt-ridden reaction to constant criticism.<sup>24</sup> What is clear is that one should not assume that the other children were not hurt based on superficial impressions alone. No one ever claimed that errors in parenting have to result in children going "off the derech." It is only one of many possible negative consequences.

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<sup>24</sup> Often eventually resulting in psychosomatic disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder etc. (Sarno, 2006; Sorotzkin, 1985, 1988, 1999a).

Even if it were clear that, in a particular case, the parents were successful in raising their other children, what relevance would that have to the parents' impact on one particular child's life? There are cases of undisputed, serious parental abuse where some of the children seem to have survived without major psychological damage. Does that prove that the problems that the other children suffer from were not caused by the abuse? If four people are in a car accident, and one passenger gets hurt while the other three escape unscratched, does that prove that it could not have been the accident that caused the injury?

Parents never treat all their children identically (e.g., boys vs. girls, youngest vs. oldest, etc.) and there can be other external factors unique to one of the siblings (as noted above from Alice Miller) that may make him more immune to the negative impact of parental maltreatment. Likewise, parents sometimes learn from their mistakes with one of their children and therefore are more successful with other children. Based on informal surveys that I have conducted, for example, it seems that the vast majority of parents are significantly less strict with their later children than they were with their oldest children since they learn from experience that being overly rigid and strict is counterproductive. In such a situation, perhaps only the older child would develop a serious problem.

### **We don't know what causes the problem**

Another common myth is that we don't know the cause of the problem. In fact, I believe that it is more accurate to say that we **rather not know** the cause of the problem. This refusal to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth is reminiscent of the study commissioned a few years ago by the secular Jewish establishment to study the problem of assimilation. The published results presented clear evidence that the major factor combating assimilation was an Orthodox Jewish education. Yet the study concluded that assimilation was a complex issue and that they had not been able to ascertain the specific causes of this problem and further study was necessary! A writer in the secular journal *Commentary* chided the study for ignoring the uncomfortable truth they themselves uncovered.

The assumption [of the intermarriage task force] is that intermarriage is present in every Jewish family; that it appears at random; that all sectors of the community are equally vulnerable. Why are American Jewish leaders disposed to see all-pervading crisis when the data they are drawing upon suggest a number of subpopulations behaving in different ways [with the Orthodox having a substantially smaller percentage of intermarriage]? [Because] distinguishing between core Jews and peripheral ones would imply that some Jews behave in a fashion that is "better" than others. Such judgmentalism goes against the neutrality-seeking culture [so they] banned discussion about the most divisive and i.e., most important issues.<sup>25</sup>

A similar phenomenon can be observed when AIDS activists insist that "AIDS can happen to anyone," denying the obvious but uncomfortable reality that - in the vast majority of

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in the *Jewish Observer*, February 1996, p. 31.

cases - there are limited and specific behaviors that bring about this disease. The well-known columnist, John Leo (2000), describes what happened when a (formally) liberal journalist challenged the notion that AIDS is just as much a threat to heterosexuals as it is to homosexuals, by quoting a researcher who said, "By and large, people who are responsible will not get AIDS." His statement was met with outrage and denunciation for casting doubt on liberal dogma.

When I hear a prominent therapist at a professional conference state that "we have no idea what causes adolescents to go off the derech, and it can happen in any family," etc., I ask the same question asked by the writer in *Commentary*. Why are we disposed to see all-pervading crisis when there is clear evidence for those willing to see it that, in the vast majority of cases, it is faulty parenting that causes this tragedy? To paraphrase the AIDS researcher (and the *mechanech* from Bnei Brak cited above); **By and large, parents who act responsibly – by being sensitive and responsive to their children’s emotional needs – will not suffer from rebellious children.**

Another version of this myth is that there aren't any natural causes of this problem (e.g., it can happen in the finest family, etc.). Rather the causes are spiritual and/or mystical in nature. To reinforce this view, Rabbi Matisyohu Salomon has been quoted (from a *Tisha B'Av* speech) as describing the current epidemic of rebellious youngsters as "a *gezeira* of *golus*." This has been interpreted by some as suggesting that this tragedy can happen to anyone without natural reasons of cause and effect. Recently, I had an opportunity to ask Rabbi Salomon about his statement. He explained that he did not mean that this tragedy strikes at random, without rhyme or reason. Rather, he meant that the conditions that bring about this problem are and he emphasized the quality of the parent-child relationship as a major factor are the result of the *geziara* of *golus* (e.g., the absence of the *Beis Hamikdash*).

