

Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D.
Clinical Psychologist
Brooklyn, NY
www.DrSorotzkin.com
bensort@aol.com

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BEGINNING THE HEALING PROCESS*

“It can happen in the best of families” is an expression often heard in regard to rebellious teenagers. Indeed, when a teenager goes “off the *derech*,” we tend to blame the teenager himself, bad friends or negative influences. We tell ourselves that even a youngster from a “good home” can be swayed by a decadent culture. After nearly 30 years of counseling parents and teenagers in the Orthodox community, I am convinced that this attitude is both detrimental and inaccurate. It is detrimental because it causes parents to feel powerless in preventing this tragedy from happening to their child. One can’t change the basic nature of a child nor can one totally isolate his child from the environment. It is inaccurate because teens who reject their family’s way of life are far more likely to be reacting to family issues (e.g. anger and hurt resulting from ongoing conflict with their parents) than to innate character flaws or environmental influences.

While it is certainly a bad idea to expose vulnerable youth to hangouts and other negative influences, parents cannot afford to remain oblivious to the significant role they can play in trying to prevent teen rebelliousness. Based upon my observations of hundreds of cases of troubled adolescents, I feel that parents who are reasonably sensitive and responsive to their children’s emotional needs will not have to contend with rebellious teenagers later on. A secure parent-child relationship is the most potent means of preventing future problems.

What is it that destroys the parent-child bond? Many factors, to be sure. But over criticalness, by far, is the most common destroyer of families. A Torah educator recently related how he had a set of parents record everything they said at home for several days. When the parents subsequently listened to the recording, they were shocked to discover how frequently they criticized their children.¹

Tragically, many parents are unaware of their own negativity. Note, for example, the father who claims that his learning disabled daughter is not doing well in school because she is

* [From the Fall 2001, Jewish Action, “Just Between Us” column, pp. 74-76. Reprinted with permission from *Jewish Action*, the magazine of the Orthodox Union. *Editor’s note: Readers are invited to use this forum to express personal views and address issues of concern to fellow Jews. The views expressed in this column are not necessarily the views of the Orthodox Union*].

¹ Cited in Rabbi D. Brezak, “Practical *Chinuch* in Our Turbulent Times,” *Yated Neeman*, December 10, 1999

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“lazy” or the mother of a troubled teen who states, rather matter-of-factly, that her son was “a manipulator from day one.”

One parent complained bitterly that his son “never opens a *sefer*” when he is home from yeshivah. It turned out his son was learning with great diligence in an out-of-town yeshivah and came home only once a month for Shabbat. When he was home, he naturally felt a need to unwind. To the father, however, this signified laziness and a lack of discipline.

Children who are repeatedly criticized feel they are a disappointment to their parents and will respond in either of two ways: try to be perfect in order to feel worthy of acceptance or give up trying, and rebel.² In a home where the parent-child relationship is unstable, it is not surprising when the child chooses to abandon Torah and *Yiddishkeit*. We need to remember that *Yiddishkeit* is transmitted via *mesorah* (tradition) and the transmitters are the parents. If the relationship is defective, then the transmission will invariably be defective.

“Samuel” was a seriously depressed adolescent who spent most of his time alone in his room. The only time he spent with his family was during the Shabbat day meal. One Sunday, the father called me and exclaimed, “Samuel left the table to go to his room in the middle of the meal.” I assumed he was concerned with the intensification of his son’s depression. The father continued, “Didn’t he realize that he was needed for the *mezuman* (the necessary quorum for Grace after Meals)!” How surprising is it that Samuel eventually rejected his father’s religious way of life?

It seems that contemporary parents are far more critical than their predecessors. There may be many reasons for this. For one, our generation’s unprecedented prosperity gives us the luxury of focusing on our children’s success as never before. Also, rising standards in education (both secular and religious) cause parents’ expectations to rise. Our shrinking world, where parents are aware of everyone else’s children’s successes, has increased the pressure to succeed. Perhaps most seriously, some parents, who are unable to serve as positive, influential figures in their children’s lives, use criticism as a way of relating to their children.

Often parents, while acknowledging their role in contributing to their child’s troubles, claim that they cannot be expected to change their own behavior as long as their child is misbehaving. This is flawed reasoning. Parents and children do not share equal responsibility in developing a positive relationship. Indeed, it is primarily the responsibility of the parents to develop a warm, nurturing relationship with their children. The *Sefer Chasidim* notes that the verse in Leviticus³ “*Ish aviv ve’emo tirau,*” commanding a person to revere his or her parents begins in the singular but ends in the plural. The implication is that the obligation also falls upon the parents “that they should not be so negative, critical and provocative to their children to the point where they will not be able to restrain themselves and they will rebel.”⁴

² Benzion Sorotzkin, “The Quest for Perfection: Avoiding Guilt or Avoiding Shame?” *Psychotherapy* 1985, Vol. 22: “Understanding and Treating Perfectionism in Religious Adolescents,” *Psychotherapy*, 1998 Vol. 35: “The Pursuit of Perfection: Vice or Virtue in Judaism?” *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, 1999 Vol. 23.

