




**SPECIAL
PRINTING**

Tribute To Our Youth Edition

Securing Our Future



a primer for parents
and teachers

by Rabbi Shaya Cohen

In Tribute To Our Youth

The community of friends and supporters of Priority-1 are united in paying tribute to the youth of our communities. They are truly worthy of honor and we are privileged to pay tribute to them. They are growing up in difficult times. The negative influences of society are stacked against them and the temptation, pressure and challenges that they face are rarely fully understood by their parents and teachers. So many have flourished despite these difficulties and even those that have strayed seem to be turning around and coming back.

Shlomo Hamelech , in Shir Hashirim, refers to the Jewish people living in the distant exile as blackened and beautiful. Blackened on the outside and beautiful on the inside. Rashi explains that even though on the outside we appear so far away from Torah and the traditions of our ancestors, it only takes an outside cleansing to reveal the full greatness of our forefathers that lies intact beneath the camouflage.

The positive reversals in the lives of our youth at risk are living proof that all we have to do is remove the darkened covering and the full radiance and beauty of our glorious forefathers shines brightly in the lives of their descendants. Though the credit truly belongs to our youth themselves, it should be shared by their parents and teachers who instilled within them the deep connection to Torah. They worked hard and waited patiently for the beauty of Torah to shine once again in these young lives. In the long run, we are all very fortunate to be able to look forward to these young men and women becoming the future leaders of the next generation.

May your parents and teachers be privileged with continued nachas and may you, our dear youth, be blessed with every measure of honor and success.

With heartfelt tribute, friendship and love,

The Friends and Supporters of Priority-1

Lawrence Country Club, Lawrence, NY

Septemer 14, 2005

Securing Our Future

by Rabbi Shaya Cohen

© 2005, Priority-1

This volume is presented as a community service by Priority-1, a multifaceted educational organization with a proven track record of successfully addressing the most challenging issues in Jewish education.

In addition to its traditional post high school Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh, Kollel Ner Yehoshua, and national outreach programs, Priority-1 has dedicated itself to battling the critical crisis of "At-Risk" youth in the Jewish community.

Priority-1 also provides training and guidance for parents and educators in dealing with issues of risk prevention and crisis intervention, and a special high- school tract for prevention of At-Risk behavior.

Many thanks to Milton M. Markovitz who reviewed and edited the manuscript. His and valuable advice on many editorial and technical matters made this publication possible.

For further information please contact:

Priority-1

P.O. Box 486

Cedarhurst, NY 11516

[516] 295-5700

Fax: (516) 295-5737

Email: Priority-1@priority-1.org

This volume is dedicated
to the memory of
Mr. and Mrs. Murray Katz

משה ב"ר חנינא ליפא זצ"ל

האשה חי' שרה בת ר' יוסף ע"ה

whose intense love
for every Jewish person
was the impetus for the
founding of Priority-1

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

To the reader,

Since the original manuscript for this work was written a few years ago, some significant changes have taken place. The problems described in this book are still very serious and growing but there is, however, good news too. Many different entities are addressing these issues with impressive results. The extent of the positive effects on the lives of teens at risk by those who have given of themselves to help them, indicate they can be turned around.

The extent and totality of these turn-arounds attests not only to the talents of those who work with them, but to the years of efforts and inspiration put into them by their parents and teachers. If they return so fully from so far, it must be that deep down they really internalized the values and teachings of their parents and rebbeim. The fact that they always look back and want to find their way to return, is a testimony to the hidden success of the efforts of their parents and teachers.

This phenomenon creates a new ray of hope for the amelioration and for the reading of a work like this. Even though it may seem negative to talk about these problems, in the context of this changing scene, the admission of the problems is really a concrete step towards their resolution. May we be *zoche* to the fulfillment of the words of the *navi*: וכל בניך למודי ד' ורב שלום בניך

Rabbi Shaya Cohen

Securing our Future

By Rabbi Shaya Cohen

Dean, Priority-1

This Volume ...

presents a candid discussion of real, perilous problems facing Orthodox Jewish youth today. It focuses primarily upon the harmful dangers to which Yeshiva/Day School youths are exposed and to which they too frequently succumb.

Based on his extensive personal experience in counseling and rehabilitating Yeshiva/ Day School children at-risk, the author offers valuable and effective advice concerning appropriate identification, prevention, intervention and coping with these challenges before it is too late.

Introduction

Ours is a unique generation.

On the one hand, we live at a time of unprecedented growth and advancement within the American Orthodox Community. The proliferation of Torah institutions and the advancement of religious commitment have reached unusual proportions. On the other hand, we are increasingly challenged by a decadent society whose negative influence is so pervasive that it has already penetrated even the most protected citadels of Torah life.

Today's American Jewish child has been provided with abundant and unparalleled opportunities to receive an education under the guidance of competent teachers and Rabbis, in comfortable classrooms with inviting atmospheres. Yet, seldom before has there been so much concern about the rising toll of students who reject the message of their Yeshiva/Day School and opt for foreign physical and spiritual alternatives that are prone to ruin their lives as individuals and as Jews.

The danger of negative social influences perforating the bulwark of these bastions of Jewish learning and religious observance make it obvious that mere attempts to shelter our children from their effects, as important as that may be, are not enough. We must understand the nature of our vulnerability to these influences, and develop strategies to anticipate them. We must also immunize and fortify ourselves in order to ward off the predicaments that affect general society, and circuitously also impact upon our Orthodox community and its children.

Oftentimes the problems are of our own making, and society's influence only serves to exacerbate them further. We must, therefore, devote time and apply effort to focus

our attention on these issues, to prevent and to counter the tragedies that they provoke.

Yeshiva/Day Schools and their constituent families must forge partnerships in these efforts. They must work in tandem to identify and counteract the wide spectrum of issues that they share. For the purpose of this work, we will concentrate on the common roles of parents and educators, as well as on their pertinent differences.

Before we begin... a word about happiness.

Any informal survey of young people who seem to have drifted away from a Torah lifestyle and/or constructive living, leads to one conclusion: These kids are not happy with themselves, their families, their schools and their environment. A working definition of happiness would therefore be helpful in understanding their plight, preventing such problems in the future and possibly bringing them a measure of relief.

In our holy language, Lashon Hakodesh, the root of a word defines the essence of its concept. An advanced form of internal happiness is referred to as "Osher." The root of this word is the concept of "validation" (LeAsher). When a person feels personally validated, he or she feels happy. Happiness is about validation. If our homes, schools and communities validate our children, they will be happy with them and with themselves. If they are happy, they will not want to drift away from their environment. We must learn how to maximize the opportunities for our children to find validation.

There is a Problem

The proliferation of at-risk Yeshiva/Day School students over the past decade requires our immediate attention. This urgency is especially true when we realize that the apparent tranquility of our Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods is belied by the utter grief and chaos hidden inside some of their neatly tended homes. While it was considered a mere “fringe” problem in the past, currently there are many religiously observant families who are forced to contend with at-risk children and need proper guidance in dealing with their situations constructively and effectively.

As loving parents and caring educators, it behooves us to understand the root problems that lead even some of our best teenagers away from pursuing a healthy and productive lifestyle. Only through such an understanding will we be able to develop and implement strategies that will prevent the spread of this phenomenon, and to safeguard other children from its negative effects.

The endeavor of reclaiming our at-risk children cannot be assigned to volunteers who work with youth in the unsupervised role of “mentor” or “big-brother/sister.” Rehabilitation is an art, not a hobby. It requires skill and experience, not merely good will and compassion. It can only be undertaken as a joint venture involving the active participation of family and professionals who will approach each case individually and comprehensively, and will make it a primary priority of their agenda.

Our experience in dealing with countless children at-risk whose behavioral and social problems caused their separation from the mainstream Jewish community has demonstrated that prevention and rehabilitation require the participation of both parents and children. This text is intended to implore every parent and teacher, regardless of immediate and direct need, to become educated and

trained in the methods and processes that will produce maximum results and optimum outcomes.

Who is At-Risk?

The term “at-risk”, when applied to school-aged children (12 to 18-years old), refers to a segment of the student population which is neither able to fully benefit from the educational opportunities offered by their school nor capable of fulfilling its potential.

The source of this predicament is not necessarily intellectual. It may result from a series of circumstances that cause children either to drop out of school, be expelled, or graduate without having a solid academic foundation or the skills necessary for leading a healthy and productive life.

These circumstances may be reactions to a level of stress that leads today's youth to seek relief in perilous endeavors including alcohol and substance abuse, promiscuity, crime, and other life-threatening activities.

Lest we fail to realize it, it is essential to understand two important facts:

» *The level of stress is different for today's youth.*

» *The reality of children is different from the reality of adults.*

The major concerns and anxieties that are facing today's children were not present in generations past, and require complex decisions at an early age. Furthermore, the stress that these concerns cause to our children offers a picture of life viewed through an incomplete developmental lens.

From a moral standpoint, just knowing what is “right” is not enough. Thus, children growing up in families or

communities that do not provide them with a system of positive empowerment, and do not offer attractive norms of personal and social values, tend to seek more enticing alternatives. Unfortunately, these alternatives are likely to jeopardize their future as ethical and law-abiding members of society.

The same can be applied to children attending schools which do not provide the basic elements that students require from their schools, namely: a nurturing and supportive environment, opportunities for individual academic success, and help with personal problems. Unfortunately, a review of Yeshiva/Day Schools which have previously enrolled students at-risk demonstrates that they have failed to address the special circumstances – including economic, family, community, ethnic and racial status – that characterize students placed at risk.

Assumptions and Facts

It has been widely assumed that poverty is a prime factor, which motivates children to explore behavioral alternatives and to reach beyond the pale of their families. It has also been speculated that material deprivation among young adults results in a feeling of desperation, which leads to a search for such alternatives.

Upon closer scrutiny, it has become evident that, in fact, these assumptions are flawed and inaccurate. Our own experience with at-risk Yeshiva/Day School students has demonstrated that many school-aged boys and girls who have forsaken their family tradition and explored alternative lifestyles based on substance and alcohol abuse, are children of middle to upper-income homes, with educated and professional parents.

Consider one example of many:

Tall and handsome, with a clear complexion and deep brown eyes, Sholomo came to our attention after being expelled by one Yeshiva while in ninth grade, and subsequently rejected by three other Day Schools following short enrollments on a probationary basis.

At age 15, this bright teenager was an addict who has progressively advanced from mild to hard drugs during the past two years. A son of an Orthodox family, Shlomo has been living with his parents and four siblings in a beautifully decorated home in Brooklyn, all while gaining a reputation as a truant and delinquent student, and establishing a police record for shoplifting.

His father, a businessman, and his mother, a speech therapist, were devastated. They have been working hard to support their family and to be able to send their children to the finest Yeshiva/Day Schools in Brooklyn. As working parents, and active members of their community, parenting has not been an easy task. Yet, they helped their children with homework, sent them to summer camps, took them on family trips, and provided them with nice opportunities to grow up as healthy and sociable children.

When Shlomo started failing in school, they consulted a psychologist who offered to counsel the boy. Despite the therapy, Shlomo regressed and his behavior at home and at school worsened. Kind words by his parents and Rabbi gave way to warnings of unpleasant consequences. Yet, Shlomo's defiance and spitefulness created an unbearable situation that required a drastic response.

His alcohol consumption and substance abuse started to show their effect on his personality and physical well-being. "Nothing less than a miracle will help him," cried his mother. Shlomo's condition required immediate attention; otherwise, this juvenile delinquent was going to end up in police custody, facing incarceration or similar punishment.

Shlomo had everything to lose. He had every logical reason to enjoy the comfort of a beautiful home and an established family. Yet, he chose to find adventure and gratification somewhere else.

Unfortunately, Shlomo is not the only one. From Brooklyn to Long Island, and from Miami to Los Angeles, too many Yeshiva/Day School children of similar background have fallen to a life of substance and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, non-observance of Mitzvos, and negativity toward the Orthodox religious community.

