

Let Kids Be Kids

By Rabbi Manis Friedman

How to teach today's precocious kids values; How to prepare them for the adult world without treating them as adults; How to command respect while respecting them as well.

Bright Doesn't Mean Wise

A child needs to know that he's a child in order to have a foundation on which to build a successful adult life. Treating a child as a miniature adult is really not helping the child to grow. Sometimes children are very bright and very perceptive, and we can make the mistake of thinking they are wise. We may treat them as confidantes or peers. But by definition, a child's opinions, no matter how bright, are not wise. They are not based on the kind of knowledge Judaism calls *da'at*. *Da'at* is a maturity of the mind, an ability to make connections and perceive the consequences of one's ideas. A person can come up with brilliant ideas, but without *da'at*, those ideas don't connect with the real world.

A child before bar or bat mitzva is not a bar *da'at*. They may have a lot of sense and intelligence, but not *da'at*. That's why their behavior doesn't necessarily correspond to their level of understanding.

So if you want to share knowledge with a precocious second grader, teach him eighth grade math. But never debate the ground rules for behavior; that belongs strictly in the realm of the adult who has *da'at*, and has learned wisdom from experience.

There's a certain comfort for children in knowing that they can listen to and trust an adult's judgment. If a child wins a debate with parents, not only will the parents be distressed but so will the child. That doesn't mean that you have to disagree with them. If they come up with a good suggestion, listen and genuinely consider it. You might say, "I thought about what you suggested and I've decided that we should do it." But the decision about what to do should be yours.

It Takes Time To Get It Right

We expect both too much and too little of our kids, mixing up normal maturation with moral development.

There's a big difference between behavior that reflects a child being a child, and behavior that is inappropriate for a child. One of the most frustrating things in childrearing is when you tell a child something over and over again — not to climb up to the cookies, or not to make a mess — and he keeps on doing it. Inappropriate behavior must be stopped, but if the child is merely being a child in spite of your expectations, then change your expectations.

Make sure not to get it backwards. There's the parent who knows that the child lies and exaggerates and lets it go. If the same child takes some cookies when he's not supposed to, or spills something at the table, it's a disaster and he gets spanked. A child can't spill and a child can't not go for the cookies. It's normal.

But if a child is lying, it isn't safe to let it go, saying, "He's just a child; he'll outgrow it." Because adults lie, too. You can be confident that the child will outgrow the juice on the shirt but he or she may never outgrow the lying.

When it comes to morality, we have to create expectations and we have to have the courage to put some teeth into our expectations. Even a good child with good ideas needs your authority to be able to do what's right. Telling them what's right is not enough because they already know; you've told them before and they're not lacking information. What they're lacking is *da'at*.

If you consistently condemn and reject a wrong act, like lying, then the child realizes that what you've been saying is not just theory. It's the truth, the way to be. If a mother is horrified that a child did something wrong, that's what the child needs to see. He doesn't need to be told that it's wrong. Not after the first time. But to see that you're horrified, to see that it hurts you, to see that you're disappointed, that you can't get used to it, you can't make peace with it — that, in later years, will be the teeth behind the child's own values. Meanwhile we don't reject them for not getting it right, because we understand that they're children.

The ideals eventually become the child's own. But until that happens the child goes along with your agenda. That's what it means that you're responsible for your child's sins until they're bar or bat mitzva.

The right balance to maintain is that you recognize that a child may engage in immoral behavior such as lying, yet you also recognize that now is the time to start changing.

When we think about it, this is the parenting technique, so to speak, that G-d uses with us. Three thousand three hundred years ago G-d told us not to lie. After that He sent us a prophet. Over and over again, many hundreds of prophets came to tell us, "Do what you were told to do. Keep the commandments." G-d knows that even after He's taught us right and wrong, we're not going to do it right; we're children and we're human. So He repeats it, but He doesn't throw us out of the house. We need to do the same with our own children: to teach them right from wrong forty times, but then not to be surprised that they haven't changed yet. Ultimately they will change. Our frustration with kids still being kids after we've told them forty times is not kosher. We don't have the right to refuse our kids their childhood.