

Speaking to Children about Adult Topics by Avi Landa

Awkward, scared, uncomfortable, worried. These are the feelings that come to mind when considering having an “adult” conversation with a child. Such conversations are necessary throughout the year to empower our children’s safe and healthy development. The approaching summer months, when many children go to sleep-away camps, present an especially important time to do so. We have greater awareness than ever before of the occasional boundary crossing and even abuse that can take place within our community. It is thus incumbent on us as parents to properly prepare our children before they leave home for an extended period of time.

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Parents preparing for the “conversation” should realize that our children generally know much more than we think they do. I have had the privilege of speaking with children and adolescents in both professional and school settings. Often, adult topics need to be discussed, either due to something that happened or the child asking a question about it. He may have heard something in the school halls or on the radio, or perhaps she saw something on a computer or in an advertisement. We can choose to give the child the impression that “this topic” and “that subject” is not something we speak about. The child then swallows his feelings or goes elsewhere to communicate. Sometimes, the information obtained “elsewhere” is confusing, inaccurate, and even dangerous.

Or we can choose to encourage such a conversation, through initiating it at times. Even if the child is awkwardly quiet throughout the conversation, the information is heard. It may go “in one ear and out the other,” but it leaves a residue in between. The child then understands that any topic is an acceptable topic to be discussed with the people involved in his *chinuch*, including his parents.

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“Yossi,” a good student and a reserved, quiet boy, came home from summer camp after the first session and was acting differently. He seemed spacey and irritable. His parents wondered what happened and if anything was bothering him. His response was, no. His parents, wanting to be good parents, gave him his space and allowed him to spend many hours in his room. But by the end of the summer, Yossi’s parents knew that something was very wrong. Yossi stopped going to minyan and came to the Shabbos table for just a few minutes, then returned to his room. When school began, Yossi had a decent first day, but it was all down hill from there. After a few weeks of his not coming to school at all or coming but ditching classes, Yossi’s parents were called into a meeting, and everyone agreed Yossi should begin speaking to a therapist.

Eventually, it came out that, over the course of the camp session, a particular counselor was secretly getting too close to some campers, including Yossi. *Baruch Hashem*, many boys understood what was inappropriate. They had been taught that anything that feels uncomfortable to you, or anything that is moving towards touching or speaking in inappropriately close ways, should be told over to a staff member and a parent. However, Yossi’s parents never spoke to him about this topic. He did remember a safety training he had in class a few years back, but that wasn’t enough. Nothing can replace parents speaking directly to their children with kindness and patience, showing them, through action, that they *can* speak about these “awkward” topics – and it’s okay for it to feel awkward. The child should nevertheless speak about it, as long as it is with the right people, those involved in the child’s *chinuch*.

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The above scenario, based on a true story, is certainly not the only scenario that can come up. Sometimes a social and athletic boy suddenly becomes quiet and reserved. Alternatively, a child might all of a sudden become *more* willing, even excited, to go to school. Although parents may not want to look a gift horse in the mouth, they should know that any sudden change should be explored, understood, and monitored.

In other cases, children have enough resilience that they don't display any sudden or overt change in their behavior. They may seem the same as they were before, despite desperately needing some guidance and care. Lastly, there are many reasons for sudden changes in a child's behavior and attitude, and it may not be an indication of any inappropriate crossing of boundaries at all.

The bottom line is: if we only react, we are going to miss – or misinterpret – situations that come our way. But if we take a healthy and balanced *proactive* approach, we can stop many problematic scenarios from happening in the first place.

One of the best defenses children can have is knowing how to stand up for themselves. When something seems not right, they can always walk out of the bunkhouse, classroom, gym, etc. A child always has the right to speak about something that made them nervous or uncomfortable to another trusted adult, someone involved in their *chinuch*. So when parents initiate some level of conversation about these sensitive topics, it opens the door for the child to more easily discuss these topics with them or, perhaps, with another appropriate adult. Properly educating our children regarding their development in general and how to stay safe is tremendously empowering to them, and is exactly what perpetrators are looking to avoid: a knowledgeable, self-confident, self-advocating child.

It is beyond the scope of this article to get into exactly how these conversations are to be had, and what topics should be covered at what ages. However, any parent can present even a small amount of information for the child to know, and can end with, "This is something you can always discuss with me or with your *rebbe*, *menahel*, and *mashgiach*. I can also arrange for you to speak confidentially with someone trustworthy if anything ever comes up, or if you have some questions." This can be followed up with a check-in with the child every few months. Such a strategy will greatly increase the chances of this child preventing a harmful scenario from occurring.

If a child does open up to a *rebbe* or other school staff, it is almost always appropriate for the parents to be informed. Parents can be the best resource for the school to partner with, towards helping this child. Of course, we wouldn't want the child to feel like anything he/she says immediately gets repeated to the parents, and that we are willing to go "behind their backs." However, in my experience, there is a simple way around this problem. The adult can say, "What you're saying is pretty significant, and I think your parents should be aware. I know I told you we would maintain confidentiality unless there was something potentially harmful being discussed, but this case borders on that exception. Therefore, for your safety, I need to speak to your parents, but I am happy to discuss with you what I should say, what I shouldn't say, and how you would like me to say it. Also, let me know if you prefer for me to initially speak to your mom or dad."

In the vast majority of situations, the child will allow me to speak to the parents with some possible conditions. As long as the child "allows" me to speak to their parents about one aspect of the scenario, usually parents understand that there is more to it, and ultimately find out everything they need to know. (Ultimately, of course, if there is a safety concern regarding a

minor, and the above strategy does not work, a conversation with the parents must be had for the safety of the child.)

Lastly, nothing can replace parents davening for the safety of their children. It is only with Hashem's help and guidance that we can add to the already overall healthy and safe communities we live in.

Avi Landa LCPC, NCC, is the director of the Landa Counseling Center. He is also the Talmudical Academy of Baltimore's Middle School Mashgiach, and High School Counselor. All questions and comments are welcome, by replying directly to Rabbi Landa at: Avi@LandaCC.com.