בס"ד

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS

FOR THE HOME

PARSHAS
CHAYEI SURAH

A SENSITIVE OLDEST CHILD

A famous midrash tells of the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva who were falling asleep during a shiur. To wake them up, Rabbi Akiva suddenly asked a question that was seemingly out of place: "How was it that Esther HaMalka merited to rule over 127 nations?" Rabbi Akiva explained that for each year of Sarah Imeinu's life – 127 in all – Esther merited to rule over one nation.

The Chiddushei Harim takes this a step further. He explains that a nation, a country, is a large entity, and if Esther merited to rule over a country for every year of Sarah Imeinu's life, she must have earned a city for each week, a town for each day, a village for each hour, and a street for each minute. The message Rabbi Akiva was trying to impart to his talmidim was therefore the value of even a short span of time. During each and every single minute of life lived correctly, Sarah Imeinu was conquering a house, and then another house, and then another, for Esther Hamalka. When a person is aware of how much he can accomplish even within such a short space of time, he won't sleep through such an opportunity.

Time is truly the greatest gift. But aside from seizing the moment and accomplishing what can be done in the present, it's important to realize that at every opportunity we are also changing the course of the future.

A famous story is told about Rav Shlomo Heiman zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaas, who gave a daily shiur at the yeshivah that was always extremely well-attended. One day, there was a massive snow storm, and only three talmidim showed up. To Rav Shlomo it made no difference – he gave the same passionate shiur he always gave. When asked afterward how he could feel the same enthusiasm even though he was only addressing three boys, he responded, "I wasn't just addressing the three of you. I was addressing you and your children and your talmidim, and all their children and talmidim as well!"

When it comes to chinuch habanim people sometimes think that issues will resolve themselves over time, and that it's not necessary to tackle problems as they arise. Such an approach leads to parents missing opportunity after opportunity, not just to correct things at the moment, but also to enable the child to grow into a healthier future. It's amazing how small investments, little lessons, compliments and shows of affection, given at the right time, can have a tremendous ripple effect down the line. As the El Al announcement goes at the end of the flight: "Small change can make a big difference in the life of a child."

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QUESTION

DEAR RABBI GRUEN

My 12-year-old daughter, our oldest child, is very sensitive. Whenever I want to discuss an issue with her, she becomes defensive and aggressive, even if I approach her when things are calm. She's also verbally and physically aggressive with her brothers whenever something doesn't go the way she feels is right. She feels like I'm always on her brother's side. How should I react to this? I'm really working on seeing her good qualities and loving her unconditionally but it's very challenging when she's so aggressive...

Thank you.

ANSWER

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN RESPONDS

It's clear from your question that you're dealing with a very sensitive almost-teenager. I have a lot to say about handling such a child with care, as I elaborate on in my book Get Along With Everyone, but here I'll focus on the points you have singled out.

You start by mentioning how hard it is to "discuss" an "issue," which gives me the impression that you are trying to communicate to her something she's done wrong. As a general rule, what helps a lot when dealing with sensitive people is keeping in mind that they are easily unsettled by the unexpected. That's why a good approach to use is opening a conversation with, "Do you have a few minutes? There's just something I'd like to talk about, if that's okay." That can give your daughter a chance to reorient and mentally prepare for what she probably is starting to realize is about to come. You can then continue with, "I could be mistaken, but it seems to me that..." and presenting the "issue" as a suggestion rather than a critique.

The next step, after pointing something out, is to try to leave it at that. Even if your daughter responds or justifies, don't get dragged into an argument. You can simply say, "Okay." This does not imply that you are okay with her excuse or that you were convinced by whatever she said. It simply means that you're finished with what you have to say. One of my favorite "sayings" is, "Everyone knows everything." Your daughter is not stupid. She knows that she often fights with her siblings. Even if she complains that it's other people picking fights with her, chances are that she does actually realize that she may have a big part in this. You don't have to prove anything to her. Say what you have to say and move on.

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But let's back up a bit, because before deciding what and how to say something, you need to consider whether to say something. You have a child who often deserves criticism and who presents you with so many more opportunities to criticize than to compliment. But sometimes that's all the more reason to resist!

Sensitive people generally have a splitting perception, thinking and feeling in black-and-white. Things are always either very good or very bad. Once you've criticized a sensitive child a few times, their perception may be that you're always criticizing. Yes, you know how many times you didn't say anything, and how that outweighs by far the number of times you did, but that doesn't affect your daughter's perception. Unfortunately,

the opposite doesn't apply, and sensitive people generally don't perceive just a few compliments as always complimenting, probably because they have a low level of tolerance to discomfort, which causes even semi-discomfort to be experienced as extremely uncomfortable. Does this make sense? Well, it doesn't have to… that's simply how emotions work; they aren't bound by rules of logic. This is how even a few critical comments can erase the impact of even a large number of compliments.

This doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't ever say something, especially when worded and phrased properly. At times it's definitely necessary. But you want to make sure you have a much larger ratio of compliments and feel-good statements to offset it. Fifty-fifty is far from enough.

