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Love for our Children is Food for their Souls

The importance of love for the healthy development of our children is well-known. Yet many look at this in a very superficial manner, so we will try to clarify it thoroughly.

Why must parents love their children? What is the purpose of this love? The bond between parents and children must be based on mutual love, but what is the goal of that love? The truest answer is that this love should lead to unity among all of creation. *Ahavah* (love) has the same numerical value as *echad* (one). Through loving our children, it will be easier to generate wide-reaching *ahavas Yisrael*. But we are not dealing with this deeper understanding at present; our goal here is to clarify why love is essential in the home for the children's healthy development.

We intuitively know that just as parents must give their children bread to eat, clothing to wear, water to drink, books and a knapsack for school, so must they give them love. But what we don't know is why. What purpose does it serve?

Every person exists on many different levels, both physical and spiritual. Just as it is clear to every father and mother that they must give their children food, clothing, and all their basic physical needs, it must be clear to them that it is just as essential (and really, even more so) for the child to be loved. As food sustains the body, love sustains the soul.

A child who does not receive love from his parents suffers like a child who is not given breakfast. If love goes missing for a few days, it is as if the child was denied lunch and dinner as well. If he goes without love for one day, the child may overcome the difficulty, but after a number of days, he is likely to become dangerously ill. Just like every parent knows that they need to supply food for the body, so they need to supply love for the soul on an ongoing basis.

The Vital Importance of Love in Education

There are two reasons parents must provide for their children. The first is that the children cannot take care of themselves, so the parents are responsible for providing all the children's material needs. The second reason is that the parents are obligated to develop the child's personality and to educate him which requires love.

It is written in *Mishlei*,^[2] "Hashem rebukes the one He loves." When one is certain that the person

rebuking him loves him, he can generally accept the rebuke. But if he believes that the rebuke is motivated by spite, hatred, or jealousy, it is unlikely that he will accept it. Without healthy doses of parental love, it is difficult for the child to accept rebuke and guidance from the parent.

Rebuke is only one example. Love is required for any goal related to education. As we explained at length earlier, before education can be instilled, there must first be mutual love established between parents and children, which serves as a bridge for them. Just as water from a lake needs a pipe so that it can reach a house and provide it with running water, so does education need love, which serves as a pipe for effective transmission of important lessons.

When Moshe *Rabbeinu* was preparing to build the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), he initially planned to build the vessels first and then the *Mishkan* afterward. Betzalel (the chief engineer of the *Mishkan*) said to him, "If we make the vessels before the building, where will we store them before it is ready? First, we must build the *Mishkan* and then we should make the vessels." Moshe *Rabbeinu* agreed with Betzalel's logic, and even praised him for it.

So it is with education. We cannot form the content without first creating a container. The container is love, and it must be built and put in place first, like the *Mishkan*. Only afterwards can the content (the educational matter itself) be delivered. Without this container, it is as if we are pouring water from a bottle without a cup below to catch it, and instead of being neatly contained, the water spills out. Without love, education goes to waste.

Thus, love is needed for two reasons: (1) as food for the child's soul, and (2) as a container for education. The first aspect is not related to the parents' role as educators, but is part of their responsibility as parents, who must provide for their children's needs. Since the soul hungers for love with the same intensity as the body hungers for regular meals, parents must regularly offer love to their children. The other aspect relates to the parents' role as educators. In order to properly educate, a parent must first develop this love.

We can observe this truth in the natural development of the relationship between parents and children. Think about it: When a baby is born, do the parents first express love for it, or do they try to educate it? Obviously, a parent who tries to educate a newborn baby is wasting his time. But natural love for the child begins to flow starting from his first day on this earth. This is how Hashem designed the relationship between parents and children. First, the love is given, and as the child grows, the parents assume their role as educators.

The problem is that as children grow up, the parents neglect to mix love into the educational process. Parents love their children, but many think that love somehow contradicts education - or at least that their love should not be mixed in with it. This is a common error parents make.

Parents' Love for Children is Generally Imperfect

Hashem has implanted in each person a love for his children, so there cannot be a parent who does not love his children.

But is this love absolute? Often, there is a conflict between the child's needs and those of the parent, and the parent must decide between the two. At times, the parent will put his own needs first, and at other times, he will put the child's needs first. If a parent is unaware that he sometimes puts his own needs ahead of his child's, he is not in touch with himself.

There are many examples. Sometimes, there is one candy in the house. Do the parents always save it for their child? When a child needs something, do the parents always give it to him without delay? If you are honest with yourself, you will realize that you do not always provide 100 percent of the child's

needs, either because of laziness, or because your own needs come first. Is there a parent who can declare that he was always as patient with his child as the child needed him to be? Do parents always determine their budget based on their children's needs, or do they sometimes spend the money instead on a new cabinet, suit, or car?

Another example: When the mother is sleeping at night, and at 2:00 am, the baby awakens and cries, does she get up right away, or does she wait until the third time he cries out? Many mothers will claim that the baby will calm down by himself, or that there is value in training the baby not to cry every night. This may be true, but often the real reason is that it is very hard to leave the pillow at such an hour. The parent in such a case is putting his needs (albeit appropriately) first.

We must stress a basic concept here: Just as a child has physical and emotional needs, so does a parent. A parent cannot and should not sacrifice her own genuine needs for her child. Ignoring these needs can cause her physically or emotionally to collapse. On the other hand, a parent must overcome laziness and improper desires for the benefit of their children.

Is there a parent who can declare that he has never raised his voice even once in the house? Or, when he did raise his voice, can he honestly say that he only did so for educational reasons, and not as an expression of some inner anger?

The examples differ from person to person, but they apply in all areas of life. Any parent who searches himself will find that although he invests a lot in his children, at times his own desires and interests take precedence.

So on one hand, there is no parent who does not love his children, but on the other hand, no parent can claim that his love is perfect and totally free of any self-interest. This is completely normal, since this is how Hashem made man. It is common that one's self-interest affects his relationship with his community, spouse, and children. This differs from person to person, but on some level it applies to everyone.

