



*Revealing the inner beauty of the Torah in a way that touches and inspires the Jewish soul*

## RAISING EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

B.S.D.

By: Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen

During the last 13 years I've had the privilege of studying an essentially "ancient" sect of Jews in Jerusalem who conduct their lives as their ancestors have for thousands of years. These people are single-mindedly committed to the precise preservation of their culture's insights and customs, as were their parents and grandparents. Through their eyes I am gaining a glimpse of how Jewish communities from long ago approached life in general and educational issues in particular. These traditional Jews represent an anthropological gold mine.

I will never forget the night when one traditional Jewish scholar spoke about the centrality of love. While his students sat beside him ready to absorb that evening's instruction, their teacher lifted a worn volume of the Torah, opened it, and began to read: "See that I [God] have placed before you life and good, and death and evil; and I am commanding you to love..."

The elderly scholar paused, his eyes closed, deep in thought. Then, with his eyes still closed, he repeated, "I have placed before you life... and I am commanding you to love." He brought the book closer to his eyes, squinted to see the tiny print, and read from the 11th century commentary of the Spanish scholar, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: "This verse teaches us that life is for love."

The Talmudic master closed his eyes again. Then he repeated, "Life is for love." Every creature has its purpose, and ours is to forge relationships, to create closeness.

### ATTENTION IS THE KEY

Today, my colleagues back at UCLA and Harvard are catching up with Jerusalem's traditional Jews. Most secular researchers today believe that children do better when they are raised as if life is for love. Specifically, people in the university are beginning to stress the importance of attention and affection—two pillars of the traditional Jewish approach to childrearing.

The first step in loving a child is being sensitive to his needs and attending to them. This is not an easy task. Many new parents are shocked by how difficult it is to sustain sensitivity and attentiveness throughout the day and night. We have no choice, however, since attentiveness, and all the love it represents, is crucial to our child's development.

When we are attentive to a child's needs, we create a sense of security and confidence—what psychologists call attachment—and this provides the internal strength children need to handle stress later in life. When researchers in New Jersey evaluated attachment levels in 1-year-old boys and then followed the children for several years, they found that 40 percent of the insecurely attached boys showed later signs of psychopathology, compared to only 6 percent of the securely attached boys.

Research also links self-esteem to attentive parenting. Moreover, not only do attentive parents produce sons and daughters who enjoy greater self-esteem than other children, this positive self-image persists up to 20 years later. In one study of women raised in Islington, England, investigators found that children raised by more responsive parents were twice as likely to have positive self-image in their adult years as those raised by less responsive parents. And children who feel good about themselves have higher aspirations, do better in school, earn higher salaries when they grow up, and handle stress more effectively than children with low self-esteem.



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Parents sometimes worry that attentive parenting undermines independence and confidence. The opposite is true. "Children who experience consistent and considerable gratification of needs in the early stages do not become 'spoiled' and dependent," explains Dr. Terry Levy, President of the Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children, "They become more independent, self-assured and confident."

Children cry less frequently and for shorter duration after their first nine months when caregivers respond promptly during the child's first nine months. Conversely, children who do not receive enough attention early on tend to be clingy, suffer from separation anxiety, and respond with panic when pushed to explore the world or when left in the hands of an unfamiliar caregiver.

### **NIGHTTIME CARE**

Although our children always need our sensitive responses, they especially need them at night. The combination of drowsiness and darkness makes children feel especially vulnerable. We have to make special efforts to be attentive to nighttime distress.

The effect of ignoring children's nighttime cries was tragically illustrated during the only modern, cultural experiment in which children were voluntarily secluded from their parents during sleeping hours. Beginning in the 1930s, parents living on Israel's secular kibbutzim elected to sleep their children away from home in communal children's facilities. The small staff size at these facilities made it impossible to attend promptly to every cry, but the early pioneers of the kibbutz movement hoped that their children would adjust to the less attentive arrangement.