³ 19:3.

⁴ Paragraph 565.

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Interestingly, many experienced religious educators have noted the relationship between faulty parenting and teen rebelliousness. In a 1977 article on the “crisis in parent-child relations,”⁵ a noted educator wrote: “I know of crises in...every neighborhood, in every sub-culture [of the Orthodox community]. The common denominator in all of these situations would seem to be a lack of communication and a growing hostility between parents and children. While this may be analyzed from many perspectives, the fundamental needs not being met in all of these situations are those of understanding, respect, and...patience of parents toward children. Every child needs to be loved by his parents, and most important to be accepted for what he is. **This seems to be such a simple solution. And yet how often...this is overlooked!**” [emphasis added] Had this advice been heeded in 1977, we probably wouldn’t need conferences on acting-out teens today. Adhering to the advice today might prevent the need for such conferences in the future.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, the renowned *rosh yeshivah*, commented:⁶

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 to be people who find it extremely difficult to understand the meaning of love.... Show me the hardened criminal, the juvenile delinquent, psychopath...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.

In contrast to a colleague who stated at a recent conference on mental health attended by Orthodox professionals that “even after all the years of study we still have no idea why kids ‘go off the *derech*,” Rabbi Scheinberg states that indeed we do know the cause - “lack of proper love.” Perhaps “proper love” refers to acceptance, since almost all parents love their children, but alas, many find it difficult to accept them.

I want to emphasize that I am not writing this to indict parents. Rather, I am writing to appeal to parents to be aware of the tremendous power they wield upon their children. As a parent myself, I know what a challenging task raising children can be, even under the most favorable conditions. Unfortunately, many parents labor under the additional burdens of financial pressures, health problems, marital disharmony, or their own traumatic histories. Such challenges make the job of parenting especially daunting.

⁵ Rabbi A. Brafman, “Crisis in Parent-Child Relations: An Analysis with Some Prescriptive Suggestions,” *The Jewish Observer*, April 1977, 10-14.

⁶ Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *Heart to Heart Talks*, (New York: Artscroll/Mesorah, 2000), p. 139.

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It is certainly painful for parents to realize that their errors and insensitivities may be factors in their children's difficulties. However, by building a better relationship with their children, parents can do a great deal to heal the wound. If, instead of focusing on the disturbing behaviors, parents concentrated on the core relationship with their defiant child, they could begin the healing process.

How to Improve Your Relationship with Your Rebellious Teen

- **Stop criticizing.** Don't think that an indirect or subtle critical statement will take the sting out of the remark. Hinting is the *least* effective form of communication. You get all the negative effects of criticism without any of the benefits of direct communication. Likewise, criticism said with a smile or "for a child's own good" remains criticism.
- **Focus on emotional needs and on the relationship rather than on behavior.** Just until the relationship improves, try overlooking your child's rebellious behaviors (sleeping late, hanging out) and put all of your energy into developing the relationship.
- **You don't have to exercise every right you have.** You certainly have the right to tell your 16-year-old to be home by 1:00 A.M. However, if exerting your authority will make your child more resentful and thereby worsen the relationship, then it makes no sense to exercise that right at that time.
- **Focus on process and not on events.** Appreciate your child's developing sense of confidence, or other signs of emotional health. Acknowledge gradual change. Otherwise, even when your teenager begins to improve, he will view himself as a failure since his actions are still far from your expectations. This can cause him to stop trying.
- **Don't expect your child's angry mood to dissipate overnight just because you become more sensitive to his or her feelings.** Be patient. There may be years of accumulated anger and resentment. It will take time for your child's anger to dissipate.
- **When you give advice or make decisions regarding your child, do so with obvious consideration for his feelings.** Don't objectify your child. Relate to him as a human being with particular feelings, wishes and desires.
- **The most difficult task. Change your attitude!** Stop believing your son or daughter is acting out because of maliciousness or laziness. Children who act out usually do so because of a deep-rooted unhappiness. If your child is sleeping until 11:00 A.M. every day and as a result is constantly punished and criticized, laziness is obviously not a sufficient motivation.
- **Make your child's happiness, and not your *nachat* (pleasure from children), your major goal.**

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- **Last, but certainly not least, don't give up.** If your child sees that you are genuinely concerned about his happiness, he will respond. It may take some time, but together with the merit of *tefillah*, it will happen.