One of our tasks as parents is to continue to grow from our current level, and to deepen the love we have for our children as much as possible. The natural love for the children should remain, but each parent must know that when there is a conflict between her interests and those of her children (such as an issue of laziness or personal desire), putting herself first reflects an imperfection in her love toward them. The stronger the love is, the more readily will laziness and personal desire disappear.

We must stress again that a parent has essential needs, and these should not be sacrificed for the children.

Understandably, it is difficult to pass this test perfectly. As with all of life's tests, sometimes we succeed more and sometimes less, but the first step is to identify that the task and test exist. If one believes that his love for his children is perfect, he is not capable of acknowledging this test. But if he realizes that he sometimes wrongly puts himself first, he can begin to deal with it. As he overcomes this tendency, his love for his children will naturally strengthen. He can expand his *ahavas Yisrael* and come to love each Jew like his own child.

We need to flame the fire of our love for our children so that it can be stronger than one's self-interests. Parents' love for children is like a piece of coal. There is a fire inside, but it has not yet emerged. When one blows on the coal and fans the flame, the fire bursts forth. So, too, the parental love is initially incomplete, and one of our major responsibilities is to continually flame the love so that it will burst forth.

Does the Child Always Feel his Parents' Love?

It is very common for parents to feel great love for their children, while those same children feel that their parents don't love them. This is not so common at a young age, but as the children grow older, many will tell their therapists that their parents don't love them. (They are often incorrect, but this is how they feel.)

To address this problem, we must first see where it comes from. Fundamentally, the claim is false, because parents always love their children, but every falsehood must contain a spark of truth.

As we mentioned and emphasized many times, parents love their children and care about them; otherwise, they would not invest so much time, effort, and resources in them. Why are their children oblivious to this?

A partial explanation relates to what was said above. If the love were perfect, the children would naturally sense it. But no parent is perfect, so the children sense the areas in which their parents put themselves first, and decide, erroneously, that there is no love at all.

The Importance of Verbal Expression of Love

To complicate matters further, the love is often not expressed. Parents do not take the trouble to express it openly and clearly toward their children, in the form of clear statements or actions. (These two factors are related. If the love would be perfect, it would automatically be expressed openly.)

In general, the reason this misunderstanding occurs is because parents are busy with the practical aspects of child raising, such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, buying clothes, and other tasks that can take up the whole day. Although all of these tasks are accompanied with love, the fact that we are, on a daily basis, much more focused on the practical realm than the emotional realm, conceals the love from being apparent to the children. Even when we help them with homework, there is minimal expression of feelings. When a child has difficulty with a math problem, we just tell him how to solve it, and the discussion ends there.

If we would ask any parent why she does so much for her children, she would say that she loves them. After all, she doesn't do these things for the neighbor's children. But if we would probe further, we would find that this love she claims to feel is hidden. Though the parents are usually aware of the love, the children often are not.

To illustrate, we will provide an example related to marriage: Is it enough for spouses to "know" that they are loved, or are words also important? Is it enough to say such words one time, or should they be said on a regular basis? Is it enough for a woman to feel loved since she knows that her husband supports the family and makes sure that the house is well-stocked? Most women would say that it is not enough. She needs to hear verbal expressions of love. Practical aspects of the home are the technical requirements of married life, but the husband cannot only talk about those things. First and foremost he must build the relationship with his words.

But when we consider the relationship between parents and children, we find that the practical aspects of life take up most of the conversation, while the emotional bond, if present at all, is nearly invisible.

Every parent must make an accounting: Does the emotional element of their relationship with their children come out often enough in conversation? It often happens that only after the child displays signs of an emotional problem and a therapist advises conversing with the child in a way that will help his emotional state do the parents make an effort to express their love verbally. We shouldn't wait for such a problem - we should try to avoid it developing at all.

Sometimes the emotional bond is deficient to the point of absurdity. Parents devote themselves tirelessly to caring for their children's needs. Mothers prepare their children's clothing each night for the next day, and stay up until late at night washing and drying the children's clothing, but they don't devote even one percent of that effort into making a direct emotional connection with their children.

Three Ways of Showing Love

To illustrate a proper bond, we must first describe the structure of the soul. We will see how the words of our Sages regarding the soul are the source of our comments here about child raising.

The soul has three layers (modes of expression): action, speech, and thought. The parents must channel their love in these three ways, so that all the garments of the soul will be properly developed. Most parents succeed with the actions of parenting. Most of their efforts go into the actions required for taking care of their children. But the aspect of speech generally needs improvement, and the aspect of thought in most homes does not even exist.

Thinking about the Love of our Children

We are not yet dealing with the aspect of thought, but we will touch on it briefly. Love, as mentioned, must be revealed on all three levels - action, speech, and thought.

When two people love each other, and there is a physical separation between them, does each take pleasure in remembering that the other loves him? Of course he does! The Rambam writes that people who love each other often think of this love. Thinking about love is not a new idea. It is written in the words of our rabbis, and the Rambam applies it to love of Hashem^[3]. Just as this applies to love of Hashem, so should it apply to love between parents and children.

There is great benefit to parents who invest effort in loving thoughts. All parents are familiar with the tension and anger that their children's antics can arouse. Even though the parent tries to put the anger out of his mind, he isn't always successful, and in any case, the next mischievous act he does reawakens the anger toward the child. But when a parent gets used to thinking about the love she has for her child, that is the best recipe for calming the anger, as it says, "Love covers all offenses."^[4]

With Hashem's help, we will elaborate later on this idea, but we will now delve into the realm of emotions, and show how they should be verbally expressed in the parent-child relationship.

Introducing Emotions in the Relationship with Children

Along with the natural love every parent has for her child, there is another kind of love, referred to as, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"^[5] which doesn't come naturally and must constantly be developed.

This second kind of love is not so easy to develop and express. Returning to the example of a married couple, the relationship there is easier to develop, because the two spouses relate to each other as equals and it is easier to build a bond of love. But when parents want to build a relationship with their children, and because, for the sake of discipline in the home, the parents must take a higher position, the relationship sometimes becomes more like that of a boss to his employee, and this can result in children developing a feeling of inferiority.

