

EVERY CHILD NEEDS TO HEAR “I LOVE YOU”

Important Suggestions for Parents

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We hear a lot about the importance of telling children that you love them. Is it really important to say those words? Isn't it enough to show love by being there for them?

In reply to this important concern of many parents, I would like to share a true story of a family that I worked with many years ago, and then provide some important lessons – *Mussarei Haskel* – that we can learn from them.

The client, 16 year old Chaim D., the youngest of three children, was a third year student at a yeshiva high school. His siblings were Dov, 21, and Dvora, 19. The father, 15 years his wife's senior, had severe health problems. The mother was involved with *gemilas chasodim* in the community. Chaim was referred to his school counselor because he was hardly at school this year. Chaim was exhibiting a variety of physical symptoms including headaches, weakness, and nausea. Despite extensive medical examinations, nothing physical was found. The doctors believed that these symptoms were psychologically based. Feeling miserable, Chaim would do anything to help himself.

I saw Chaim for six months on a weekly basis. When he was “too ill to leave the house,” I patiently urged him to come to sessions with his pillow, aspirins, or whatever medical aid he needed. I also had sessions with his parents and family. It did not take me long to assess that the symptoms did have a psychological basis. In one crucial session, I told the family as a unit that I wished to present an important observation. Although mother certainly had always done her best to raise her three children, she was only one person and naturally had given more love and attention to whichever child was not well. The

older children had particular medical problems, and Chaim had at a very early age learned that to be “sick” is to get mother’s love and attention. That is not to suggest that Chaim was malingering; he was really sick. Much of how we function physically happens for psychological reasons. Following my presentation, Mrs. D. turned to Chaim and in an empathic and loving tone, said: “Chaimel, you don’t have to be sick for me to love you. I love you whether you are sick or well and I would much rather love you well, so please get well.”

Soon all the symptoms began to disappear. Chaim graduated with his class and continued into Bais Medrash. At the age of twenty he got married to a fine bas yisroel and he invited the Wangrofskys as “friends of the family.” There are no words to adequately describe the *nachas* that I felt as the D.s led Chaim to the *chuppah*. He still calls me just to say hello and find out “how I’m doing.”

It would be too easy for me to list all the factors that went into this therapeutic “success story.” I would simply state that there was *Siyata Dishmaya* operating with this family. I am truly grateful to HaShem for having been fortunate to have touched and been touched by the D. family. The lessons we learn from the story are basic and important and cannot be overstated.

The first lesson is - tell your children that you love them. **They need to hear of your love genuinely and frequently. Don’t assume that they know it.** Often parents will ask about disciplining their children. Invariably, my answer to them is: How confident is your child that you love him? If the answer is “very confident,” we can deal with the discipline question. If not, let’s work on that basic need first and put the other questions on hold.

The second lesson is – do not make the mistake of neglecting any of your children if one child has special needs. Every child needs your attention, whether he/she appears sick, problematic, weak, or if he/she seems to be happy, adjusted, and independent. Every child needs to be loved and recognized, and

needs quality time to be given to him/her by both parents. “Forgetting” or simply not having the energy, or telling oneself that “Chaim” or “Rachel” is doing well so he/she doesn’t need my involvement, can *chas v’shalom* have frightening ramifications.

Parents often encounter issues with their children that can be remedied without outside intervention. Sometimes, situations arise that could be addressed through parenting workshops. In more complex cases such as the one described above, the family clearly benefits when parents are wise enough to reach out for help from a *frum* therapist.

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