The Vilna Gaon says that the best criticism— the only valid rebuke—is focused on future improvement. We should not dwell on what happened in the past, but be clear what kind of behavior we would like to see in the future. That’s a positive message. “Yesterday you may have done something wrong. Here’s what I would like to see from you tomorrow.”

When disciplining your child, try to frame the discussion in terms of consequences as opposed to punishments. Framing the consequences as logical outcomes of improper behavior makes for less resentment on your child’s part. It will also, in all likelihood, result in long-term improvement.

A consequence can loosely be defined as an outcome of one’s poor behavior. There is a direct correlation between the misdeed and its consequence. Your child can learn positive, long-term lessons about avoiding these types of consequences in the future by exhibiting self-control and avoiding the behavior that resulted in the consequence.

A consequence of a child leaving a messy room would be to have him or her clean it up during a time he or she would rather be out with friends. A punishment would be not allowing the child to go to the park later in the day after the room has been cleaned. The punishment in this case has nothing to do with the misdeed.

Obviously, punishments are in order when misdeeds are done, and there are many types of poor behavior that cannot be presented as consequences. But creatively thinking in terms of outcomes and consequences will hopefully enable your child to grow from the unpleasant experience of being on the receiving end of your rebuke.

Several years ago, I was invited by the owner of a summer camp to conduct a staff-development lecture with his counselors. I addressed several topics—among them the subject of constructive criticism. I began by asking for a volunteer willing to describe the last time he criticized a camper.

It was quiet for a few moments. Then a very charming young man raised his hand. “I admonished one of my campers today in front of the whole bunk,” he proudly stated. I asked him to describe what happened.

“Well, I caught him going through my things in my cubby. He was reading a private letter of mine. And…” you know… I told him what he had to hear.”

Before he launched into any further details, I immediately told him that unless he was an angel, I was quite confident he had not handled this situation well. I explained to him that he was simply too close to the situation. The offense was not something he’d observed being done to someone else—it had been perpetrated against him personally. And he didn’t have time to carefully formulate a response.

Sure enough, his response had been, “You’re a thief, and I’m never going to trust you again,” in the presence of the entire bunk. Moreover, he informed the child, “I’m going to tell your teacher about this.”

I was quiet for a moment. Then I asked him, “Can you think of a time when an adult-figure in your life called you a less-than-flattering name? What was the label the person gave you? What do you think that person was trying to convey to you? And finally, how effective was his criticism?”

The young man related how he had been admonished for his (admittedly) inappropriate dress on a school day, and how a member of the faculty used a label with negative connotations when delivering the criticism. Of course, he shared with his peers that the rebuke was ineffective, and upon reflection, he mentioned he was clearly resentful about having been given an insulting label.

I suggested to the camp counselor that instead of calling the boy a thief, another way to handle the incident would have been to say to him—privately, without humiliating him in front of his peers—“You’re a nice kid, and I’m very disappointed that a boy like you would invade my privacy and take something belonging to me.”

When giving criticism to our children, it is important to offer them an opportunity to make amends, to right the wrong. It is important to tell our children what they did wrong, but it is equally important to tell them how they may make it right.

Rabbi Yakov Horowitz is the Founding Dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam and the Director of Bright Beginnings. The entire Bright Beginnings innovative Beginner Gemara and Chumash books are now available on Amazon at https://amzn.to/3hpKdqC.