OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

QUESTION:

When my kids were growing up, they didn't enjoy visiting my in-laws. The meals were formal, and my in-laws expected a lot from them. Now that I'm a grandmother myself, I really want my children and grandchildren to enjoy coming to us. I work very hard to create a warm and relaxed environment.

There are two things I'm wondering. First, even though I try so hard to make them comfortable, some of the children don't seem to enjoy coming. Some of them hardly ever come, saying they prefer to stay home, while others do come but seem unhappy when they're here. I can't figure out why. Will they just be unhappy no matter what, or is there something I'm doing wrong?

Second, with some kids I seem to have succeeded too well in making them comfortable. They come very often, drop in unannounced, and stay for a very long time. I'm happy they're so comfortable, but it seems to be a bit much. This daughter and daughter-in-law are the sensitive type, and I'm hesitant to say anything for fear of hurting their feelings. How I can deal with this?

RABBI GRUEN RESPONDS:

1. *Learning from experience*

Like so many other things in life, we're expected to look back, learn from experience, and avoid repeating past mistakes. At the same time, we may never get it 100 percent right. It's amazing how despite everything you've gone through and everything you've learned, new issues, new mistakes, and new challenges will inevitably come up. You may think you've seen everything growing up and when raising your own children, and then your grandchildren come along with a whole new set of personalities and needs. It's not a simple.

Baking a cake is simple because there are so few steps, and building a spaceship is complicated because there are so many, yet both have a predictable outcome. Raising children, on the other hand, can't be pinned down to steps, and the outcome is almost never predictable. There are so many unknown factors and so many more variables that affect the success you're striving for.

Parents want to do the best they can when raising their children, and they often look at their own experiences to guide them. But saying that life experience is the best teacher can cause its own issues. This occurs when people tend to go to the opposite extreme based on a negative experience.

Parents often look at mistakes that other people made and then try to do the exact opposite, hoping that will bring them success. We assume that if our parents got it wrong, then we need to behave very differently. And yet, these people often find that this new approach brings different challenges.

A simple example: Growing up, Yaakov's parents were very on top of his schoolwork, and he hated it. They were always checking to see which tests he had coming up, talking to his teachers, and making sure he did his homework. When raising his own children, Yaakov took a very hands-off approach with regard to schoolwork, making sure that home was a safe place that always felt good to be in and leaving academics for the better part of the day, when a child is in school. But he soon discovered that his children were struggling in school and needed assistance.

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You often see that the child who resented a long *davening* now attends a short *minyan*, and the child who grew up in a no-rules, open-technology household raises his children in a stricter household. And then, interestingly, the next generation swings in the other direction, being more like their grandparents.

We can't always outsmart or overcome challenges that others have struggled with. Of course, we must try and put effort into our parenting and do the best we can, but the correct method isn't necessarily to be so drastically different. And even if it is a good method, it may not work for your children.

I once heard from a wise man that when you're young, you think you know better than your parents; when you grow older you realize that they aren't less smart than you; and when you grow even older, you realize that they are smarter than you.

I commend your quest for a better way of hosting kids and grandkids than that which you've seen at home, and I feel bad that you're not getting it exactly right yet, but that's often how it is. There may never be a perfect way to do things.

2. *The perfect fit*

A warm and relaxed environment is appealing to most people. Creating such a family atmosphere is usually what draws people to one's home. Generally speaking, you're on the road to the best outcome. However, not everything works for everyone, and what one person loves, another person may get nervous from.

Your warm and relaxed atmosphere may, for example, cause your child to feel that her kids get too wild at Bubby's house because anything goes. They might not appreciate that timing in this relaxed environment is a bit unpredictable and no one knows when to expect the *seudah* to begin. Maybe they feel uncomfortable that they're being treated like family and not as guests. Never forget that different strokes work for different folks.

People are people, and you won't be able to make everyone happy all the time.

