

**T**he problem of at-risk and rebellious Orthodox youth is finally receiving deserved attention. Wayward adolescents (mostly between ages 12 and 18) pervade all spectrums of Orthodoxy, all financial classes and families of all sizes. The problem exists in equal measure among boys and girls and, with the exception of the learning disabled, affects strong and weak students in almost equal numbers.

There are factors that clearly increase a child's chances of falling through the cracks: dysfunctional or stressful homes, bad experiences in school or with peers, disillusionment with adult role models, hostile relationships with parents. But these are not always possible to avoid, and in many cases, rebelliousness sets in even without any visible risk factors.

After a decade of dealing with numerous at-risk Orthodox youth here and abroad, and after seeing hundreds of rebellious teens "brought back," it is clear to me that there are not only factors that put a child at risk, but there are also parenting techniques that can secure a child, dramatically reducing his chances of rebelling, despite the presence of risk factors in his life. Relationship-centric

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The father of three teens, Rabbi Shapiro is rabbi of Bais Medrash D'Bayswater, Far Rockaway, N.Y., and director of Project ReJewvenation, an outreach organization for adolescents from religious families. He has published numerous articles and lectured widely on the topic of at-risk Orthodox youth.

*parenting is the key: here's how it works.*

Parenting small children is like managing employees. You make the decisions, they carry them out. And your function, like that of a manager, is to establish methods of reward and punishment, rules and boundaries and clear and consistent instructions, which induce your children to carry

ment-centric, but relationship-centric.<sup>2</sup>

Relationship-centric influence is what salesmen use when they cultivate a friendship with a prospective client in order to close a sale some time in the future. It is why your best friend can convince you to change your lifestyle faster than your therapist can. It is the type of influence that bad friends wield so skillfully over our children.

Just as two people can present the same proposal, but only one will make the sale because of his relationship with the client, children will listen to rules depending on who is making them. Sports are nothing but a set of self-imposed regulations, yet we have never heard of a teenager refusing to play baseball because he "doesn't like rules." Whether a teenager will accept rules depends more on the rule-maker and less on the rules themselves. Therefore, to generate compliance, instead of changing the rules, change who you are to the teen.

The greatest mistake parents of teenagers make is trying to manage their teens instead of relating to them.

# What Can a Parent Do?

## Preventing Teenage Rebellion in Your Family

By Rabbi Yaakov Shapiro

out their assigned duties willingly and with competence.

This changes with adolescence. Teenagers, like adults, do not carry out the choices of others; they make choices on their own. Even when teenagers obey, it is not the same as when they were younger. Children obey. Teens *choose* to obey.<sup>1</sup>

Teenagers can be directed even more assuredly than pre-teens, but you must use a different type of influence. The influence teens respond to is not manage-

The parents treat the teen like an employee, insisting he carry out the decisions of management. They don't realize that they have been transferred out of Management, and now find themselves in Sales. When parents try to use management-centric parenting on teenagers, disaster usually strikes.

Rachel, 13, has suddenly developed a "mind of her own." She no longer carries out her parents' wishes the way she used to. "Teenage rebelliousness," they think

to themselves. "She's developing an attitude." They try to put down the rebellion, to "put her in her place," teach her "they mean business" and return Rachel to her pre-adolescent state of obedience.

Rachel, in the meantime, has no intention of rebelling against anything. She just wants to make her own decisions, a desire that Hashem gave her together with her adolescence. She would gladly do the "right thing," as long as it is her decision. She wishes her parents would provide her with information, experience and wisdom so that she can make the right choice on her own. Instead, she sees her parents attempting to strip her of her own decision-making ability, rendering her a robotic husk of non-humanity, bereft of free will.

Life, according to the Torah, is nothing but the possession of *bechirah* [free will].<sup>3</sup> An assault on a person's ability to make independent choices is an assault on his life. Rachel's survival instinct will not allow anyone to remove her *bechirah*. In what she believes to be self-defense, she rejects the rules, lest she allow others to make choices for her. She comes to despise authority and rules, which she believes are designed to rob her *bechirah*, rather than guide it. She is afraid of becoming something that is "not her," for when that happens, the real Rachel ceases to exist. The power struggle escalates, and, more often than not, both sides lose.<sup>4</sup>

As teens develop, parents must slowly shift their approach from making decisions for their children to influencing decisions made by their children. This is accomplished through establishing an effective and influential relationship with the teen.

## Creating Your Influential Relationship

### Step I: So You Think You Love Your Children?

People are influenced by those they believe love them and care for them.<sup>5</sup> Many parents do not love their child; they love the person they think is their child. Rav Nachman of Breslov, *zt"l*,



Illustrations by Caryl Herzfeld

said about his opponents, the *misnagdim*, "Them? They have nothing against me. They have something against the person they think I am. And he deserves it!"