Sensitive children are so deeply affected by how they feel, and their behavior depends on their emotional state to a far greater degree than it does with others who are less sensitive. Keeping this in mind will help you to find the right balance, as well as creative ways to make such children feel good.

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You mention working on seeing your daughter's positive qualities and loving her unconditionally, which is very important. Often, people use these ideas to try to improve relationships, but what they don't always realize is that they're doing all this work internally. The question is whether your thoughts and feelings are being expressed practically, and enough. This means actually verbalizing your feelings, and mentioning the good qualities you see in your daughter. Positive energy does a lot, but just remember that a little verbal criticism will still outweigh it. It can take a lot of "noticing" and "mentioning" to get your daughter to believe that you identify her with these qualities, rather than with her challenges.

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With sensitive children, you want to try to catch every little thing they do right, and, when possible, overlook things that went wrong. Even if you think a certain behavior is normal or a given, praise it. Even when your daughter doesn't realize she did anything special, point it out: "You were so nice to your brother. He sat next to you when you were reading and he looked so comfortable there." Even if she didn't intend to be nice, you can compliment her for her action.

It's possible that you'll see somewhat of an immediate difference with such an approach, but over time it will make a bigger and more significant difference. Small expressions of affection, small compliments, really are a big deal. They add up and gradually cause a shift.

As much as we try not to make a big deal when we need to point out something problematic, that's how much you should try to make a big deal out of every little positive thing. Sometimes, sensitive children have a hard time taking compliments, and you may need to exercise some creativity to make your comments meaningful and convincing. However, don't be discouraged if it doesn't look like your words are having a positive impact. A steady stream of positivity will bring about changes even if it looks like your words are not being well taken, as long as you are genuine and consistent.

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Another idea I like sharing that's especially relevant to sensitive children is making them feel needed. A child who's behaving aggressively is often not so helpful around the house, and parents often simply resign themselves to the situation and stop asking for help entirely. A sensitive child who knows that his difficult behavior has brought this on will only feel worse about himself as a result, and this will only make them behave worse as a result. But parents can turn this around.

See how you can make your daughter useful; find ways for her to show that she actually enhances your life. What can you ask her to do – and it doesn't have to be a chore. "Can you make a salad for Shabbos? I like how you work in the kitchen." "Can you do me a favor? Would you take care of the baby for a few minutes? It would really help me out, and the baby loves you," or, "I trust you with the baby…" Instead of focusing on the chore that needs to be done, you're stressing how much it would mean to you. Feeling useful, important, and significant does wonders for children and can bring about a true shift in self-identity.

This could be easier to achieve in your case, as your daughter is the oldest child and you can stress how responsible she is and how reassured you feel when she's looking after the baby, for example. You don't even have to wait for something you need doing and that she could help with – because it's not about your needs. You can create areas for her to contribute, and build her self-image as someone

who makes a positive difference. (And, keeping children busy is always a good tactic to keep them out of trouble.)

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Many of us are familiar with the idea of introducing a criticism with a compliment. All too often, however, the criticism and compliments become one big jumble. Rav Avrohom Genechovsky of Tchebin explained that complimenting should be independent of anything else, and preferably, at least several times a day. If the only time you offer a compliment is right before a critique, if all your compliments end with "but," you're undermining your credibility.

Aside from genuine compliments that should be expressed often, you could also introduce critique gently, starting with good words. Use creative compliments to introduce a point you want to make. Validate, and then redirect. "You really tried hard. That's great. Next time, it would be great if you could do it like this..." It's still criticism, but it's camouflaged in positivity. You're letting the child know that he's still okay even if he needs to do better next time, and this makes it easier for him to accept your input.

For a sensitive 12-year-old, compliments, expressions of love, good words, encouragement, and appreciation will achieve a great deal more than criticism. It's still important to know how to offer positive criticism, to punish or make rules when necessary, but anything you can invest in your child in terms of positive energy will do a lot more. Especially when we're dealing with sensitive or difficult children, we may not realize that 90 percent of our interactions with them are based on negativity. That's why it's so important to focus on bringing in the positive.

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There's also another aspect of your question that warrants addressing, and that's the reality that a 12-year-old is almost a teenager. The teenage years are challenging years. Young children are happy to play; adults are often busy and productive. Teenagers are stuck somewhere in the middle. The teen is a child and adult at the same time. He's transitioning.

My good friend Dr. David Lieberman says that if we would treat children like adults and adults like children, we'd have great relationships with everyone. But the teenager seems to get sandwiched in the middle with a mix of an approach and it's definitely a challenge. Maybe we should try treating them like adults when they're behaving the most like kids, and like kids when they're behaving like adults. Whenever a teenager is being babyish, irresponsible, or immature, try to make them feel good about themselves. Give them the nice word they weren't expecting. But if you think that when this teenager acts like an adult, you can "tell it like it is," hold back. Talk to him with the kindness and sensitivity you usually reserve for children. It's the good feeling that will make the biggest difference.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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Thank You & Tizku Lmitzvos!