

OUR FAMILY, OUR STRENGTH

by Nechama Stampler

The basis of personality is laid down in the first few years of life. Our Sages instruct us to "listen to the teaching of your father, and do not stray from the Torah of your mother." What is this "Torah" of the mother? And why is it specifically the mother and not the caregiver or teacher?

It's not how smart our children are that determines how successful we are as parents; it's how much we can learn to love our children unconditionally. This is the Torah of the mother, and it begins on day one. Our challenge is to love a baby who can't yet return that love.

Our role as parents is to shower the baby with affection and nurturing, by holding and cuddling him, caring for his physical needs, and being there for him, day and night.

In order to pass on our values to our children, we must establish credit with them so that they will want to accept from us. They must appreciate their parents as worthy people, and we encourage them to do so by establishing a relationship of love. This relationship begins in infancy.

The more we love our babies, the better off they are. The relationship we establish through this love lasts forever. And the child learns how to create close loving relationships as he grows.

The mother's reward for this selfless giving is that the child loves her above all others and reserves that brilliant smile of recognition only for her. Children in institutions who have been cared for by a continually changing host of people will smile at anyone. They show what might seem to be tremendous "independence," having no particular attachment to any one person. But because these love-deprived children lack the experience of a specific bond early in life, they have difficulty developing intimate relationships later on. These children often become troubled teenagers and, even more, troubled adults.

One might think that anyone can bring up an infant. All that's necessary is to put a bottle in his mouth, change his diapers, and wipe his face. It doesn't matter to the baby who's holding him, as long as his physical needs are being properly met. Perhaps one might question a situation where the nanny changes every month when the child is "old enough to know the difference," but in the case of a baby, why worry?

This attitude has led to the explosion of day-care centers that accept babies as young as two weeks old and of mothers returning to work when they've barely recovered from the birth. Unfortunately,

society has begun to feel the effects of these detrimental practices. Recent research traces one cause of the increase in violence in our society to the number of children in inadequate day care. Other researchers have shown that aggression and violence result from infancy devoid of love. This explanation makes perfect sense when we realize that an insecure child will likely grow to become a maladjusted adult. A child's security arises from knowing that his mother can be relied upon. A very young infant does not distinguish between himself and his mother; if the mother disappears, replaced by a changing array of full-time babysitters, it shakes his definition of who he is.

The baby's most natural place in his first year is in his mother's arms. Nowhere in the world can he feel more secure than close to the body in which he grew, close to the rhythms familiar from nine months of feeling her heartbeat and hearing her breathing. No other sound can be as comforting. God determined that a mother should be the primary caregiver of a baby -- and it's a wonderful experience that women should be loath to pass up. The joy a mother feels in the close relationship with her baby cannot be gained from any other worldly success.

Women who separate from their babies very early in order to go back to work find it a struggle. The dream of having both a baby and a career, of having it all, has turned out to be just that -- a dream. The struggle for equality in the workplace has backfired. Child specialists from Dr. Benjamin Spock to Penelope Leach are calling for society to reassert the priority of parental child-rearing.

No one can care for a baby like his mother. Sadly, women who elect to stay home, as full-time caregivers, have come to be looked upon as sacrificing their careers and their futures. A career means self-fulfillment; without self-fulfillment, the thinking goes, how can a woman be happy?

At a well-attended women's conference, a certain rabbi gave a talk about the role of the Jewish woman in society. Eventually one of the women asked what his wife did. He told them how she had founded a shelter for children. He spoke at great length about the eight children she cared for, how she cooked them three nutritious meals a day and made sure they were well clothed, how she helped them with their homework. He spoke about how, if not for her, these children would be homeless. She gave them the loving environment they needed so they would not become like thousands of unwanted youngsters who, neglected as children, can become criminals as adults. The audience was moved to tears and gave this brave, hard-working woman a standing ovation.

When the applause quieted, the rabbi added, "By the way, these eight children are our own."

What a contradictory society surrounds us. If the children are someone else's, that's most commendable. If they belong to us, by caring for them we become a wasted resource.

Parenthood is a profession which people are deserting simply because there is no paycheck attached. We respect the director of a shelter for unwanted children; we should respect the woman who makes her home a haven no less.

The invaluable years of childhood pass by never to return. It's a lifetime of loss if we don't establish

the relationship properly from the very beginning. It is very difficult to make up for this loss later on.

We can make our home the priority. Managing a home is as challenging and fulfilling as any career can be. Ideally speaking, this requires a total, dedicated effort, putting other priorities on the back burner. After the children grow up one can always pursue other activities with dedication.

Perhaps not everyone can choose to stay home with their baby. But more people can make that choice than actually do. We use finances as an excuse, but often the cost of child care virtually equals the income we generate by working. It is possible to get by with less materially in order to stay home with a baby. We can buy a used car instead of a new one, or put off moving into a new house and build bunkbeds instead. And if we're creative, we can often find ways to supplement our income from home. Once a woman has gone back to work, it can be hard to reverse her choice and stay home instead. But the challenge is a worthwhile one.

Researchers have shown that the less time a mother spends with her child, the less patience she has for the child -- contrary to what many think. As with any relationship, what we put into the relationship with a baby is what we get out of it. If we do not spend time building a loving, close bond with our child, he cannot be expected to build a close bond with us. There will be little positive reinforcement for the work of parenting and a great deal more frustration. A mother who hasn't spent enough time with her child to know why he's crying will not know how to help him stop crying -- and may end up feeling angry, frustrated, and out of control.

The modern notion of quality time versus quantity time with a child has been disproved. Trust and love are built through experience together. A baby has no concept of time; he only knows that when he needed his mother she wasn't there. One hour of concentrated attention cannot make up for five hours spent alone. Nor can a parent and child share the same experience in an evening that they can in an entire day. Adults, perhaps, have the capacity to savor an hour spent with that special someone, storing up the memories to bolster them later when they are again alone. Children, however, live in the here and now. If we are not with them here and now, they will experience life without us. Once they -- and we -- are used to being without each other, we begin to build our lives separately, instead of together as a family. The togetherness of a family begins at the very beginning, in infancy.

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