

Becoming a Happier Parent

By: Benjie Stern, PhD

Question

I really enjoyed the article that you had written about the importance in how we communicate with our children. My husband and I have been working in applying the strategies that you had suggested in the article, and we actually felt that we were beginning to make progress, as we caught ourselves a few times from degrading our children with labels. However, I still get very frustrated when my children tantrum. In specific, one morning this week I asked my son to clean up his toys. As soon as I made this request, he began to tantrum, and I completely lost it. I realize that I get frustrated easily when my son has a tantrum. If you can explain, perhaps, a reason for why I get frustrated so easily from my son's tantrums, I would greatly appreciate it.

Anonymous Reader

Dear Reader,

Great question! I first wanted to start by saying that I am very impressed with the enormous feedback that I had received for the first issue of the column of "Parenting Today". It is so nice to see that so many people have a desire to constantly grow and improve to become better parents. Please continue the feedback and comments so we can grow and learn together to become the best parents and people that we can be!

Before I focus on the specific content of your question, I feel it is important to describe the goals of the column "Parenting Today". The objective set out in this column is to attempt to clearly define the "ideal parent" (based on the Torah views), and to present various methods to be implemented in order to facilitate our growth towards being the ideal parent. Bear in mind, it is important for each of us to acknowledge that no one is a perfect parent. Each of us need to take into account where we are holding in regards to our real challenges, strengths and weaknesses that we experience with our own children. Once we are clear with where we are holding, we will be able to, in our own creative way, come up with means in which we can apply the lessons presented in this column to our own unique circumstances.

In regards to your specific question, let us start with an introduction. There are two different mindsets one can experience when trying to help and guide someone to reach a specific goal, which will thus color the tone of the interaction. The first mindset we will call the "commissioned salesman" mindset. At times, store owners will utilize a double commission to their sellers as an incentive for them to manipulate buyers into buying the old and out of style stock of merchandise. This is the merchant that we often find in clothing stores saying things like "you look great" to almost anything they want us to put on. They are also the sellers that we often come across as being pushy, having a low

tolerance for frustration when the customers do not comply with their suggestions, and will often experience rejection from their customers. These sellers have a need (double commission) for the customer's problem to go away (buying the old line of clothing as opposed to the new line of clothing), and will solve and fix the situation however they can in order for the problem to be solved.

The second mindset we will call the "commissioned salesman" mindset. The commissioned salesperson approaches each sales interaction quite differently. These sellers are more likely to be open in understanding the needs and wants of the customers, as have the best interest of the customers in mind. Instead of focusing on their own needs, they have the opportunity to empathize with the customer and encourage them to purchase the piece of clothing that best fits their needs. Consequently, the commissioned salesperson is also less likely to get frustrated when the customer does not comply with the seller's suggestions. This often allows their customer breathing space to make their own decision, and find a significantly higher level of compliance from their customers than the commissioned salesperson.

Every interaction we have with our children, we are faced with a choice to approach the current interaction with either the mindset of the commissioned salesperson or noncommissioned salesperson. The "commissioned parent" encounters chinuch interactions with the mindset that they have a need for the child's problem to immediately go away. The "commissioned" parents are apt to taking ownership of their children's problems, and tend to get frustrated easily when the problem is not fixed with their solution.

The parent who is invested in the need for his/her child to clean up their toys without a tantrum, can be compared to the commissioned salesperson. In such a case, when the child begins to tantrum, the parent immediately has the need for the problem, in this case being the tantrum, to go away. Since the child's actions are conflicting with the needs of the parent, the result is a frustrated parent. As the parent struggles to solve and fix the problem in a frustrated state, to get the child to comply with the parent, the child attacks back with even more resistance. The interaction concludes with either the parent finally giving in to the child, or using intimidation tactics to ultimately get the child to do what the parent wants. Just like the commissioned salesperson, the parent that projects their need onto their children, will often find themselves nagging them, discovering resistance, and noticing themselves constantly getting angry and easily frustrated during chinuch interactions.

On the flip side, the parent that chooses to deal with chinuch interactions without the condition of "needing their child", will approach their encounters with their child similar to the noncommissioned salesperson. Since these parents do not feel a need for their child to behave a certain way, they are able to stay in a calm state of mind and take the time in trying to learn and understand their child. These parents uphold the belief that what might be easy for us to do may actually be difficult for the little ones to do. These parents are then able to use the tools of empathy and encouragement, without getting frustrated, in assisting their child to comply the mandates that the parent had set for him.

In regards to the you, the parent that is getting frustrated when the child is having a tantrum, the ideal solution would be for you to take on the mindset of the noncommissioned salesperson. You should, as best as you can, avoid needing your child. Rather, you should take upon the mindset that the obligation to clean the toys falls

entirely on the child. With such a mindset, you will be able to keep a caring and calm demeanor, empathize and encourage as opposed to solve and fix, and offer suggestions without being emotionally invested in the need for the child not to tantrum. An ideal suggestion would sound something like “wouldn’t it be easier for you to clean up the toys quickly, than to have a tantrum and then clean up the toys?”. The results include a higher probability that your child will comply immediately as he/she realizes that they can not get the parent emotionally frustrated, and therefore they have no way of winning. Other results include a calm parent offering clear and observable directions, and most importantly, a parent who feels successful in the Chinuch interaction.

This model does not exclusively apply to parenting interactions, but it is relevant to any interaction or relationship that we encompass in our life. How do we approach our relationships with our friends, our spouse, and our family? Do we view them as unique individuals whom we are constantly making an effort to understand their needs and wants, or do we project our own need and wants to the people we interact with on an everyday basis? When the people close to us have a problem, do we help them because we truly care for them, or because we have a need for their problem to go away? From the naked eye, these differences are subtle and difficult to decode, but to the ones so close to us, the distinction can be detected almost instantaneously.

The concepts expressed in this article are based on the teachings of Dr. Ephraim Becker, PhD, a dear mentor of mine.