If a child feels that his parents do not know him, he will not feel their love. A child will complain, "My parents don't love me," and the parents think the child is being dishonest or unreasonable, since they do love him very much. What is usually happen-

ing is that the child is saying, "My parents don't love me." His meaning? "They don't know me."

How many parents know their child's favorite color? Favorite subject in school? Likes and dislikes? The little things that make up his or her personality? If there are things you know about your best friend that you do not know about your children, keep work-

ing. The more you know your children, the more they will relate to your love.

Spend time with your children. You can discuss how they are doing in school, but include lots of small talk. Eating and drinking together creates a strong bond between people.<sup>6</sup> Advice for busy parents: Better than spending once a week with all the children together, spend time with one of them each week. They will appreciate going out once a month alone with their father or mother more than once a week together with their siblings.

It is also vital to become painstakingly familiar with your child's culture and environment. Every generation has its

strengths and weaknesses, and in order to determine if your child is at-risk or just "expressing an adolescent *naarishkeit* [folly]" you need to familiarize yourself with contemporary adolescent *naarishkeiten*; in order to know how to protect your children from the risks they are facing, you need to familiarize yourself with those risks.<sup>7</sup>

Learn the early warning signs of rebelliousness. Not every "difficult child" is at-risk;<sup>8</sup> it depends mostly on

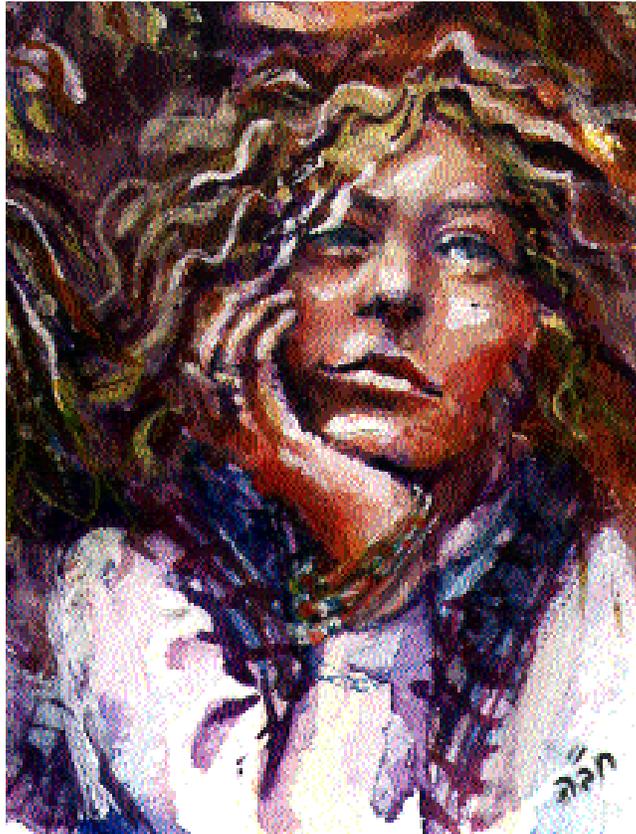
how noncompliance is expressed. When a teenager complains that following rules and performing duties are “too hard,” you have a normal teenage problem. But when they complain that the rules are “not me,” or “try to make me into something that I am not,” you have an at-risk youth.

Another example: Experience shows that girls (not usually boys) who were bothered by questions in *emunah* [religious belief] between the ages of 11 and 13 were twice as likely to leave Orthodoxy (three years later) than those who did not express religious doubts, all else being equal. Data also indicates that the most likely person the child will reveal these doubts to is a counselor in camp – not a teacher in school. Ask your daughter’s counselors if such doubts have been expressed. If they have, alleviate them as soon as possible through an expert in the field of *hashkafah* [religious perspective].

### Step II: *Never Tell Your Children That You Accept Them “For What They Are”*

Something (or someone) valuable does not need to be accepted “for what it is.” Telling your child, “I accept you for what you are” says something positive about you (that you are tolerant) and something negative about the child (that he needs to be tolerated). Children gravitate to where they feel special, wanted and valuable. The usual pitch made to a child who wants to “leave” Orthodoxy is, “Don’t go – what you’re giving up is too valuable to lose.” Wrong move. When Yisro wanted to leave for Midian, *Moshe Rabbeinu’s* plea to him was just the opposite: “Please don’t go – for you are too valuable for us to lose.” Everyone has something that only s/he can contribute. If that individual

leaves, we lose that something forever.<sup>9</sup> Every child is special in some way, and can contribute to *Klal Yisrael*. Parents must identify that quality in their children and send the message, “*Klal Yisrael* needs you.” A child will feel attracted to those who say, “We need you” far more than he will to those who say, “You need us.”