Each parent should consider this: Until what age do you say to your children, "I love you"? I think we will find that as the children get older, we say it less and less. At some point, the emotional bond weakens, which is the opposite of the proper way to raise a family.

Every person is comprised of a body and a soul, the main part being the soul. But when it comes to the nuts and bolts of child raising, we get everything backwards. We do so much for their bodies, making sure that the shirt they are wearing is clean and their shoes are polished, but few parents give sufficient attention to the more important part of their child: his soul.

As explained above, a person has three layers – action, speech (the medium through which emotions are expressed), and thought. By doing for the child, we develop the child’s level of action; by speech and acts of love, we develop his emotions; and we must also work to develop his thought.

Often, there is a close connection between the active and emotional arenas. For example, if a child sees that his mother has not prepared the clothes that he needs, although it appears to be just an action, he can be emotionally hurt. He not only misses the shirt, but also the love that comes with it. But it doesn’t always work both ways. When the mother does prepare the clothing daily, the child only senses the action, and not the inner emotional element.

Again, we are not claiming that parents are uncaring towards their children, because this is generally not the problem. Parents do want to provide the best for their children. Almost every parent puts a maximum degree of effort into actively caring for her children. But even though she knows she must develop her child emotionally, she does not express her emotions properly.

What is the root of this problem? In some cases, the parents themselves are emotionally blocked, and they cannot even express their emotions to each other properly. If so, the root of the problem far precedes their relationship with their children. They may have been raised that way themselves, or they may have gone through difficult experiences in their lives. Sometimes, it is simply that they are emotionally underdeveloped, just as some people are less mentally developed than others.

In such a case, the parent must first deal with his own emotions and try to develop and express them properly. This problem needs to be corrected not only for the sake of their children, but also for his relationship with his spouse and with his friends. Without healthy emotions, his friendships will be shallow. In fact, he will not even be able to have a proper relationship with the Creator. But since this problem does not relate specifically to children’s education, we will not deal with it here.

The Importance of Building the Child’s Emotional World

We are referring now to parents who are basically emotionally healthy and have a good relationship with each other, who now want to build a strong emotional bond with their children in order to build their emotional world. How can they do it?

The first step is to ensure that the child’s emotions are not blocked, and that he can express his emotions to the proper degree. After ascertaining that the child’s emotions are properly developed, he can begin to express his emotions to us as parents.

In today’s social reality, the emotional realm is not dealt with in school at all. It is completely ignored with boys, and girls are not given much encouragement to express their emotions in a healthy way. As a result, they tend to experience unhealthy outbursts when they are very hurt or under pressure. As they get older, the absence of emotional maturity becomes more and more evident.

When we want to check if a child’s emotions are adequately developed, there is a simple test: if the child knows how to feel and identify his emotions, then he will be able to express his feelings to others. How many children can properly express feelings? A very small percentage. And even those who are properly developed did not necessarily turn out that way as a result of good parenting. Just as there are many children who are intellectually mature and can understand things that are not explained to them, so many children are naturally emotionally mature. Most children, though, are

somewhat blocked in this area, not to the extent that they need special therapy, but enough that they need our help. As parents, we need to develop their emotions.

We are not discussing merely removing negative emotions here, such as when a child is too shy to even go to the corner store and obviously needs more self-confidence, but rather the building of an emotional world that will be properly expressed, such as through joy or love.

There are parents who invest effort in teaching their children joy, but love is rarely taught, and so most people do not know how to love Hashem. Though emotions may be expressed from time to time, they are not systematically developed, so the emotional bond between parent and child, or between siblings, or among friends is deficient. Even our service of Hashem suffers.

Besides the spiritual benefits, a child requires properly developed emotions for his well-being. When parents develop this realm successfully, his soul can be happy and loving.

Children often receive the impression from their parents that they will only consider them to be successful if they always score 100 on their tests and never come home with a note of complaint from the teacher. They also have to help in the house.

The truth is that a successful child is one who is emotionally healthy – happy, full of life, loving, and beloved. When the child has these qualities instilled in him, it becomes so much easier for him to be naturally successful.

Every parent must see emotional development as a goal no less important than caring for physical needs. Just as we do so much for our children and train them in what they have to do, we must also keep in mind that each child has a world of feelings, and it too requires an investment of effort and training.

You know you cannot put the same clothes and shoes on your child for three years in a row because he outgrows them. So too, at age two, you give certain emotions to the child, others at age three, and so on.

Properly Building the Emotions

Now that we see the importance of this effort, the next question we must ask is: how do we do it? Once parents have internalized the fact that developing the child's emotions is a central and important task, they have made great progress towards reaching their goal.

When children are young, parents have many opportunities to talk to them, because they are often home. When they get older and are home much less often, the conversation must of necessity be of higher quality.

Think of your normal topics of conversation at home. You might want to place a recording device in the house for a few hours, and then listen to what you spoke about with your children. Mostly, we will hear a lot of orders: "Do your homework! Pick up your knapsack! Clean up your room!" There might be a small amount of time in which the parents listen to what happened in school. If there is more time, the parent may tell some stories to the children which is a very positive ingredient. This is the way things are, more or less, in most homes.

How, then, do we introduce a method for building the child's world of emotions? As mentioned before, if the parent's own emotions are weak or poorly expressed, it will be very hard for him to talk about emotions with his children. He must first get the help he needs in order to break through his own blockage. We will assume that the parents here are properly emotionally developed, and they are

seeking a way to help their children in this area.

In addition to the daily conversation which consists mostly of practical details and a little bit of education, there should be another kind of conversation, directly related to the emotions. This is not the same thing as an investigation of the emotions: "How are you feeling? Are you happy or sad?" The best way to initiate this type of conversation is for parents to describe and explain their own feelings to their children to the extent it is appropriate.

Each of us has had many experiences. Some of these are happy, and others less so. When parents relate their experiences, and describe their own feelings about them, the world of the child's emotions begins to take shape.

