

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

HEALTHY DEPENDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

During one period in his life, the Vilna Gaon *zy"a* left Vilna and traveled around various towns and villages in order to put himself through the experience of *galus*. When he reached a certain town, he was approached by a German rav who asked him for his assistance.

This rav's father, who was no longer alive, had been a great *talmid chacham* who wrote many notes and comments on the *sefarim* he learned. The son had found a few mysterious comments in Parshas Bereishis that he could not decipher, and he asked the Vilna Gaon if he could perhaps make sense of them.

The comments were written on the *passuk* relating how Hashem created the sun and the moon, the "two great lights" in the heavens, one large and one small. Next to the "big light" the rav's father had written, "גסעשא" and next to the "small light" he had written, "קאסעשא." The son could make no sense of these letters.

The Vilna Gaon immediately responded that the letters referred to a Gemara in Maseches Bava Metzia, which defines an adult, a "big person," as someone who does not rely on his father for his needs, whereas a child is someone who still relies on his elders. Big and small aren't necessarily defined by age, but rather by a person's level of independence.

Therefore, the rav's father had written next to the "big light" the acronym of גדול אינו סומך על שולחן אביו which means, "a big child is not reliant on his father for sustenance," while next to the "small light," he had written the acronym of קטן סומך על שולחן אביו, meaning, "a small child is reliant on his father for sustenance," as these descriptions explain the context of the big and small lights.

Growing up physically, and even becoming financially independent, is often much easier to achieve than maturing emotionally to the point that one is no longer dependent on the approval and encouragement of others. While even adults naturally seek approval and feel upset when they do not receive it, a sure sign of maturity is when one can tolerate disapproval and not be broken by it.

Another aspect of independence and emotional maturity is taking responsibility and not seeking someone else to blame for a bad move or decision. The same applies to not blaming others for a bad day or mood.

Chava was created as a wife for Adam Harishon and is described as an "*ezer k'negdo*—a helper opposite him." She is surely a helper, but opposite, in the sense of being independent. Sometimes a wife helps via being different and even opposing, though never with hostility or confrontation. Adults should be independent of one another, while children are not expected to be; indeed, they should be able to rely on their elders for both physical and emotional support. Pushing them prematurely and trying to make them independent in the false (albeit well-intentioned) belief that this is good for them, is often counterproductive.

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Parshas
Bereishis

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Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

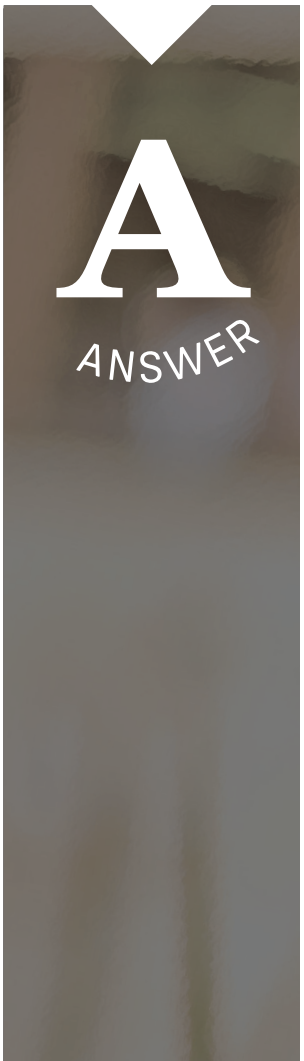
Thank you so much for your *shiurim* which have given me so much clarity on many topics.

I would like to ask your advice on a question about bullying. How can a parent teach his child to stand up for himself without hitting back? What is the right balance between defending oneself and going on the offensive?

I'm asking because my ten-year-old son, who is a bit introverted, has been bullied in school. I told him that he can and should stick up for himself, and that no one should get away with hurting him. But I since found out that he has started to hit back.

I'd also like to ask your advice on friction between neighbors. If a neighbor's child hits my child, or otherwise treats him wrongly, should I deal with that child myself, or tell his parents?

Thank you



A ANSWER

Bullying is a sad topic and is fairly common, both at home and in schools. However, no parent or teacher (or any adult responsible for children) should take the approach that because something is this common, it should be seen as "normal" and just part of growing up, and therefore tolerated.

That said, when it comes to a vulnerable child who is being bullied, the issue usually didn't start when the bully singled him out. Even if a vulnerable child isn't being bullied, there is still an issue to address. It's known that bullies tend to zero in on children who lack self-confidence. A child with a healthy dose of self-confidence will usually use it to his advantage in many areas of life. It's generally easier for people to reach their potential and do better if they feel confident. Therefore, a lack of self-confidence, and certainly if it is to the point where it invites bullying, is a problem to be dealt with, and any parent or teacher of such a child should feel responsible for doing whatever possible to remove this limitation and enable the child to flourish.

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Some children are naturally more confident while others struggle in this area due to their type of personality. Nonetheless, there is a great deal that parents of vulnerable children can do to build up their confidence and help them feel better about themselves. All children need *chizuk*, compliments, and praise, but children with low self-esteem need much more, and on a very regular basis.

Parents should also recruit teachers and let them know how much their child needs to hear the at-least-occasional praise and encouragement. And parents can also report back to their child how much their teacher admires them for their qualities and how much they enjoy having them in class, even if the teacher hasn't actually expressed such feelings in so many words!