A barrage of studies found that the graduates of kibbutz children's facilities suffered disproportionately from a range of psychological disorders, including attachment deprivation traumas, major depression, schizophrenia, low self-esteem, and alcohol and drug problems. By 1994, more than half of all children on Israeli kibbutzim exhibited symptoms and psychopathologies associated with insecure attachment.

Professor Carlo Schuengel, an investigator from Leiden University (The Netherlands), echoed the findings of many earlier researchers when he identified the cause of the psychological disintegration kibbutz children experienced: "Although collective sleeping may allow for sufficient monitoring of children's safety, it leaves children with only a precarious and limited sense of security."

As data poured in revealing the damage that had been done by children's sleeping facilities, kibbutz leaders abandoned the experiment. The last of the kibbutzim's 260 children's facilities was finally closed in 1998.

### **CRY-IT-OUT?**

Frighteningly, some children in the West are being exposed to just such inappropriate child-care arrangements today in their own homes. The "cry-it-out" sleep-training program offers parents an effective alternative to the hassles of nighttime childcare. Behavioral psychologists behind the plan have demonstrated that infants whose nighttime cries are not answered really do stop crying within as little as three days. Although the program has been touted as "a new, revolutionary method for teaching children to sleep through the night," it constitutes no more than a revival of the disastrous kibbutz experiment, and what it really teaches children is despair.

People are attracted to the cry-it-out method for the same reason they are attracted to many other destructive childraising techniques: It offers a quick behavioral fix. However, intelligent educators take into account the long-term effects of every childraising strategy. Ignoring a child's nighttime cries might eventually produce quiet, but it does not cultivate security.

Thus, children trained with the cry-it-out method were found to wake more often throughout the night, sleep less efficiently, and walk around with more daytime tiredness than children attended to by their parents. Moreover, children



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deprived of nighttime comfort are at risk for all the psychopathologies discovered among children who slept in kibbutz children's homes.

## **CREATING AN ATTENTIVE ENVIRONMENT**

Attentive parenting extends far beyond nighttime care. For example, throughout the day, newborns yearn for eye contact with their caretaker. They naturally focus on objects 7-12 inches away, precisely the range needed to see parents' eyes when held in their arms. Infants also respond with pleasure and intense interest when shown a mask of a human face. When the lower part of the mask is covered, infant response remains unchanged. However, when even one eye on the mask is covered, infants exhibit displeasure and lapse into apathy.

As children mature, they continue to need parental attention. Toddlers thrive when we play with them, and preschoolers experience ecstasy when we read them stories. It does not seem to matter much to our children what we play or what stories we read, as long as we are giving them our full attention.

Elementary school children need us to listen to them as they retell the day's adventures, and they will often repeat the same stories over and over again just to hold our precious attention. They crave our participation in their homework and in their play, too. If our children learn that they can count on us for the attention they so badly need during their early years, they will continue to turn to us throughout teenagehood, too.

## **THE AFFECTION INGREDIENT**

Affection is more than just attention. Attention just requires being responsive to a child's needs. Affection is the next step. It is warm, and it is the most powerful medium we possess for communicating love. We need to make special efforts to infuse this magical ingredient into our interactions.

As it happens, Ugandan mothers tend to be more attentive and responsive than many American mothers. Dr. Mary Ainsworth, Professor of Child Development at the University of Toronto and the University of Virginia, found that Ugandan children consequently exhibit more secure attachment than a comparison group in Baltimore. However, Ugandan mothers do not try to elicit hugging or kissing, and the Ugandan babies very rarely manifest any behavior pattern even closely resembling affection.

Holding back affection has consequences. Dr. Ainsworth found that the Ugandan children who had been deprived of affection in turn treated each other indifferently. Dr. Kevin MacDonald, Professor of Psychology at the California State University of Long Beach, reports that such behavior is predictable. Children growing up in less affectionate societies exhibit less prosocial and altruistic behavior. Conversely, warm parenting tends to produce heroic, pro-social behavior in children.

