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SHELTERED IN THE SUN



By Elisheva Appel | JULY 4, 2023



Advice from educational experts and experienced parents on sheltering your kids without stifling their summer fun



Summer makes us think of long, lazy days, with kids frolicking in the great outdoors, often without an adult in sight. It's axiomatic that kids need time to just *be*. But is all that unstructured, unsupervised time healthy for kids?

The conundrum isn't a new one. In 1984, an unsigned editorial in the Jewish Observer had this to say: "Summer is a season for loosening up... The added space offers people an opportunity for exploration of their environment and beyond, as well as of their inner selves — a time for discovery and growth. Untended, untamed, the growth can become wild, tangled, a sorry mess."

"All my 'education' came from the country," remembers Rivka. Describing a widely shared experience, she recalls being on her own for hours at a time, running around in packs of kids of mixed ages, without any understanding of what topics were off-limits and what type of touch was a no-no. "We sat under a tree with long, overhanging vines, where no parent would ever come." The memories of what she and her friends spoke of makes her fear for her kids.

Kids' developmental needs haven't changed, but the risks of exploration have exploded, says Mrs. Aliza Feder, head *mechaneches* at Bais Yaakov Machon Ora in Passaic, and a noted speaker and author. "The worst they could ever do, the worst they could ever access, has changed so much from when I was a teen thirty years ago," she says. "Every time you think it can't get worse, it gets worse."

It's enough to make a responsible parent want to ground her children for life.

And yet, one of the crucial processes of maturation is individuation. Kids and teens need to make their own mistakes as they find their way, and psychologists and *mechanchim* are unanimous that the helicopter parent who hovers protectively, and the lawnmower parent, who flattens obstacles in her kids' paths, both breed unhealthy adults.

"Our community has been mindful of threats from without, but an overwhelming majority of problematic situations have been from within," says Dr. Shloimie Zimmerman, a psychologist who directs a group practice with offices in Brooklyn and Queens. "We've been busy patching the exterior walls, but if all you have is outside walls, one breach and you're done." And of course, walls don't protect from internal threats. A better approach, he says, is to also arm the citizens within and teach each one to defend himself.

Through communal education and in his recent book, *From Boys to Men*, he makes an impassioned case for the use of proactive education to combat the dangers of modern society.

How is it done? How do we protect our children without coddling them?

Early Footings

"Your relationship with them is the foundation of everything," says Mrs. Feder. "More than anything else, cultivate a warm, open relationship with your children, so they feel comfortable talking about personal things with you."

Dr. Zimmerman similarly quotes mussar giant Rav Shlomo Wolbe, who says, "Early childhood education must have a long-term perspective. Parents must build such a warm relationship with their child that the relationship will survive and assist the child even during the difficult period of adolescence."

It's good parenting advice in general, but it's especially applicable as your child heads out into the world on his own. Play the long game and don't sweat the small stuff; a relationship with lots of criticism might get him to put his socks in the hamper (or not), but it won't lead him to turn to you for help with personal struggles.

In other words, protecting your child's innocence starts in the cradle.

A child with strong self-worth and clear values, says Dr. Zimmerman, will be much more capable of saying no when his internal alarm is triggered. Especially in a society like ours, which emphasizes deference to adults and those in authority, it's important to teach kids assertiveness and the importance of listening to their instincts. Although the docile kid who is always *mevater* might be easy to parent, it's also a trait that puts him at risk; he needs to practice speaking up when he doesn't want to share or be bullied into playing a particular game. From the earliest years, kids should be taught that they're allowed to say "no" if something feels wrong. Role-playing can be a great tool for helping kids practice sticking up for themselves.

Healthy boundaries and the importance of privacy can also be taught at a very young age. Knock before entering even very young kids' rooms; don't go through their stuff without permission. From the time they comprehend, have matter-of-fact conversations about personal safety practices. Teach your kids about privacy and owning their bodies as you toilet train them.

A full treatment of personal safety practices and abuse prevention is beyond the scope of this article, but should be standard practice in every home.

The Best Defense

It's a scary world out there. What our community is beginning to realize, more and more, is that it's a scary world in here, too. "Stranger danger" is an outdated message that ignores the reality that most threats to children's innocence come from people who look just like them — people they know and often trust, like classmates, neighbors, and family members.

