# OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

## THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

New message

To: rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com

Subject: reader comment

If you didn't have a relationship with your child in their youth, it's obvious that they won't have a deep relationship with you once they grow up. Children and parents don't become close for the first time in their adult life.

For those with adult children who haven't had that relationship until now, it doesn't hurt to start showing interest in your child's life, without coming across as overbearing and asking personal questions. This way, perhaps the relationship will gradually evolve. It's not hopeless! It's about showing care and concern about your child and their family—tuning in, remembering, "Oh, how's the kid with the ear infection?" etc.

I think parents need to tune into their children's needs as they grow up. Every child needs parental approval and a listening ear, and if it's not going to be you, it'll be someone else, perhaps someone you don't approve of. It's about listening to them. Whatever interests them should interest you. Trust me, it's not easy. It's often an act. I'm not super-interested in the game they played during recess when I'm in the middle of making supper, running to change a dirty diaper, have a babysitter coming in an hour that I want to tidy up for, and also need to get dressed and ready to leave. But I can listen and ask questions and feign interest because it's my child, and I want to invest in our current and future relationship.

All that being said, it's perfectly okay to tell a child, "I'd love to hear about that game, but right now, I'm a bit overwhelmed because I need to be ready in a few minutes, and I have a few things to finish first. Can you tell me about it at breakfast tomorrow? Or can you help me clean up so that I can be calmer and ready to hear?"

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### RABBI GRUEN'S TAKE

*Agree*

Relationships sure do require investment, and often, effective investing is done on the other person's terms. This includes showing interest in what's important to them, asking questions they feel comfortable answering, and engaging in ways that are meaningful to them.

Many parents feel, and rightly so, "Do I have to go running after my kids? What happened to good old *kibbud av v'eim*?" These parents may be 100 percent correct, and they are not obligated to do so. Still, success, especially in relationships, often comes from being smart, not from being right.

Developing a strong relationship with married children can be done by remembering to show interest specifically in the way the



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other party appreciates it (based on feedback given in the past and following up). This is a great way to spread goodwill and build a relationship, even in situations where it was strained before.

***The goal is not to determine who feels more misunderstood, but to create changes that can make both people in the relationship more understood, loved, cared for, and connected***

## Disagree

As to your blanket statement of "Children and parents don't become close for the first time in their adult life": it's sad when this belief that things can't dramatically change discourages parents from investing in this all-important relationship. Instead of making their best effort, they're primed to think, "What am I going to gain from this? I'll just do what it takes to survive."

In terms of the statement itself, I beg to differ. Fortunately, it isn't necessarily true. Many relationships thrive once the children grow up and leave their parents' home. Once the parents (and children) are past the difficulties of childrearing and the constant challenges brought about by living together, there's so much room for the parent-child relationship to blossom.

In general, changes in dynamics are opportunities for growth. For example, moving into or out of the house brings with it the potential for change, and it's often up to you to decide how to utilize that change. When parents and children are separated in a technical sense, this can create emotional distance as well, or, by the same token, it can be a reason to feel more comfortable and get even closer. By putting in the energy and thought to learn the new patterns and opportunities that come along with the change, you may be able to achieve what you haven't been able to achieve in the past.

Don't be discouraged by the fact that there's no instant recipe for change. Change is often gradual and happens slowly. Even if someone's not responding the way you want right away, keep on investing.

## I would add...

The idea shared here is wonderful and works with many. However, while many people love when others show interest in their life, there are those who have an aversion to the very same overtures. As always, when parenting children, "*Chanoch l'na'ar al pi darko*" is so important, and saying "Well, I'm doing the same thing for all my kids, so this child must be the



problem" is a serious mistake. If you connect with many of your children by taking an interest in their lives, and one child doesn't like it, pick up on those cues. Stop being right, and don't pursue something that can actually be counterproductive.

It would be wonderful if adult children, or anyone for that matter, would gently speak up and articulate their feelings by saying something like "I'm sure you don't mean anything, but it bothers me when you ask about *xxxxx*. Can we please discuss other topics?" However, if someone isn't being very clear with you about the kind of communication they like or appreciate, it's important to try to figure it out on your own and learn their pattern. If something's working, do more of it. If something's not working, try something else.

## This reminds me of...

Beware of unspoken vibes. There's a lot more to communication than just saying the right things.

This reminds me of a married young man who complained to me about the way his mother asks him so many personal questions about his life. He went on and on about how the way she doesn't stop asking him about his day hits a raw nerve.

Suddenly, he stopped and said, "You know, it's funny because my father does the same thing. But with him, I appreciate those same questions."

It took him time to realize and be able to verbalize why this difference existed. But eventually, he got it.

"When my father asks me questions, I feel like he's nodding along and giving me encouragement and good feedback. I feel that he's happy for me, proud of me, and trusts me. With my mother, though, I can hear her criticism in a small grunt. By the way the questions are asked, I feel like she's almost expecting me to mess up. I don't enjoy the blank feedback that gives me the feeling that she's not impressed with what I did or said."

So often, it's not what you say but how you say it.



Rabbi Shimon Gruen, author of the bestselling book *Get along with Everyone*, consults and guides individuals in the areas of *shalom bayis* and *chinuch* through classes, workshops, teleconferences, and one-on-one counseling. He specializes in guiding and counseling based on a very deep understanding of personality assessment. Many of his classes can be found on TorahAnytime.com.

Are you on either side of the adult child-parent/in-law relationship? Feel free to share your thoughts by contacting Rabbi Gruen at rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com.
Your correspondence will be kept anonymous and identifying details will be changed to protect your privacy.

