OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

New message

To: rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com

Subject: personal experience

I don't have married kids yet, but from personal experience, I feel that there's one question parents should never ask.

Please don't ask us why we (or close relatives of ours) don't have children yet. Related to this, please don't ask when (or if) we will have another child. It comes across as pressure and controlling. You may not be privy to the struggles we may be experiencing having a child. Your question may not be meant as a criticism, but it comes across as critical.

Also, please don't ask if your daughter or daughter-in-law is expecting. What if she's not? Do you want to cause your child pain by reminding them that they're not expecting? When your child has good news, rest assured that they'll be excited to share it with you.

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RABBI GRUEN'S TAKE

Agree

Oh yes, parents must realize that despite their desire to hear good news, this is a place where they need to respect their children's privacy. It's a particularly sensitive topic. For one, it's very personal, as people don't talk about this with just anyone. In addition, it's an area that people feel very helpless in. Remarking on it just deepens that feeling. This is true both when asking children about their status as well as asking them about the status of their own children, for those who are up to that stage.

Besides the pressure or controlling feelings you mentioned, many comments on this topic are downright inappropriate. People shouldn't need to be told to respect someone's privacy when it comes to saying things that are obviously not an open topic to discuss. I understand that parents may be concerned; it doesn't change much, though.

Bringing up this topic might also cause the married child to think, *This is all you see about me? This is all you care about?* No one wants to cause such feelings.

While people often ask uncomfortable questions such as how much someone spent on something, why they didn't come to a wedding, or where their spouse is, the pain of such questions fades with time. However, the pain of questions about



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fertility and childbearing usually lingers long after the conversation is over. It may never go away.

Respecting people's privacy is always important, but in this case, I would add an extra measure of caution.

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Yes, but...

It's nice to hear you say that as soon as a child has good news, they'll immediately run to the phone and excitedly inform their parents. Unfortunately, this isn't necessarily true. First, everyone has different ideas about when is the right time to share good news. Often this is based on Torah guidance and specific opinions on the topic. The child's opinion may not be the same as their parents'.

Second, those who waited longer for good news are often so consumed with their own agony that they don't realize how others may be feeling about the same issue. And when there's good news, they're so overwhelmed by their own emotions of relief and excitement that they may not realize how desperately their parents are waiting for good news.

Interestingly, the exact opposite may be true as well. Some young couples might not have been nearly as stressed as their parents and are oblivious to the fact that their parents are sitting on the edges of their seats, biting their nails each time they call, hoping for some good news. Children don't mean any harm, but it's important to clarify that by not sharing good news right away, they may be causing unnecessary angst to their parents. They care, they *daven*, and they want to hear. In general, it's important to make the effort to share all good news and nice feedback whenever you can.

There's another point that's relevant before there's good news that will "surely be immediately shared," as you mentioned. Even considerate parents who aren't inquiring in any way would surely appreciate knowing that their children are being taken care of. Whether children are waiting for children or are dealing with any other issue, parents naturally worry. Without sharing details, just letting the parents know that their children are getting the necessary help and have an address to turn to would be comforting to the parents.

Whether to share sensitive information is a decision each couple needs to make on its own. Husbands and wives often have different opinions on how much they should share about a challenge they're dealing with. When deciding when and how much to share, it's important to take into account how much comfort parents derive from knowing that their children are taken care of, not because they're nosy or because they don't trust their children, but because they love and care for their children, even if they may not express it that way.



I would add...

There's an important caveat I'd like to add here. Yes, parents should be sensitive. No, they shouldn't ask overly personal questions. Yes, by getting involved they can cause a lot of pain. No, not everything needs to be shared. It's all true. But none of this ever justifies reacting inappropriately to a hurtful or insensitive comment.

Recently, I heard about a couple who haven't been to visit the husband's parents in close to five years. Why? Because on their last visit, the mother made a hurtful comment. I'm sure it was hurtful, regardless of whether it was intentional, but the mother-in-law apologized many times since then. Alienating parents, even just temporarily, because they meddled isn't the right way to respond. You can't use parents stepping out of their roles as a reason to be disrespectful or cut them off. It's hard to be the one who's big and mature and puts aside the pain, but that's your role.

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This doesn't mean you need to allow meddling. When your mother calls and asks if your eight-year-old son is going to therapy for his social skills, you don't need to hang up the phone or point out how wrong or out of place you feel she is. Instead, you can say in a polite and respectful tone of voice, "Mommy, I really appreciate your concern. I know how much you care for us. I'm not comfortable discussing the details, but it's being taken care of. Thank you for caring."

It's often easier to make someone feel stupid for addressing something you don't like, but it's definitely more respectful and helpful to take it on yourself and say, "I really don't want to discuss this."

In any case, to share nothing because of the one topic you'd rather keep private is usually a mistake and generally unnecessary. Parents want to feel involved in their children's lives, and it's important to make the distinction between sharing some information and sharing everything. Allow your parents to be a part of your life while knowing what to keep private and what not.

This reminds me of...

It's never pleasant to pay a *shivah* call, but I'm reminded of a visit I paid to a *shivah* house that was sadder than the typical. The parents were sitting *shivah* for a child who had been found dead in another country, and it was a very uncomfortable, awkward situation with unanswered questions in the air. While most visitors were sensitive, it was clear that some just didn't know what to say.

The father was repeating some of the insensitive remarks or questions people had mentioned. He related that someone asked, "How did your son get kosher food in that country?" He had been so taken aback by the inappropriateness of the question that he'd blurted out, "You're the winner! You asked the stupidest question I heard all week!"

Most people know to avoid inappropriate or private questions. However, parents, sometimes due to their age and stage, other times due to their emotional involvement, and yet other times due to their feelings of entitlement regarding their children, sometimes miss the boat with this one.

This isn't only about having children. Every child has different issues they don't feel comfortable discussing with their parents. For some, it's *shalom bayis*; for others it's their children's success in school, and for yet others it's mental health issues. Parents, please don't take it personally. They love you and they know you love them, yet they have their comfort level, which should be regarded with the sensitivity it deserves.

By being more sensitive to each other, the bonds will be tighter, and hopefully children will feel more comfortable sharing the most they can.



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.