Instead of passively hoping our kids will be fine, says Dr. Zimmerman, we need to play offense, proactively educating our children, emphasizing the Torah's values and perspective. His approach is endorsed by numerous *gedolim*. As Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky says, "If we're open with kids, they'll be open with us, and that's most important."

In order to best protect your child, Dr. Zimmerman recommends preemptively sharing the basics of physical maturation and the challenges of kedushah before children reach puberty. At that stage, the information is filed away as mildly interesting but not alluring or exciting, and is then available when the child needs it. When he later encounters misinformation, or struggles with related topics, he'll already have a bank of reliable information, and ideally, even strategies for dealing with the challenges.

The best education happens organically, as a topic comes up in daily life, news, or something they're learning (Chumash and Gemara provide many opportunities), but a sit-down chat is also fine if that's what works for your relationship. Critically, though, it shouldn't be a one-time lecture, but the opening of an ongoing conversation.

Even in earlier decades, before the onslaught of technology, the majority of children picked up bits and pieces of adult knowledge, and today it's almost inevitable that children will encounter some information you'd rather they hadn't.

"I can think of two separate incidents where my children were so upset with me, and justifiably so, because they heard something from friends instead of me," recalls Mrs. Feder. "They were things I didn't think I needed to share with them because 'they wouldn't find out.' They deserved to hear it from their mother, not the grapevine, but I pretended that we were living in a much more sheltered world than we are, probably out of wishful thinking."

The benefits of proactive education are enormous.

“My son was schmoozing with me and mentioned some inappropriate comments boys made at recess based on what they’re learning in Gemara,” reports Shaina. “I asked what he does when that happens. He says he walks away; he’s not interested. And I think he’s not interested because he knows he can ask his parents anything, and we’ll answer him honestly, so he doesn’t feel a need to join in and ‘learn.’ These inappropriate ‘education’ sessions will always happen, but how much your kid will participate is partially up to you.”

Of course, inoculating your children is no guarantee they won’t ever be party to vulgar conversations.

Still, says Dr. Zimmerman, you haven’t failed if your child does encounter some inappropriate exposure or misinformation. “The most toxic damage isn’t misinformation; the fundamental issue is that silence speaks volumes.” When a child encounters a topic he thinks is taboo, that he has never heard his parent or rebbi mention, he assumes there is something dirty or inappropriate about the subject. Quickly, that translates into the child himself feeling dirty and tainted, which can sometimes precipitate a downward spiral.

Instead of maintaining a studied silence, recommends Dr. Zimmerman, go on the offensive. Explain how physical drives are a normal and healthy part of life and where they fit into our value system, while emphasizing their private nature. No matter when or how you choose to introduce these ideas to your children, remember that the key is the relationship; your child should feel confident in your steady support and availability on this journey.

More than any specific piece of information, the critical piece is framing our struggles with kedushah as normative and healthy. If a child mentally divides the world into Shabbos, kashrus, Torah, *avodas hamiddos* on the one hand, and physical drives on the other, he develops a sense of shame, as well as a feeling that these holy parts of the Jewish experience are unclean. We need to show up and be there for our kids, helping them understand that struggles or temptations in this area aren’t an indication that they aren’t really a *ben Torah* or *bas Yisrael*, and that they aren’t on their own in facing their challenges.

Sunlight: the Best Disinfectant

Even the child with the best preparation, whose parents maintain stellar lines of communication, shouldn’t just be tossed out onto the street and told to come home for supper. But how do we find the balance between responsible supervision and being overbearing?

While we all want to keep our kids away from pernicious influences, a level of control that would eliminate any chance of exposure isn’t only highly impractical, it’s not even desirable, says Dr. Zimmerman. “Even North Korea hasn’t been successful, and we don’t want to run a dictatorship or be paranoid. That’s also risky — parents who are uber-anxious create unhealthy children.”

The most effective rules, he says, encourage transparency and mutual oversight. Don’t go off with one kid to a private spot; the bigger the group, the better. Play should be in open areas with foot traffic.

Since both inappropriate conversations and abuse thrive in secrecy and privacy, pay special attention to times that are unstructured and unsupervised. For example, when all the adults are sleeping on Shabbos afternoon, who is watching the kids? When the kids are finally playing quietly for a long time in the basement, it can be tempting to enjoy the quiet interlude, but a safer practice would be to pop in at occasional intervals with an offer of drinks or to admire their Magna-Tile towers.