When parents relate their own experiences to their children, and express the feelings they had about them, the child will see that revealing feelings is natural. This is how his own emotional world develops. This is one way parents can include their children in their experiences. The point, of course, is not just to tell stories, but to describe the feelings that went along with the events. This is the most successful way to build a child's emotional world. We must stress, though, that when the child is young, he should not be privy to the major problems in the house. We should not discuss with him the overdraft at the bank, or his older brother's *shidduch*. Each parent should evaluate which matters are age appropriate and can be safely related to the child without causing him unnecessary worry. In the Western world, if a person speaks openly about feelings, he is considered weak. When you try to talk to someone and open him up a little about his feelings, it may seem to him like an invasion of privacy.

This is a distorted view. Parents must create an atmosphere in the house where feelings are openly expressed, and just as a child will feel comfortable to say that he needs a knapsack or new shoes, so will he be able to say that he loves or is afraid.

The Appropriate Measure of Emotional Openness

There are homes where the children have the feeling that they cannot know anything about what their father and mother does, and in other homes, the children know all about bank statements and medical issues.

Both approaches are extreme, and as with everything, there is a correct and balanced approach which should be followed. Each parent should decide, based on his knowledge of the child, which matters are appropriate for him to know about, and which are not. Once it is decided that a particular issue should be discussed with the child, it should be done in a way that will develop within him healthy emotions.

When a parent discusses his personal feelings about something that happened to him, he is sharing his own emotional world with his child. This is especially effective if this is done regularly and becomes part of the bond between them.

Again, we must emphasize that one must find the proper balance. Parents must not burden their children with all their troubles, but they must also avoid blocking off their own feelings from their children.

Building Emotions through the Subconscious

Indirect messages affect children on the subconscious level and penetrate deep inside, as we know. When children see how their father helps their mother, and their mother prepares food for their father, these positive actions have a great effect on the children in an indirect way.

So too, on an emotional level, a healthy atmosphere can be created in a circumspect way. The parents can intentionally talk to each other about certain appropriate topics while the children are around, and discuss their experiences and feelings. In this way, the children will internalize the fact that their parents are discussing emotions.

A child will naturally acquire the behaviors he grows up with at home. If his parents only show emotion when something extreme happens, whether it is a very joyous occasion, or, G-d forbid, the opposite, he learns that emotions have no place in daily life, and should only be expressed when a sibling gets married or a relative passes away. Only then are his parents moved to tears; otherwise, he doesn't see any other emotional expression.

When a child sees that his father is sometimes very happy, or that he cries (yes, cries!) about things the child can understand, he sees that his parents also have a soul. This is how he learns that emotions are perfectly legitimate. (But he should not see his father crying about personal problems, because that indeed comes from weakness.)

Again, care must be taken so that the expression of emotions the child sees is moderate and balanced. If all they see is emotions, the results will be disastrous. The children can become so sensitive and so easily offended that it will be impossible to live with him. But if there is a proper measure, the soul develops as it should, and the benefits are tremendous.

There is no precise formula for the extent to which emotions should be exposed. Each household is different, and the emotional maturity of each individual child must be taken into account. There are no exact instructions for how to act in each situation in other areas of life either. A parent must know himself and his children and act according to that awareness.

Note that at this stage, we are not yet dealing with the child's own emotions. We are at a prior stage, where the parents express feelings either through talking to each other with feeling, or by sharing their feelings with their children. In this way, the child learns that the emotional realm is a part of normal life, and need not be hidden or shown only on rare occasions.

Practical Examples of Describing Emotions

Since this is a new idea for many, here are some examples of how parents can properly describe their feelings.

A parent reads a particular book and is moved by it. When he describes to his children what he read and what he found so moving, he is developing his children's feelings. He might also relate that when he sees children walking to class on the first day of school, he is very moved by it. He might also include them in painful experiences, such as, "I was walking in the street and saw someone (without mentioning names, of course) acting improperly, and it hurt me very much."

There is no need for long stories; brief and simple comments that express feelings are equally effective. There is a whole world around us, filled with so many experiences that can be shared with children to help them grow.

Building the World of Emotions - a Precondition to Education

If a parent wants to properly educate her children, she needs to go through three stages. She must: (1) form an emotional bond with them, (2) build their emotional world, and only after that, (3) actually educate. If she tries to start with the third stage, she is wasting her time on an effort that will surely fail.

Our children have a body and *nefesh*^[6] (we refer here to the *nefesh*; the spiritual element – the *neshamah* – will be covered later). Just as we must care for the body by providing food, clothing, and more, so must we (and perhaps even more so) provide for the *nefesh*. This must be a continual goal of ours.

When a child wakes up in the morning, his mother does not need to ask if he is hungry that day and wants a sandwich to take to school; so too, emotional needs should be provided not only when a problem has surfaced, but on a regular basis. A child needs to eat properly even if she does not seem ill or malnourished; so does her emotional world need to be nourished even if we do not observe a need in the form of an emotional problem. (Of course, if there is a real problem, we should deal with it, but it should not have to come to that.) If parents don't understand this, they end up ignoring their children's feelings unless they come home from school and seem especially sad. We should not wait to begin developing the child's emotions because of problems; there is a better, more consistent and proactive method.

If emotions have been ignored in the home until now, there will be a need for external reminders at first. After a while, the proper kind of conversation will become natural. As a mother does not need to be reminded to prepare breakfast, so will the need to develop the children's emotions be obvious. Once parents understand its importance, they should try to make it as natural and as self-evident as the importance of caring for physical needs.

Just as there are ways to tell if the child's body is healthy, so is there a way to tell if the child's soul is healthy: a healthy soul is happy! This does not require a new baby, bar-mitzvah, or wedding in the family; the joy of life should always be present.

As we explained, the emotional world must be a concern in the home, no less vital than three square meals. Just as a mother prepares dinner and sees to it that it will be properly seasoned and neither over cooked nor undercooked, so must each parent see to it that the child's soul will receive the right amount of sustenance. Furthermore, just as we have become more conscious of the need for a balanced and nutritious diet, and for the need to nourish a child in accordance with his age and needs, so too, each child, according to his situation, needs a balanced emotional diet.

A Proper Balance when Sharing Experiences with our Children

To what extent should a child be aware of his parents' experiences and feelings?