### ACKNOWLEDGING CAUSE AND EFFECT vs. ASSIGNING BLAME

The second major objection to attributing the problem of adolescent rebelliousness to parenting factors is that it makes parents feel bad. I find it difficult to comprehend this reasoning. Would we ever consider not telling an ignorant smoker that his habit is endangering his life, for the sake of not hurting his feelings? If parents are not made aware that their approach is contributing to their child's problem, why should they be motivated to change it? At a recent conference, a mother of a youngster who went off the *derech*, and is currently abusing drugs, wondered how this tragedy could happen in a beautiful family such as hers. Yet, in the same breath, she noted that her husband still tells their son that he still expects him to be a big *talmid chacham* and *tzadik*! Would it not be an act of kindness to at least discuss with these parents the possibility that their excessive expectations may have been a major contributing factor to their son's troubles?<sup>26</sup> Most importantly, should we not tell them that if they become more accepting of their son and have realistic expectations of him, they might be able to save him?

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It is important to emphasize that acknowledging the role of parents in the development of their children's emotional difficulties and acting out behaviors is not an issue of moral condemnation or assigning blame. In fact, I wholeheartedly agree with the words of an eminent therapist (Karon, 2000) who spoke of the need to enlist the aid of parents in the treatment of emotionally disturbed patients;

This may seem strange because so many of the therapeutic issues have to do with hurtful experiences concerning their [parents], but typically the destructive parenting experiences have derived from [the] unconscious defenses of the parent. The parents had no conscious knowledge or control of these defenses, and in most cases are very decent people who would never consciously hurt their child. Often they will go to great lengths to help their child. [p. 43]<sup>27</sup>

There are often circumstances that make it particularly difficult for parents to be appropriately responsive to their children. Wahler and Dumas (1989) identify three factors that can inhibit and distort parental responsiveness; (a) a child with a "difficult" temperament; (b) the parent's nuclear family is a constant source of aversive experiences for the parents; (c) the community setting is a constant source of aversive experiences for the parents. Regardless of the distal cause, it is crucial for parents to realize that, at the proximal level, it is the lack of appropriate responsiveness on their part that causes children to suffer from emotional distress and/or acting out. For example, no one doubts that a child with a strong-willed temperament is a greater challenge for parents than a more compliant child, but it is the parents' responsiveness to this challenge that will ultimately determine this child's future. Will his strong-willed nature be channeled by the parents so that it will be used by the child to persevere in difficult undertakings, where others would give up, or will the parents' punitive over-reaction to his "stubbornness" create a rift in the parent-child relationship so that the stubbornness will be turned against the parents?

When Rav Matisyohu Salomon was asked in a *chinuch vaad* how to deal with a stubborn child, he responded: "Stubbornness is like a muscle, the more you exercise it the stronger it gets, so try to avoid getting into situations where he'll be stubborn."

I also identify with the words of Rav Matisyohu Salomon who after elucidating the underlying psychological causes of *lashon horah* apologized for pointing out the shortcomings of his readers: "This is the place to apologize that we didn't come here to uncover the shame and

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<sup>27</sup> A student in a special education training program for *frum* teachers shared with me the following email from her instructor to the class. The email clearly expresses my true feelings regarding "blaming parents" better than I have been able to so I am including it here. "I have a very eye-opening article for you to read on the role of parents in the current crisis of rebellious teens in our community [referring to this article]. After reading and contemplating the article, you will surely appreciate the time you spent on it. Most likely, you will initially be appalled by what you are reading. Your first reaction will be to defend all of those wonderful people you know whose children are for some reason or another not acting the way their parents hoped they would. Calm down, and realize that Dr. Sorotzkin is being very levelheaded. His purpose is NOT to attack parents, or blame them in a disparaging way! He is merely tracing the roots of these problems to deficiencies in the parent-child relationships, which can come about from many different and complex circumstances. But by being blunt and saying what people do not want to hear or believe, he is, in my opinion, bringing us closer to rectification and prevention of this growing problem. This is Dr. Sorotzkin's only goal."

dishonor of people, *chas veshalom*. On the contrary, because they are spiritual people who want to improve themselves, therefore we dared to raise this issue in print.<sup>28</sup>

## THE PRICE WE PAY FOR IGNORING THE ROLE OF PARENTING

I used to be hesitant to openly attribute adolescent acting out to parental attitudes and behaviors because I was sure that parents would be defensive and reject this approach out of hand. Over time, I began to realize the high price parents were paying in order to avoid the unpleasantness of acknowledging their role in their children's problems. When therapists collude in avoiding connecting their adolescent patients' problems to their past history, this encourages the patients to unjustly take full responsibility for their problems, which in turn further lowers their already depressed self-esteem. As a result, the likelihood of recovery is reduced. The parents, for their part, have no reason to work on improving their relationship with their children since it isn't presented as contributing to the problem. As a result, the problem gets worse.