“It’s risky when they feel they’re totally on their own, with no one around,” says Dr. Zimmerman. “You don’t need to keep them in your bungalow the whole time, but having no real idea where your kid is or with whom for a long time isn’t really appropriate.” You’re going frog-catching in the woods? Sure! With whom? Not just Moshe — take three or four boys. Around when do you expect to be back?

“Keep a close watch at a long distance,” says Mrs. Feder, describing her ideal of supervision for teens. “Don’t take their emotional temperature five times a day.” She suggests being extremely mindful never to invade your kids’ privacy; she doesn’t generally believe in reading their messages or diaries, for example, but rather keeping an eye on their overall mood and affect. She’ll only comment, though, in cases of extreme or prolonged dysregulation. If a mood change seems extreme, she might ask them to consider their sleep or eating patterns, for example, or delicately ask if something they’ve heard or seen is weighing on them.

It’s healthy to have a general sense of what’s normal in your child’s peer group, without launching a full-scale FBI investigation. Have a sense of what other mothers allow in terms of staying up late or going out at night. Do other mothers permit their kids to drive around with friends, and with what limitations? If it’s common in your kid’s peer group, says Mrs. Feder, you may have to allow it, even if you’d really prefer not; save your firm nos for true safety concerns.

Certain ground rules are extremely common among all parents we spoke to, and highly endorsed by experts. Never allow kids to lock bedroom doors, unless they’re the only one there and need privacy while getting dressed, etc.

A number of families go further and don’t allow socializing in kids’ rooms at all; all playing and studying with friends needs to be in public places with foot traffic.

Sleepovers are a matter of significant debate among experienced mothers; most don’t like them and don’t see any purpose in them, but feel pressured to reluctantly allow them as their kids reach upper elementary age.

Filtering all devices is absolutely critical and a basic safety measure, but it’s only a small part of a battle that includes education, ongoing conversation, and continued vigilance. Both kids and adults need to know that while filters protect against inadvertent slips, they’re far from foolproof.

If your child has a phone or other device, says Mrs. Feder, there needs to be a clear understanding that parents can see it at any time to review the apps and media the child has access to. Still, there must be an ironclad understanding that the parent will never read texts, emails, or any other personal content.

Knowing who their kids are with and where they are is a common parent favorite, although it’s critical to realize that the knowledge that your kid is with “good” kids from “good” families can lull you into a sense of false complacency, points out Dr. Zimmerman.

Of course, we want to weed out obvious red flags — Chani shouldn't play at the house of the friend who has unlimited access to cable TV or whose unstable older brother will be supervising the playdate — but assuming that a "fine home" means our child is safe is a potentially deadly mistake.

"In my beautiful neighborhood, it's the kid from the 'top' school, from the finest home with the most *erliche* parents, who had the most exposure, and felt the need to share the wealth with her friends," says Baila, though her comment could have been made by dozens of mothers. "They're the family that if I'd asked friends, 'Can I send my kid there?' everyone would have reassured me."

Similarly, Malky reluctantly allowed her daughter to sleep over at a friend's, since they knew the host family well. They were completely blindsided when, over the course of the night, the host's daughter let slip about serious impropriety her father was guilty of.

Still, keeping a watchful, albeit non-intrusive eye on your child's peer group is beneficial.

If there's a solid parent-child relationship, and you have a real, specific concern, you can have a level-headed conversation with your child, says Mrs. Feder. "Chaim's language surprised me. How did you feel about his choice of words?" "Did you notice the change in Shani's dress?"

If you just have a general discomfort with your child's friend, say nothing, she stresses. Generalized anxiety accomplishes nothing for anyone and is an unfair burden to put on a child.

Showing up is another deceptively simple weapon in the battle for our children's *neshamos*. Concerned about the reckless driving or thoughtless partying that teens are up to? You offer to drive, says Mrs. Feder, or be the chaperone.

Baila goes to great lengths to make her house the happening place to be. She provides generous snacks, buys popular games and toys, and is the mother who tolerates the noisy, messy, chaotic activities that others refuse to countenance.

