

Empowering Parents: Communicating With Children About Challenging Subjects

By: Shloimie Zimmerman, Psy.D.

(718) 338-4477

steven@zimmerman1.com

Core Principles:

- The importance of the parent-child **relationship** cannot be emphasized enough!!!
 - Everything else is secondary – don't allow secondary concerns to damage relationship
 - "Early childhood education must have a long-term perspective. Parents must build such a warm relationship with their child that the relationship will survive and assist the child even during the difficult period of adolescence." (Wolbe, R' Shlomo, p. 24)
- Empathy is the cornerstone of relationships
 - Empathy: "the capacity to understand and respond to the unique experiences of another" (Ciaramicoli, p. 4)
 - What is the experience of the child? – attempting to see the world through the eyes of the child
 - As opposed to sympathy: Sympathy = "two people together in their separate experiences". Empathy = "two people are both in the shared experience" (Ciaramicoli, p. 80)
 - "When people are in pain or trouble, their deepest longing is to be understood as exceptions rather than rules. Generalizing from their experiences to similar situations can do more harm than good." (Ciaramicoli, p. 80)
 - Active and reflective listening and a lively interest
- Open communication – develop safe, supportive, and secure relationships
- Listening usually more important and beneficial than talking
- Children with healthy self-esteem are less impacted by stressors, make bad victims, and are more resilient
- Empowering children – respect their choices, they can say no, they aren't forced to talk or hug when don't want to, etc
- Tell The Truth!!! – While maintaining optimism
- Children always "know" even if they can't articulate it
 - "Knowing" something that others can't / won't acknowledge is very confusing and scary
 - When children sense something and we deny, repress, or avoid it we are teaching them that they cannot trust their sense and perception
- Do not promise what you cannot deliver
- Secrets Destroy Families!
- "One of the most important essentials of chinuch is personal example" (Wolbe, R' Shlomo, p. 31)
 - The need to feel like we are "doing something" makes us forget importance of modeling
 - Your behavior, non-verbal communication, and mood are more important than your words
- First prepare yourself for dealing with issue at hand (like the O₂ masks on airplane)
 - Have to work out our own "stuff" and our history to properly parent our children
 - Coherence of our own narrative is predictive of our children's attachment – AAI research
 - Children can pick up when we are ready to talk/ hear or when we can handle their emotional expression e.g., many children wait to grieve until they have seen that their parents grieved and can withstand it. Children reported only disclosing abuse when they perceived grownups were "ready"...
- Education, Education, & more Education!
 - We are communicating values about relationships, intimacy, emotions, communication, etc. from birth
 - Education is a process not a one-time "talk" - It should become more advanced, comprehensive, and explicit as child ages
 - Take your cue from the child
 - Must be in accordance with the child's way – Chanoch La-na'ar... Match the educational method, communication, and approach to child's unique personality, way of thinking, & psychological makeup
 - "Coping style lies on a continuum from "attenders" to "distracters" - from active information seekers to information avoiders". (Pelcovitz & Pelcovitz, p. 136) – Both can be adaptive- Match the approach to the child's style

- Get a sense of what child needs – Don't go over their heads and don't ignore what they need
- Prepare Children for their experiences
 - Brazelton's studies of recovery post-surgery dependant on child's preparation
- Address children's Magical Thinking
- Reiterate that it is not their fault when such things happen – children will naturally think it is their fault and need a lot of reassurance that it is not
- Imagined fears and issues that are not able to be communicated are even more frightening than the worst reality
- Reassure children that someone will always take care of them
- Importance of play as child's form of communication, working through, mastery, and healing
- Help children create a narrative and make sense of their experience e.g., writing, drawing, creating books - remember for many children "talking" will NOT be their preferred mode of communication
- It is fine not to have answers to everything – take questions seriously and follow-up on them
 - Partner with your child in attempting to learn
- You do not need to do this alone – reach out to your supports and consult with people with expertise
- Important balance between getting social support & finding private time to process - teach children how to get support
- Changing perspective to be able to focus on positives - finding meaning and purpose in life, adversity, and loss
- If you sense your child is out of sorts, seems "different", has difficulty functioning normally, or you have concerns- Get a Professional Consultation
- Children can heal and lead healthy, productive, and happy lives after difficult/ traumatic experiences