Some therapists try to "have their cake and eat it too" by telling parents that "you were not part of the problem, but you are part of the solution." In other words, they didn't contribute in any way to the development of their child's difficulties but they can be helpful in the treatment. The problem I have found with this approach is that it does not allow patients to put their past behind them. It is only when parents acknowledge the hurt that they have inflicted and express regret for it that their children can come to terms with the past and focus on the future.<sup>29</sup> In addition, taking this step sets an example for children to take responsibility for **their** actions (see Sorotzkin, 1999b).

My original hesitancy to explore the effect of parenting practices on my patients' current problem behaviors was also influenced by "current treatment models [that] emphasize enhancing current adjustment rather than understanding past events."<sup>30</sup> However, past events are not merely historical artifacts. Rather, they are events that have created psychological structures (e.g., low self-esteem, and chronic feelings of rejection) that shape current attitudes and behaviors. As Gillman (1986) put it, trauma is "an organizer for development. Although whole or part of trauma may be out of awareness, something is embedded in the personality, a focus that draws into it posttraumatic events, to be dealt with over and over again" (p. 75). As a result, when I tried to "enhance current adjustment" without uncovering the underlying psychological structures, it resulted in temporary and superficial improvement, at best.

An analogy I have often used to explain this point is what happens when you drive a car without oil. Eventually the engine burns out (i.e., structural damage). It is no longer sufficient to just add oil. The engine has to be rebuilt. Likewise, when children suffer psychic structural damage from mishandling it is usually not sufficient to start treating them nicely from now on. It

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg, Drake, & Mueser, 1997, p. 261.

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is necessary to undo the damage to the psychic structure, by addressing the hurt from the past in psychotherapy.

*A 21 year-old young man had a history of a mild learning disorder and conflict with his father who had always attributed his poor academic performance to laziness and lack of motivation. This young man was struggling with college. His father, who by now realized the unjust nature of his past criticism, assured his son that it would be perfectly acceptable to him if he dropped out of college. Unfortunately, because of the long history of criticism, the son no longer believed his father that he really meant it. He became very anxious worrying that his father would reject him if he left college.*

As a result of the above considerations, I began to more directly (albeit, gently) point out to parents how their parenting approach (e.g., being overly critical and negative) directly contributed to their children's problem. To my surprise, I found that the majority of parents were quite receptive if this was presented in a sympathetic and respectful manner. In fact, many of the parents began to admonish me for not getting the word out to other parents. It is mostly in response to their prompting that this paper was written.

There is another reason why I am troubled by the well-meaning effort to spare parents from the painful truth. Why don't we have the same sensitivity and consideration for the child's pain? If we take the attitude that parenting practices is not a significant factor in their children's problems, then the child is left to take full responsibility. In fact, as discussed above, this only reinforces the attitude children already have that it must be their own fault.

I would venture two reasons why we often feel more concern for the pain of the adult perpetrators than that of the child victims. First of all, as adults we identify more closely with other adults. Secondly, if we attribute malicious intent to acting-out children while denying the role of parents, as discussed above, then it is no wonder that we have little sympathy for the children.

## RESPONSIBILITY

Some *mechanchim* fear that attributing children's problem behaviors to parental errors might reduce the youngsters' sense of responsibility. If they don't feel that it is their fault, they won't be motivated to improve.<sup>31</sup> This concern is unwarranted. Anyone who has worked closely with these youngsters and has developed an open relationship with them, knows that they are not at all happy with their state, and would give anything to become "normal," regardless of the amount of responsibility they assume. The fact that they often act in self-defeating ways is indicative of low self-esteem and lack of confidence (i.e., they see themselves as too-far gone, or too "bad" to be saved) rather than a lack of caring. Even youngsters who claim that they "don't care," are only being defensive about their caring.