Although exact statistical data is still being accumulated, reliable estimates consider the number of at-risk teens currently requiring help and urgent attention at between 10%-25% of the total Yeshiva/Day School population. This data includes boys and girls, pre-teens and adolescents, Honor-Roll students and low-performing pupils, children from across the religious spectrum, all displaying differences in the nature and manifestation of their risks.

Parental Denial

Before initiating a diagnosis of the origins and symptoms of this malignant social malady, it is important to expose a preliminary barrier, which serves as a critical impediment in the search for a solution, namely: Denial.

Unlike Shlomo's parents, too many Orthodox fathers and mothers, educators and communal leaders still deny the existence, extent and significance of the "at-risk" problem within their ranks. In certain situations their attitude can be more accurately labeled "deception", bordering on "neglect". At times, the severity of this self-deception is worse than any other factor affecting the child's resolve to turn away from his/her home and school, and makes the process of remedying and resolving the individual problem totally unfeasible.

This phenomenon must not be allowed to run its course. We cannot wait for the problem to become so acute that even the parents/teachers are compelled to shed their defensiveness and cooperate. Lest we marshal greater initiatives and imminently overcome the "Denial Syndrome" we will inevitably experience a rapid proliferation in the number of devastated families whose losses are tragic, and even more than tragic because they could have been avoided.

Let's call a spade a spade.

Let us face the facts, confront the issues and recognize the seriousness of the impending threats to our children.

As loving parents and concerned communal members we are obliged to lift the curtain behind which we have been hiding. We must begin identifying the circumstances that

have turned families and communities into a cauldron of vexing child-rearing problems.

Some have naively theorized that those children who fall prey to deviance do so of their own free will and nothing can be done to stop them. This thesis seems quite tenuous in light of the success record of programs such as Priority-1's Torah Academy of Lawrence Cedarhurst and others in counseling scores of youngsters ravaged by some of the worst manifestations of risk-related behavior.

In talking with these adolescents and addressing their grievances, it has repeatedly been discovered that it was not "free choice" that led them to their horrific situations. Once reached and offered an attentive ear and a non-judgmental advocate, these "outcasts" readily accepted help in putting their grievances in perspective. To the surprise of skeptics, such a response clearly indicates a readiness to reevaluate attitudes toward life, Torah, family and community, and to realign priorities. With competent and professional help, individualized therapy and counseling, and faith in the authenticity and truth of Judaism, the results can be truly impressive.

The Anatomy of Risk

Many children are positioned for failure from an early point in their lives. However, positioning for failure does not mean that they will necessarily fail. It does nevertheless mean that they internalize certain issues which, if not properly addressed, are very likely to cause them to blunder, flounder and fail.

This positioning can take many forms. Some of the more common ones are: learning disabilities, depression, other psychological or psychiatric problems, tragedy, family trauma or discord, overly demanding or critical parents, and highly pressured school situations. In order to prevent these issues from becoming devastating, they must be recognized early on. They must be properly diagnosed and appropriately dealt with before they cause the youngster severe emotional and psychological damage, and devastate his/her self-image and attitude towards life in general and Jewish life in particular.

On the other hand, it must also be pointed out that a majority of the at-risk population is composed of "regular" youth from "regular" functional middle to upper class families without significant or unusual problems. In these settings, parenting skills may be not the only contributing factors, as evident by the fact that other siblings do not become at-risk children.

From where, then, does the problem originate?

Among the most serious impediments are home and school conditions that make it difficult to focus on every child as an individual and to engage in the early identification of his/her personal problems:

» The need for both parents to work away from home.

» The over-enrollment of Yeshiva/Day School classes

Within these contexts, a child who requires special attention is lost in the shuffle, without receiving the necessary attention to his/her character development and personality traits. Emerging ambiguities are not observed, nor are atypical habits, peculiar inclinations and subtle dispositions recognized by either parents or teachers.

"When I was growing up, my parents left me alone as long as I didn't hit my sisters or fight with my brothers. They were so overwhelmed by the eight of us that they were happy whenever we didn't bother them. I therefore did what I wanted, whenever and wherever I wanted, and no one ever stopped me. I used to think it was great – I now realize that that's how all my problems started."

These factors along with parental apprehension at turning to professionals for help, and the lack of qualified mental health professionals in many communities who are sensitive to the needs of the American Orthodox Jewish community, exasperate the problem and limit the family's access to counseling at this critical juncture in their child's life.

As these youngsters continue to grow without appropriate guidance, supervision and attention, their self-esteem continues to suffer. Their anger and frustration increase and they become more disillusioned with their parents' and teachers' expectations. In such a mental state, they become vulnerable to the influences of the accessible street culture, which they explore for fulfillment. Within this unrestricted environment they quickly find the acceptance and self-esteem that they are not accorded at home or in the Yeshiva/Day School.

Intolerance of Nonconformity

Have you ever wondered: With all the outstanding accomplishments of the nationwide Kiruv movements which reach out to the not-yet-observant segments of the Jewish community, how is it possible that Yeshiva/Day School students should find it necessary to respond to the antithesis of Kiruv?

The answer to this incredulity requires pensive introspection and examination of the standards and norms, which prevail within the Yeshiva/Day School, the home, and the Orthodox community. The revelations that surface point to the tendency of the Orthodox community to be too judgmental, critical and intolerant of nonconformity.

It is thus understandable why any Yeshiva/Day School student who starts interfacing with the street-culture and tasting the forbidden fruits of the general society gravitates towards this precarious, ill-fated group where he/she finds immediate acceptance. Barriers and boundaries, which exist at home and in school and separate these malcontented children from their parents, siblings, teachers and classmates suddenly fade away on the street and are replaced by acceptance and approbation. No wonder these vulnerable children fall prey to every measure of society's decadence and then some.

Moreover, at this critical turning point, when parental understanding, tolerance, love and acceptance can make a monumental difference in the nature of the relationship with their children, many parents and teachers tend to misinterpret the child's actions, and label them as evil, rebellious and disgraceful.

As a result, they miss the painful confusion that their child is experiencing and do not hear his/her cry for help and call for rescue. At this crucial stage of "push" or "pull", some

parents compound their youngster's frustration by accentuating his/her unconventional behavior and vocalizing their disapproval of his/her external appearance. Tragically, they respond to their own child's quest for attention and acceptance with hostile censure and a cold shoulder. They literally miss the point!

Children at-risk have gruesome stories to tell about parents and teachers who refused to listen to them, and instead cast them away as derelicts, pariahs and delinquent outcasts.

Longing for attention, craving recognition, hungry for love, these disappointed children react by developing passionate anger against their parents, teachers, the Orthodox community and its entire establishment. In their eyes, the community within which they were raised is not concerned with their personal situations. Rather, it is preoccupied with its own perpetuation and advancement. With time, their feelings of pain gradually evolve into hatred of family and teachers who appear to them ready to sacrifice a child's life for their own ego, reputation, Yichus, or cognate goals and purposes.

The tendency to blame everyone for his or her pain and failure is often totally random and indiscriminating. Failure in school or lack of contentment at home become directly associated with every person and system which is even peripherally related to the home or the school. Progressively, this projection of hostility spreads wider, penetrates deeper and eventually includes the entire Jewish community, the Torah, and even Hashem Himself.

Fragile Relationships

Another factor in the feeling of alienation that is experienced by many children is the lack of meaningful

relationships. Young adults who do not have healthy and honest relationships with their parents, teachers and other role models, lack the necessary support which would help them work out their difficulties and frustrations.

In a home where parents are overly busy making a living, or in a school where teachers do not have the experience, training, guidance, means and resources to cultivate relationships with each and every student in their over-enrolled classes, children are deprived of the kinds of trustworthy relationships which could support and help them at a time of personal and emotional need.

As already stated, this socio-economic context incubates the seeds of alienation in their embryonic stage. Parents and teachers often misunderstand the signals, which their children/students try to communicate to them. Instead of responding reassuringly to their child's test of their true affection and devotion, trying to determine the extent of their parents individual love, these busy and overextended adults misconstrue the "test" as a sign of rejection, rebellion and contradiction. This error breeds further alienation, and propels the child into the trap of temptation. An opportunity to salvage the relationship has thus been missed.

Lost Sense of Purpose

Another piece of the puzzle that contains a clue to understanding the background for many issues pertaining to "at-risk" children is the absence of a fundamental sense of the meaning and purpose of life.

Although textually/academically knowledgeable, some of today's children have not been inspired and stimulated to develop an appreciation for the purpose of life. They may be proficient and conversant in the theory and practice of

Jewish observance, but they lack an appreciation for the meaning and significance of such observance.

Recognizing the void in their lives, at-risk teenagers often complain about a lack of spirituality and inspiration within their strict religious upbringing. They do not recognize the relationship between Torah, Mitzvos and a kinship with G-d as the basis for true happiness. Instead, they equate the pursuit of physical and sensual pleasures with the ultimate ideals of happiness, and see no correlation between spirituality and personal fulfillment.

One Yeshiva student who dropped-out in the twelfth grade admitted:

"I get an empty feeling while reciting my prayers. In fact, I do not understand what prayer is. I cannot fathom what is the relationship between Tefillah and uplifting ourselves closer to the Creator."

When told about his student's confession, the Principal of the Yeshiva paused, sighed and whispered:

"I wish that were not the case. But, as you know, the daily Yeshiva curriculum does not leave much time to deal with these topics. And, truthfully, most of our Rabbeim are not adequately equipped to articulate them in a meaningful way. It's a problem for which there is no solution."

Interpreting the Principal's candid assessment, we conclude that this double-edged sword creates a devastating situation. It supports claims by scores of at-risk students that their Yeshiva/Day School is a "fact-finding institution", a school that imparts information without translating it into inspirational messages. Viewed from the students' perspective, teachers too often insist on textual proficiency and encyclopedia-like accumulation of data, but falter in expounding on this data and exploring its beauty, spiritual

essence, significance, inclusiveness, and personal enrichment.

A leading Yeshiva educator coined a phrase, which correctly describes this problem as "Sterile Erudition".

Taken one step further, we frequently hear at-risk students complain:

"In my school, Judaism is a religion of 'Don't!'"

Despite claims to the contrary, what seems to be lost in the educational routine is the portrayal of Judaism as a religion of glowing spiritual radiance, brimming with ideals and dreams. To hundreds of students who are processed through the Yeshiva/Day School system, their heritage is perceived as dull and mundane rather than overflowing with abundant ethical and spiritual treasures and personal benefits.

Lacking an appreciation for these spiritual concepts, children become vulnerable to outside influences, which superficially espouse spiritual values of their own making, and accompany them by gratifying pleasures and indulgences. It also leaves them bereft of any inner strength to overcome the pressures to rebel against the suppressive/conservative lifestyle of their family and community.

A revealing testimony by a 16-year old boy from a large Midwest city, serves as a candid illustration of this situation:

"I do not know what I would have been like if I had a deeper feeling for doing daily Mitzvos," confessed an at-risk teenager. "Maybe my life would not have been so messed-up. Maybe my inner conflicts could have been alleviated if I had a deeper appreciation for these religious experiences and values. I think I could have benefited from a positive relationship

with Hashem, and a general sense of the purpose of life. But I never learned how!"

Many at-risk youth today are missing the motivation to persevere and to strive for success. They have no faith in themselves, and no Bitachon (trust in Hashem). In response to inquiry they acknowledge that a deeper internalization of such feelings would have probably gone a long way to encourage them never to give up.

"You know what I think? I think that I could have turned out a much different person. If I would have found an inspiration along the way I could have been a success, not a drug addict with so many Tzores."

You Must Fit the Mold

A recent report documenting the profile of at-risk children between the ages of 12 and 21 points out:

They want to "chill". Simply stated, they desire to abandon any set of rules and rather be guided by "what I feel like doing". As a result, they shirk any responsibility, sleep all day, party at night, engage in drug and alcohol use, irresponsible and unsafe sexual activity, steal and become a nuisance to family, neighbors and the community at large.