A proper balance must be maintained. The children should be exposed to as much of the parents' positive experiences as possible, but to little of the difficulties of life. However, if parents only share positive experiences and no negative ones, depicting all of life as rosy, happy and successful, the children will be deluded into thinking that there are no problems in life. When they grow up and see that this is not the case, they can become overwhelmed. The proper way to raise children who can be realistic is to share a lot of positive experiences, but to also share some of the problems – of course, to a degree that they can handle them.

A precondition of such discussions is that the parents must themselves know how to cope with these problems. When they can properly cope, their children can benefit from learning about these situations.

Using a Negative Experience as a Means for Positive Thinking

Here is a common example: Often, a child will need to be hospitalized for a few days. (We are not talking about an extreme case, G-d forbid, like a chronic illness, but a normal situation due to a light injury or a minor illness that requires a few days of hospitalization.) A parent will need to be with him

at night, and this will be hard on the other children. In most cases, it will be difficult for both parents.

How should we talk to our children about such situations? One might directly ask the child about his difficulty and suffering, and how he is dealing with it. But a better way is to start by talking about the difficulties facing the parent who is at home and how he or she is coping, and only after that speak about how the child himself is managing.

When we talk to the child directly about the problem and the ensuing challenges, we have not given him the tools for dealing with it, so we are not helping him. But when the parent shares his own feelings in an appropriate way, he opens a common channel between his feelings and those of the child, and thus helps him cope in a healthy way.

In the example above where the child is in the hospital and the parents take turns being with him, the parent remaining at home should describe to the children at home how hard it is without the other parent there, but should also mention the positive perspective. The conversation should not be full of complaints, but must express both the current lack as well as the positive element, as we will describe.

Before we describe how to transmit this to the children, we must first clarify how the parent should convince himself. Only then can the message be properly delivered to the children.

When a father or mother remains at home and feels the absence of the other spouse strongly, because he or she has to get up during the night for each of the children, and to get all of them out to school (with all that goes along with that), what kind of thoughts does this lead to? Is there sadness or depression? Such thoughts will not help the children develop their emotions, and in fact will do just the opposite. Therefore, the parent must first work through his own feelings. To think only of what is lacking is not called coping. How, then, should one cope?

He can think, "Yes, there are certain difficulties. But now I can learn to appreciate when things are going smoothly, when I do get help from my spouse in running the house." This kind of thinking can cause the current absence of the spouse to lead to some degree of inner happiness.

Of course, even positive thoughts will not make someone overjoyed and hope the situation will continue for as long as possible. The absence of their spouse is definitely troubling and distracting. But at the same time, there comes a level of appreciation and respect for the spouse, and this will lead to gratitude and appreciation of the normal routine.

When the parent succeeds in attaining a primarily positive outlook, he can start talking to the children about how he feels bad that his spouse is not home. He can do this because he will share both perspectives – the difficulty as well as appreciation for his spouse's usual presence. Thus, the message to the children is that the absence is not totally bad. In fact, the children can learn that it is possible to grow from a negative experience.

If the parent is really convinced of this and the words come from deep inside, the children will absorb the message and be able to successfully cope with the parent's absence by thinking of the benefits of their regular routine. When we speak openly to them in this way, they will naturally begin to talk in a similar manner.

Here is another example of a situation that seems negative but can have a positive outlook. A couple is married for a number of years and has not yet been blessed with children. This certainly causes a feeling of emptiness, but are there no benefits at all? Many childless couples claim that the shared suffering brought them much closer to their spouses. Thus, even a very difficult situation has a positive side.

Of course, if we would ask a newly married couple if they would choose to be childless for a number of years in order to become closer to each other, they would say that they would not. But if they find themselves in such a situation, they should recognize the difficulties, but also dwell on the positive dimension.

Denying Problems does not Develop the Emotional World

There is another way some people handle difficulties in life – they push them out of the way to some distant place in the soul, and try to forget them. This method should only be employed if there is no other alternative. It is not a good way to deal with most difficulties, because a person who ignores their problems eventually loses all of his sensitivity.

A better way is to acknowledge the problem, and then form a kind of puzzle, with both positive and negative pieces to the picture. Then we should look at the big picture and see if we can have an overall positive outlook. If so, that is a great accomplishment. In addition, one should look at the negative parts themselves: are they totally negative, or can something positive come from them? Since there is no absolute negativity in Creation,^[7] we should be able to divert any difficulty toward a positive direction.

Thus, we cope with difficulties on two levels. First, we see if the experience has more positive elements than negative ones. Even if this is not the case, we must look for some points of light within the difficulty that can help us cope with what we are lacking. (Of course, faith in the Creator can help tremendously in dealing with difficulties, and the stronger one's faith is, the more easily he can cope with his problems. But here we are working with someone on a lower emotional level.)

When to Discuss Problems with the Children

Now that we know how the parents should deal with difficulties and problems, the question is: which problems should be shared with the children?

In light of what we have discussed, there is a simple indicator: If our own attitude is that the negative outweighs the positive, then we should keep the children away from it. Otherwise, we will deliver a negative message, and give them negative emotions. Of course, if there is a chronic problem in the house, like a disabled or ill child, the other children must be involved and taught how to deal with the situation, as tough as it is. But if the children might never find out about the problem, it is often best to hide it from them. (This is not an absolute rule, though, because they must learn that life has challenges that must be confronted.)

When should the children be involved? When there is a problem and the parents feel that the positive outweighs the negative, the children should be shown the big picture, both the lack with its unpleasantness and also the positive side. We thus fashion their emotional world properly.

Let's apply this to the example mentioned above. When one parent needs to be away from the house for a number of days, the other spouse should examine his feelings: does he go to sleep sad, or is he able to cheer himself up? If he feels sad, there is no point in his waking up the next morning and transmitting this sadness to his children. But if he is convinced that there are positive elements to his current situation, which brings him appreciate the normal routine when both parents are together, and he becomes happy, he should transmit such feelings to his children. He should describe how much he misses his spouse, and at the same time, show that he is dealing with their absence by concentrating on the positive elements.

Even during Great Difficulty, one can find a Positive Point

Here is a different example, which will apply to a case where there are older children in the house, and we cannot hide from them what is going on: A family is renting an apartment, and the landlord informs them that they must move out in thirty days. They need to find a new roof over their heads, and this generally causes a very unpleasant situation. The parents are under stress, and their minds are preoccupied with the problem. They need to be in touch with real estate agents, go to see apartments, check out which neighborhoods are appropriate, and so on.