#### *Highest risk profile:*

A 13-year-old girl from a large family, of which she is the youngest. All of her siblings are married and her closest sibling is at least 5 years older. At the onset of adolescence, this girl is the only child in a large house with parents two generations older than she. She never had a close-aged sibling.

-For more statistics, see “*StraightTalk*” on page 48.

### Step III: *Don’t Feel For Your Children — Feel With Them*

Even the most out-of-touch parents feel bad for their children when they are sad, and good for them when they are happy, but relationship-centric parents feel bad *with* their children when they are sad and good *with* them when they are happy. Loving someone to the point that his pain is yours is called *achvah* [brotherhood] in the Torah.<sup>10</sup> We are supposed to love all

Jews to this extent,<sup>11</sup> but parents specifically are called “brothers” to their children<sup>12</sup> for this reason. When your child is hurt, put yourself in his place and feel *with* him. When he is happy, celebrate with him. Let his *simchah* be yours. People are influenced by those similar to them,<sup>13</sup> and the greatest similarity possible is a sharing of emotions.<sup>14</sup> Our

Forefathers would establish their credentials as a “brother” before they gave someone advice, so that their advice would be accepted.<sup>15</sup>

### Step IV: *Share An Agenda*

Children are influenced by advice that is for their benefit – not the benefit of the advisor.<sup>16</sup> When parents demand modes of dress or behavior from their children, not for the children’s sake, but because of “what the neighbors will say” or to prevent their own personal humiliation, their words may be obeyed, but will have no impact on their children’s values. When parents want their children to be successful so they can proudly consider themselves successful parents, the children will merely discard the parental guidance as advice designed to aid their parents, not them.

Football players will accept large measures of abusive rhetoric from their coaches because they know they are on the same team. If he wins,

they win; if he loses, so do they. They understand that their goal is his and they accept his harsh criticism as meant for their “own good.” When children believe that their parents are “on the same team” as they, pursuing the same goals, they will accept guidance and even harsh criticism as relevant and for their own good.

### Step V: *Express It*

As in all relationships, it is not

enough that you love someone; your love must be expressed clearly and often, in deeds and words. You must demonstrate to your children in measurable ways that they are the most important things in your life. Love is expressed in the Torah by going a bit overboard for the one you love.<sup>17</sup>

- Relationship-oriented parents are not afraid or ashamed to verbally express to their children how much they mean to them. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, in a letter to his 13-year-old daughter, refers to her numerous times with such phrases as, “my life, my soul, my heart.”<sup>18</sup> The daughter, now an adult living in New York, told this writer that Rav Dessler was a much warmer and expressive father than even the letter indicates.

- One relationship-centric set of parents is always the first to arrive at camp on Visiting Day. They come 45 minutes early, before they are allowed entry, and they wait, for they are enthusiastic about the opportunity to visit their child – and the child knows it.

- When the daughter of a couple I know spends Shabbos out of town on a school Shabbaton, instead of merely calling to say “Good Shabbos,” they send a bouquet of flowers. “We love you. We miss you. Have a great Shabbos,” the note reads.

- When a set of relationship-centric parents were honored at their daughter’s yeshivah dinner as Parents of the Year, they put a full-page ad in the journal: “To the Children of the Year. Our honor is yours. Love...”

Relationship-centric parents never miss being present at their children’s moments of glory. When their fifth-grader makes a five-minute social studies presentation in school, they will gladly travel 45 minutes back and forth from work – and take a few hours off in the middle of the day – to be there to share their child’s glory.

Parents who practice relationship-centric parenting strengthen their children, enabling them to choose right from wrong themselves — rather than

constantly choosing for them, and then calling counselors seeking ways to enforce their decisions. This is the Torah’s approach that has shown the most success in protecting our children from the dangers of a spiritually hostile environment. It is the response to teenage rebelliousness that has provided maximum *nachas* and pleasure to both parents and children. **JA**

**Notes:**

1. *Rashi, Gitin* (23a): “A *koton* has no thoughts except for what he is commanded by others to do.”
2. *Seforno, Bamidbar* 11:12: “A parent can lead his children even when they disagree. This is because the children perceive him as someone who loves them, and would labor with all his energy for their good.”
3. *Maharal Gur Aryeh, Shemos* (4:19): “Life means autonomy, not being dependent on anyone else. The absence of [autonomy] is death.” *Meshech Chochmah, Bereshis* (1:26): “‘Let Us make man in Our image.’ This means free will to make his own choices.”
4. Cf. *Pele Yoeitz, Nitzachon*.
5. *Seforno, ibid. Rambam, Deos* 6:7: “You must make him know that you are telling him [to change his ways] for no reason other than his benefit.”
6. *Divrei Torah*, vol. II (2) in the name of the Yud HaKodosh of P’shischa; R. Chaim, brother of the Maharal, *Sefer haChaim (Hachnosas Orchim)*.
7. Cf. *Divrei Yoel (Shlach* p. 393. *Vayigash* p. 471, *Ki Sisa* p. 338) re *manhigim*.

