

# THE DYNAMICS OF ROLE MODELING

*by Rabbi Chaim Morgenstern*

The most important area of child-raising that parents should focus on is being a good role model for their children, as the Stiepler Rav once remarked, "Role modeling is 50% of child-raising."

A story is told of a young man who asked the Chofetz Chaim when and how he should prepare himself for child-raising. The Chofetz Chaim asked him, "Where are you holding in life?"

"My wife just gave birth to our first child," he responded. "Mazel tov," replied the Chafetz Chaim. "But you are a few years too late!"

The Chofetz Chaim was conveying an important message: Chinuch starts when parents are still single, when they create and mold themselves to be the best role models possible for their future children.

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Parental role modeling can be broadly defined as: actions, behavior or conducts that have a subtle and very powerful influence on their children. The reason for this influence is because children naturally imitate & emulate their parents' behavior.

The Kaminetzer Mashgiach, Rav Moshe Aharon Stern, explained the dynamics of role modeling as follows:

"The greatest people in a child's eyes are his parents, and what they do is like Torah from Sinai. Children observe and study all their parents' actions and behavior and record them in their subconscious minds, leaving lasting impressions. Why is this so? Because parents are the most reliable source for priorities and values in their children's life. Children have the simple trust that their parents won't transmit any non-Torah or non-ethical ideals to them. Parents are the children's prime rebbis and educators, and their actions are the basis for their Chinuch."

Moreover, since children's intellects are not fully developed, they function mostly from their emotions rather than from logic. The result is that they learn and absorb more from what they see than from what they hear. Therefore, showing one's children how to properly fulfill mitzvos and be a G-d-fearing Jew (yiras shamayim) has a greater impact and influence than telling them so.

This concept is further explained by Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky who defines the parents' role in Chinuch not only as educators, but also as mashpiyim - educating by influencing. A teacher or professional educator merely gives over information. Mishpiya is from the root shipuah - slant. The

way that parents act, talk and behave automatically flows down to their children. It is irrelevant if it is advertent or inadvertent, conscious or subconscious - everything flows down. Rav Yissachar Frand terms this "Rav Yaakov's trickle down theory" because the parents' actions trickle down to their children, both in influencing and becoming part of them.

He said that he personally witnessed this concept by an incident that occurred to him. One day when he left his home and was halfway to the yeshiva when he suddenly remembered that he hadn't benched. Since it was a hot and humid summer day, he was debating with himself if he could bench away from home b'dieved (post facto). In the end, he decided not to look for any kulos (leniencies) and he returned home, perspiring from the sweltering heat. That day his young daughter happened to be home and asked her father in amazement why he returned home so suddenly. When he told her that he had forgotten to bench, she exclaimed, "What! You came back to bench?" Rav Frand realized that he had just "scored a win." Seeing her father's great effort to fulfill the halachos of benching properly made a greater impression than countless times of telling her the importance of benching. Rav Frand further notes that since it was done inadvertently, it made an even greater impression because it showed true sincerity. (From a recorded shiur.)

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