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<sup>31</sup> Here again, there doesn't seem to be a similar concern that the parents take responsibility for what they did wrong.

When adolescent patients insist to me that they don't care about their dismal state, I ask them the following question. "If someone offered you a magic pill that would change you to be like other normal youngsters, would you accept it?" I have yet to have a patient turn the offer down. This serves to make it clear to patients that their not caring only reflects their lack of hope for improvement.

As indicated above, many youngsters arrive at the point of rebelliousness after going through a period of perfectionism. They have often taken upon themselves too much responsibility rather than too little. These feelings of responsibility are most often accompanied by feelings of profound shame and relentless and unreasonable guilt. Only after being overwhelmed by these feelings, have they finally given up hope. Helping them become aware of the familial conditions that promoted their rebelliousness is often an important step in their recovery (Sorotzkin, 1996). When patients are helped to express their anger over past parental hurts and when parents make a sincere effort to repair their relationship with their children, it is specifically this process that most often leads to a significantly improved relationship with the parents.

### **WORKING WITH PARENTS IN THERAPY**

In my practice, when I speak to parents of rebellious children, I ask direct and often difficult questions.<sup>32</sup> I focus on the early relationship with the child. Were the parents very demanding, critical, or difficult to please? Did the child feel that nothing he or she would do would be enough to please the parent?

It needs to be emphasized that if the clinician merely asks the parents of rebellious youngsters if they had a good relationship with their children, they would most often answer "yes," regardless of the true historical nature of the relationship. The clinician needs to ask specific and direct questions.

The following event is typical. A parent who attributed his son's problem behaviors to school issues, at first claimed that he had a good relationship with his son. It was only after some direct, probing questions that he opened up and admitted to being a very negative person (he saw himself as very similar to his own father in this regard). As he spoke about this problem at length, he was able to actually see how this had impacted negatively on his son. He also resolved to try and repair his relationship with his son. Would I have been kinder to him if I would have spared him this information?

When speaking to youngsters, it is also necessary to ask specific and direct questions regarding their relationship with their parents, since they also tend to repress and/or deny the negative aspects of these relationships. Young, et al. (2001) discuss at length the challenge of ascertaining whether patients suffered maltreatment during their childhood. On the basis of their study, Dill et al. (1991) also concluded that; "Data suggest caution in accepting at face value, initial denials of abuse histories" (p. 166) - (See my article on "Chemical Imbalances"). This is

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<sup>32</sup> Based on the feedback I get from my referral sources, I am reassured that I do so in a respectful and sensitive manner.

another reason that even experienced clinicians are often convinced that the problem of rebellious adolescents can occur even in a home with the most positive and emotionally supportive parent-child relationships.

Recently, a young adult from a well-known and respected family stated, in our initial conversation that, “I didn’t have a particularly hard life.” Only in response to a series of direct question did he state that there was “absolutely no *sholom bayis* in our house.” His parents have not spoken to each other in years and live in separate rooms. In his younger years he often observed his father being physically abusive to his mother. Most of his siblings suffer from some form of emotional disorder. Nonetheless he sincerely believed, at some level, that he didn’t have a particularly hard life!

Once the therapist ascertains what it was in the child’s early home environment that made him or her vulnerable to becoming a rebellious teenager, the next step is to help the parents understand this without causing them to be overly defensive. It must be made clear to them that the purpose of this exercise is not to blame them but rather to set the foundation for repairing the relationship with their child and thus reduce the level of his or her problem behaviors.

### **“Tough love” vs. “gentle love”**

Once parents appreciate the harm caused by a negative relationship, they are usually motivated to listen to suggestions on how to develop a positive relationship. Often, it is necessary to first dissuade them from following well-intentioned advice to apply “tough love” treatment. The “tough love” approach seems to me to be the natural consequence of attributing negative intent to children, as discussed below in the “Parental Attitudes” section. These parents will often attribute children’s rebelliousness to the fact that they were “spoiled.” Not surprisingly, this is the one parenting mistake that parents have no problem “confessing” to. It is especially appealing when a spouse can be blamed for spoiling the child. (It is astonishing and disheartening to hear parents claim that children who have been constantly yelled at and severely criticized were “spoiled” and have had it “too easy” just because they had an abundance of material objects).

