Preparing our Children for Marriage

Our tradition has long directed us to the realization that raising children involves much more than providing for their physical needs.

Preparing our children for their various roles as adults begins the moment we bring them into this world. Every human interaction affords these newborns the opportunity to learn numerous cues, responses and behaviors. As children move along developmentally, an initial and later ongoing source of these lessons focuses on the dynamic they perceive between their parents. As mothers and fathers, we are not always tuned in to the extent our marital interactions form a template for the expectations our children will have of themselves as future marital partners.

Since we doubtless would like to see them married, and happily so, which relational elements would we ideally prefer them to glean from growing up in our homes? While there is no one formula for a successful marital relationship, our focus here will be on modeling the skills of intimacy. We suggest that the following list provides a framework that may enhance our awareness of a crucial aspect of husband/wife modeling and parent/child interactions:

- **Trust and acceptance** – Comfort in familial relationships is to a large part dependent on feeling accepted by others just as you are, without expectation of fundamental change. This in turn enhances a sense of trust that openness and honesty, sharing uncertainties and vulnerabilities, will be treated with respect.
- **Caring and affection** – These are emotions which express connectedness and should be pervasive aspects of family relationships. People may communicate these feelings differently, some more verbally, some more action-oriented. No matter how you do it, the result is strengthened relational bonds.
- **Open communication** – Verbal communication should be clear and unambiguous, intended to convey messages that are as positive as possible. Assumptions about another’s thought or feeling must be confirmed verbally – no one reads minds. When disagreements arise, neither side should imply rejection or devaluing.
- **Curiosity** – Truly being interested in the lives of those around you, in their experiences, thoughts and feelings allows you to stay attuned to each other. Curiosity about your family members’ reactions and behaviors (rather than making assumptions) helps to avoid and resolve conflicts.
- **Expressing acknowledgment and gratitude** – For both the expected and unexpected, expressions of appreciation and thankfulness can minimize feelings of being taken for granted. Creating such a positive atmosphere contributes to the security of being seen and valued.
- **Acts of kindness** – Each family member should consider doing more than just fulfilling minimal expectations and to do so as a gesture of good will. The goal is to make the lives of others that much happier and each of these acts conveys a message of investing in emotional intimacy.
- **Mechanisms for healing and repair** – All families confront difficult moments, when expectations are not met or when communication fails. Developing mechanisms to positively cope with these situations avoids accumulating emotional scar tissue and allows for strengthening family ties.
- **Independent growth and development** – Each family member should be encouraged and supported to pursue personally important interests, career paths...
and moments in which to invest time and energy. Personal satisfaction allows for giving others significant parallel opportunities.

- **Self-awareness** – Gradually knowing and understanding oneself cognitively and emotionally mark various stages of maturity into adulthood. Mastering this process further grants each family member greater insight into the lives of others, their hopes, expectations, fears and doubts.

Every family’s journey is different and each journey requires adaptation to life’s changes and challenges, with a primary goal being preparing our children for intimate relationships. Our focus above has been on the elements of emotional intimacy, but we should feel equally tasked with preparing our children for physical intimacy as well. These two facets of adult, marital intimacy – emotional and physical – clearly cannot exist as separate realms and thus both require our active guidance as parents.

As a general approach, we should note that the core values and behavioral expectations that guide our day-to-day interactions have equal application in the bedroom. Making space for others in our lives, respecting boundaries, sensitivity, supporting each other’s individuality and seeking to develop together are all qualities which enhance a future couple’s intimate life just as much as they enhance our communal and familial fabric.

An initial issue of course is parental comfort level. Well-meaning parents may hesitate to raise issues with their children regarding physical intimacy due to embarrassment, anxiety about the response of their children (who all are certain their parents know less than they do), feeling uncertain in a rapidly changing world or simply lacking communication tools.

In addition, some parents may have fallen into a sense of complacency, assuming they are exempt from this responsibility, naively and incorrectly assuming that this knowledge gap will be filled by school-based programs or premarital madrichim. When we abrogate this parental task, we risk children becoming confused and poorly educated.

As with emotional intimacy, we share here some guidelines to assist parents in discussing the physical side of marriage:

- Our sense of sexuality is much more than biology or physiology. It includes how we and the world around us see ourselves and each other, and how we determine and respond to gender roles.
- Make sure you are both on the same page and are clear about your own values and expectations before talking with your kids.
- In this world of unrelenting confounding media inputs, parents must be proactive to counter misinformation and unhealthy messages. We are our children’s cultural interpreters, and if parents are silent, children will not develop the values they need to make responsible decisions.
- Stop talking in code or metaphors. Children are naturally curious and need accurate definitions, facts and guidance. Be aware that your language conveys values and judgment.
- Parents need to define and set adequate, reasonable limits. Limits are essential to a child’s sense of security, and be prepared for adjustments as children mature.
- Messages about marital intimacy must also include emphasis on the broader relationship context, a context which includes the religious, the social, the emotional and the physical.
- If your child refuses to talk with you, try this, “It’s my job and important to me that I share this information. We don’t have to discuss it now, but you need to listen.”
- One final point, if the first conversation you have with your children about physical intimacy is when you discover they have seen inappropriate Internet content, you have not fulfilled your parental responsibility.

This is by no means an easy task, and to the detriment of our children and their development as healthy marital partners, few parents enter this unnecessarily feared realm with grace and confidence. Perhaps the following excerpt may somewhat ease these hesitations:

“There are young people who do not know how to observe the mitzvah of Onah (marital relations)… because, to our great sorrow and distress, in our time the inner bonds between father and son, and mother and daughter, have been sundered… matters of intimacy and knowledge of the private matters that transpire between husband and wife... in previous generations were transmitted from father to son and from mother to daughter with love... (Sefer Kedushah, as quoted in Marital Intimacy by A.P. Friedman)

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