In analyzing these behaviors it is easy to discern a rebellion against the perceived social message that "to be accepted in the Orthodox community everyone must fit the same mold". While this perception may be exaggerated or even distorted, it points to a prevalent truism, which, in many cases, considers even a slight deviation in appearance, speech, or personal habits intolerable.

With parents, teachers and the establishment reacting in such an exclusionary manner, children agonize and worry

about ever being accepted by the Orthodox community. Admitting their desire to remain integrated into their native environment and to belong to its social network, they want to be accepted for what they are rather than for what others expect them to be. Because they somehow “do not fit the mold,” they feel ostracized from their native surroundings, and seek an alternative acceptance in a world that does not have such high and demanding standards for belonging.

“You wouldn’t believe it. Just because I came to school in my favorite, comfortable sneakers, my teacher sent me to the Principal, who yelled at me and called my parents to come and take me out of school as if I cheated on a test or hurt someone. Can you imagine? My crime was – wearing comfortable sneakers. Ridiculous!”

Time and again, we meet children who cry in anguish when they tell their story of alienation. They admit to relatively innocuous actions, which did not fit the mold, and describe the consequences of being treated as an outcast. Their bodies tense and their voices quiver as they recount being verbally abused and publicly embarrassed by parents, teachers and other members of the establishment. Such severe reactions affirm the youngsters’ conclusion that their indigenous society rejects them and refuses to have anything to do with them.

Admittedly, there are many reasons for insisting on conformity. Among them are concerns for family reputation and for the competitive status of the Yeshiva/Day School. These reasons are acceptable as long as they are also in the best interests of our child or student. However, one must question their legitimacy when the policy becomes its own *raison d’être*, or when its strict enforcement creates frustration and generates rebelliousness on the part of the child whom we claim to serve.

In such cases, the message that is projected is obviously harmful. It appears to them that our own religious commitment is not really genuine and is intended to satisfy our selfish needs. It conveys to our children a negative message of indifference to their feelings and our willingness to let them stray and deviate if they refuse to conform to the uniform mold that we have cast for everyone.

No wonder we are frequently told: "My jeans and my boots made me drift from Yiddishkeit! And my 'loving' parents are to blame."

With some merit, these words reveal the youngster's interest in remaining religiously observant, despite a nonconforming outward appearance. This preference to dress a little differently from the mainstream could not be tolerated by his parents, whose reaction pushed him over the edge.

A Word About Criticism

As parents and teachers we tend to find the justifiable need to criticize our children in order to teach and improve them. However, we must be aware of the potentially devastating effects of criticism.

Moshe Rabbeinu, only reprimanded Klal Yisroel shortly before his death. Rashi explains that he learned this from Yaakov, who told Reuven that he is only reprimanding him now before his death, because he was afraid that if he had done it sooner, Reuven would leave him to join with Esav, Yaakov's wicked brother. The implication is astounding. Reuven had long done T'shuva for his mistake and Yaakov was the loving, sensitive father of his righteous son, yet criticism could have had such a devastating effect on Reuven, no matter how gently it was given.

How careful must we be, even if we criticize and reprimand as Moshe did with the greatest respect (see Rashi), only

hinting at their mistakes, so as not to sound disrespectful to them.

A Word About Pressure

When the Rambam lists the environments that people naturally tend to emulate, he does not mention parents or Rabbeim.

It seems that although there is a natural phenomenon of following and being influenced by ones friends and society, parents and Rabbeim do not necessarily qualify for that influence because they represent serious pressure to conform. Pressure to conform undermines the natural tendency to conform to one's environment.

An astute observer of the teenage problem-scene pointed out that there is a difference between girls and boys with problems. The boys seem to come from less problematic families than do the girls.

It would seem that since in the high school years boys often have much greater pressure to learn and limit outside interests and activities than do girls, they tend to rebel more often. The girls with less academic pressure and more extracurricular activities do not rebel as often under normal situations, and therefore more problem girls come from difficult backgrounds, and less from the relatively normal situations.

We must be very careful about the pressure that we place on our children and students. It can be counterproductive and extremely detrimental. That is not to say that pressure does not have an important place in Chinuch. However, it must be measured very carefully.

The Decadence of Society

Everyone bemoans it; everyone decries it. Educators, clergy, therapists, and law-enforcement agents of every persuasion, each from his/her own perspective, all admit that the level of decadence which has permeated every facet of American culture in the twenty-first century has reached an abysmal level. The collapse of every acceptable norm of morality and values has reached unprecedented proportions. From advertisements to music, and from fashion to literature, the graphic vulgarity that prevails is unquestionably responsible for the escalation of crime and immorality, which has overtaken our entire social rainbow.

As sheltered as we attempt to keep our children, these negative influences are mightier and more potent than any conventional method that may have worked in the past. Antisocial behavior, crime, promiscuity, alcohol and drug abuse are rampant and the opportunities to participate in these activities abound. The media, videos, beepers, cell phones and the Internet bring the full gamut of inappropriate conduct into the privacy of our children's lives. Even children who do not have direct access to these technological developments are constantly exposed to peers who do, and are easily affected by them, regardless of how much parents and teachers try to prevent this from happening.

As an illustration of this anti-social deluge, its scope and proportions, consider the following startling statistics provided recently (January, 2002) by the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free, a coalition of 33 governors' spouses along with five Federal agencies and 28 public and private agencies:

» **20% of 12-year-olds in the United States have tried alcohol.**

- » **40% of children who began drinking before the age of 13 develop alcohol-abuse or alcohol-dependence at some point in their lives**
- » **20% of ninth graders report binge drinking (consuming 5 or more drinks in a row)**
- » **33% of eighth graders and 50% of tenth graders have been drunk at least once**

A comprehensive study of over 2000 children found that nearly **50%** of 8 to 11-year-olds admitted that alcohol, illicit drugs and violence are big problems in their lives. The percentage increased to **68%** among 12 to 15-year-olds (ABC News, March 2001). Another study released in Pediatrics (October, 2001 issue) revealed that those who started drinking before age 17 were three to four times more likely to have been involved in alcohol-related violence as adults.

The Associated Press (February 26, 2002) unveiled the results of a study, which concludes that “minors account for a significant percentage of the alcohol consumed in the United States.”

“Underage drinking has reached epidemic proportions in America,” stated Joseph Califano Jr., President of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. Based on this shocking information, he issued a “clarion call for national mobilization to curb underage drinking.”

Beyond alcohol, drug abuse has proliferated to astronomical proportions. A documented report entitled “Malignant Neglect: Substance Abuse and America’s Schools” warned that substance abuse and addiction will add at least \$41 billion to the 2002 budget for elementary and secondary public and private education due to class disruption and violence, special education and tutoring, teacher turnover,

children left behind, student assistance programs, property damage, injury and counseling.

A special alert issued in July 2000 introduced a new community threat: "Club Drugs." These potentially dangerous substances are gaining popularity in increasingly high rates among teenagers and young adults. They are attractive to today's youth because they are inexpensive and produce increased stamina and intoxicating highs. Because many of these drugs are colorless, tasteless, and odorless, individuals who do not want to be targeted for injecting harmful drugs into their veins can secretly add them to beverages. The most widely used Club Drugs are: Ecstasy (also known as MDMA), Rohypnol, Ketamine, GHB, and the hallucinogen LSD.

The entire United States is under siege from these and other drugs and alcohol. Children of governors, statesmen, clergy, and other prominent national and local leaders have succumbed to these addictions. In many instances the problem deteriorated to the level of crime, and became associated with gambling or promiscuity. Based on collected data, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) concluded that today this cumulative decadence is the equivalent of a contagious and infectious disease, which is communicable and pandemic, and, in its nondiscriminatory manner, is vigorously infecting every segment of the American society.

Our Yeshiva/Day School children are no exception.

The Danger of Naiveté

Despite all the facts, figures, reports and alerts, the Orthodox community has been somewhat naïve in admitting the extent to which its children are exposed to and involved in these dangerous activities. Such innocence,

or rather, denial, has enhanced the infiltration of inappropriate opportunities for experimentation and engagement, which are currently available in our neighborhoods to Yeshiva/Day School children.

Hence, as soon as some preteen or adolescent children experience the newfound freedom of young-adulthood they seize the liberty of exploring the pleasures associated with alcohol and other accessible drugs. This is especially true for those teenagers who harbor feelings of frustration, anger and emptiness without a means of fulfillment or a sense of happiness. These children are the most vulnerable to the temptations around them, and, like their peers in the non-Jewish sector, once they begin to identify with these unacceptable allurements, they become more and more drawn into their deviant ways.

In assessing the scope of the above-mentioned predicaments, we get a sense of what many of our teens-at-risk are up against. The magnitude of the dangers that they pose to the physical and spiritual lives of these children requires our immediate attention and obliges us to address these problems in order to avoid potential tragedies which have unfortunately affected our community and which continue to menace too many of our beloved youth.

In Summary

Most Yeshiva/Day School children are a source of pride and joy to their devoted parents and teachers. However, many youths are positioned for failure due to factors beyond their control. Learning disabilities, psychological issues, and family trauma are just a few of the inherent causes for children's special needs. Unfortunately, these symptoms are not recognized (or are ignored) at an early age due to large family size and the over-enrolled classes. These demographic obstacles make it hard to identify and address the individual developmental needs of these youngsters, and to offer them timely intervention and guidance.

As they continue to grow and develop without appropriate early detection of their special needs, these children cultivate personality needs, which make them vulnerable to the influences of foreign social elements. These extrinsic influences offer instant gratification, sensual fulfillment, acceptance and enhanced self-esteem which neither the Yeshiva/Day School or the home seem to offer.

Despite repeated efforts to sensitize and inform the leadership and laity of the Jewish Orthodox community to the predicament of children with special social and psychological needs, there still exists a lack of understanding of the pain and suffering which these youths experience. Instead, the prevailing assumption regarding their non-conforming behavior is that it is merely a sign of temporary rebelliousness or simply "bad conduct." The consequences of such parental misperception are primary causes for the syndrome known as "children-at-risk."

Beyond the misunderstanding of the reasons and causes for children's nonconformity, there is yet another negligent attitude which contributes to the breach of responsibility toward the young "at-risk" constituency. This breach is a result of placing greater concern on the family's reputation

(especially for Shiduchim), and the acclaim of the yeshiva, over the interests of the child/student. Such skewed priorities generate intolerance by parents and/or teachers for any deviation from the "norm," and, in turn, prompt greater anger, frustration, disdain and rebellion on the part of the children.

Feeling abandoned and neglected, and lacking the empathy of a trustworthy support system, youngsters tend to blame everyone for their pain and failure. Eventually they take out their frustrations on their parents, teachers, siblings, the religious establishment, Torah, Yiddishkeit and Hashem. In effect, their anger is directed at the community and the institutions which seem to them to be more concerned with their own promotion and grandeur rather than with the emotional needs of their searching souls.

Desiring and yet deprived of strong and meaningful relationships with parents, teachers and mentors, these youths are missing positive role models to help them work out their difficulties and frustrations. This dilemma is compounded by a lack of meaning and purpose in life, an absence of appreciation for Torah and Mitzvos, and a significant void in their relationship with Hashem. This spiritual chasm deprives the children of the recognition that within the essence of their time-honored Jewish heritage they may find answers to many of their questions, strength to withstand the temptation to rebel against the system, and an inner feeling of joy, serenity and contentment.

As a result of the overwhelming pressures to conform and "fit the mold," adolescents develop a sense of frustration and concern of ever being comfortable in a society that will not accept them for who/what they are. These feelings are often compounded by constant pressure and too much criticism.

Finally, the negative influences of the perilous street culture have so penetrated the Orthodox community that

youngsters find it very easy to embrace the worst habits and vices of that culture. Once they start gravitating toward this “scene” they adopt its speech and dress patterns, imitate its habits, apparel, music and dance, and internalize them as compensation for their own frustrations.

The Basics of Prevention

Reclaiming Our Children

Most “Prevention-related” literature in circulation today deals with problems-at-hand, when the danger signals are already flashing. While it is never too late to invest effort and energy into a relationship with any child, and every resource should be utilized to ameliorate an existing problem, it is more effective to commence these processes before danger strikes.

