

Steps to Serenity

My A+ kid and his struggling sibling

We want so badly for each of our children to be successful in every area. This desire takes on new levels of meaning when it comes to our boys and their academic success, as so often this is the precursor to spiritual success in our society. What do we do when one son is academically successful, while his brother lags behind? How do we build up the unsuccessful child, and how do we foster a good relationship between the two siblings? Does the successful child also suffer in this equation?

Read on and find out...



Mrs. Perl Abramovitz

discusses the best way to approach our girls based upon their inherent natures:

I once worked with a woman who had twin boys who suffered from twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome while she was expecting. Only one of the babies received enough nutrients before birth. The deprived twin was born with developmental issues and went on to have learning disabilities. Watching the other twin bring home academic honors was brutal for this mother, as she had an exact measure of where her other child could have been had this syndrome never occurred.

But this mother worked hard to internalize what we all need to realize about our children: that whatever situation a child is in is the situation Hashem has meant for that kid and that the only thing we can do is help a child be the best that he can be in his own way. Our goal as parents is not to create a situation that isn't, but to help our children maximize the situation that is.

My goal as a coach is to help each person open her box, look inside, and say, "What did Hashem give me?" We have all the tools to cope with the things that we lack, and so do our children! For example, your child may not be able to pass a test, but he may have an extra-sweet smile or a charismatic personality. Instead of feeling sorry for our kids, we need to make life work for them. Sure, I will empathize when my two kids come home and one of them

got a bad grade, as usual, but I want to spend most of my time and energy thinking of solutions, instead of "oy veying." I want to get creative and think of solutions, instead of crippling my kid with too much pity.

One way we can help our unsuccessful kids to feel good about themselves is by role modeling how we accept our own limitations. My kids know that, yes, I'm learning disabled, but I'm very successful in many other areas. Nobody is successful in every area. Some mothers work doubly hard in the kitchen and accomplish half as much as their sister or neighbor. Whichever mother you are, accept yourself for your failures and your successes; then your kids will be open to finding success inside their own boxes.

We must find a place for our kids to be successful. We want to make our academically unsuccessful kid feel like he is a hero, even though he thinks that his brother is the only hero around. When he says that he's a failure, don't stay silent! Let your positive impressions of him linger in the air, and eventually he will believe you! It might take time, but remember that your child is 'pickling' in your belief in him.

There is a belief that good grades make you successful, but this is not a Jewish value. In the *beis din shel maalah*, it is only the effort that counts. Every time we try, we create a *malach*. When this child learns, we celebrate the effort and downplay the results.

And what about the successful child? When he does well, I would tell him, "I'm so happy for you. You have such a special gift, and you're using it for good things." I do not need to go overboard with praise, but I also don't need to hide

these words from the less-successful child. I'm not going to manipulate or deny the situation that Hashem created. And I would never knock the brighter child just to make it easier for the weaker one.

If your weaker kid says, "I'll never be as smart as him," I'll tell him, "We never compare. That's *apikorsus*." I would be strong in relaying this to him. Then I would tell him, "I know how hard it is to be jealous. But if you would be as smart as Yossi, then you wouldn't be my Sruly. I don't need two Yossi's and neither does Hashem." The concept you are imparting is that Yossi and Sruly both have the same Hashem; He gave you these tools for a reason. Don't coddle your kids and don't try to protect them. Instead, prepare them for their own unique path to greatness.

Perl Abramovitz gives interactive parenting workshops in person and on the phone. Her bi-monthly refresher conferences keep hundreds of mothers connected to what they have learned. In addition to answering hundreds of questions weekly, Perl lectures in schools internationally, for teacher, parent, and student bodies. Perl also coaches people in all areas of life, be it parenting, shalom bayis, addictive behavior, or personal growth. She can be reached at 718-640-1878 and at victories1234@yahoo.com.



Mrs. Sara Stern

looks at the other side of the equation:

Surprisingly, the child who is doing well often suffers even more than the one who is not succeeding. The child who is not succeeding is looking for a scapegoat, and his sibling that "has it all" is often the most convenient target. Often, the academically or religiously unsuccessful sibling will take jabs at

just the things that are most meaningful to the successful sibling. Clearly, this can be very painful to the successful child and needs to be dealt with.

The successful child needs to receive sensitivity training from you in order to help him understand what is transpiring here. You need to explain to him that the hurtful things his brother says and the behaviors that he exhibits toward him are driven by personal pain and disappointment. You want to help the affronted sibling to develop compassion for his sibling who doesn't have it as easy as he does. The successful sibling will need to work on himself in order to develop empathy for his sibling, along with a hefty dose of patience for his sibling's actions. He will need to develop a certain level of maturity in order to not be *makpid* on his sibling's behaviors that are directed towards him.