Affection also primes children for friendship and intimacy. A plethora of scientific literature reports that children who receive more affection tend to have more positive peer interactions and closer friendships. Dr. Bowlby reports that children growing up in affectionate environments are also about one-third more likely than children raised in unaffectionate environments to marry and remain married.

## **PREVENTING DELINQUENCY**

Hugs defuse delinquency. So say researchers at the Duke University Medical Center who compared the backgrounds of normal children and delinquents. After controlling for a range of factors, the Duke researchers discovered that parental affection was the active ingredient. They conclude their report noting that, "Violent boys were almost twice as likely as matched control subjects to have fathers who never hugged them or expressed verbal affection."

Criminologists at the University of Illinois and Northeastern University also report that lack of parental affection is "one of



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the most important predictors of serious and persistent delinquency." Sociologists at the University of Wisconsin and Florida State University reviewing the psychological literature, similarly find "absence of warmth, affection, or love by parents" associated with aggressiveness, delinquency, drug abuse, and serious criminality.

### **HARDWIRING KIDS FOR GOODNESS**

Psychologists differ over how warmth cultivates goodness. Some suggest that children are simply more willing to accept the values of parents and teachers when these authority figures are affectionate. Others propose a biological mechanism, arguing that affection actually develops parts of the brain responsible for conscience and internalized moral orientation.

Dr. Harry Chugani, a neurologist at the Children's Hospital of Michigan, revealed in 1998 that children raised in love-deprived environments show evidence of abnormal metabolism in a specific area of the brain's temporal lobe thought to be involved in social functioning. "I think we can hypothesize," Chugani says, "that what we saw in these [PET] scans is related to neglect, to a lack of maternal-infant interaction at a critical phase."

A group headed by Elinor Ames at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia conducted what many deem the most thorough study of children raised in Romanian orphanages, and concluded their report, "Orphanage experience tends to dampen all areas of intelligence [including] fine-motor, gross-motor, personal-social and language development."

Taken together, the basic ingredients of love-attention and affection-might constitute the single most important factors in human development. Love is not a luxury.

### **MAKING TIME FOR LOVE**

Practically, what all this data means is that we need to pour on lots of attention and affection, and this takes time-more time than most people who are not yet parents would ever believe. One American mother-who held advanced degrees from Stanford, the University of Southern California and the University of California-recently confessed to me, "All the academic challenges I faced, including writing my doctoral thesis, don't compare to the challenge I face now raising my three children."

Often, finding time for our children is the most difficult aspect of parenting. Dr. Bowlby addressed this challenge during his 1980 talk to the psychiatric staff at Michael Reese Hospital:

Looking after a baby or toddler is a 24-hour-a-day job seven days a week, and often a very worrying one at that. And even if the load lightens a little as children get older, if they are to flourish they still require a lot of time and attention.

For many people today these are unpalatable truths. Giving time and attention to children means sacrificing other interests and activities. Yet I believe the evidence for what I am saying is unimpeachable. Study after study... attest that healthy, happy, and self-reliant adolescents and young adults are the products of stable homes in which both parents give a great deal of time and attention to the children.

Long before the first child is born, we must come to terms with the fact that our lives must change dramatically; that we must refocus; and that sacrifices must be made.

### **LONELY CHILDREN**

Today in the United States, more than 60 percent of mothers with small children work. More than half of American parents polled say they do not have enough time for their children. Indeed, over the last 20 years, the average amount of time parents spend each week with their children declined by 12 full hours.

The average American teenager spends three and a half daytime hours completely alone every day, and in the words of a



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Newsweek reporter, "The unwelcome solitude can extend well into the evening. Mealtimes for this generation too often begins with a forlorn touch of the microwave."