The following chapter deals with such prevention. Its premise is based on a statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which advises:

Kids who learn from their parents about the dangers of underage drinking, drugs and other harmful substances are less likely to use those substances. In other words, you have the power to keep the child that you love, healthy and drug free. But finding the right words and the right approach to childrearing can be hard.

This is where *“The Basics of Prevention”* comes in. It recognizes the fact that the toughest and most complicated job in the world comes with no training manual. It also regards parents and teachers with respect and dignity. At the same time, it attempts to help them put their good intentions into a context and propel them into action.

Finally, while the facts and figures that were provided in earlier chapters may be discouraging, take heart. Two-thirds of the children whom we counsel have told us that losing their parents’ and teachers’ respect and pride is one of the main reasons that they agreed to enroll in a rehabilitation program.

Faith-Based Prevention

As a religiously oriented approach to prevention, our discussion of techniques and approaches should rightfully begin with a discourse on the importance of Tefillah and Siyata DiShmaya (Prayer and Divine Assistance). There is, however, a danger in this approach.

Some pious parents, especially those overwhelmed by the prospect of children veering off the path of proper conduct and normative behavior, may rely solely on prayers, supplications and Psalms and avoid taking any other action to accompany their faith and trust. Such an approach, under the guise of spirituality and devoutness, may represent a neglect of parental responsibility, and a non-fulfillment of the obligation to provide children the best possible Torah upbringing and education.

Where, when and how should caring parents start the process of prevention?

Positive Relationships

Simple as it may seem, any approach to prevention must start at an early age, by establishing positive relationships with our children. The affirmative impact of such relationships is immeasurable. It validates a child's self-esteem, melts a heart full of resentment, and inspires the child to believe the sincerity of the affection, which is genuinely transmitted by the parent.

Seforno defines love as *"rejoicing in the attributes of the loved one."* A person who feels loved by another realizes that he is worthy of such love by virtue of his own qualities. Such a realization serves as an important affirmation of the loved person's confidence and self-esteem. Such a good feeling of being loved is magnified by a gratifying awareness

of the personal merits, which have earned this affection and devotion.

Genuine love, when conveyed by a teacher, mentor, or a friend, can accomplish even more than the love of a parent. After all, parents intrinsically love their children. Their love is therefore not as reflective of the child's greatness as the love of an outsider.

This is an important point for parents to realize. Parents often think, "I love my child. Why does he have low self-esteem?" Their astonishment becomes even greater when they see their child respond to a Rebbe/teacher but not to them. It is therefore important to reassure parents that their child's warm relationship with the Rebbe introduces a new dimension, which re-enforces the message which their love conveys. At the same time, parents must also recognize that their love may be overshadowed by their constant criticism and persistent fault-finding. A child is hurt even more when the person who loves him/her the most, thinks so little of him/her.

In analyzing the potential impact of a loving relationship, the Ralbag (Parshat Vayishlach) points our attention to the fact that despite his past conflicts and enmity with his brother, Yaakov could have succeeded in softening Esau's heart through his gestures of brotherhood and friendship, despite Esau's perception of a history of Yaakov fooling him. The message of the Ralbag is just as relevant today, for friendship, and certainly love, are so powerful, that even the mere possibility of being genuine can soften the heart of the worst enemy.

Indeed, a loving relationship is an extremely powerful tool for parents and teachers to use in influencing their children, defusing their resistance and overcoming their negative attitudes.

In one of the most remarkable and astute observations about the importance of cultivating a human relationship, Maimonides (Rambam) interprets the essence of the biblical commandment "Bo Tidbak", clinging to Torah scholars (De'ot 6:2). Maimonides explicates that the Mitzvah implies eating and drinking with Talmidei Chachamim, marrying into their families, and cultivating a close friendship with them. However, he also includes an additional dimension of the Mitzvah, which has been augmented by the Sages, namely: to "sit at the dust of the scholars' feet and thirstily drink their words".

It appears from the Rambam's formulation that the core of the Mitzvah is the requirement to establish social relationships with Torah Scholars, and that Talmudic Sages later added an obligation to learn under the tutelage of scholars. This sequence of priorities seems very strange. Would not learning Torah be included in the original Biblical core of the Mitzvah, rather than as a Rabbinic addition?

The answer may be found in the Rambam's Sefer Hamitzvos, which expounds upon the two reasons for the Mitzvah of "Clinging to Scholars". He explains that the first obligation is to learn from Torah Scholars, and the second is to believe the truth of their words. In other words, the message which the Rambam derives from this Mitzvah is that when meaningful personal or social relationships exist between two individuals, one is more inclined to accept what the other says as true.

Based on this observation, parents and teachers who would like children to accept their guidance and internalize their teachings ought to establish bonding relationships with the youngsters and thereby earn their trust and respect.

Recognizing Uniqueness

Another critical corollary issue that can have far reaching effects in the Prevention process is the need to recognize every child's uniqueness and individuality.

There is no better illustration of this point than the request, which Moshe Rabbeinu placed before Hashem while presenting his criteria for a credible successor. According to Rashi, Moshe outlined four special qualities, the first of which was: A leader who is capable of recognizing and tolerating the unique individuality of each and every member of Klal Yisroel.

As difficult as it may be, the ability to tolerate and the commitment to deal with each person individually is critical to any leadership position. Thus, while our ultimate goals for our children and students may be quite similar, we cannot lead them toward these goals by forcing all of them to fit into the same mold. To really succeed with our youth, we must recognize their intellectual, emotional and psychological differences, as well as their unique talents, interests, strengths and weaknesses.

In developing our parenting and pedagogic strategies, we must model ourselves after Moshe Rabeinu. Our relationship with our children and students, especially in the context of large families or classes, requires our tolerance, flexibility, and individualization, as we take into account each child's unique attributes.

In many instances, this requirement can literally be lifesaving. It can make the difference between winning the child's trust and reciprocal esteem, and losing him/her to the clutches of the alluring street culture.

Beyond slogans and buzzwords, individualization must be transformed into specific deeds and actions. These include making use of enrichment programs, resource rooms,

special diagnostic tests, tutorials and mentoring, and an array of professional services. As an aspect of effective Prevention, teachers and parents must work in full partnership. They must strategize to craft opportunities for each child to succeed and excel at what he/she can do best. Such collaboration will help the child to develop a positive self-image, so critical for success, and to reach the ultimate goal of leading a life of Torah and observance, which we visualize for all our children.

The Art of Paying Attention

King Solomon taught us "Educate the child according to his way". He emphasized "according to his way," implying that each individual must be nurtured and trained in accordance with his/her unique aptitude and competency.

To succeed in this design, and to achieve the desired results and *Nachas*, parents and teachers must be very attentive to what their children are saying, alert to any mood changes, seek guidance for themselves, and strive to deal with each child differently.

It is important to take time to listen to children when they want to talk. "Just a minute" and "Not right now" tells them "You are not very significant." Devoting attention to what a son, a daughter, or a student is saying increases their self-esteem, and develops a relationship of communication. "My parents care about what I tell them. They don't just pretend to listen!"

To encourage conversation, parents and teachers should ask open-ended questions, and avoid asking questions that the child can answer with a simple "Yes" or "No". They should make it clear to their child/student that they are listening and trying to understand his/her point of view. Time consuming as it may be, parents and teachers ought

to go out of their way to establish regular occasions on which they will do something alone with their child/student or with a small group of children, and use the opportunity to allow the child(ren) to talk. It does not have to be an elaborate activity but as simple as taking a walk or going for ice cream, as long as it can be an opportunity to listen. And when they have listened, they should not leave their child(ren) guessing. They should react, respond, and address the subject of the conversation. How pleasantly surprised they will be when their child will come back for more time and talk.

Balancing Discipline and Discretion

Guiding and inspiring spiritual and emotional growth in our youth, requires a fine balance between structure and discipline on one hand, and explanation and understanding on the other.

Psychologists have documented that children crave structure and discipline. It provides them with a sense of security, and the confidence that they will not get lost. It serves as their yardstick to measure the appropriateness of their development and their success. At the same time, they seek to understand what they are doing and why, and frequently ask challenging questions, which give them the feeling that they are making educated choices for themselves.

Living in a world with so much insecurity, children need to know that they are doing the right thing, and that, as Yeshiva/Day School students, their ultimate “right-thing” is the directive of the Creator Himself. Their questions and queries about discipline indicate their inherent need to

understand the benefits and reasons behind the restrictions and obligations that are imposed on them.

Such inquiry is healthy, and a positive aspect of Prevention. Children who are allowed to express their doubts and uncertainties will likely continue to ask other pertinent questions about drugs, drinks and addiction. Parents and teachers should therefore provide responses, which are appropriate to the age and understanding of the children, and address each question in a manner, which acknowledges the children's right to ask and to know.

To be able to communicate with a child about these topics requires an environment that combines discussion with action. To do so effectively, parents and teachers should be sufficiently involved in the children's lives to know what the children are doing, what activities they enjoy and how they spend their time.

Parents should praise and reward good behavior, but should not hesitate to set limits, with clear rules and consequences for breaking them. Of course some children might not like the fact that adults are keeping tabs on them. "It won't be a democracy, and it shouldn't be. In the end, it's not pestering, it's parenting."

The Virtues of Inquiry

While some parents and teachers may find children's inquisitiveness bothersome and inappropriate, Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 117) expresses a different view. In the context of introducing the prohibition against bringing yeast or honey to the alter, the author admits that although he presented reasons and benefits for all the Mitzvos, he is in a bit of a quandary about this one. Nevertheless, he feels compelled to provide a reason for its observance because he is concerned that if he omitted the explanation of this

Mitzvah his children and their friends might exploit this obscure “exception” to rebel against the observance of other Mitzvos in favor of alternates in the vanities of the world.

Imagine the apprehension of this great author approximately 500 years ago. His children did not experience the dangers and temptations to which children are exposed today. Yet he was concerned that if he left out an explanation for just a single Mitzvah, which he personally did not completely understand, his children or their friends may one day reject all the Mitzvos and abandon them forever.

This remarkable statement clearly highlights the importance of providing our children comprehensive answers and explanations to every question, which they may pose. In the course of providing them “Continuing Education” we will also foster an amicable environment in which they will not hesitate to communicate their questions about topics of concern and to consult us freely and confidently. By encouraging questions and providing answers we are activating the best available means of Prevention, and their benefit compensates for any investment of time, patience and energy.

This entire process must begin at a young and tender age and continue repeatedly as the children mature and acquire deeper levels of insight and understanding. With time, this Prevention-approach will provide our teenagers with a “comfort zone” in the observance of Mitzvos, and an ability to withstand the negative influences to which they will inevitably be exposed.

Interactive Learning

While counseling at-risk teens we often detect a great source of frustration, anger and rebellion, which can be

traced to the teenager's lack of fulfillment, excitement and interest in Torah learning. All too often, we are told,

"Our Shiurim were always presented in a dry, lecture format without providing the challenge and excitement, which would make us interested. So, I got bored and turned-off to Torah learning."

Our society is overwhelmingly interactive, from the local ATM to the global Internet we are engulfed by technology, which allows us much give-and-take. Consequently, Yeshiva/Day Schools, which do not incorporate interactive methods of teaching, lose their opportunity to compete with the other interactive pursuits of our society. To arouse and pique children's interest in a complicated Talmudic passage or Biblical chapter, we must ask challenging questions, stimulate excitement and foster an interactive experience, which will make the learning process real in the eyes of our students.

Benjamin Franklin once remarked:

***Tell me, I'll forget,
Show me, I'll remember,
Involve me, I'll understand.***

Understanding Torah can be one of the greatest pleasures that a Jewish child can experience. But, to reach this understanding he/she must engage in its learning in a stimulating, challenging and exciting way. The pleasure that the child/student will feel will be of a spiritual nature, and will provide him/her fulfillment and happiness. Moreover, having found fulfillment in Torah learning, the chances of a young Jew drifting from Yiddishkeit become very minimal. From our experience, we can attest that this kind of positive experience is Prevention at its best!