We cannot hide this from older children. It is impractical to discuss all these things behind closed doors. How then can we train the children to cope in such a situation?

Here, too, the extent to which we include the children depends on how the parents themselves deal with this situation that was thrust upon them. Without a doubt, it is not easy to move to another house. Besides the move to a new area with new neighbors, there is the difficulty of packing up all the belongings, taking apart and reassembling the cabinets, setting up the furniture, and so on, which is all very difficult and exhausting. How does a person feel in this situation?

The initial feeling will be one of difficulty, negativity, and impatience. But does one need to only see the negative, or is there also something positive?

If one only looks at the negative aspects, he cannot go through this process properly. He will not be able to stop complaining and will not be able to find any comfort. But if one looks for positive points, it will be easier and simpler to cope. What can be positive about being forced to move on such short notice?

Each of us knows that we are not here forever, but most of us do not think about this fact on a daily basis. The fast pace of life forces us to push this truth away to a distant corner of the mind. We suffice with observing the law that requires us to leave a space of four handbreadths without plaster in order to remember the destruction of the Temple,[\[8\]](#) but we do not remember that our own house will also be destroyed one day.

When a person is told that he must leave his apartment, though it is very difficult, he can find a positive side in that he now has a reminder that we have no permanence in this world, and that true eternal life is in an entirely different world.

This is an example of a case where children are forcibly made aware of a difficulty, and we must help them deal with it properly. If the parent senses that he can only feel sadness about the situation, there is certainly no value in talking about it a lot with the children. But if he has found at least some point of joy from it, together with the difficulty that he will convey, he can help them find some positive point themselves.

If the children would not become aware of the situation, it would in fact be better not to discuss it with them at all, because all the parents have managed to do is to find one positive point, while they predominantly see the experience as negative. Ideally, children should only be exposed to situations where the parents can show them how the positive outweighs the negative. But since in this case, they already know about the problem, we can show them at least one positive aspect.

Any parent can easily think of negative situations that their children know of in the house. The rule is always the same: first look by yourself at the positive points, and then discuss with the children the problems as well as the hopes and positive elements.

Developing their Emotional World Makes them Strong

When we talk to our children about problems in the home, and we present both the positive and

negative sides, there are many benefits: We strengthen our bond with the children, which is itself a valuable achievement. We train them to cope with problems that may surface in their own lives by talking about the positive and negative sides of a situation. And we give them a formula for remaining happy even when we are lacking things. This is the best way to develop the emotions, as it gives the child the strength to deal with the storms of life in the healthiest way.

We see youths nowadays between the ages of fourteen and seventeen who have come across small problems in their lives, and have no idea how to cope with them. Why? Because they have never had to deal with adversity. When they went to the store, the grocer just recorded the amount, and the parents paid at the end of the month which is common in Israel. When one of them needed to buy clothing, he took along a check from his father. If there was a problem in school, the parents straightened everything out for them. Now that they are beginning to grow up, they suddenly find that life does not go all that smoothly and sometimes, difficulties arise.

What is the solution to this? Of course, we would not intentionally place difficulties before a young child just so he can deal with them. But at least we can give him the tools for dealing with troubles and navigating through the hazards of life in the best way possible.

When we have a generally good emotional bond with our children, and when there is a problem, we show them the negative aspect but emphasize the positive, we develop children who will be able to deal with life's challenges as a matter of instinct. This is not just information they learn; it is patterning emotional lessons that touch the inner soul of the child.

We cannot possibly foresee all the problems they will confront in their lives and offer specific guidance as to how to deal with each of them. But when we have succeeded in directly touching their emotions, we have given them a tool for dealing with all sorts of difficulties that may arise.

Here is an example: If a person goes out of a warm home in the winter to a very cold place without proper clothing, there is a good chance that he will get sick. All the more so is this true on the emotional level. On one hand, the house must be a warm place for the children, through constant love and care, but we cannot present the whole world as full of such warmth. We must teach them from their youth that there are challenges in life. The proper and balanced way is to develop their emotions so that when they grow up they will be able to navigate more easily through their challenges.

Emotional Development Strengthens the Bond with our Children

Here is another benefit: Most parents attest to the fact that often, when their children have grown up, they don't come to their parents to discuss the struggles and challenges confronting them. Sometimes this is because the grown child feels his parents are part of a different culture or generation and won't understand the problem, but often the lack of connection between them comes from the fact that the child never sensed that his parents had a listening ear toward his or her feelings.

The reason the child feels this way is usually because emotions were not discussed at home. When the child came back from school crying, he was calmed down with a candy. Sometimes, the child feels inside that his relationship with his parents exists only on the practical level, but that his parents have nothing to do with his emotional issues.

Even when there seems to be evidence of a strong relationship, it might not be strong in the emotional realm. At times, we see that children really miss their parents, like when they go away to yeshivah, or get married, or travel out of the country, and such. But though a child will generally miss his parents when he is away from them for a while, this does not mean that the emotions have been

developed properly.

What, then, is a sign that the emotional world has been properly developed? The only proof is when we see that the child knows how to see the positive side of things. This is especially true when he is faced with challenges and knows how to deal with them correctly. Then we can be confident that his emotions are properly developed.

We must remember that the child must learn about this primarily from us, the parents. Math, grammar, and history can be learned within the walls of the school, but to deal with the challenges that will surface at home, or with friends, or at work, or in school, or anywhere else, he needs to learn by observing how his parents cope with problems. If they tend toward unbridled sadness and depression, she will often follow suit, but if they display proper reactions, she will reap the fruits daily.

Developing the Emotions Helps against the Tendency towards Sadness

There is another reason for developing children's emotions: When we look at the world, we see that most people tend to be sad. The main reason for this is ordinary human nature, as is written, "You are earth, and to earth you will return."^[9] The element of earth in the soul is the source of sadness, as Rav Chaim Vital writes in *Sha'arei Kedushah*. But there is another factor that reinforces the sadness: most people's emotions are not properly developed. ^[10]

A person generally passes through childhood relatively happy. When he is a teenager, he begins to confront minor problems. As he gets older and bigger problems surface, he realizes that there is a soul to deal with that reacts to these problems. Most children don't think about their souls at all. Even teenagers are able to let life flow, and they try to push their difficulties into a distant corner of the mind.