The pediatric inmates in Romania's notoriously indifferent orphanages got only about 10 minutes of conversation a day. The average U.S. teenager speaks seven minutes a day with her mother and five minutes a day with her father. Author Patricia Hersch, describing experiences she had preparing a book about affluent teens in Virginia, confesses that "Every kid I talked to at length eventually came around to saying that they wished they had more adults in their lives, especially their parents."

## **OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS**

Men have a lot to gain and little to lose when their wives go to work. They benefit from the supplemental income, and they are less sensitive to their children's loneliness than are most mothers. As Yale University professor David Gelernter explains:

Most mothers, my guess is, have always valued the best interests of their children above money or power or prestige, and still do. And I would claim, too, that the typical husband would always have been happy to pack his wife off to work; he had no need of Betty Friedan to convince him that better income in exchange for worse child care was a deal he could live with. Society used to restrain husbands from pressuring their wives (overtly or subtly) to leave the children and get a job. No more.

Women, on the other hand, feel enormous stress trying to balance the demands of work and parenting. Without doubt, following children, women are the number-two casualty in dual-career households. The New York Times columnist and mother of two, Anna Quindlen, mused recently:

Betty Friedan wrote in "The Feminine Mystique" that the question for women in those times was "Is this all?" Now, of course, we feel differently. I hope this is all, because I cannot handle any more.

Even the 1960s radical feminist, Sara Davidson, admitted in 1984, "How to reconcile family and career is the crucial unresolved issue in women's lives." She expressed the frustrations of millions of women when she wrote, "All my time is spent on three things: baby, work, and keeping the marriage going. I find I can handle two beautifully, but three pushes me to the edge."

Working women's stress often has health consequences. Researchers at Duke University found that full-time working women with even one child at home excrete higher levels of the distress hormone cortisol than men or full-time working women with no children at home. A study of full-time working mothers in England found that they experienced 50 percent more illness and injury than mothers who stayed home to raise their children.

Other studies find that working mothers earn the "highest scores for feelings of tension and time pressure" among U.S. adults, report "greater perceived stress" and lower self-esteem than homemakers with infants, and adopt a pattern of "diminished attention to their own personal health and well-being" in order to cope with role overload.

Employed mothers might also withdraw emotionally from their newborns, to avoid separation anxiety upon return to their job. "Many working parents guard themselves against an intimacy with their children that might cause pain when they return to work," says T. Berry Brazelton, Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard University, "It is too painful to recognize the delicious closeness only to give it up."

## **AVOIDING THE ISSUE**

Many dual-career couples know that something is amiss, but search for solutions that will not compromise their careers. The old trick of calling upon Grandma is not an option since most grandmothers work too. A pamphlet distributed by MCI



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Telecommunications offers some technological bandaids including: sending messages by fax, tape-recording bedtime stories, arranging for the videotaping of children's events that take place while parents are away.

Even the parent too busy to record his own bedtime stories can rely on the information age to see him through-especially if he lives in New York, where a prerecorded storytelling-by-phone service called "Let's Imagine!" is available for 85 cents a minute.

Many turn to daycare, but this solution fails on two counts. First, the extremely rare, high-quality programs that nearly mimic one-on-one parental interaction cost nearly as much as most working moms make. Second, the more common, affordable programs provide much less of what children need most-attention and affection.

Researchers at the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois demonstrated that many children put into standard daycare programs at age eight months exhibited attachment disorders by age 12 months. They conclude their report with the warning, "Repeated daily separations experienced by infants whose mothers are working full-time constitute a risk factor" for psychopathology.

Dr. Jay Belsky, a professor at Pennsylvania State University, similarly cautions that in all too many cases daycare produces "insecure attachment, heightened aggressiveness, noncompliance, and withdrawal."

Providing for the emotional needs of our children is not easy. Children need love. They cannot thrive without our attention and affection. If this demands a reshuffling of our lifestyle, it is a reshuffling we will never regret.

If life is for love, then the ordinary things that "ancient" Jerusalem Jews stress, like being there to give a hug and a caress, really do matter a great deal.