Hand in hand with finding fulfillment in Torah learning, it is important to convey to our children that Torah is Hashem's

special gift that offers us insights into the true meaning and purpose of life.

Likewise, it is essential to demonstrate how, despite its longevity and transmission from generation to generation, the essence of the Torah encourages creativity (Chidush) by every Jew who studies it.

As parents and teachers we have the opportunity to guide and channel our children's inquisitiveness toward becoming creative in Torah. What better Prevention is there than increasing their level of excitement and personal fulfillment as committed and scholarly Jews?

The Divine Relationship

Prevention goes beyond Love, Individualization and Communication. It also includes Relationships. Yet, there is one relationship, the most important and fulfilling one of all, with which children, for the most part, are not too familiar. The relationship is with Hashem! To some Yeshiva/Day School children, the possibility of such a "Relationship" seems bizarre; to others it is outright foreign. How truly sad this is! Despite the curriculum and the espoused ideology, this divine relationship is not manifest even at those times when it could help children through their most difficult teenage years.

"Ahavas Hashem", a liaison with G-d, is a concept, which can be introduced and inspired early in a child's life and communicated by word and by example. For instance, as children are introduced to prayer, they should also be sensitized to its role in establishing a relationship with Hashem.

To accomplish this goal, parents and teachers should approach the teaching of Tefillah as a meaningful dialogue and as a medium for worship rather than as a tool for reading efficiency. Most of all, children should be guided to view Tefillah as a mode of personal expression and fulfillment rather than an obligation for the benefit of G-d. Utilizing stories and poems, children should be motivated to internalize the feeling that praises of Hashem will allow them to recognize His greatness, kindness, and mercy. Subsequently, they will develop confidence that He can and will answer their prayers and respond to them in their time of need.

One Talmudic story that reinforces these lessons is found in the Talmud (Shabbos 31a). It tells about a Gentile who came to Hillel and asked to be converted to Judaism and be taught the entire Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel's

famous response was: "That which to you is hateful do not do to your friend. That is the entirety of the Torah. The rest is commentary. Now, go and study". Rashi explains that the "friend" to whom Hillel was referring is none other than Hashem, and that the essence of the Torah manifests the relationship between Man and G-d. All the rest is just an elaborate commentary.

According to this allegorical explanation, to be a Jew and to experience a meaningful and rewarding Jewish life, one must develop a loving relationship with G-d. How to do it is a matter of individual intellect, cognition and perception.

How sad that this essence of Torah is almost lost on our younger generation!

The Highest Intervention

Another cornerstone in the plan of Prevention is the concept of "Hashgacha Pratis," G-d's intimate and intricate involvement in every aspect of our existence. This awareness allows children and adults to recognize various occurrences and developments in their lives as hidden miracles, and to feel the urge to express their gratitude for these unexpected events in their daily lives. Obviously such appreciation is a major factor in the scheme of Prevention, and affords the children an early opportunity to forge a personal relationship with their Creator.

Once they begin to recognize that Hashem is positively involved in their personal lives, they gain the sense that their prayers are not just a one-way relationship. Rather, like a two-way street, Hashem desires the opportunity to respond to the ones He loves. Such a meaningful relationship helps to fill the great spiritual void which children (and adults) sometimes feel, and which, more frequently, overcomes most teenagers. As its roots reach deeper into the soul, this

relationship can make all the difference in fortifying their commitment to Torah and Mitzvos and in preventing them from looking elsewhere to fill the vacuum that may exist within them.

Instilling in our children an appreciation for Tefillah and a recognition of "Hashgacha Pratis" enhances their ability to adopt a more sophisticated sense of Bitachon (trust in Hashem). As an integral component of Prevention, such trust will navigate them through the sea of difficulties throughout their own lives. The awareness that Hashem cares and is involved in every facet of His creation, coupled with the recognition of His infinite kindness and mercy, will infuse our children with strength and inspiration whenever they may encounter what may appear as insurmountable personal or emotional difficulties.

Do As I Say, Not As I Do

Children are very sensitive to any inconsistency that they may notice in the parents'/teachers' conduct. It is therefore incumbent upon every parent and teacher to provide our youth with powerful examples of positive behavior and attitudes, of consistency without hypocrisy. As a matter of Prevention, we cannot chance any sort of hypocritical behavior on our part, lest we compromise our privilege as role models and mentors who guide our own children. It also goes without saying that "Do as I say, not as I do" never works with children, but rather undermines our ability to have any real influence on their lives.

Children must see our passion for Yiddishkeit and for learning Torah. They must witness the joy, which we derive from our Torah way of life. They must also sense our serenity and trust in Hashem in times of challenge, and our ability to cope in times of tragedy and danger. They must

be able to perceive our palpable relationship with Hashem and the positive influence that this relationship yields in our lives.

Consistency

People tend to let their guards down when they are at home. Often, the standards by which they abide in the workplace or in a social setting are not the same as those they practice at home. Parents must therefore be constantly vigilant about their conduct in front of their children, if they want to be effective in rearing them in a positive direction.

Achieving Happiness

As part of our own dedication to religious observance, we desire to raise our children to follow the paths of our heritage and tradition. Like most other aspects of Prevention, this can best be accomplished through personal example, and the clear articulation of the impact of Torah on the pursuit of human happiness.

To accomplish this goal, parents and teachers must understand the dynamics of human happiness.

Every human being is made up of body and soul, of physical and spiritual components. The total human experience is the combined sum of both. While the physical component desires material sustenance and pleasure, the spiritual longs for meaning, purpose and fulfillment, morality and ethics, and a relationship with the Creator. Consequently, to achieve real and lasting happiness a person must attain a successful balance between the physical and spiritual aspects of his/her human experience.

Since the spread of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, Western Civilization has attempted to divest itself of spiritual meaning. It accepted the hypothesis of a world operating on the basis of chance and accident, without purpose or meaning. It rejected the belief in a Divine Creator with a Supreme Design and a long-term plan. Negating the belief in purpose and meaning, Western Civilization developed a fascination with material pleasure. Regrettably, this passionate fascination has produced human misery, depression, alcohol, drugs and suicide, which are the antithesis of pleasure. This can be better understood with an insight mentioned in the introduction.

As part of their Prevention orientation, Yeshiva/Day School children must be made aware of this social condition. They must recognize that they can attain lasting happiness and fulfillment by enhancing their material and physical inclinations with spiritual fulfillment, meaning and purpose. In school and at home, parents and teachers should reinforce the fact that Judaism transcends Western Civilization by providing a framework which does not negate life's physical and material pleasures, but rather elevates their integration through spirituality for a total "happiness" experience.

Appreciating Happiness

The ultimate opportunities for conveying the message of integrated physical and spiritual experiences occur on Shabbos and Yom-Tov. They also take place when we recite our daily blessings and benedictions. According to the Kuzari, our Sages instituted the gamut of Brachos to enable us to enhance the pleasures of life, appreciate them more and express our gratitude to Hashem for the combined physical and spiritual happiness which He has granted us.

Although some children can experience spirituality at an early age, others cannot. Adults must therefore learn to recognize the different spiritual needs and capacities of their children and to provide for them accordingly.

Young children need to play, as do most teenagers. Depriving them of appropriate physical outlets at various stages of their development can be very detrimental to their balanced growth and overall happiness. Children should be encouraged to exercise, relax and seek diversions, and not be made to feel guilty for enjoying the development of a sound body and mind. Supporting these activities can minimize our children's need to solicit alternative and inappropriate means of enjoyment.

Facing Reality

As much as we would like to have our children grow up believing that life is "all-pleasant" and the world is "all rosy", the fact is that such is not the case. Life is filled with difficulties and challenges, disappointments, illness and tragedy. The world at-large is brimming with dangers, and evil forces lie in ambush set to trap and hurt those who least expect it. Unfortunately, our children are among the most vulnerable targets. When they encounter temptation and are unacquainted with its camouflage their spiritual and physical well being are jeopardized.

They must therefore be prepared for these situations, and not be taken by surprise. They must be given the strength and the means to cope and survive these difficult challenges. By over-protecting and sheltering them from the realities of life we are doing them a cruel disservice. For, when difficulties do arise they will lack the fortitude and stamina to confront them.

Our experience is replete with cases of teens that faltered because they were unprepared to tackle the problems, which they encountered at home or in school. They were not aware of harsh realities and thus succumbed to the pressures, which were exerted upon them. Lacking prior introduction to the challenges of life and to the temptations of society, they were not immunized sufficiently to withstand direct exposure to the “pleasures” of crime, drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity.

In anticipation of the dangers of over-protection, parents and teachers should gradually introduce children to the idea that a human being must be in control of both body and soul. When material difficulties arise, he/she must counterbalance their challenge by focusing on the spiritual aspects of his/her existence and drawing strength from their wellsprings. Such Prevention will become useful throughout the child's adolescence and adulthood and may avert many unforeseen personal tragedies.

A complementary lesson to which children should be introduced relates to the continuum between this world and the eternal next world. Utilizing colorful symbolism, children should be encouraged to imagine the events of this world as a beautiful needlepoint tapestry. The top of the needlepoint shows a picturesque illustration, while the underside consists of a mass of disheveled threads. To appreciate the tapestry one must focus on the top/front surface, because the bottom looks like a mess.

At an older age, children may be introduced to another concept, which may clarify for them the existence of suffering or tragedy. This esoteric concept involves the mystical idea of “Gilgul Neshamos” and describes the return of souls to this world for the purpose of completing an unfinished mission. Upon completion of their test, these souls return to their eternal rest. Thus, what may appear to us as premature deaths may be an indication of a positive

achievement, a fulfillment and a favorable accomplishment of the “second chance” which was granted to the soul of the deceased.

Questions about suffering are really not logical questions. Rather, they are expressions of emotional pain. Sometimes the only antidote to such inquiries is an emotional exposure to the kindness of Hashem, and dimensions of “Hashgacha Pratis” which manifest such kindness in a manner, which overrides human comprehension. Reinforcing these profound concepts will strengthen our children’s determination to look to their Jewish resources for solutions to any extraordinary dilemma, rather than seek to resolve them through precarious activities, which may endanger their physical and mental health.

The Eternal Testimony

In addition to the emotional and psychological issues involved in keeping our students and children in line, they must become well versed in the testimony and evidence that exists to the truth of “Torah from Sinai”. To the extent that they accept the fact that the Creator and Master-of-the-Universe revealed Himself publicly at Mt. Sinai to the entire Jewish people, this concept will guide and ward them off from falling prey to a host of negative influences and pressures in their lives.

To present the fundamental concept of “Torah From Sinai”, students should be introduced to the testimony of the original generation of eyewitnesses to the revelation at Sinai, and to the built-in Biblical system of transmitting this testimony down to this very day. An understanding of this system provides a credible basis for establishing the truth of “Torah from Sinai”.

The children should also be gradually introduced to the evidence contained in the written and oral Torah of which only the Creator could have known at the time the Torah document was written. Such extraordinary evidence, hidden in code formulas, serves as proof of the Creator's direction of the world, in synchronization with what we find in the Torah.

Both of these concepts are unique and can only be found in Judaism. Furthermore, the Torah abounds with evidence of its Divine authorship, in the form of information both prophetic and scientific, that no author could have known when the Torah was first given. If properly taught, our children will be fascinated by these evidences, and will develop an affinity to the Torah-text and thereby also to its concepts. Such an intellectual, spiritual and emotional bond will certainly serve as a potent ingredient of Prevention, and will strengthen the children's bond to their time-honored familial heritage and tradition.

Epilogue

This text should only be viewed as a brief overview of some of the basic issues of Prevention. Parents and teachers must consider themselves as critical to the developmental process of their children and students. They must always be ready to learn more and improve their skills and approaches.

Implementing all the facets of Prevention outlined above is not an easy task. But, for parents who are engaged in what is said to be the most exasperating task and yet the most joyous and rewarding experience of child rearing, the "Basics of Prevention" is our contribution to their efforts to raise the next generation of happy and healthy pillars of the Jewish community.

