



# Without Happiness, We're All At-Risk

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You've seen those aimless, listless Jewish kids walking the streets and avenues. What's behind their anger? Rebelliousness and hopelessness? Drugs? Alcohol? Addiction to pleasure?

Sorry. These are not the problem, but merely devastating symptoms of an inherent lack of happiness: the common denominator among children we call "at-risk."

*The shoshon, root, of the word osher, fortunate (and advanced manifestation of happiness), is asher – validate. In Lashon Hakodesh, the shoshon defines the essence of a word. Indeed, here, Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the architect of Lashon Hakodesh, hints to something of unfathomable value: validation is the root of happiness. If we feel validated, if our lives have validity – then we feel happy.*

Validation is the essence of the human spirit. A person who doesn't feel validated sees little purpose in his or her existence – as a result, he or she senses a deep void. Ultimately, without intervention, this void gets filled with addictive substances, pleasure seeking and fierce rebellion.

Several occurrences predispose children to feeling invalidated. Knowing what they are helps us recognize the risk, and define solutions – before it's too late.

**Learning disabilities:** Children who have difficulty learning feel acute failure, which is excruciating and debilitating. They stand out. They feel inferior. They feel no validity.

**Divorce/death/family conflicts:** Disrupting the sanctuary of the home leads to deep feeling of uncertainty, guilt and invalidity. Questions such as "Why me?" or "Did I cause this?" can have devastating consequences on a child's self esteem, confidence and personal validity.

**Psychological/medical issues:** Children with psychological or medical issues (ADD and ADHD are common examples) are predisposed to behaviors that, if not addressed and treated early, may lead to chronic feelings of invalidity.

**Overly demanding, critical or controlling parents and teachers:** Children who are constantly criticized, corrected and rebuked don't feel secure or validated.

**Intense, unrelenting pressure:** Parents or teachers who demand that children perform past their threshold of personal ability create a pressure-cooker

environment, feelings of inadequacy, and a predisposition to failure and invalidation.

So how do you recognize problems early on? Is the child engaging in behaviors uncharacteristic in this age? Such behaviors can be recognized as early as five years old. Crying, tantrums and rebelliousness are the symptoms to look for.

How do you prevent problems from spiraling out of control? Seek, find and work with appropriate mental health professionals. Concurrently, seek, find and work with appropriate religious leaders. Why? Because children feeling frustrated with their religious community suffer the ultimate invalidation. After all, for a child failing History or Science, there's always Math. But a child who isn't good at being Jewish, where can he run? This frustration ultimately becomes rebellion and estrangement. Conversely, a child who feels secure and satisfied with his home and family, friends and religious environment, won't need or seek outside temptation.

Religion is a critical factor to happiness in Jewish children. Being part of a meaningful system is the ultimate validation. Kids have to feel *successful at Yiddishkeit*. They have to feel loved and valued by Hashem. That is how they can feel ultimate validation.

How do we help children feel connected to Hashem? Talk. Listen. Answer questions. Identify the presence of Hashem in the world. Elevate the concept of *Hashgacha Pratis*. Rejoice in *mitzvos*. Demonstrate joy in being Jewish and serving Hashem. Without these, children sense pointlessness and purposelessness to the whole religion – and invalidity.

Your listening to what goes on in their minds helps them feel comfortable discussing how they feel – even when their feelings deviate from “acceptable” behavior. And when they do, don't criticize. Talk – *without judgment* – to explain your point of view, while showing respect, validating their feelings and making them feel loved and valued.

Our experience with “at-risk” teens shows that these children do not feel validated. They do not feel happy. But we, as parents and educators, can start making a difference by becoming educated.

Just as young couples attend *chosson* and *kallah* classes before marriage, and just like expectant parents go to Lamaze classes, we must popularize parenting classes for new Jewish parents.

Priority-1 has developed a series of courses that easily demonstrates how to implement the ideas contained above. Through such lessons, parents and teachers will have a chance to reduce the risk that we face, as Jews, as parents, as teachers and as individuals. After all, if we can't create happiness, then we are all truly at risk.

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