When parents express concern that my advice may be tainted by secular, liberal influences, I suggest that they may feel more comfortable following the advice provided by the *Chazon Ish*:

When asked how parents should treat their children who have gone “off the *derech*,” [the *Chazon Ish*] responded that they should try to draw them closer with bonds of love and not to push them away. A youth who became a *mechallel Shabbos* later asked his father to buy him a car. The father agreed with the condition that he promises not to drive on *Shabbos*. The son refused to promise and tension between father and son rose sharply. The *Chazon Ish*, however, advised the father to give his son the car without any conditions, because



I once had the *zechos* of being present when Rav Matisyohu Salomon was explaining to parents of a rebellious *bochur* how their over-control of their son drove him away. He showed them an incredible *vort* from Rav Shimon Schwab on this issue (see note).<sup>35</sup>

I suggest to parents that, when it reaches a point where children rebel against the family and its way of life, then they need to show their children that they are more concerned with their feelings than with their behavior. If they can do this, there is a good chance that they can turn the situation around.

### Parental attitudes

It is important for the therapist to keep in mind that improving the parent-child relationship is usually not just a matter of improving specific parenting techniques. The problem is more likely to be in the parents' overall perception of, attitudes and emotional responsiveness toward their children (Wahler & Dumas, 1989; Wahler, 1990, 1997). Some parents, for example, will refuse, on principle, to accommodate a particular child's likes and dislikes in food by preparing something different for him than the rest of the family. "This is not a restaurant!" they insist. As if treating a child with the courtesy afforded any guest would be unthinkable. Likewise, parents who are particularly negative and critical will obviously react punitively to behaviors that they perceive to be unusually deviant or purposely defiant (e.g., "he's taking the easy way out [by being dysfunctional!]; he wants to show that he's the boss!"). In fact, the parents are actually reacting quite reasonably considering what they perceive. (See Strassberg, 1997 for a fascinating study of the impact of parental attitudes and perceptions on disciplinary patterns).<sup>36</sup>

*A patient who had a severe stuttering problem related how he confided to his father about his feelings of terror and shame when speaking in public. His father reacted with criticism, "It is only because of your gaava (haughtiness) that it bothers you". This father was reacting in a "reasonable" fashion considering what he saw as the obvious reality.*

When speaking to parents, the therapist needs to listen closely for parental attitudes that undermine the healthy emotional development of children.

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*I mentioned to parents of an adolescent patient how a child who feels close to his parents would confide in them if he were troubled by something he did wrong. The mother objected, "If he respected his parents and had consideration for their feelings he wouldn't burden them with information that would upset them." One can only imagine that it is not likely that her children would have an open relationship with her.*

### **Genetic factors, chemical imbalances, and child effects**

In the ongoing attempts to avoid acknowledging the primary impact of deficient parenting practices on children's future adjustment problems, many other factors have been suggested as primary factors. Often, parents feel that their children's difficulties started at a very early age and probably reflect genetic influences. They therefore feel absolved from any responsibility. This attitude is reinforced by the fact that many contemporary clinicians attribute adolescent misbehavior to genetic factors or to a "chemical imbalance," either because they believe this and/or because they prefer a "no-fault" approach. The evidence for these assumptions, however, is tenuous at best and suspect at worst (see the studies cited in my article on "Chemical Imbalances"). Often, there are obvious familial explanations that they fail to uncover or choose to ignore.

Even when genetics does play a role, it does not preclude the importance of understanding the environmental factors. A noted genetic researcher (Mann, 1994) stated in a special issue of *Science*: "the interaction of genes and environment is much more complicated than the simple 'violence genes' and 'intelligence genes' touted in the popular press". The same data that show the effects of genes, also point to the enormous influence of non-genetic factors [p. 1687]. (See also Collins et al., 2000)

The following true incident illustrates the overriding impact of parental attitudes, even when dealing with behaviors with a clear genetic base.