The future of our children and our people depends on it.

Prevention - In Brief

A Synopsis

Developing close relationships with our children/ students. Identifying those children who are positioned for failure. Never denying, minimizing or dismissing the existence of a real or perceived problem, and finding appropriate professional help when behavior seems beyond the norm.

Recognizing the uniqueness and individuality of every one of our children, and providing him/her opportunities to succeed by fostering a positive self-image.

Encouraging children/students to think critically and creatively. Challenging them to explore, question and attempt answers in accordance with their level of understanding.

Providing caring discipline by offering explanations of rules and restrictions, which govern the life of children and adults. Counterbalancing the imposed discipline with a clarification of the benefits and rewards, which can be derived from the performance of Mitzvos.

Setting positive role models who will inspire children to develop a meaningful and potent relationship with Hashem. Through personal example, rather than by teaching or preaching, the role model should demonstrate how authentic Torah observance provides both happiness and fulfillment, as well as ample opportunity for wholesome, exciting and gratifying physical, social, and emotional experiences.

Helping children/students to cope with suffering, disappointment and tragedy, and educating them about the dangers lurking in society.

Whenever possible and practical minimize pressure. Always be careful about the damage caused by criticism.

Beyond Prevention

Securing Our Future Through Direct Intervention

Having devoted the previous chapter to the “Basics of Prevention”, we are compelled to add a final note, which will address parents and teachers whose children are on the brink of becoming “at-risk”.

Once again, our recommendations are based on years of counseling teens that have traveled the road of disgrace and have been scorched by the inferno of drugs, alcohol, and worse. Our record of success speaks for itself, and the children who have successfully undergone behavior modification under our aegis are testimony to our credibility. Hopefully, sharing our insights with the reader will provide a sense of direction and guidance, which is sorely needed by those who cry in solitude, not knowing where to turn.

Confronting the Problem

Sometimes parents are the last to know; at other times they recognize the signs but refuse to admit the problem. Instead, they prefer to think about it as a phase, when, in fact, it is not. By the time they are compelled to admit to the problem, it has been going on for quite a while and has overtaken the mental health of their child.

Thus, the most essential aspect of dealing with children at-risk is recognizing their problem and facing it. Beyond accepting the fact that a child is positioned for trouble, parents must be willing to search and engage appropriate professional help, before the problem gets out of hand.

Changes in the greater American culture make raising children today harder than ever. Families are splintered, and the influences of the media and technology on children

are pervasive. In a society marked by affluence and overwork, where therapy is routine, desperate parents will naturally be more inclined to seek outside help for both minor and severe problems. But who is really in need of help?

Who is at-risk?

Most children are "at risk" at some time or another.

Given increasing divorce rates, families in which both parents work, and the general complexity of modern life, even children of well-educated, middle-class parents can come to school unprepared, get into trouble with faculty and peers, and engage in unacceptable social endeavors because of the stress their families are undergoing.

Certain children, however, are in critical need of special intervention. These are generally the children who have traditionally been termed "at-risk."

How can a parent or a teacher know when it's time to strongly intervene?

You've given your child "one last chance" - at least 3 times!

You've had several "heart to heart" talks where you felt you really got through ... but your child just went back to doing the same things.

The following is intended to help parents realize that the time has come to go beyond well-meaning friends and relatives, and to seek professional help for their teenager.

Warning Signs

Change in routine and healthy sleep habits

Gravitating towards and/or joining a new group of friends who are unacceptable to parents

Recent and dramatic decrease in school work, attendance or grades

Refusal to participate in family activities

Deception, lying and keeping activities a secret

No respect for authority

Making bad decisions

Blaming others for his/her problems

No respect for parents or house rules

Disruptive manifestations of behavior

Critical Signs

Dramatic disregard for self-care and hygiene

Drugs or drug paraphernalia

Abrupt change in personality, attitude and emotional stability

Possession of weapons

Reckless, destructive and threatening behavior

Violent, self-harming or suicidal statements or behavior

The Causes

In most cases it takes time for a crisis to become critical, life threatening or intolerable. A pattern of crises has usually taken place before one further crisis escalates into a dangerous situation. Identifying these factors can help

characterize the progress of the crisis, the appropriate response and the duration of intervention that may be necessary.

Drugs, alcohol, peer and social pressure, traumatic experience, a "brittle" or fragile emotional temperament, parental divorce or separation, untreated parental alcoholism, drug abuse or mental disorder, failure to provide rules, discipline and a bonded relationship with a child, family conflict and discord

Interventions

Understanding the potential cause of a crisis is only useful if there are readily available interventions that are comprehensive and of sufficient duration and intensity to contain and redirect the situation. The range of potential interventions includes:

Self-help

Education and training for parents and teenagers

Individual counseling and therapy

Group counseling and therapy

Family counseling and therapy

Increased parental involvement and supervision

Change of schools

Moving residence to a new community

Parenting by other family members

Foster care

Day treatment program

Therapeutic Boarding School
Residential treatment program
Psychiatric hospitalization
Police or law enforcement response

The availability and the competence of those involved are critical factors to insure success. More than anything, the intervention must be appropriate to the level of risk and responsive to the underlying problem or potential cause.

While stabilization and symptom relief are necessary first steps in many interventions, there must be sufficient structure and follow-up in order to prevent further crisis and a relapse. Parents and teachers must keep in mind that an inappropriate intervention may potentially make matters worse and can not only undermine their relationship with their child, but could potentially create another crisis.

Researchers have pointed out that there is often a cycle to the crisis that teenagers, parents and families experience. This crisis tends to escalate, subside and resurface in a pattern of increasing emotional, psychological and behavior problems. Brief periods of normalcy are typical in crises involving teenagers. During these periods, teenagers can become more cautious, reflective or sincerely remorseful.

Whether the crisis represents a turning point or not will depend on whether or not the appropriate intervention is designed and followed through.

Our generation is fortunate in having many mental health professionals with strong Torah credentials as well as professional expertise. They are a far cry from the mental health professionals of previous generations who were almost as committed to freeing the patient of his religious shackles as they were to healing. Having worked with many

psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, substance abuse counselors, physicians, and clergy we recommend to parents and teachers to utilize their expertise with confidence.

In contrast to the attitude of the previous generation, the social environment today has significantly reduced the stigma associated with receiving counseling. The consideration of medication has also been modified and its use is much more acceptable. However, even when medication is called for, it should be accompanied by serious counseling, preferably by a psychologist who collaborates with the psychiatrist prescribing the medication.

For this approach to work, no less than ALL of the above ideas combined with the total commitment of parents and teachers are critical factors in the successful recovery of their child. The abundance of scenarios in which teenagers in serious trouble were helped to literally “turn their lives around” serves as a reminder to parents and educators never to give up.

Experience has also taught us that at-risk children who required major therapy have often emerged stronger and more deeply committed to their family, community and Klal Yisrael than their counterparts, who seemed to have it much easier all around.

In Closing ...

As the substance abuse phenomenon continues, parents in the general population have begun to expect and even accept some drug use by their children. If the Orthodox community is to resist this trend, parents of yeshiva students must educate themselves.

Alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana are addictive substances, attractive and available to our community's children. Once a chemical dependency has been established, even yeshiva

children from observant, stable families are vulnerable to the allure of more addictive substances.

Nonrealistic social, academic, or emotional goals which parents may unwittingly foster in their children, or which children may create for themselves, may lead youngsters to act upon the media's message: "Relief is just a swallow away."

"Parents can still exert more influence upon their teenagers than their children's peers. Support your children's self-esteem; whether they always hit home-runs, sometimes hit home-runs, or never hit home-runs, make sure your children feel that you love them for who they are not for what they do, or do not do."

Barry Wilansky, MA, CASAC

Tempo Group

A comprehensive treatment program for chemically dependent persons and their families

Principles of Successful Parenting

(Based on Planting and Building by Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe zt"l)

Create a powerfully warm bond of love and trust.
Build intimacy and have open communication.

Be a good role model (personal example).
Every child naturally wants to identify with his
parents and imitate them.

Correct goals: Include the soul in the educational process.

Assess their needs rather than use them to fulfill ours.

Encourage them to fulfill their dreams instead of ours.

Avoid harshness, both physical and verbal. Harshness is
insidious, for the distance it provides is not always
immediately apparent.

Motivate and inspire.

BASICS OF PARENTING

1. Show love, respect and friendship.
2. Listen, Listen, Listen.
3. Recognize the individuality of each child.
4. Provide numerous/varied opportunities to succeed.
5. Foster positive self-image.
6. Encourage and answer questions.
7. Provide loving, caring discipline, with constant explanation of rules and restrictions.
8. Set a positive example (i.e. husband/wife relationship).
9. Explain the reason behind the Mitzvos and benefits derived from them.
10. Challenge them and give them opportunities and encouragement to think and use their heads (i.e. questions on the Parsha that they can try to answer).
11. Do not deny the existence of a problem.
12. Find appropriate professional help when behavior seems beyond the norm for children of that age.
13. Inspire a positive and active relationship with Hashem through recognition of Hashgacha Pratis, Bitachon and Tefillah.
14. Limit pressure and criticism as much as realistically possible.

YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN TROUBLE: PREVENTION, EARLY DETECTION AND CRISIS INTERVENTION

An Outline

I. Prevention

1. Close, loving relationship with parents who spend time and interest, not just money.
2. Respect shown to children by parents and teachers which recognizes the child's unique needs, strengths and nature.
3. A balance between a sheltered environment and the wisdom and insights needed to cope with the negative influences that seep through.
4. Wholesome regular activities and pursuits of appropriate interests to minimize the desire and need for inappropriate means of enjoyment.
5. Offer some space and choices between appropriate alternatives, recognize individuality, limit pressure and criticism.
6. Educate early on about the need for spiritual fulfillment in order to be happy. Pleasure does not necessarily bring on happiness. Remember: happiness has much to do with feeling personally validated.
7. Take advantage of opportunities to show that the world which constantly pursues pleasure is far from happy.
8. Educate on the dangers lurking in society.
9. Be sensitive and attentive to answer questions and take them seriously.
10. Show pleasure and happiness of Torah lifestyle.

11. Excite and stimulate emotionally and intellectually. Involve in Torah learning.
12. Share relevant wisdom of Torah and show Torah's relevance to our quality of life.
13. Find every opportunity for kids to succeed, accomplish and feel good about themselves.
14. Keep their living surroundings normal and intact.
15. Never over-react to problems or deviations and always encourage children to be open and speak only truth.

II. Early Detection

1. Any problem positioning a child outside of the norm for his group can be a cause for trouble.
2. Monitor any problems and address them early on with sensitivity and real concern. Oftentimes professional help is imperative.
3. Do not resist professional help when needed.
4. Any abrupt and radical change in normal behavior patterns can be a sign of trouble brewing.
5. Extreme anger, unhappiness, mood swings or fears can be signs of trouble.
6. Professional evaluation can help to determine the extent of the problem.
7. Lack of involvement in learning, cynicism, sleeping late, and lack of interest can all be signs of trouble brewing.
8. Bad friends usually indicate trouble.
9. Subtle change in language, dress, hairstyle, etc. may indicate early signs of trouble in the making.
10. Open communication, with sensitivity and caring will often provide signs of trends and attitudes that might become problematic.

11. Smoking cigarettes, staying out very late at night and breaking curfew are usually signs of brewing trouble.
12. Parents should realize dangers that exist and not be naive and yet not be overbearing.

III Crisis Intervention

1. Today there are many competent frum professionals, even Bnai Torah, and it is very important to avail ourselves of their services at the earliest possible time, before the problem becomes more difficult to deal with.
2. Parents, teachers, principals, guidance counselors and professionals must work as a team to intervene and help resolve problems.
3. Lines of communication between the above and the child must be always open.
4. Never condemn the child and always remain loving and understanding no matter what the trouble seems to be.
5. Consider even the worst possible problems and consult freely with experienced people and professionals.
6. Deal with problems appropriately and don't allow personal or family (i.e., Shidduchim) considerations to prevent proper action or treatment.
7. Remember: Children in crisis really want their parents' help and often crave the very structure that they seem to resent.
8. Often a mentor, a bit older than the child, can have a positive influence if they develop a close relationship.
9. Although it may be appropriate under certain extreme circumstances, don't jump to reject and throw a child out of home or school.