Abuse:

Approach to Education:

- Process not Proclamations – need ongoing dialogue regarding all safety issues
- This is a basic safety issue like any other – It's our responsibility to address this and overcome our resistance to talking about it (we don't need to "expose" our children to anything inappropriate to keep them safe)
- Kids don't panic or become fearful unless you convey high levels of anxiety. At worst what you say may go over their heads & they'll look at you funny (kids take their cues from us - behavior & emotions more important than our words)
- There is a latent effect where they may not show a response now but should the issue arise they may remember

Areas to Focus on:

- Create relationship where they can talk about anything (even if it is wrong/ inappropriate)
- Expressing that you always want to know what happened to them or they did - even if they feel bad about it or think you will be upset – react in ways that will foster their openness with you
- Explicitly teaching about secrets that don't feel good & that they should never be kept
 - No secret that is supposed to be kept forever is ok – have to tell mommy or daddy about any secret that is supposed to be forever
- Reiterate that you will always love them no matter what they do
- If you don't teach your children about their bodies, sexuality, and intimacy who will?
 - We need to impart the torah's perspective on the beauty, sanctity, and kedusha of proper intimacy
- Battle against the forces attempting to objectify people & focus on individuality, subjectivity, and self-esteem
- Address issues of body awareness, good/bad touch, right to say "NO", etc.
 - Give children language to talk about these issues (e.g., names of ALL body parts)
 - "Your body belongs to you. No one has a right to tickle you or touch you in a way you don't like" (Uncle Willy's Tickles, p. 20)
 - Model dealing with uncomfortable situations
 - Can educate through and in play – puppets, people, imagination, role-play – create scenarios in play for child to process and deal with
 - Utilizing Role Plays / What if game (e.g., unwanted hugs/kisses, unwanted tickles, "I will show you mine"...)
 - Use dolls, stuffed animals, toys, books, and multimedia as educational / expressive tools

- Teaching that it's not chutzpa to say "No" regarding their bodies even to a grown up
 - Children expressing themselves and their feelings to adults is not chutzpah- depends on how it's done
- They SHOULD tell another grown up about something uncomfortable someone did
 - Even if another grownup says not to tell (tell a parent!)
- Differentiate Tattling / Snitching from Being Safe & a good friend - Careful about dangerous mixed messages
 - Tattling is telling something for the purpose of getting someone else in trouble
 - Telling in order to be safe / help self or friend is doing the right thing (it's definitely not lashon hara)
- Encourage children to keep seeking help until they feel like they are safe and being heard
- Reinforcing "running and screaming" and any material/ skill used in a curriculum in a different setting (e.g., review and practice what was learned in school)
- Attempt NOT to leave it up to children (especially young ones) to avoid harm – **Supervision**
- Ensure exposure to proper tznius, boundaries, conversations, reading and media material in our homes & other places
- Teach children that Grown-ups/ older kids do NOT need help changing or in bathroom
- Not addressing abuse properly is much more detrimental to life e.g., mental health, shidduchim, becoming "at- risk", etc. than addressing it
- Don't cave in to fear tactics e.g., threats of ruining shidduch, community alienation, rejection by yeshivas, etc

Additional points for parents addressing abuse with their children:

Reasons for not disclosing ("Breaking the Silence" P. 55): Abuser told them it was a "secret" or threatened to harm them or their family members, they fear the abuser, they still love/respect the abuser, they feel ashamed & at fault, they felt important, enjoyed the relationship & special attention, they may have experienced physical pleasure, **they do not believe that anyone will believe them**

Sample Script of major points to convey for preschoolers- (exact words not important) from "Breaking the Silence" p. 30:

