

# LIVING WITH KIDS

*by Miriam Adahan*

[One day], I decided to cut my sons' hair. My 4-year-old sat happily until I finished with his hair; however, when it was the 6-year-old's turn he pulled away defiantly. I started to chase after him; his hair had to be cut! Since he's a lot more agile than I am, I could see it was a losing battle. Although I could have forced him to sit still, by threatening or bribing him, I chose not to. Instead, I said, "I'll tell you what. You stand on a stool by the mirror and I'll only cut where you tell me to." He thought it was a great idea.

From totally defying me and refusing to have me touch his head, he stood proudly while directing me where to cut. Now, this may sound like psychological nonsense to many. Some people may think: "I would have taken the little brat and walloped him!" True, I could have done that. I could have beaten him with a strap and tied him to a chair and then slapped his face each time he moved his head until he held still, and I would have gotten his hair cut. But I would have lost my relationship with the child, which is far more important to me.

I don't believe in parents giving in to children, patronizing or indulging them, whether out of fear of the children's rejection or because it's often just easier to let them have their way instead of getting into a power struggle. I do believe that parents should be sensitive to their children's need for two very important elements for which we all strive: love and power. My 6-year-old needed to feel a sense of power. And to get it, he was willing to give up my love for the moment.

What I tried to show him was that he could get both at the same time, which is something very few children know how to do. They either give up on power and become "goody-goodies" with no sense of their own strengths or worth, unable to be assertive or express their own views,

always seeking other people's approval and terrified of rejection; or they become domineering little tyrants, not caring what others think, focusing on force to get whatever they want. We see these patterns in many adults: passive doormats or insensitive bullies.

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## LOOK AT MY FACE

As parents, we can help prevent these patterns by showing our children how to be caring, yet assertive, achievement-oriented, yet feeling. When I discipline my children, I try not to take away their sense of power and self-esteem. I try to awaken sensitivity rather than force it upon them.

For example, a friend was over with her four young children. One of them started playing with a toy, which my 4-year-old promptly grabbed away. I didn't scold my son. Instead, I said, "Look at Chaim's face. How does he feel now that you've taken the toy away?" My son looked at Chaim's face intently and immediately returned the toy. I didn't have to tell him to do so. On his own initiative, he experienced what the other child was experiencing, which is a quality that makes us feel powerful as well as compassionate.

On one of the Jewish fast days, my 6-year-old wanted me to help him learn to ride his two-wheeler. I just said, "Honey, look at me. Do you think I can help you now?" Right away, he said, "Oh, I forgot, you're fasting and weak. Can you read me a book instead?"

Sometimes I'll be schleping bags of groceries home from the market and one child will say, "Ima, hold this." "All I have to do is say, "Look at my hands," and they become aware of reality outside of their own immediate desires. If one says something hurtful to me, all I have to do is say, "Look at my face. How did that make me feel?" And I can see in his or her eyes that there is an awareness that I am a human being with feelings, who is capable of being hurt and deserves to be treated with respect.

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## NARROW COCOON

When my son pulled away from me after I told him I was going to cut his hair, it was my turn to look at his face. He was being defiant for a reason. It suddenly dawned on me that it was his hair, which he perceived as part of his body, and although I may take hair lightly, he didn't. It was important for me to show respect for his feelings, just as I want him to show respect for mine. This doesn't mean that I had to let him have his way. I had no doubt that his hair would be cut, one way or another. And I am not above using force and ordering my children to do things when necessary. But in this situation, it would have been unnecessary and harmful to use force.

By far, the biggest problem plaguing families (beyond money problems) is lack of sensitivity to each other's feelings, fears and desires. We have to take responsibility for helping others become more aware of our reality. Most people walk around enveloped in a very narrow cocoon, unaware of anything other than themselves. Some are afraid to leave that familiar territory and experience what others are experiencing. They are terrified of intimacy, of anything other than polite but superficial relations.

We can often help them break out of that shell by letting them know it is safe to feel and express those feelings. Don't be afraid to tell someone, "Look at my face. How do you think what you just said [or did] made me feel?" If the person has any desire or capacity for compassion, you will notice a look on his face that shows you have helped him become more aware. You won't have to criticize, yell or nag; the awareness will come naturally.

[Note: when you say the words "Look at my face," say it softly, with love, not harshly and bitterly, or you are likely to get an angry, defensive response instead of regret, love and understanding.]

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