You can still try to get it right with everyone, and sometimes by putting in some thought and creativity, you can come up with ideas that work for each family. Maybe invite them with the kind of company they like best, or try other ideas to make coming more attractive to them. But if this is too draining or impossible, don't give up. If they don't enjoy coming for Shabbos, find other ways to connect with them. You might feel that your way is best, but don't push them to come by telling them that.

Most importantly, if, for whatever reason, you can't get everyone to want to come over, don't take it personally. Remember that there are people who appreciate staying home, and it doesn't reflect on you at all. There may also be personal challenges that prevent them from coming. There's no magic formula that will work for everyone, and you may not be capable of getting it right to the degree of making everyone happy at the same time in your house. And that's okay.

3. *When to say and when not to say*

About those children of yours who make themselves too comfortable and you seem to be afraid to address it, I'd like to mention two points.

1. Almost anything can be said if it's said at the proper time and in the right way. Definitely don't say anything when they're currently over for a visit and the kids are acting up. Instead, pick a moment when the issue isn't relevant and is therefore less emotionally challenging, when both of you are calm and not stressed.



There are many tips when it comes to communicating a challenging message so it goes over well, and I'll mention a few briefly. Make it clear that it's not personal and doesn't reflect on your child. Validate their feelings and say what you think they might be thinking or wanting to say, such as "I know you might feel this isn't fair, and I see that you try really hard..." This helps them feel less defensive or tempted to explain their view to you. Clarify that it's a personal preference and not something they could have known on their own or something they're wrong about.

It would be a shame not to say something that should be said. Many people get so caught up in their fear of saying something that they build up resentment and cause avoidable, unnecessary damage to their relationships.

2. While that's true for most cases, there are times when saying something will cause harm either because the topic is too delicate or because of the sensitivity of the recipient. That's when you need to decide if it's worth it for you to say something unpleasant and deal with the fallout or if you would rather just keep quiet.

If you're clearly being taken advantage of, or if you can't handle the building resentment—which is bound to cause an explosion—it may make sense to talk it out in the best way possible even if unpleasant feelings may ensue. However, sometimes, you may choose to stay silent and accept the situation because maintaining the relationship with the other person is more important to you. So while most children will be okay when you say something, for those who won't, you might choose to just accept the situation.

Acceptance isn't easy, but when done right, it will resolve a lot of bad feelings and spare you the pain of high expectations and constant disappointments. Acceptance doesn't mean a decision to be continually aggravated. Rather, it's the acknowledgment that the situation isn't what you want, but because you know that you can't change it, you choose to work with it and make the best of it. You choose to not say anything.

Life is about choices, and it's up to you to decide how you want to deal with this uncomfortable situation. Think about it, perhaps have someone help you decide which path to take, and proceed with confidence and a good feeling.

Visiting your parents, spending time with them, and bringing your children to them isn't all about you and your children

4. *On the other end...*

I'd like to take the liberty of addressing any children out there who are reading this.

Visiting your parents, spending time with them, and bringing your children to them isn't all about you and your children. It shouldn't be done solely based on your comfort and interests or on whether your parents succeed in making you feel perfectly comfortable. They aren't angels, and they may not be getting it right all the time (or ever, for that matter). Connecting with them and bringing them pleasure is your obligation and privilege.

A veteran *maggid shiur* told me that a student of his from many years before approached him and asked him what his secret was. How did he manage to raise such a big family of wonderful, successful children? He was a bit taken aback by the question and said that honestly, he never gave it much thought and attributed his *nachas* to Hashem. But after his student kept pushing him, he said that he would ask his children what they thought it was.

When he asked his daughter, a *rebbetzin* herself, if she had any idea, she responded right away that she did. Seeing the way her father hosted, respected, and treated his in-laws with such devotion and respect left a lasting impression on the children, and that, in her opinion, was the secret ingredient.

Today's children often complain about their parents and discuss what their parents could have done better. Yes, parents should do all they can to make their children feel good and keep the connection. But at the same time, it's important to remember that children are children and parents are parents. And especially when the question isn't about hosting parents respectfully but parents trying their best to host and attract their children, the respect toward parents shouldn't depend on their success at saying and doing the right things.



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
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