1. Mommy and Daddy love you and nothing you do will change that and nothing will take it away. If you did something bad, I may not like what you did but I will always love you. I want to hear the good and bad things that happen to you.
2. Three kinds of touch: Yes: like when mommy hugs you and you feel good. No: Like a friend hits you – it hurts! I don't know touch: Doesn't hurt but makes you feel funny - Say no! Run away, and tell mommy about it.
3. No one is allowed to hurt you or make you feel sad or scared. If someone is hurting you or making you feel bad tell me about it, I will try to find out what happened and stop it.
4. The area covered by your bathing suit is your private area. Sometimes, when you're little, your teacher may help you in the bathroom and that's ok, other than that you are not allowed to touch someone else and no one is allowed to touch you in the area covered by your bathing suit. You are not allowed to show those parts to anyone and no one is allowed to show you. If anyone does this, say: no, my mommy doesn't let me, go away from the person, and tell your mommy what happened
5. If anyone tells you 'do not tell your mommy', be sure to tell mommy right away! I will give you the biggest hug if you tell me about it.

Illness:

When a child is ill/ hospitalized:

- Prepare yourself – share your fears with an adult you trust - get support
- Help children gain mastery over their experience
- Be present physically and emotionally for the child
- "We know from experience that the best way to prepare a child is to be as honest and as complete in the description of what will happen as possible. Prepare the child in advance with clear, simple, straightforward information as much as you can. Don't ever tell a child it won't hurt if it will." (Brazelton, p. 294)

- Use dolls, stuffed animals, toys, books, and multimedia as educational / expressive tools
- If possible, tour the facility before – provide the most realistic preparation you can
- The child needs the comfort of knowing that the parents are aware of and approving of what will happen to them
- Advocate for your child e.g., request that Dr. give stuffed animal exam first; providing explanations of treatments
- Provide a rationale for the interventions and how they will help
- Use books to prepare children for what a hospitalization would be like when they are well so if they (chas vshalom) are hospitalized in an emergency they will have some preparation
- “A child will inevitably feel that her suffering is retribution for something she has done. When a parent says something like, “if only you’d worn your boots,” she’s convinced her illness was meant to punish her. Her mother’s statement serves to confirm what she already believes - that sick children are really bad children.” (Brazelton, p. 296) - Child may feel it’s retribution for something completely unrelated to illness
- Allow child the sense of “conquest” after an illness or hospitalization
- Provide child with as much of a sense of autonomy, control, and mastery as possible
- Prepare your child for when you leave – no slipping out
- Provide a return time and know who will be attending to her in your absence
- If child desires, have family members and/or friends visit as much as possible
- Take care of yourself – you need it and it will make you a better caregiver
- Regressions are normal and expected after such an experience – help the child understand the regression instead of feeling guilty about it
- Provide environment where child can play out, talk about, or otherwise communicate about the experience

When someone the child knows is ill:

- Explore what child knows
- Use real words e.g., Cancer
 - Make sure to differentiate the illness the person has from the types of illness the child has/ will likely get
- Encourage questions
- Remind them they are not at fault – even if they have to be careful now e.g., the person’s immune system is weakened - they did not cause illness
- Address fears of catching the illness
- Allow for and respect the wide range of feelings the child may have
- Join child in doing something kind and helpful for person
- Address who will meet the child’s needs while the person is ill
- Allow children (sibs) to visit when they desire & allow them to say goodbye in their way- prep them for goodbye

Death:

- “We need to respect a child’s right to experience loss fully and deeply” (Fraiberg, p. 274)
- Should be a shared experience rather than an exclusionary one – children are often overlooked
- If parents can share their experience it can allow the child to have their own experience
- “To be able to show grief openly and to mourn without fear or embarrassment can help both children and parents to accept the naturalness and pain of death” (Grollman, R’ Earl, p. 12)
 - “Trying to shield them from the parents’ own feelings can be disastrous” (Brazelton, p. 322)
 - Can have such feelings & still be able to move on – “loss mixed w/ reassurance and hope” (Pelcovitz, p. 150)
 - If you are overwhelmed / do not have a handle on your emotions – be careful what your child is exposed to - get supports for yourself and have others help support your child as well
 - Share own questions as well as child’s and children can experience questions in safety
- Children will take their cues from us
- Honest about the experience and the finality of it

