

I think the following statement captures the essence of love: "If it's important to you, it's important to me." When your three-year-old daughter flies through the door and babbles excitedly about the earthshaking incident that took place in nursery school that day, take time out to listen, for her world was indeed shaken. Don't tell her you're busy. Listen. It's important to her! If you can't listen right then, set up a time for it later on -- but do it. Granted, your child must realize that you cannot listen all day long -- but make time to hear what's important to her...

There is another extremely important thing for parents to remember: Children want to love and respect their parents. I have often counseled children who, despite parental mistreatment (real or imagined), wanted to respect and love their parents. We all know that our love for our children is inviolate; yet we tend to forget that a child's love for his parents, while not necessarily as intense as parental love, is also natural and an important part of his self-image.

So remember: God imbues both parents and children with love for one another. Even when the going gets rough, we mustn't think we have no bond with our children. We are far likelier to succeed than we think...

Advice for Busy Parents

If you claim that you haven't got time for your children, you're not alone. Others, too, have this problem and feel helpless to solve it. Busy parents are not necessarily irresponsible parents. They may simply be too busy with their jobs, community projects and benefiting the Jewish people, or simply have large families and find it difficult to give each child the time and resources which he deserves.

Be partially consoled by the fact that, by age eight or so, your child has probably realized you are busy, and that will make him treasure the time you can spare. Beyond that, try taking your child along with you to share a busy day. You'll be surprised at the opportunities for private time -- even during such a day. What's more, your child will get a better picture of your day and feel closer to you, even when he's not there to share it.

This point is so important that I want to make a potentially controversial statement: taking your child with you can be so

beneficial to your relationship that it sometimes justifies taking him out of school for a day or a weekend. Don't fret over missed schoolwork; your child will be more than happy to make it up. Hire a tutor if necessary. A parent-child "getaway" doesn't have to be done often, but do it.

Building Trust in Advance

Most relationships have their tough moments, especially when the interaction involved is frequent and intense. When you see someone often, and your relationship is highly emotional, difficulties are more likely to occur, both because of the amount of time you spend together and the emotional nature of the relationship.

Our ability to weather these "storms" generally depends upon our investment -- quantitative and qualitative -- in the relationship beforehand. When a relationship is solid, any inevitable misunderstandings or conflicts become less serious.

The most important element of this investment involves building trust. When I trust your motivations and your attitude toward me, I can more easily deal with any emotional "squalls" which may arise.

Trust is largely based upon honesty. Children particularly are hurt by even a minor breach of promise, often blowing it way out of proportion. Even a minor promise is major to a child.

I therefore strongly recommend striking the words "I promise" from your vocabulary when speaking with your children. Then, in an unusual situation, "I promise" can make a major impact, as is shown by the following poignant episode.

Seven-year-old Chaya just had a spat with her 12-year-old brother. As a parting shot, the boy taunted his sister by telling her she was adopted. The girl, believing her brother, ran to her room, buried her head in her pillow, and began to cry. Chaya's father entered his daughter's room and explained that, although being adopted was nothing to be ashamed of, he and her mother were in fact Chaya's biological parents. She continued to sob. Her father then asked, "Have I ever told you, 'I promise'?" His daughter shook her head. "Well," continued her father, "I promise that you aren't adopted." The girl immediately stopped crying, realizing that her older brother had merely taunted her.

Had this father used the words "I promise" in non-emergencies, this incident would not have been so quickly resolved. Build trust by saying, "I will try," and following through, but don't promise. The Talmud (Succah 46b) itself warns against breaking promises made to children. In addition, to be totally honest with your children you must role-model this by never breaking a promise to them.

A promise is like a shout: Use it sparingly, if ever, in order that it be effective in the rare situation where it is appropriate.

Your Most Important Guest

Another good piece of advice is to "schedule" your child in your datebook. After all, he is at least as important as your other appointments. Small chunks of time can be used to plan longer sessions, which of course can also be scheduled.

The following true story brings this idea into focus:

Well-known, busy Rabbi N. was once sitting and talking with his son Shmuel when an unexpected visitor arrived to see him. Rabbi N. replied, within earshot of his child, that he was busy. As he escorted his guest to the door, the rabbi quietly thanked his visitor for the opportunity to show Shmuel how important he was to his father.

Everyone agrees that guests deserve special consideration. Consequently, we are attentive, responsive, and accommodating toward them. Let us remember that our children are essentially our guests, for after 20 years or so, they'll be moving out. Although we certainly don't want to spoil them, and indeed many guests love to feel like "one of the family," and not be treated too royally, we want our children to enjoy their stay in our home -- especially since, as someone once mentioned to me, we hope one day to be invited into their homes! So give your children your attention and make them feel welcome and wanted.

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