10. Environment plays an important role. Work hard and strategize to construct an environment to foster more positive behavior.
11. Try to avoid rejection at all costs. If school is ready to throw a student out, transfer him to another school before that happens.
12. When serious alcohol or drug abuse is an issue, these issues must be dealt with first. However, spiritual and Torah values and experiences help to find purpose in life and inspire one to want to cope and be cured from these problems.

Prevention of Problems in Our Children

An Outline

1. Study each and every personality and recognize uniqueness.
2. Learn to recognize positioning for failure and intervene professionally early on to avoid trouble later.
3. A close, loving relationship with parents who spend time and interest, not just money, and respect shown to children by parents and teachers which recognizes the child's unique needs, strengths, and nature, will foster positive self-image and well-balanced state of being.
4. Importance of happiness to maintain Torah life-style.
5. The process must be gradual and according to the understanding and emotional development of child.
6. Child must be given to understand the benefit of observance of Mitzvos, and what they are all about - overall purpose and individual meaning and benefits.

7. To maintain happiness and well-balanced emotional state there must be a sense of purpose in life and it must encompass the total person, both physical and spiritual.
8. We must introduce our children early on to spirituality and to a relationship with the Creator
9. The key elements in the process of developing a relationship with Hashem are:
 - a) Positive human relationships
 - b) Knowledge that Hashem gave us his Torah at Sinai as a very special kind of gift.
 - c) Introduction to and discovery of Hashgacha Pratis in their lives.
 - d) Understanding and appreciation of prayer coupled with positive Tefillah experiences.
 - e) Exposure to the concept of Bitachon and development of Bitachon in their experiences.
10. When a Jew delights in Torah study, he finds more pleasure than any material or physical pleasure. We must challenge our children and excite them in their learning to make the learning experience delightful.
11. They must witness and feel passion and happiness in our study of Torah and observance of the Mitzvos.
12. We must help them cope with the concept of suffering.
13. They need and want discipline and structure, but with kindness, temperance, understanding, and tolerance.
14. Develop understanding of truth of Torah Misinai with testimony and evidence.
15. Make sure that they have good friends.
16. Give them a balance between a sheltered environment and the wisdom and insights needed to cope with the negative influences that seep through.

17. They must be involved in wholesome regular activities and pursuits of appropriate interests to minimize the desire and need for inappropriate means of enjoyment.
18. Offer some space and choices between appropriate alternatives.
19. Educate early on about the need for spiritual fulfillment in order to be happy. Pleasure does not necessarily bring on happiness.
20. Take advantage of opportunities to show that the world which constantly pursues pleasure is far from happy.
21. Educate on the dangers lurking in society.
22. Be sensitive and attentive to answer questions and take them seriously.
23. Find every opportunity for kids to succeed, accomplish and feel good about themselves.
24. Keep their living surroundings normal and intact.
25. Never over-react to problems or deviations and always encourage children to be open and speak only truth.

Academic Motivation

A Handbook for Parents

by Michael B. Brown, Ph.D., East Carolina University (NC)
and Patricia B. Keith, Ph.D., Alfred University (NY)

What is Academic Motivation?

A child who is academically motivated wants to learn, likes learning-related activities and believes school is important. We want to help children develop a desire to do well in school because the children believe that learning is important and rewarding in their lives.

Development of Academic Motivation

Children are naturally motivated to learn when they are infants. A baby's struggle to reach a toy, learn to walk, or eat without help are examples of motivation to learn. This early motivation to learn is later applied to school-related activities such as reading and writing. When children are not motivated to learn it is because something has gotten in the way of their natural motivation. They believe that they cannot do well in school-related tasks, and they stop trying or do not try hard enough because they don't think that it will make a difference. They become easily frustrated and give up when learning is difficult. Since they stop trying, they do not learn successfully. They do not get to experience the thrill of learning something new. They believe that any success they have is due to luck or circumstance.

Why do children develop these negative beliefs? Sometimes it is because of things that affect their ability to learn. Learning disabilities, difficult temperament, developmental delay, depression, or chronic life stress may make it harder for a child to learn in school. Children who have failed in school before are also very likely to stop trying to learn because they develop the belief that they cannot do so. The attitudes of adults can also influence children's beliefs about their academic success. Parents who have standards that are unrealistic can discourage their children's efforts. Competition in school (where someone always wins and someone always loses) can be very discouraging to children, especially those who may never be "the best" at school, even though they can learn a lot. Children who don't experience success or whose successes are not recognized may develop poor academic motivation. Children whose parents or peers do not think school is important or do not place importance on doing their best in school also can develop poor academic motivation.

Increasing Motivation to Learn

There are many things that parents can do to increase their child's academic motivation. Keeping good parent-child relationships and letting your child know that you think school is important can enhance academic effort. You can also help by teaching your child good study habits and providing recognition for his or her successes. Working as a partner with your child's teacher is also important. Here are some ideas to help you increase your child's motivation to learn:

» Be firm and fair when you discipline your child. Children need reasonable discipline to be independent and responsible.

- » Teach your child to be responsible at home. Chores and expectations for proper behavior are ways of developing self-discipline that can transfer to school-related learning.
- » Work hard to have a good parent-child relationship. Take time to do fun things with your child. Listen when your child talks to you, especially about school.
- » Do family activities that encourage learning, such as visits to the library, museums or parks.
- » Let your children know that you think learning is important and is the central purpose of school.
- » Provide opportunities for successes. Children who feel successful are more likely to try new things.
- » Talk with your children about your interests and likes.
- » Help your children identify things that they enjoy and what they do well. Capitalize on their interests to build learning experiences. For instance, if your child likes baseball, you can encourage your child to read and write about baseball players or the history of baseball.
- » Talk with your children about school and show an interest in their school activities.
- » Talk with your children about their career interests and how school is related to a career.
- » Be sure to praise your children for trying hard and for being successful. All children need to know when they are doing well.
- » Balance praise and punishment when you are helping your child. Too much punishment can be discouraging. Make sure your child knows what is expected and gets some kind of recognition. Remember, rewards don't always mean getting money or privileges. Just telling your children that you are proud of them or you notice the effort they put into their work will make a big difference.

Teach Habits that Encourage Learning

- » Have a set routine for school work. Your child should know when he or she is expected to work on their school work each day.
- » Set up a place to study where your children have the needed supplies and as much quiet as necessary.
- » Make sure your children finish school work at home before doing things that could distract them from doing their school work.

Work with Your Child's Teacher

- » Show your child that you respect his or her teacher. Don't handle disagreement with the teacher in front of your child.
- » Talk regularly with the teacher so that each of you know what is going on in school and at home. Waiting until report cards come out is often too late to make changes.
- » Work with your child's teacher to make sure your child learns good study skills.
- » Develop a system to give reinforcements at home for working hard in school.

If Your Child is Already Having Problems with Academic Motivation

- » Talk with your child about the problem. Is he or she feeling confused or frustrated by the work? Does your child feel that he or she is trying hard to do well?
- » Talk with your child's teacher to identify areas in need of improvement.

- » Let your child know that you are willing to help them do better.
- » Help your child identify things he or she does well so that the focus is only on areas of difficulty.
- » Help your child identify things that he or she likes that could be used to help with school work (for example, if a child is interested in animals, have him or her read books about animals, make up stories about animals, etc.).
- » Reward effort and productivity.
- » Provide increased rewards for improvement.
- » Limit things that interfere with learning, such as excessive TV, video games, computer time, etc.
- » Increase the amount of time your child studies each day by a small amount - 5-10 minutes until you reach a reasonable goal (such as an additional thirty minutes per day).

Get More Help if Necessary

- » Talk with your child's teacher, school counselor or school psychologist for help and advice. If there is reason to suspect an educational disability, request a comprehensive assessment from your school's special education team.
- » Often, there are parents groups or PTA groups that can help you or provide support.
- » Find out if instruction in study skills is available at your child's school.
- » Don't be afraid to seek counseling or other help outside of school if necessary.

Resources for Parents

Brown-Miller, A. (1994). Learning to learn: Ways to nurture your child's intelligence. New York: Plenum Press.

Clark, L. (1996). SOS: Help for parents (2nd Edition). Bowling Green, KY: Parent's Press.

Levine, M. E. (1994). Educational care. Cambridge, MA: Educators Publishing Service.

Martin, M., & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (Eds.) (1995). Solving your child's school-related problems. New York: HarperPerennial.

Rimm, S. (1996). Dr. Sylvia Rimm's smart parenting: How to raise a happy, achieving child. New York: Crown Publishers.

*© 1998 National Association of School Psychologists,
4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814
- 301-657-0270*

Excerpt from Chovos Hatalmidim

We should be heartsick, however, and our hair should stand on end when we see the way the younger generation has turned to heresy and has lost all spiritual discipline. They possess neither faith, nor fear of G-d, nor knowledge of Torah. They have actually come to despise G-d and His servants, the people of Israel. The administrators and deans of the yeshivos, who are totally immersed in the life of the yeshivah and its students and encounter only the elite of our youth, are unaware of the gravity of this problem. They console themselves, saying: "Yes, it may be true that many of our young people have freed themselves of any commitment to Torah, but still, Israel has not been abandoned. There are still young men, sons of our people, outstanding in their Judaic scholarship, whose heart is steadfast with the Lord."

Poke your heads outside of the four cubits of your yeshivah! You will see the great mass of people who have broken from the observances of our faith, may G-d have mercy on them and us. You will see houses of study where the destruction of Jerusalem has been reenacted. Once they were filled with Torah scholars, now they have become empty, and instead, groups and organizations whose goals include the dissemination of heresy and the rejection of Torah have been filled with members. In former good days, even the laborers and merchants who were not necessarily scholars were at least faithful Jews. Now their youth have denied Torah, have wandered and fallen into a great depth of spiritual darkness. Should we be satisfied with merely the handful of students who attend our yeshivos? Is this the entirety of the people of Israel?

And are we really so sure of our yeshivah students? Have we done everything we should do concerning their education?

Yes, we can be confident that the students who have reached the upper level of classes, and especially those who have already begun to instruct others and render halachic judgments, and have filled themselves with Torah and acts of devotion, will remain within the holy palace of Judaism and of divine service. But will all our students reach the upper level of classes? Many of our students in the lower grades will be unable to continue their studies much longer. They will leave the yeshivah to become merchants or laborers, either of their own free will, or by force of circumstances. As the *Midrasb* says: "A thousand enter to study, and only one emerges to instruct (from among the whole group)." Do we have any assurance that, a short time after having left the yeshivah, these students will not divest themselves of the commandments and, G-d forbid, cease to observe the Shabbos? Why should we not strategize on how to influence them while they are still in our schools? All the children that eventually throw off the yoke of Torah are in our hands during their childhood and grow up in our schools. Why should we abandon them without binding them and their souls to G-d and to His Torah in their childhood in a way that will last until their old age?

We tend to look at the straying of our youth as if they alone were to blame and we were completely innocent. G-d, however, declared the following about his relationship to Avraham: "I have made Myself known to him in order that he command his children and his household after him to guard the path of G-d (Bereishis 18:19)." Every generation in Israel is a link in the chain of our heritage, a chain whose beginning stretches back to Avraham and whose end will reach our righteous Messiah (may he come soon). Every generation receives its faith, its Torah, and its sense of awe before G-d from the generation that preceded it. They take what they have received, serve the Lord with it, and pass it on to the next generation. "In order that he command his children" is the mainstay of our existence. And if this chain

has been broken in our generation, and we are not succeeding in our attempt to pass the Torah on to the next generation, can we truthfully put all the blame on them? Are they not from the seed of Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Are they not also holy souls? Why deceive ourselves with the faulty excuse that we want to pass on the tradition, that it is their fault for refusing to receive it? For however much they are at fault and however true it is that they refuse to listen, try and imagine what would have become of these same "criminals" in earlier generations.