Being proactive and building up a child's self-esteem is so much better than waiting for problems such as bullying to emerge and make us painfully aware of the underlying situation that caused it. Averting bullying is certainly not the only reason why we should build a child's self-esteem.

Another advantage of a head start is that once a child is being targeted due to his vulnerability, it's much harder to boost him.

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Of course, it's never too late to invest in a child and build him up. However, once a child is already being bullied this is no longer sufficient. The bullying must be directly addressed as utterly wrong and entirely the fault of the bully. While there is a certain school of thought that effectively blames the victim for "attracting" a bully by being too weak, this is very mistaken and damaging for all those concerned. Children are vulnerable and need to be protected. In your case where the bullying is taking place in school, this means approaching the principal and the teacher and telling them what your son has told you and insisting that they deal with it appropriately.

It's important to remember, however, that while you must accept your son's account of events and not give him the impression that you don't believe him or trust him to represent things accurately, there may still be another side to the story. If your child is provoking it, or is otherwise partially responsible for how the other child is behaving, or is simply giving an incomplete account of the interactions going on, it's important to find out about that before jumping to conclusions. When you approach the school's staff, you should ask them for their input and whether they know of any other details that you may not be aware of. Aside from this being the right way to approach the situation, it will also serve to bring them on board and make them more likely to want to help, instead of becoming defensive. When people feel less blamed or accused, they will be more eager to cooperate.

That said, with all the politeness you can muster it should be absolutely clear that they are responsible for ensuring that the bullying is addressed in school, and that you will not settle for anything less than the issue being dealt with head-on and eradicated. You don't have to accept excuses such as, "It's like that everywhere," or, "We deal with these things differently," or, "It's too early to address it," and so forth (all excuses I've heard). At this initial conversation, I wouldn't suggest that you threaten to remove your child from the school if the issue is not responsibly addressed. Aside from that being a drastic step you may not even be ready to consider, nobody likes feeling threatened. However, if the issue is not dealt with responsibly it may be something you will need to mention and actually consider.

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Meanwhile, what should you tell your son? I assume that you appreciate the importance of not dismissing his story or trivializing the issue, and that you will not use phrases such as, "Grow up and stop complaining." It's reassuring that he told you about the bullying — unfortunately, many children don't feel able to open up about such situations, or are threatened by the bully that if they tell on them, there will be terrible consequences. You should make sure your son knows that he did the right thing in telling you, and you should encourage him never to be afraid of anyone, even if they make horrible threats. A child must be reassured that they won't suffer from speaking out. It's tragic to learn of situations that were never addressed because the children concerned were cowed into silence by the threats of people who were abusing them.

Once you have reassured your son, you should be sure to tell him that you're dealing with the situation and that if anything else comes up, he should come to you right away and you'll do whatever is needed to set things right. You should also tell him that his teacher and principal know what's going on and that they, too, will be addressing the problem.

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It's understandable that you're not happy with him having learned to hit back, but all the same, the message you give your son should be that you can

understand why he did that even though in general it's a bad idea to respond to violence with violence, as it only makes things worse.

What you should be careful not to do is give him the impression that by hitting back, he is partially responsible for the situation, or "just as bad as" the bully. As long as he really was hit first, he should know that you understand the difference.

Another important message children need to hear is that the bully is not the big strong kid that he's making himself out to be, but just a kid with no self-esteem who is trying to feel better about himself by picking on someone else. It's the bully who's the problem, not your son. While there are children who benefit from being sent to someone who can talk to them and build them up, it's important to avoid creating the feeling that they're being sent for help because they are to blame for having caused the situation.

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When talking to your child, your focus should be on building up his self-esteem so that he isn't so hurt by disapproval or even verbal abuse from others. Parents should never tell their children, "What do you care what that kid said? It's only words." Even adults can be hurt by adult forms of bullying. But be clear that the words said were wrong, and not something to be taken to heart or believed in.

At the other extreme, you should guard against giving your child the sense that he's so fragile that he can't possibly deal with even the occasional harsh word. He doesn't have to report to you every single hurtful thing that happens to him; plenty of things are minor enough that he can deal with them or brush them off without your involvement.



It's important to find the right balance of empathy and validation without blowing tiny incidents out of proportion, and without making it tempting to keep coming with sob stories for more babying.

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With regard to your question on the children of neighbors, one thing to be aware of (as mentioned above) is that there are always two sides to a story. Your child may have provoked the other child and omitted to tell you, so it's important to get the facts straight, especially as parents are by nature very defensive when it comes to their children (which is as it should be), and this can skew their perspective.

Once you know what transpired, you can generally speak directly to the child involved, which may be more effective than going via their parents. You don't need permission to talk to a child who bullied your child, as long as you don't act as if you were their parent and try to educate them, and certainly as long as you do not punish them. Often, a child being spoken to by another adult will feel more intimidated than when their own parent tells them the same thing. Of course, if that doesn't prove effective, you can and should tell the parents and ensure that the situation is dealt with.

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Be'ezras Hashem, when we daven for clarity and seek to protect our children and give them the emotional tools they need to grow up securely and happily, we will see them thrive even when they deal with complex situations and turn into adults who serve Hashem with all the capabilities He has given them.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: BEREISHIS 5785

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