The soul begins to concern a person when his problems become more frequent.

This is particularly true after one is married and suddenly discovers an incomprehensible inner emptiness that makes him feel he is lacking something. Since this discovery happens without any prior preparation, and one does not have the tools to deal with it, he tends toward sadness, and finds it hard to extricate himself.

To illustrate, if a pot is left in a storage room for twenty years without use, what will it look like? At best, there will be a lot of dust and worms, but normally, it will be rusty and unusable, and you will not be able to clean it even with boiling water. One who ignores his emotions when he is young, and does not know his emotional world, can only be at peace when things are going smoothly. As soon as life gets more difficult, he must confront his emotional reactions, and this becomes difficult and complex.

We see nowadays that there are many seminars available for the sake of "getting to know yourself".^[11] In most of these seminars, there isn't a single empty seat. Why? Since most people discover their emotional world after they start encountering all sorts of troubles in life, they sense the problem stems from their inner world and they don't know how to deal with it.

When we begin to deal with life's problems after they have already surfaced, they are doubly difficult to overcome, but if we have managed to prepare in advance, they will be much easier to confront.

If our children are to properly deal with the problems in life, we must start building their emotional world from a very young age. Each age must be treated differently, but the effort must begin at a very young age. Just as we give them food appropriate for their age – at first, liquids, and we later transition to foods that are more and more solid – so too, we should give them the opportunity at

older ages to deal with the emotions appropriate for those ages.

There is a view among some parents that if children are forced to confront life at a too young an age, they will eventually become depressed. Where do they get this idea from? It seems that the parents themselves get depressed whenever they are faced with some challenge, so they feel that if we force the child to contend with challenge, he too will get depressed! But if they would see each challenge as an opportunity for growth, they could train the children to deal with these challenges in a way that will strengthen them.

Mixing Emotions into Daily Life

Building the emotional world of a child must be an inseparable part of running the home. Just as we check the temperature in the house, so that it won't be too cold or too hot, we must regularly check the "emotional weather" of our children, make this a daily concern. When we see that more must be invested into a child's emotional needs, take care of.

When there is a baby in the house, we play with it and want it to laugh, smile, and be happy. In this way, we develop his emotions. But when the child gets older, we focus less on the soul and more on doing practical things for him. Therefore, the parents' mission statement must be: "In our home, we raise people with souls – not robots!" Since joy is food for the soul, we must put effort into it, creating an atmosphere of happiness in the home that will sustain the children's souls.

This value must be applied to our own personal lives first. Only then can it be a mission in the home. A sad person cannot be made responsible for making other people happy. Not only must the parent be happy, but she must look at life with a positive perspective. She must understand that what grants her joy is not bread or breakfast, but something from within, and then she can share her joy with a child.

If parents view life as full of the burdens of child raising, work, and other responsibilities, children will get the same message. But if we feel that life is about our emotional reactions, we can share that point of view with our children.

We must also emphasize that we cannot ignore the necessary actions, but we must join it with emotional development. We need to train the child with the knowledge that actions, even those related to religious obligations, should lead to a state of "Rejoice, O righteous, in Hashem."[\[12\]](#)

A Healthy Soul

When we engage in developing the soul, we have to first ask ourselves, What is a healthy soul? First of all, a healthy soul is not one that lacks nothing, because there is no such soul. What, then, is a healthy soul? When a child is fully aware of the difficulties in his life, and even feels them, but the joy that accompanies him far outweighs the pain, his soul is healthy.

To create this level of joy requires much effort, but if we see this as a daily mission, we will train our children to cope properly with challenges. Only in this way can we hope that at a certain stage they will feel an inner joy that will allow them to cope with all the troubles they encounter in life. If, however, emotions are ignored in the home, once the child faces a problem, he will fail; he was not taught what to do, and the need to confront the challenge makes him sad.

The Benefit of Proper Emotions in Children's Education

Besides the importance of building the emotions for the sake of the child's soul, it can also help in education. Many parents who want to properly raise their children ask advice as to what to say and

what not to say, what to do and what not to do, and so on. Although this too is an important part of education, let us think more deeply.

When there is no love between people, even if we try to educate and rebuke them in the best possible way, the message will not come from a pure place in the soul. At best it will come from a neutral place, and at worst, from a bad place. Thus, there is little hope for success. But if there is already a deep bond between parent and child, the child senses that the rebuke is given out of love and it is much more likely that it will be accepted and internalized. As it says,[\[13\]](#) “He whom Hashem loves, he rebukes.”

When a child does not feel emotionally attached to his parents, and a parent gives orders and punishes, he feels that the parent is against him. What can we hope from a child who grows up that way? He will never develop positive feelings for his parents, and on some level, we are building negative feelings.

Let us examine the nature of the bond between parents and children. What does each feel toward the other? We can say that parents will always have some feelings for their children, but their children don't normally feel for their parents, unless they go away for a while and they miss them. If so, all the child feels is that his parents take care of his basic needs on a daily basis and they punish him. (He is not correct about this, but he certainly might feel this way.) Clearly, we don't want to raise our children this way.

But, when parents first develop a constant emotional bond with their child and they are forced to punish him, although he will have some negative feelings toward them, on the whole, the positive feelings will outweigh the negative. The negative feeling gets pushed to a corner and has almost no effect.

Reality proves that often, as the children get a little older, the only emotions they express toward their parents are negative. This is due to the fact that their emotions were not developed properly, and they only know how to express themselves when there are problems, and then, the emotions expressed will be negative.

Each Child and his Emotional Needs

Each child must be dealt with according to his personality. Some children are more sensitive than others, and we must deal with them differently. Just as some children have different physical needs – one must sleep more than another, another must eat more, another feels colder and needs warmer clothing, and so on – and must be treated differently, so too in the emotional realm, we cannot complain about a child who has more emotional needs than his siblings. A mother would not criticize a child for needing to eat more than his siblings, because such are his bodily needs. Emotional needs are no different. If we see that a child's soul has greater needs, we must provide for them, such as by expressing ourselves to the child more.