8. Rav Eliezer Shach, *Letters and Addresses*, vol. III (#147).

9. *Tzavah* of R. Eliezer HaGadol; *Divrei Yoel Toldos* (p. 552) in the name of “*seforim*” explaining the statement of Chazal, “*Chacham shemeis ain lo temurah*.”

10. *Akeidas Yitzchok, Bereshis* (25:19): “He should love his friend to the point that what happens to his friend is as if it happened to him...therefore the Torah attributes [such a bond] to a ‘brother;” Rav Matisyahu Solomon, *Matnas Chaim* (p. 186); see also *Abravenel, Bamidbar* (12:12): “Brothers are like one flesh.”

11. *Matnas Chaim, ibid.*

12. *Rashi, Bereshis* 31:46.

13. Cf. *Tanchuma, Vayera* 22; *Pele Yoeitz (Tochachah)*; *Ben Poras Yosef* (end of *sefer*).

14. Cf. *Rabeinu Yonah, Sharei Teshuvah (Ish Left Mahalolo)*.

15. Ponovezher Rav, quoted in *Matnas Chaim* (p. 183).

16. *Rambam, Deos* (op. cit), which is referring to adults as well as children.

17. *Bereshis Rabbah* (51:11): “*Ahavah m’kalkeles es hashurah*,” *Orchos Tzadikim* (Chap. V) “Love blinds the eye and deafens the ears;” *Akeidas Yitzchok Bamidbar* (23:2): “*Hachosheik ain lo aynayim*.”

18. *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, vol. IV, p. 328.



# Straight Talk

*These observations are based on over 1,000 cases encountered by Project ReJewvenation in the last seven years. They represent a cross-section of Orthodoxy in America and Israel to the best of our ability.*

## Definitions:

*Hard Core:* Teenagers whose rebelliousness is sufficiently intense so as to derail them from a lifestyle of normal teenage functionality. They are no longer religious. If they continue their present trajectory, their future will be no more promising or productive than their present state of rebelliousness. This lifestyle may include crime, heavy drug use, extreme promiscuity, truancy and a generally unproductive or self-destructive lifestyle.

*Soft core:* Teenagers whose rebelliousness involves unacceptable, sometimes risky behavior, and often includes blatant violations of religion. May include experimenting with drugs. The lifestyle of these teenagers is altered from their childhood, but not radically changed. These teens may live their semi-wayward life and still grow to be productive members of society.

## Who is in rebellion?

Boys: 52%

Girls: 48%

## The age most likely to rebel:

Boys: 15

Girls: 14

## Who is in school and who is on the street:

*Hard-core Cases:*

9% remain in school

91% drop out or are expelled from school

*Soft-core Cases:*

65% remain in school

35% drop out or are expelled from school

## How long it (most often) takes for an at-risk youth to become a hard-core case:

In school: 6 months — 1 year

Out of school: 5 weeks

Out of home: 3 weeks

## Factors that cause children to stray (in order of severity):

- 1) Child was sexually or physically abused;
- 2) Child has hostile relationship with at least one parent; child feels rejected at home;
- 3) Parents had a hostile divorce; no *shalom bayis*, or other dysfunction at home;

4) Child feels rejected at school or by community; (In Israel, this factor is among the first.)

5) Child was exposed to negative peer influence.

## Rebellion is *not* caused by:

1) Inability to fare well in school. (This generalization does not include learning-disabled students.) There are equal numbers of strong and weak students in rebellion.

2) Large families.

3) High-pressure schools.

## Highest risk profile:

A 13-year-old girl from a large family, *of which she is the youngest*. All of her siblings are married and her closest sibling is at least 5 years older. At the onset of adolescence, this girl is the only child in a large house with parents two generations older than she. She never had a close-aged sibling.

## Of the youth who have “returned:”

*Hard-core Cases:*

90+% returned due to a trusting relationship with an influential good friend, teacher or family member (including a parent) who has worked on their relationship with their child;\*

10% returned due to other reasons, such as their own initiative, therapy, etc.

*Soft-core Cases:*

70% returned due to a trusting relationship with an influential good friend, teacher or family member (including a parent) who has worked on their relationship with their child;\*

20% returned due to their staying in a Jewish school (where the influence of environment and teachers reversed or limited their slide toward rebellion);

10% returned due to other reasons, such as their own initiative, therapy, etc.

\* *Of the youth who have “returned,”* the child is much more likely to return completely to the original standards of the home when the parents were involved in the returning process.

Where the parents are not involved — even when the child returns — s/he is not likely to return to the exact standards of his or her upbringing.