However, it's the pity that the unsuccessful child feels from his more talented sibling that drives him crazy. He wants to be respected for who he is, and it is agonizing for him if he feels that his sibling is being patronizing. This puts the more-successful sibling into a delicate predicament; he must learn to walk that fine line of being

children will follow our lead and react to their sibling similarly. If we don't lose faith in the unsuccessful child, the more-successful sibling or siblings will not lose faith in him either. But the more-successful child will need *chizuk* and coaching on the side, because theirs is not an easy place to be either.

We must teach our unsuccessful children to have patience with themselves. Help them to understand that growth and understanding our own strengths and our role is a process. In the meantime, if your kid is not doing well, you have to "get in where he is at" and show him you are very interested in his world. If your child is unsuccessful at learning Torah but he loves baseball, force yourself to sit with him and ask him to tell you all about the teams and the players. When you see your child at the end of one of his long and unsuccessful days, tell him that you went to a store especially today to pick up a pack of cards to complete his collection. Even if you feel that baseball is not where you want your child's head to be, you need to keep him close and to go where he is. This child needs to feel valuable and valued in the family system, even if he is not doing exactly what you've raised him to do. This is not

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compassionate and kind without being supercilious.

Our goal, always, is to preserve the dignity of the hurting child — not an easy feat. Our more-successful children will react towards their suffering siblings according to the behaviors that we model. Our children are monitoring our responses to provocations from the less-successful sibling. If we react with patience and love to an unsuccessful child's angry outbursts, if we are not judgmental and continue to model the values that we cherish, our other

easy! It's very difficult to give love over to a child who is unsuccessful in all of the areas that are important to you. But your love and respect is what such kids need more than anything in the world.

Mrs. Sara Stern has been in the field of chinuch and education for over thirty years. She has an MA in special ed. and helps students who are struggling with learning issues. She also teaches Mesilas Yesharim in the Machon Basya Rochel Seminary. She has extensive experience lecturing in the Far Rockaway community on parenting, shalom

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Mrs. Simi Yellen

looks at the other side of the equation:

It's crucial that the atmosphere in our home conveys the message that our job in this world is to be an *eved Hashem* and that this can take many forms. We want to teach our boys that if they are *zocheh* to sit and learn many hours that is wonderful, but if that is not their strength, there are many other ways to *shteig* in their *avodas Hashem*.

A father of a learning-disabled boy would go out of his way to point out the names of donors on any *kollel* or *shul* they walked by, saying, "You see these names? These are the names that built this community." He specifically wanted his child to know that even if you can't sit and learn all day, there are other powerful ways to contribute to *Klal Yisrael*.

It should never be that a kid should grow up feeling like a *b'di'eved* Jew if his *ko'ach* does not lie in full-time learning. Parents must be on top of what's going on and make sure they can find areas in which their child can shine — every child should have a stage to shine on. If no stage naturally presents itself because the child is not academically inclined, then it is the parent's job to build that stage.

I know of a family where there are two sons — one is a very successful learner and the other one just doesn't measure up. He will never feel as

successful as his brother in learning, so the parents came up with an innovative idea. Since this child has leadership qualities, why couldn't he organize a fund-raiser to raise money for the developmentally disabled children in the community? Can you imagine how good this boy felt when he happily followed through with this idea?

We must let our kids know that the effort they expend studying is more important than the grade they receive at the end. Everyone reaches a point in life where things don't come easy for them anymore in one area or another. The kid who naturally learns well doesn't always develop the muscle of working hard, and these kids often have

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problems when they hit glitches later on. A boy who's working very hard to get 75s and 80s might be better off than the boy raking in the As because he knows how to work hard.

I would tell the less academically successful child that his 80 is more meaningful than someone else's easy 100. If this idea of maximum effort being more important than grades is built into the walls of our home, then when this child's mediocre grade is praised to the hilt because he put in maximum effort, he will see himself as a success. Whenever we review our children's report cards, we should always drop lines like, "You got an A in effort, and that's the most important grade on the report card."

Regarding the child who is shining within the system — first, be grateful,

but make sure he's developing as a *mentch* and not becoming a *baal gaavah*. And when he does hit those occasional brick walls, utilize it as an opportunity to teach him how to work hard. Help him to understand that just because he has been given a gift from Hashem doesn't give him an excuse to look down at other kids, especially his own brother.

In summary, both children must understand that life is not a competition. Everyone has different *maalos*, and the tools you need to excel in school are not the same as the tools you need in life. Both children should learn to respect their differences and to embrace the gift that a brother is. Differences don't necessitate distance.

On the contrary, sometimes people that are very different can get along as they don't feel threatened by one another. Brothers can recognize their individual strengths and use these to promote *achdus* with one another. **B**

Simi Yellen has been teaching parenting courses both live in Los Angeles and through international teleconferences for nearly a decade. She also privately counsels women on *chinuch habanim* and spiritual growth. She can be reached via email at simiyellen@gmail.com.

Yael's new novel for young adults, officially titled *The Face in the Mirror*, will be released in June, *iy"H*. Yael's latest book, *Izzy the Whiz* and *Passover McClean*, a *Pesach* book for children ages 3-8, is now available in hardcover and softcover.



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