*[Identical twin] girls were separated in infancy and raised apart by different adoptive parents.... When the twins were two and a half years old, the adoptive mother was asked a variety of questions. Everything was fine with Shauna, she indicated, except for her eating habits. "The girl is impossible. Won't touch anything I give her. No mashed potatoes, no bananas. Nothing without cinnamon. Everything has to have cinnamon on it. I'm really at my wit's end with her about this. We fight at every meal. She wants cinnamon on everything!" In the house of the second twin, far away from the first, no eating problem was mentioned at all by the other mother. "Ellen eats well," she said, adding after a moment: As a matter of fact, as long as I put cinnamon on her food she'll eat anything." (Neubauer & Neubauer, 1990, p. 20)*

Another variation of the "attribute the cause of the problem to anyone or anything other than the parents" approach is to acknowledge deficient parenting practices, but to blame the

children for it. This is known as the "child effects" (e.g., Lytton, 1990). These children are presumed to have been born with difficult temperaments, which cause their parents to be abusive to them. An early exponent of this approach was the Austrian psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein who died in London in 1960. Grotstein (1983) reports that:

Klein emphasizes the responsibility of the infant for the occurrence of breaks in the bonding [with the mother] and minimizes the responsibility of the mother. [p. 179]

It is certainly true that some children are born with more difficult temperaments and/or temperaments that happen to conflict more with that of the parents. But to lay the responsibility for developing a positive and emotionally healthy relationship on the infant instead of the parents seems to me totally ludicrous! In fact, the well-known *posuk* in *Mishlei* (22:6), *Chanoch l'na'ar al pi darko* specifically lays the responsibility on parents and *mechanchim* to adjust their own personality to the child's temperament and not the reverse! While this can be quite difficult at times (perhaps this is the meaning of *otza'ar gidul bonim* - *Eiruvim*, 100b), it is irrational to put the responsibility on the child!

### THE ROLE OF *YESHIVOS* AND SCHOOLS

At conferences dealing with adolescents going off the *derech*, much criticism is heard regarding *frum* schools and *yeshivos*. They are criticized for, among other things, not being responsive to the needs of the individual. I find it interesting that therapists are very hesitant to criticize parents yet feel perfectly comfortable criticizing *yeshivos*. Perhaps, since most clinicians are also parents, they feel more threatened by the thought of parental responsibility. It is my feeling that it is the parents' responsibility to give their children a sense of individuality while the school's primary job is to socialize. It is only when parents themselves fail to promote their child's sense of individuality (as is common with parents who are themselves unusually sensitive to the opinions of others) that the school's socialization process takes place at the expense of the child's individuality.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, when relating to the association between learning disabilities and rebelling adolescents, the tendency is to criticize the schools for not doing enough and for not being sufficiently sensitive to the child's difficulties. Here again, I feel that parents play a more significant role than the school. When parents are emotionally supportive of their learning disabled children, then the children are better able to deal with the deficiencies of the schools. In fact, the learning difficulties themselves may be a result of emotional difficulties the child is carrying from home.<sup>38</sup>

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than a negative approach, so they are friendlier and more lenient than regular *rebbeim*, but they don't get to the root of the problem. The youngsters try to respond to the friendlier approach but their unrecognized and unresolved family issues undermine these efforts. Eventually, the *mechanchim* become frustrated and they feel that the *bochurim* are taking advantage of their lenient approach. This can result in a dramatic end to the *mechanechim's* friendly attitude.

## SUMMARY

To conclude, I would like to quote the renowned *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg (2000):

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. [p. 139]

Recent scientific research has also emphasized the critical role of parenting in preventing mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. In an article titled "The critical role of nurturing environments for promoting human well-being" in a recent issue of *American Psychologist*, Biglan, Flay, Embry & Sandler (2012) report that:

The recent Institute of Medicine report on prevention noted the substantial interrelationship among mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders and pointed out that, to a great extent, these problems stem from a set of common conditions.

However, despite the evidence, current research and practice continue to deal with the prevention of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders as if they are unrelated and each stems from different conditions.

Psychological and behavioral disorders and related problems co-occur, and these problems stem largely from the same conditions.

Biological, behavioral, etiological, and intervention evidence converges on a fairly simple and straightforward principle: If we want to prevent multiple problems and

increase the prevalence of young people who develop successfully, we must increase the prevalence of nurturing environmentsí .

Yet despite the evidence, a disciplinary archipelago impedes progress and obscures the common origins of problems and the potential of comprehensive prevention. Public health practice is similarly fragmented. From federal to local levels, separate agencies deal with mental illness, drug abuse, and crime as if the three had nothing in common. Thus progress proceeds glacially. A new way of thinking would accelerate progress in preventing multiple and costly problems from continuing to plague society. [pp. 257-258]

Without a drastic shift away from a focus on individual problems to a focus on the prevalence of nurturing environments, progress in reducing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders will continue at a glacial paceí . [p. 263]

Encouraging parents to take a honest look at how their relationship with their children contributed to their problem behaviors is beneficial both to the children and to the parents. Improving the relationship in a meaningful manner, together with the *zechos* of *tefilah*, is the only way to bring about a lasting change in the childø condition.

