

Communication: Empathy and Understanding

By: Benjie Stern

Nancy Reagan had created the slogan "Just Say No to drugs" as part of an advertising campaign, to convince children from all walks of the United States from engaging in drug use. Dr. Abraham Twersky, poking fun of the lack of true understanding the advertisement has on the difficulties people face with real life problems, has a similar slogan hanging on the wall of his drug clinic stating, "Nancy Regan's solution to the homeless, just get a home!"

Healthy communication and relationships hang off the backdrop of the concept that we do not know "what is in the hearts of our friend". The same holds true in the parent-child relationship, as the tone of healthy interactions are colored by "I don't know you, yet I would like to get to know you". When a child is an infant a mother knows the child very well. She knows when he is tired, hungry, and dirty. However, as the baby begins to grow into the toddler years, the child becomes an individual with unique emotional needs, temperaments, and talents. Each child is so different than the other, as we often find even two brothers whose personalities are day and night.

Nevertheless, as parents, we tend to project ourselves onto our children. Projection is when we look at someone else and observe their actions, and believe that we know their motivations and how they feel. When we assume that we know our child, we are assuming that the feelings or lack of feelings expressed by them particularly relates to the values we associate with that feeling. We believe that we know the child as if they were ourselves. We assume that they operate under the same expectations, needs, and assumptions that we do. We begin to solve and fix the problems that our children are presenting us by bombarding them with solutions and/or downgrading the problem itself. Some clear indications that we have entered solve/fix mode is when we begin to use the word 'just'. "Why can't you just sit next to me the entire davening, why can't you just go to sleep when I tell you to, why can't you just study like your brother".

There is a natural tendency for parents to feel that as long as we know our child like ourselves we can have full control of him and his behaviors. Also, we will not feel helpless when we can't solve his problems. However, we must admit that our child is his own individual and we must learn to treat him as "other", and on the level of development that he is currently holding.

The advantage of treating our child as "other" helps both the parent and the child in the relationship. When a child doesn't perform or feel according to expectations, the parent's stress level rises. The parent becomes angry and begins to force their mandates or feelings onto the child in way that makes the child angry. In response, the parent who is confused and feels that they know their child perfectly, as they expected the child to have already complied or felt differently, will get even more frustrated. The spiral of escalation twists up and up, sometimes to the point that a parent loses it and ends up doing something normally unthinkable.

In the child's world, and in most relationships, when the parent operates in "solve/fix" mode to the child's problems, the child begins to feel even more

misunderstood, as they do not get the emotional support that they need to overcome the problem. The child then responds with arguments and angry feelings.

On the other hand, when a child feels that his parent is spending more energy in trying to understand him than spewing solutions, the child begins to feel that they are not alone with the problem. The hurt that the child has been feeling is diminished as the parent's sympathy serves as an emotional first aid for bruised feelings.

Solve/Fix Approach:

David: Michael did not want to play with me today during recess

Mom: You'll find other friends

David: But I like Michael

Mom: You'll get over it

David: Oh, Mom! (Cries and argues)

Mom: You are nine years old and you are still such a cry baby!

Care/Empathize Approach:

Mom: "You must have been lonely during recess"

"You must have felt hurt when Rachel did not want to play with you"

Child: (With a small Grin) Yes I did, but you know there are other children in the playground I can play with- Thanks Mom!"

When we genuinely acknowledge a child's plight, voice his disappointment, and spend more energy in actively listening, the child is able to gather the strength to face reality. Remember we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. When we offer the time and compassion to understand our children, we send the message "You're important to me, and I want to understand your feelings". Behind that vital message is the reassurance: "As you feel peaceful, you'll find the best solutions."

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