No matter how much they are to blame, no matter how flawed their souls are with defects that did not afflict previous generations, would they still have refused to accept their place in the chain? Would not most, if not all of them have been *tzaddikm*, or, at the very least, simple, faithful Jews? This is because their parents, and the whole generation that would have preceded them, would have taken such great care in educating the next generation, as they did in fulfilling all of G-d's word - much more care than we take now. They would have burned like fiery torches and would not have looked on calmly and coldly as the younger generation was spiritually drowning and as G-d's people were falling headlong into heretical ideologies. They would have risen and dedicated their whole soul and might to saving them and educating them, using various stratagems and pretexts.

Are we really devoid of responsibility, we, the older generation, their educators, upon whom the responsibility for passing on the awareness of G-d's holiness, the knowledge of His Torah, and dedication to His service rests? Can we truly say, with an untroubled soul, "Our hands have not spilled this blood," the lifeblood of the Jewish souls that are descending to spiritual darkness? What will we answer the One who dwells on high, how will we justify ourselves before He whose abode is in the heavens? He will come to count His spiritual army on earth, and among them the

young generation, the sheep of His flock, whom He left for safekeeping in our hands, relying on our sense of responsibility. He will roar from on high, and shout from the place of Holiness: "Where are My children, whom I love tenderly, the children of Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Where are my children?"

And if we truly want to return to G-d and to straighten out what we have made crooked, we must acknowledge our own share of guilt. For even if they are flawed in a way that previous generations' of young people were not, this does not justify our neglecting them, our failure to investigate and discover the source of their soul-sickness while they are still young, while it is still possible to know how and with what they can be healed. Can the father or guardian of a child claim to be innocent of blame when his child has lost a limb, if the infection that led to this maiming started off as a small cut that could have been easily healed, and it spread out only through neglect?

For all that the young people are to blame, for all their corruption, we cannot simply justify ourselves by sighing bitterly. We must feel pain and heartache because of our neglectfulness as well. Only then will we be able to search for a way to take action, to repair, to heal our nation's brokenness. And we must pray to G-d to show us His path, and to remove the heart of stone from our children so that together we can merit to serve Him in truth and with a full heart. Then we can be "Israel, in whom You are glorified," and we can say "Look at this child whom I have placed before You."

With strong principles and with hard facts – not with guesses and presumptions – we must explain, first of all, what the difference is between the generations. Why, in previous generations, did just about any kind of education seem effective? Almost every student of every teacher and

every child of every father were servants of G-d, while now this is not the case.

The simplest and most important reason is that today's youth consider themselves grown-up before their time. This is not simply a wild guess, the whole world, actually, is lamenting about the same phenomenon. Our purpose is not to explain the reason or cause for this attitude among young people, but the fact is that it does exist. An atmosphere of foolishness has surrounded the young people of our time, in which they have come to think of themselves as grownup and independent – in their opinions and in their desires – though their mind is still upside down and their desires unripe and bitter. Our sages have told us all along (*Sotah 49*) that in the time preceding the coming of the Messiah, arrogance would be rampant. To think of oneself as trustworthy, secure, and authoritative in one's own opinions is surely arrogant. This trait has caught fire to such an extent that one is sometimes astonished to encounter this independent spirit and false strength bursting forth in very small children who already consider themselves grown men and women.

THE PERFECT CHILDHOOD

Why it's bad for kids

By Judsen Culbreth

Reprinted from Reader's Digest

> A teacher's comments in red on tests or papers, once considered instructive because the color makes you take notice, are fading away. Now in places like New York City, Pittsburgh and Trumbull, Connecticut, schools have abandoned the urgent red color for tones like blue or purple. "My first-graders freak out when they see red," says McGhie Calahan, a teacher in Crossville, Tennessee. "I use blue or black to make comments. They're less harsh."

> At an after-school sports program he attended when he was six, my son, Charlie, was awarded a trophy simply for participating. Every kid received a trophy and every trophy had its own inscription. The award my then-scruffy little boy received – and he could barely lace his hockey skates at the time – was for "Neatness."

> Like most preschoolers, Will Theodore of Westford, Massachusetts, likes to draw, especially for his mom, Jennifer. At first she oohed and aahed over his every creation. His drawings were clever, amazing, works of art, she'd exclaim. One day after the four-year-old had placed a few squiggly lines on a page, he blurted to her, "Look, isn't this just beautiful?"

Time for a reality check. In our zeal to create a great childhood for our kids – one in which they feel happy, safe and successful – many parents and teachers are going to extremes.

Determined to do anything – *anything* – to make life better for their children, parents have fallen for the myth that they can create a perfect childhood. They're called helicopter parents, hovering over their kids and micromanaging their lives. They've

bought into the myth that a child's self-esteem depends on never having even the slightest adversity, upset or setback.

But the “no more tears” approach to raising kids is doing more harm than parents and teachers realize.

“Of course we love our kids like crazy,” says Betsy Hart, a Chicago-area mother of four and author of *It Takes a Parent*. “But when we idolize – and idealize – them, we’re not doing them any favors.” In fact, the result of these good intentions is often just the opposite.

Kids can’t nourish their true identities or feel good about their accomplishments if we feed them junk praise that bloats their egos and leaves them hungry for real self-awareness. There’s strong scientific evidence that undeserved praise can do long-term harm, especially when doled out to malleable teenagers. What’s more, kids with a solution-minded parent constantly lurking don’t develop the mettle to solve life’s inevitable problems.

“Mistakes are experiences that prepare youngsters for their futures,” says Robert Brooks, PhD, of Harvard Medical School and co-author of *Raising Resilient Children*. “When parents rush to the rescue or take over, it sends the message, ‘I don’t think you’re competent to handle things. I’m not sure I trust you to succeed.’”

Experts agree: To have a fuller, more competent life as adults, we need the freedom to fail a little more often as children. We need the freedom to make mistakes. Only then can we learn to succeed.

The Trouble With Perfect

You see them everywhere: well intentioned but overbearing parents, making tsunami-size waves in classrooms and on ball fields. In some school districts, it’s become embarrassingly commonplace for assertive parents to pressure teachers to change grades. (“She’s eight! Harvard’s only ten years away!”)

Coaches and directors of other extracurricular activities get more of the same. Says Sharon Czelusniak of Queens, New York, a girls' soccer coach for eight years, "We had lots of parents who preferred that their children only play as forwards, even though our philosophy was for the younger kids to learn all the positions."

Pushy, grade-grubbing moms and dads take a toll on everyone in the system, not just the children. Surveys show, for example, that "parent management" issues are a major reason many new teachers leave the classroom for other professions, presumably less crazy-making ones.

The Millennials – kids born after 1981 – are America's most protected, over-watched generation ever, say Neil Howe and Richard Strauss in their book *Millennials Rising*. For a variety of reasons, their baby-boomer parents and other adults have been monitoring them like none other (I sheepishly recall over-watching my own Millennial). While no one is recommending we return to the days of wearing dunce caps and sitting in corners, the care of little egos can go too far. As Elisabeth Guthrie, MD, co-author of *The Trouble With Perfect*, writes, "Is it really to a child's advantage to have a teacher say to a student who's given an incorrect answer, 'That's the right answer to another question.?'"

If the multiplication tables or the capital of Virginia are open to interpretation, what can youngsters actually believe? When there are no wrong answers, when grades, talents and diligence all seem relative, why should children bother with accomplishment? (By the way, the Virginia statehouse is in Richmond.)

So how can parents help their kids without "hovering" like helicopters?

For starters, say the experts, parents need to real about the abilities of their offspring, and then be more honest with them. Children need to be able to "assess strengths and weaknesses, monitor and refine their own performance," writes Mel Levine, MD, in his new book *Ready or Not: Here Life Comes*. That

ability is enhanced when they have clear cues and realistic encouragement from the adults they look up to. Director of the University of North Carolina's Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning, Levine notes that self-assessment becomes essential, especially in the years between 11 and 20.

New research in neuro-development shows that this is the stage when the brain's frontal region matures and neural connections become stronger. As this part of the brain begins to specialize – important wiring for life – preteens and teens begin to explore and focus on their interests and passions, finding the personal niche that leads to lifelong accomplishment and true self-esteem. What they don't need right now is false data.

Taking Cues From Kids

"Human survival has always depended on accurate feedback," says Russel Barkley, PhD, professor of psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. When we're not making the grade, the brain knows it instantly, says Barkley, "and sends a barrage of warnings: 'work harder,' 'come up with a new plan,' or 'slow down, you're making a mistake.'" We literally can't fool ourselves, or even be fooled, into thinking everything's great when it's not. So "kids don't gain anything from syrup," says Barkley.

As Jennifer Theodore, the mother of four-year-old Will, realized, overdoing the praise can backfire. "Instead of telling my son that everything he does is a masterpiece, now I'll challenge him and say, 'What else can you do?' or we'll discuss why we like some pictures better. He may be little, but he knows when he's doing something well and when he's trying hard."

That's true of kids in general, say the experts – and also true when they're not performing up to snuff. If a child's not doing well, he tends to know it. "Children have an uncanny knack for truth," writes Elisabeth Guthrie – even very young children.

When a parent swoops in, however, kids' self-awareness is disrupted, and they can't practice finding their own answers. "Parents who overdo may have a child who doesn't engage in the thinking process," says Laura Berk, distinguished professor of psychology at Illinois State University and author of *Awakening Children's Minds*.

Instead of moving in quickly and forcefully, parents should take their cues from kids on when they need help. Psychologists call this background support "scaffolding." "There's a universal human need to master tasks on one's own, a drive to excel," says Berk. "When parents overstep the boundaries, they risk trampling natural self-motivation," she adds. Instead, it's our job as adults to make sure kids know we expect them to perform and behave.

Some of the words out of the mouths of babes reflect the innate need for autonomy. "I do it," and the all too familiar "No!" translate to "Back off! I need to work on this even if I get it wrong." (Parents, of course, may indeed have to help out little ones a lot of the time.) Children as young as 18 months old signal their inborn drive and competency needs by talking out loud to themselves in a motivating way. "When you eavesdrop on this private speech," says Berk, "you get insight into what the child finds challenging, what she wants to master." By the preschool years, this private speech begins to be internalized.

But not silenced: Self-communication remains a major tool of self-regulation. In the best cases, the core inner-voice message is *I think I can. I think I can.* "Yes – just like *The Little Engine That Could*," says Berk. Parents scaffold that message of optimism when they let kids in on their own inner speech and everyday strategies.

A mom might mention to a child, for example: "This is a hard recipe. I think it'll be easier if I start by chopping all the vegetables."

Keeping in Close Touch

By giving up the myth of the perfect childhood, we may gain something better – the good childhood. Tameka Watkins, of Daphne, Alabama, for example, seems to have a natural aptitude for parenting. She sits with her ten-year-old son, Cornelious – nicknamed C.D. – each night as he tackles his homework, but she doesn't do it for him. When he tells her what he's learning, she listens with interest. A report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that students like C.D. who discuss their studies at home have higher average reading scores. The opportunity to talk about and reflect on what he knows will serve this honor student well through his school years.

While C.D. helps his mother clear the table, they talk about what's on his mind. Some nights it's his dream of being a police officer. Tameka encourages her son's "what if" thinking, his vision for the future, and ties it to current achievements. "You know, the police have to solve problems," she might tell him, "just like you did in science class." And when he visits his mom at her job as an exercise technician, her sunny professionalism sets an example of fulfillment in a self-chosen task.

Tameka is what Robert Brooks calls "a charismatic adult," someone who helps the child learn significant things about himself. "Children gather inner strength and resilient mindset from this affectionate notice," he says.

Not overly praised, not over protected, not constantly rescued – but listened to, understood and supported, C.D. is receiving the best possible gift of childhood from his mom. It's the chance to be himself.