The upshot? "Last Shabbos, I had two teenage boys schmoozing with me in the backyard while I watched my baby, and another was reading on the couch. My own boys had already left for shul. It was hard — I just wanted a little space — but having my finger on the pulse of what they're talking about — and knowing that they're comfortable with me — is priceless."

Although it feels like too much at times, she says the hard work pays off. She learned that a neighbor had a non-kosher device he was using to show videos to other boys. How did she know? They were huddled on her porch, and she simply glanced out the window and watched the screen. If she hadn't made her home the welcoming place that it is, she might never have known and been able to deal with the issue.

According to Aliza, mother of a large family, some parents anxiously confuse the need for presence with a need to entertain their kids. "When parents are overwhelmed with their kids being off school, it's often because they take too much responsibility to entertain them," she observes. "I never take responsibility for entertaining my kids. I'll buy projects, books, and games, but the message is, 'I trust you to think of something to do.' When their boredom doesn't trigger me, they don't get the emotional satisfaction of a negative reaction."

Still, most parents consider bored kids with days upon unstructured days stretching ahead of them a recipe for disaster. Without over-scheduling them or scripting their every move, Nechama tries to put basic structure into her kids' day, by scheduling an hour in the pool in middle of the day, or the occasional bowling trip to give some shape to a limp and formless summer.

Mrs. Feder advises aiming for the happy medium. "I don't suggest you make the mistake of letting your child make zero summer plans," she says, "but it's okay for her to make the mistake of slightly under-scheduling herself. Many teens actually have a pretty good idea of how much structure they need. Sometimes we really do need to trust them to know themselves best, as much as we would like to think we always know what's right for them."

Damage Control

It's almost inevitable; sooner or later, that your daughter will come across something you would have preferred she not know about just yet, or at all. Time to panic?

"The overwhelming majority of kids will be fine," Dr. Zimmerman assures us. "The biggest predictor of how they will fare is how adults respond."

Despite your discomfort, think about the future. "How you react to what they tell you will determine what they tell you in the future," says Aliza. If your child wants to discuss something private and you're blushing and changing the topic, "You've guaranteed a shul parking lot conversation," she says.

Although some parents worry that they need to show strong condemnation when their children bring up topics the parents aren't comfortable with, those in the trenches know that by the time they reach adolescence, children have already absorbed their parents' values. What they need from their parents is unconditional support: Praise the child for sharing and avoid criticism.

Aliza credits her very strong relationships with her young adult children to this nonjudgmental attitude. Although her teen son is struggling with his Yiddishkeit, he knows that his mother always has his back. "He still feels comfortable coming to me. When his girlfriend dumped him, he still came to me to be comforted, even though I've made it crystal clear that I don't want them to have girlfriends." It's obvious to her that showing disapproval wouldn't curb his relationships with girls; it would only ensure that he never discusses his struggles with her again.

When Dr. Zimmerman's young son came home gleefully experimenting with expletives he'd picked up on the bus, his father didn't overreact. "I explained, 'Here's what these words mean. Here's why we don't joke about them.' That was the last I heard of it, because I didn't add any fuel to the fire."

Overreaction and urgently trying to shut down conversations or topics creates a taboo feel that makes the behavior more desirable to some kids. Instead, combat misinformation with credible information. That principle is why Baila has found herself having chats with her preteen boys about what the difference is between a curse word and language that's not allowed because it's simply not refined; she believes that frank conversation is always more effective than

simple proscription.

Explain that it’s perfectly normal to be curious, says Dr. Zimmerman — you don’t want kids thinking there’s something wrong with them for their interest. “If you’re clear, coherent, calm, and truthful; if you validate the normalcy of their drives and failings, we can mitigate — not solve — much of the dysfunction and pain that kids experience.”

Protecting our kids is a lifelong process, with goalposts that move constantly.

Whether from obliviousness, fear, or awkwardness, or because of pushback from fiercely independent teens, it’s tempting to abdicate the role of being that constant reassuring presence in our kids’ lives. As Dr. Zimmerman says, “When our kids are most challenged is when we show up the least.”

But by being there for our kids throughout their lives — from the earliest years of building up their selves and conveying the Torah’s values, through the teen years of turmoil and challenge — we can be the anchor that keeps them moored and safe as they blossom into adults who can be proud of themselves.

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