- Tell children as soon as can
 - Gently, warmly, affectionately, and lovingly- have something sad to tell you...
 - Use the word died and explain that person cannot come back (in way you can see them)
 - Explain that the body stopped working (when appropriate explain how/ why body stopped)
 - Usually introduce g-d when something bad happens which is inappropriate – if child has always heard about the good of hashem then can be incorporated otherwise it's inadvisable (R' Matisyahu Salomon)
- Hear the children's verbal communication and address their non-verbal communication as well
- At different ages children will have very different conceptualizations of death (e.g., temporary)
- Attending the funeral: "Like other members of the household, children should have the privilege to express their love and devotion. Participation aids children in understanding the finality of death and in dispelling the fantasies of young, fertile imaginations." (Grollman, R' Earl, p. 6) - thoroughly prep them for funeral
 - Should not force or pressure children to attend
 - Explain the k'vurah & shiva process and consult with children about their desire to attend/ not attend
- Inform school of the loss in the family- schools can play powerful role in helping children
- Children should not be made to feel that they are a replacement or substitute of the one who has passed
- Do not just try to find replacements for child (e.g., getting new pet immediately after death) – allow mourning
- Reassure children that people will take care of the living
- All issues mentioned earlier regarding magical thinking, blaming selves, etc. apply
- Children will often worry about their own death as well as that of their parents – they need honest answers and a sense of security and comfort in their world –then they can thrive through the adverse experiences!
- REMEMBER PARENTS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN CHILDREN'S LIVES!!!

Bibliography/ Resources:

- **Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason** by Alfie Kohn – Published by Atria
- **The Power of Empathy: A Practical Guide to Creating Intimacy, Self-Understanding, and Lasting Love in Your Life** by Arthur P. Ciaramicoli & Katherine Ketcham
- **Planting and Building in Education: Raising a Jewish Child** by Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe – published by Feldheim
- **Being and Becoming** by Dr. Jacob Mermelstein | Publisher: Artscroll.
- **On Death and Dying** by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross
- **Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living** by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross & David Kessler
- **A Secure Base** (Routledge Classics) by John Bowlby
- **The Magic Years: Understanding and Handling the Problems of Early Childhood** by Selma H. Fraiberg - excellent book however, the discipline section is questionable see Unconditional Parenting for better approach
- **Touchpoints: The Essential Reference: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development** by T. Berry Brazelton
- **Talking to Your Children About Intimacy: A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Parents.** By Sara Diamant.
- **How to Explain Death to Children** by Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, D.D. presented by The Jewish Funeral Directors of America, INC.

Books for Children:

- **Magination press:** <http://www.apa.org/pubs/magination/index.aspx> - they have some wonderful books for children on variety of topics including abuse, illness, and death
- **Uncle Willy's Ticksles – A child's right to say no** by Marcie Aboff and Kathleen Gartner
- **"Let's talk about it" – series of children's books on body safety, coping, general safety, etc. books available at http://www.hope4families.com/Lets_Talk_Book_Information.html**
- **Harry Goes to the Hospital: A Story for Children About What It's Like to Be in the Hospital** by Howard J. Bennet and M.S. Weber

Additional Resources:

- http://www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/caring_for_kids.pdf (www.nctsnet.org is good global site for trauma)
- http://www.d2l.org/site/c.4dICIJOkGcISE/b.6035035/k.A41/Darkness_to_Light_End_Child_Sexual_Abuse.htm - also have Stewards of Children online program for parents (low cost \$10 per person) & good general site www.d2l.org