OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

New message

To: rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com

Subject: reader comment

Growing up, I was micromanaged by my parents. Everything I did or said was a big deal. Throughout my entire single life, I tried to get my father's approval, but I never felt like I actually did. *Baruch Hashem*, this was all within the range of "normal," meaning, I wouldn't say that I had a horrible childhood or that I grew up damaged under these circumstances.

Contrasting that to my relationship with my parents now, I'm amazed. My parents accept and unconditionally love everything my siblings and I do now that we're building our own homes. They're our greatest supporters (mainly verbally and emotionally, but they also help out financially whenever and however they can) and are so proud of us and our kids. I hope to be like them one day!

Send

RABBI GRUEN'S TAKE

Agree

It may not happen every day, but I can't say I'm surprised by the switch in vibes you're experiencing. As a rule, life isn't static; things change all the time. It's common for parents to relate to their children one way when the children are young and another way when they're away from home or married. With the change in dynamics, there often comes a change in the relationship, hopefully for the better.

We should all strive for change and improvement and never become hopeless. Things can and do change. Sometimes all we have to do is allow the changes to happen and be noticed, and sometimes it's on us to make those changes. Assuming "once a problem, always a problem" is a crippling mistake that has kept many people stuck.

Disagree

You write, "I never felt that I got his approval." Including the word "felt" means that this isn't necessarily a fact, rather an expression of emotions. It's quite common for children not to feel the approval their parents have for them. I don't know if your being so close to your father



RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

FACILITATED BY CHAVA BEER

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was triggering; perhaps that's why he wasn't able to convey his approval, or maybe it didn't give you the space to feel the approval. Personally, I've heard from many parents that their feelings of approval somehow didn't make it into their children's hearts. This may be because there was a lot of criticism drowning it out, or maybe that's just the way it felt.

I remember a father telling me that he keeps telling other people how happy he is with his children in the hope of his children hearing of his approval through the grapevine. Based on previous experience, praising them directly didn't seem to have any positive impact. Still, even with this backhanded approach of using others as the medium for his praise, the children often waved the messages away. "Really? My father said that? Eh—he doesn't mean it; he's just saying it." This is hurtful to parents who are doing their best to convey their appreciation and approval of their children.

I have no idea how things were in your situation; I'm simply suggesting that maybe your parents' lack of approval wasn't as black-and-white as you think. Maybe your father tried to express his approval in his own way. Now that you're older and smarter, it's good to consider that perhaps your parents were trying to tell you how proud they were of you and how much they loved you. Perhaps at least some of their negative comments came from a good place.

In general, as we age, we tend to notice changes. In truth, often nothing has changed except our perspective. We see things differently because we're older even though essentially, things remained the same. Nevertheless, it's hard for people to hear or accept that when they get older, they'll see things differently. The *sefer Yesod Ha'emunah* explains that few people acknowledge a mistake while they're making it. Only by looking back and realizing that we've made mistakes in the past are we able to admit that maybe the thoughts we currently believe are also mistaken.

Now that you have support from your parents and you're so amazed by the acceptance and the love they're giving you, it's important to look back and say, "Well, maybe then I was too young to notice it and feel it." Now, you can choose to retroactively interpret things differently.

Often, what we get from others, be it parents or spouses, isn't only about what the other person is giving. Sometimes, accepting something in the right way by interpreting it properly, allowing people to make you feel good, is a big part of the puzzle.

I would add...

I want to highlight an expression you used so others can learn from it: "I wouldn't say that I had a horrible childhood or that I grew

up damaged under these circumstances." It's wonderful when people realize that it's not necessarily all or nothing. Often, when people don't feel good about something, they tend to overdramatize it and make it sound terrible to make themselves sound credible. It's usually inaccurate and unhelpful to see the situation that way. Although you pined for your father's approval as a child and never felt like you got it, it still wasn't horrible; it was still relatively okay or "normal."

In general, things aren't terrible, though they can be improved. We should all look to improve ourselves and be accepting of others even when they aren't perfect, especially when it comes to our parents. We can judge them favorably even as we strive to be the best parents we can be.

This reminds me of...

This brings me to yet another point. People today are so busy chewing over their upbringing traumas and all kinds of childhood problems. While this may be because people are trying their best to be the perfect parents, along with a lot of awareness about healthy parenting, it often results in children analyzing their upbringing with a microscope. They look back with complaints about how their parents didn't do everything the right way.

It's even more unfortunate when people take the lessons they learn about parenting and instead of applying it to their own families, realize that they were treated wrongly and go as far as to justify not treating their children right because of the difficulties they endured. Instead of taking the awareness and using it to become better parents, they use the awareness to excuse their mistakes, explaining that they're repeating negative patterns.

You mentioned that you were micromanaged by your parents, and it's important not to go back and do the same, especially as you realize that it honestly wasn't terrible, horrible, or damaging.

Even if and when we notice areas where our parents' parenting was flawed, we should have the maturity to conclude that they surely tried their best. They meant well, and they're doing even better now. And about yourself, too, it's fine to say: I'm going to try my best, I'm going to mean well, and I won't micromanage myself, my parents, or my children.



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.