## APPENDIX

[The following is an edited version of a letter I wrote to a well-known *mashgiach* regarding some of the issues discussed in this article] *Lechvod HaMashgiach shlit"á*:

As a follow up to our phone conversation this past *erev Shabbos*, I would like to elaborate on one important point.

I fully realize the controversial nature of, my therapeutic approach of (in many cases) encouraging/allowing patients to be aware of the role their parents played in the development of their emotional difficulties and/or behavioral problems.

I did not arrive at this approach because of theories I studied in school. In fact, when I first began practicing, I accepted the òcurrent treatment models that emphasize enhancing current adjustment, rather than understanding past eventsö (to quote a well known researcher in 1997). However, I found that this approach was only putting a bandage on the wound. The person remained the same person ó even if he could function a little better than before.

I felt that these *bochurim* - and others - deserved that we therapists actually try to cure them. This required getting to the root of why they almost all had such poor self-images and why they were certain that they were rejects in *Hashem's* eyes. With increasing experience, I became convinced that in almost all cases these problems ó at the root ó were the result of deficiencies in parenting. However, (1) children are not capable of comprehending these issues, and (2) it is too emotionally painful for children to believe that their parents could be abusive to them and (3) abusive parents are likely to respond viciously to even legitimate complaints by their children. Therefore, even abused children grow up being convinced that they are being treated lovingly and respectfully.

So how does a child explain to himself why he is so unhappy, jealous, obsessive, angry, obsessed with *hirhurim*, etc.? It must be, the child tells himself, (often the parent tells it to him also), that he is lazy, stupid, defective, a *ba'al taivah*, etc. Being supportive and encouraging to such a patient will make him feel better for the moment, but it won't cure the underlying deficiency. It is therefore necessary, it seems to me, to help the patient develop a more honest and accurate picture of his early life. The anger that results is indeed disruptive (and upsetting to the parents when they lose the only leverage they ever had, since they never learned how to influence their children through a healthy relationship) but it is also curative.

Another reason is that often these patients have internalized from their parents unhealthy and erroneous attitudes (often under the guise of *hashkafah*) that feed the low self-esteem, paralyzing self-doubt, etc. In order to change these deeply imbedded cognitions it is, unfortunately, necessary to highlight the negative aspects of the parental attitudes (e.g., illogical, unfair, hypocritical, etc.). If they don't unlearn the unhealthy ideas they were taught growing up, they will continue suffering the negative emotional consequences of those ideas. They are also likely to inflict these ideas on **their** children even if they try not to raise their children in the way that they were raised. This is another major reason why it is important for maltreated children to be fully aware regarding the mistreatment they suffered at the hands of their parents. If they minimize the negative impact of such practices why should they even try to avoid treating their own children in the same manner?

Many *mechanchim* who work with troubled teens are very much aware of the role that misguided parenting played in the genesis of a particular child's problems, yet they feel uncomfortable acknowledging this to the child. However, when a person is in the process of becoming a *baal teshuvah* we don't avoid telling him that his parents were wrong about their ideas regarding Judaism. We can explain that they didn't have the opportunity to get a Jewish education, etc. but, bottom line, they have to know that, in this area, their parents were mistaken. Otherwise, how can they be expected to forge a new path in *yiddishkeit*. Likewise, a child who internalized unhealthy and distorted views of himself and others can only develop healthier perceptions if he understands that what he was taught was wrong.<sup>42</sup>

When parents are cooperative with this approach the end result is a truly close and respectful relationship. If they are not, then tragically, but in my opinion unavoidably, the child will become healthier but more distant from his parent (although the previous "close" relationship was only an illusion). I feel very strongly that this is the key to truly building the patient into an emotionally healthy *oved Hashem* who is capable of raising his own children without being abusive.

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<sup>42</sup> The ArtScroll Yom Kippur Machzor (p. 883) cites the *Or Hachaim* that a proper understanding of the *aveiros* of our ancestors is often a prerequisite of *teshuvah*. Sometimes we accept family or community "traditions" as a proper way of life because they have "always been done and no one was ever punished." Thus we must acknowledge such *aveiros* of the past.

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