Dealing with Children who Sense Emotional Favoritism

Often, an older sibling will feel that his parents show favoritism to a younger one. This is not as common in the practical realm, but it is common for one to feel this in the emotional realm. He will get angry and complain to the parents that they give the younger brother, in his opinion, too much attention, while their relationship to him, he claims, is very different.

How do we deal with such accusations? Of course, we must first check if there is any truth to them. If there is, we must immediately correct ourselves and start to give him what he needs. But if this is an error on his part, such as when an older brother feels that he should be treated exactly like the

younger one, we must explain his error to him, by using practical examples.

For instance, we might point out that the older child might go to school without a knapsack, while the younger one has one. Because the older one is already in fourth grade, he doesn't need to take a lot of things to school, as opposed to the younger one, who is in first grade and needs a knapsack to bring all the things he needs with him. Such an example highlights the practical difference between children of different ages. Once the older child understands the distinction in such an example, we can explain to him that the younger child has unique needs even in emotions, which is why the older one incorrectly assumes that there is some favoritism.

Often, parents will try to explain this to an older child, but he will only respond with, "If a young child gets more attention, I also want to be a young child." The reason for such a reaction is that the child is already angry during the discussion, so we cannot expect him to understand and absorb this concept.

Therefore, the proper method when the child is upset with us is to first calm him and allow him to express his inner rage (up to a certain point), and only after that, look for an opportune time for speaking with him when we can explain everything calmly, so he can absorb the idea while he is able to think clearly.

Likewise, we must make sure that the conversation will be relaxed. For example, look for an opportunity to take him with you when you go shopping, or take him for a short walk in the evening. This way, you can initiate a long conversation. You can then listen to what is really bothering him and let him know that you are always interested in hearing his concerns.

There are those who feel that they don't need to explain to their children why they do certain things. There is some truth to this, but we should only use this approach a small percentage of the time, in order to teach the child that we don't need to explain everything to him. But if this defines the entire relationship in the house, the child will respond to it by developing emotional blockages, and will often withdraw into himself.

Even when the parents feel that the child is not fully correct in her negative feelings, the fact that she feels that way means that she needs proper care and support.

We do not need to agree with all his complaints. The very fact that he finds in us a listening ear gives him the message that we are not ignoring his problems. Afterwards, when we explain that some of his complaints are justified and some are not (and even with those that are not, we might be willing to make some kind of concession), he will accept what we say. There is no clear determining factor here; each parent must use his own good judgment to decide when it is appropriate to explain our behavior and when to explain that he does not need to understand everything.

This process is very fundamental to proper emotional development. At first, the child must become accustomed to hearing her parents expressing their personal feelings, in order to open a channel to the child's emotional world. After that, as the child learns to express her own feelings, the parents' job is to serve as a listening ear for those feelings (even if they are negative), and when necessary, to correct what must be corrected, in the proper way. When they follow this process, in most cases, the child will grow up emotionally healthy.

A Summary of the Stages of Developing Emotions

Because this is so important, we will sum up what we've said on the topic of developing emotions, so that it will be as clear as possible.

The soul must be an obvious element in the home. Just as it is clear that a house needs four walls, a floor and a ceiling, so does every home need a soul – feelings should be spoken about openly and clearly. It should be a topic that is perfectly normal to speak about.

How is this achieved? The parents must allow the children access to the parents own emotions. As described above at length, it should be done to the proper degree, as positively as possible, and as appropriate for the age and level of the children. As a result, the children will generally open up to us and share their feelings. Then our responsibility is to listen to them carefully, engage in conversation, and identify with them as much as possible.

If the child comes home feeling pressured and starts sharing his feelings, it is possible to calmly tell him, “Right now, I’m busy, but I’ll try to make time for you as soon as I can, so I can listen to you.” Of course, she must then make every effort to give the child the time she has promised him.

When the relationship works this way, there is meaning in the parents’ words to the child, “I love you.” But if there is no regular involvement with his feelings, these words won’t mean much.

We cannot expect that the house will run smoothly just because we throw out such a phrase before bedtime and add a kiss. Often, in fact, this is no more than a result of pangs of guilt due to all the commotion of the day and its arguments and negative events. The next day, everything will just repeat itself. The relationship between the parent and child will not improve this way. (It’s better than nothing, but it is not a real solution to a difficult relationship with a child.)

When feelings are dealt with in the home, even if at times there is a tense atmosphere, the child believes and hopes that tomorrow or the day after, his parents will ask to speak to him, hear what he has to say, and try to deal with his complaints to the best of their understanding. In this way, there is an open channel of communication between parents and children.

If the channel is open and properly functioning, as the children grow, the emotional bond with their parents also grows, just as the body grows. But if we have ignored their emotional development when they were young, then as they age, the distance between parent and child becomes greater. (Often, as they grow up, they put effort into honoring the parents because of the mitzvah to honor them, but it doesn’t come from a real emotional bond.)

If parents want to run their home properly, they must build a home where they not only take care of the children’s material needs, but they also introduce the dimension of the soul. They strive towards open communication with their children. The conversation must be respectful but open. When a child knows that his parents truly listen to his feelings, it gives him hope, and with that, he can blossom to greatness.

[1] Translated from chapter two of the author’s Hebrew sefer Da EsYaldecha

[2] Mishlei 3:12

[3] Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 10:3

[4] Mishlei 10:12

[5] Vayikra 19:18

[6] [Editor's Note: As is known from the sefarim hakedoshim, the nefesh is the lowest level of "the soul" within man and is the "partner of the body". The neshama, on the contrary, is located primarily in the mind.]

[7] Derech Hashem 1:5:8

[8] Shulchan Aruch, Hilchos Tisha B'Av 560:1

[9] Bereishis 3:19

[10] See the authors sefer, Getting to Know Your Soul

[11] *ibid.*

[12] *Tehillim* 97:12

[13] *Mishlei* 3:12

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