

THE PERFECT PARENT

by Rabbi Boruch Leff

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[Parenting is a skill like any other. Without a concerted and consistent effort to work at parenting -- without asking lots of questions -- we can never become better parents. The "perfect" parent is the growing parent.

What follows are a few questions involving parenting asked of Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, a leader of American Jewry during the late 20th century. The answers are paraphrased from parenting sessions.]

QUESTION: What would be the most important aspect of parenting for a husband and wife to focus on?

ANSWER: The foundation of all foundations is consistency. Without it, nothing can be accomplished. The child must know that you mean what you say.

It can't be that today you say 'no' and tomorrow you say 'yes'. The child needs to know what to expect. You need to give off the same displeasure for a misdeed as you did yesterday.

This, of course, includes husband and wife being consistent with each other, as well. Otherwise, the child will play one parent off the other. It's far better to do nothing in parenting than to have disputes over parenting matters in front of the child. Even when one parent strongly disagrees with how the other parent handled a situation, this cannot be verbalized in front of the child.

QUESTION: What is the Torah's view of punishment for children? Should we live with the attitude of "they'll grow out of it"?

ANSWER: There is no way around the fact that punishment is necessary. As King Solomon says: "He who spares the rod, hates his child. But he who loves him disciplines him when he is young" (Proverbs 13:24).

But punishment does not necessarily mean physical. In our day and age, this is highly inadvisable, because any "potch" or slap is taken by the child as a severe rejection. Making a child feel severely

rejected is terrible parenting, because it sends a message that the parent has given up on the child, that the child is all bad.

Punishment includes any disapproving reaction, even if only a frown or a sigh. Time-outs and temporarily disallowing use of toys or games are also appropriate means of punishment when necessary. Children must be taught when they have done something inappropriate. If not, they will grow up lacking a sense of values and will not know what is acceptable behavior and what is not.

Parents have to beware of the feeling they give off when they punish. They cannot punish out of anger and frustration. Children must feel that the punishment stems from the parents' love and concern for them. Parents should talk briefly to the child during and after a punishment, telling the child exactly why he is being punished, and how the punishment is only being given to teach proper values.

This conveyance of love even in punishment is not only important in terms of the parent/child relationship, but it also affects how the child will relate to God. Since we call God "our Father," the child's image and understanding of a father will be shaped by how he views his biological parents. If children see their parents' love and concern and develop a strong, loving relationship with their parents, they will also relate to God, their Father, in this way. If someone has a negative and stressful relationship with his parents, it will be harder to develop a positive connection to God.

So the parental responsibility for good relationships with children is a serious one and is the essential basis of all service of God.

QUESTION: What is the most important lesson we can teach to our kids?

ANSWER: It is clear that developing good character traits is the most important area for parents to concentrate on. Jewish law states unequivocally that it is forbidden to teach Torah to a student who does not have good character. We must work with a child to set him on a path of good character before we can study Torah with him.

Good character comes before teaching a child to observe any mitzvot.

QUESTION: If a child does not enjoy carrying out certain mitzvot, should he be forced? After all, we have an obligation to teach the child to observe the mitzvot.

ANSWER: Never force. If you do, the child will come to hate the mitzvot. Coax, persuade, and reward, but never force.

QUESTION: How can I teach my children about spirituality?

ANSWER: Getting your children to read is a wonderful beginning. But you have to make sure that they choose topics that challenge the mind. We tend to give them comic books and mysteries which simply entertain them. We must be very careful to monitor the books that they read so that the children read meaningful, mind-expanding material. From this comes the message that there is

more to life than eating gourmet food and playing computer games. There is a mind that needs to be satisfied.

Emphasizing the mind to the child is the beginning of teaching spirituality. From there, the child will progress to discover for himself that physical gratification is not all that life has to offer. You cannot teach nor can you preach spirituality in ways that will impact upon the child. The child (and adult for that matter) must discover spirituality on his own, if it is to last.

QUESTION: What about making learning fun?

ANSWER: Teaching [children] using the Sesame Street-style destroys them, because Judaism says that unless you teach them right at the beginning to work hard, you will lose them. If you give them the impression that learning has to be fun, they will stop learning as soon as it is no longer fun. And you cannot make it all enjoyable...

I agree that there is a certain degree of fun in learning, but there comes a point when learning takes work, and if you are not ready to work, you are not going to learn. If you train children that learning has to be fun, then when you start making them work, they will ask, "What's happening here?"...

You can bribe a child who learns with fun, but do not bribe him with fun learning. Of course, learning has to be exciting -- but as a result of its content, not because you have a big bird teaching it so that they are interested in the bird who is then able to slip in a letter A.

If the child starts off being educated that learning has to be fun, then you are going to be imposing on him when you tell him to learn when it is not fun... You are not going to make solving a math problem or doing a chemical formula fun, either. It is intensive and mind-breaking, and you have to work at it.

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