

‘I Just Can’t Get Along With My Child’s Teachers!’

Yitzi doesn’t want to go to school because his classmates are wild and the teacher can’t seem to manage them. Chani is trying her hardest and knows the material, but fails every test. Shimmy’s teacher yells—a lot... Parents today can’t and don’t just sit back and let schools make decisions about their children’s wellbeing. Here are some suggestions about how to partner with schools effectively and how to handle it when you feel like you’re out of options.

SEVERAL MONTHS INTO my first year as a teacher I sat down in the teachers’ lounge, close to tears, after being berated by a parent for giving her child an F in *Parshah*. (She hadn’t turned in any assignments all semester. No, this wasn’t due to learning differences. Yes, I had contacted the parents several times to let them know.)

A veteran teacher looked up as I came in, and as I vented, she told me something that has come to mind during many subsequent interactions with parents: “Parents talk to schools the same way they’d speak to the dry cleaners; it’s just the way it is.” Exactly. We drop our delicate and valuable garments at the cleaners and expect them to get the garment into perfect condition in a short time frame. If the dry cleaner is unable to make that happen, we get frustrated and demand the customer service that we feel we deserve.

As parents, we entrust our children to early childhood centers, elementary schools, high schools, and yeshivos and

we expect, **as we should**, that they care for our delicate and invaluable children in the best possible way. But what happens when we aren’t satisfied with the “customer service” that we are receiving? What happens when we disagree with the teacher, the policy, the methodology, or the school policy? In these inevitable situations, we must advocate for our children, but we must do it in the right way so that we achieve the best results and because teachers and principals are people too.

The best place to start is by calling an educator that you trust and respect. Ideally, this would be someone who is currently in *chinuch*, because that person would have the best insight into the situation. Talk about the issue and ask for their honest opinion. If they recommend that you let it go, listen to their advice.

Schools tend to tune out complaints from parents who constantly complain. Save your complaints so that when it really matters, you will have their ear.



Students at Torah Day School of Houston

Aside from speaking about this situation with this person, avoid talking about the situation all over town. Doing so is clearly *lashon hara* and will get back to the school 90% of the time. This does nothing to advance your cause and have I mentioned... teachers and principals are people too.

If the educator you speak to confirms that it is important to address this concern for your child's wellbeing, try to start with the teacher involved whenever possible. If it does not involve a teacher, or if you're not comfortable speaking directly to the teacher, speak to the principal. No matter who you choose to speak to, the way you phrase your request is crucial. Here are a few examples of productive conversation-starters:

- "Yitzi is having a hard time with how wild many of the other boys in the class are. Do you have any suggestions about how to help him?"

- "I'm concerned about Chani's grades because I really see her trying her hardest but her grades just aren't reflecting that. She wants to do well and so she's beating herself up about it. I'm also afraid that she might just give up. Do you have any suggestions about what she could be doing differently, how I can help her, or what supports can be put in place for her?"

-(To a principal) "Shimmy is saying that his teacher spends a lot of the day yelling, would you be able to look

into the situation and let me know what is going on?"

Clearly, in situations of physical abuse (*chas v'shalom*) it is important to go straight to the administrator with the most power to make sure that it is dealt with immediately. Verbal abuse can be just as damaging, but since defining what actually constitutes verbal abuse can be a grey area, take the time to discuss the best approach with the trusted educator you choose before proceeding.

Please note that there will be times when, no matter how you speak to a school or a teacher about a situation, it will not be resolved. There will be times when you know that a certain teacher just has a personality that clashes with your child's personality and no amount of talking to the teacher or principal can change that. In these situations, it is often important to have a conversation with your child about the teacher or situation in a very delicate manner.

On one hand, it is essential for your child to continue to show *derech erez* towards their teacher, and for your child to see you speaking about the teacher with respect as well. When a girl hears her parents badmouthing her teacher, what motivation does she then have to learn anything at all from her teacher? If a boy hears his parents constantly criticizing his yeshiva, he will begin to think there is nothing at all to be gained from being in the yeshiva, and this is a very dangerous road

to go down because the parents want their son to stay in yeshiva. Presumably, they want him to stay in this yeshiva or they would have sent him elsewhere. Hearing this criticism could lead to a disrespect towards rebbis and Rabbanim in general and could lead to him wanting to leave the yeshiva system altogether, and even go off the *derech, chas v'shalom*.

On the other hand, sometimes our child might have a teacher who has the potential to do serious damage to their self-esteem. If we allow our child to think that we don't care about how the teacher is treating them, we can contribute to that damage. It is essential to make sure that the conversation that you have with your child keeps both of these points in mind. I highly recommend speaking to the trusted educator that you spoke to at

she hadn't said that to you. We don't know what other people might be going through and even if Mrs. Klein has an empty bucket a lot of days, it is your job to behave with respect and to learn the material she is teaching you. Keep in mind that when someone has an empty bucket, you are not the problem, even if she might be speaking to you as if you're the problem. I'm always here to listen if you're having a hard time with a teacher, even if there are some things that I wish I could change for you, but I can't. Try to think of this as practice for life, when you'll encounter lots of people with empty buckets and you'll be able to remind yourself that it's not about you.

-I'm so glad to hear that you enjoyed last night's farbrengen so much that you stayed until 2 AM. I'd love to hear more about it. I'm sure that it wasn't fun for you

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the beginning of this process to make sure that what you want to say to your child has the right balance of respect for the teacher and respect for what your child is experiencing. Here are some examples of possible ways to discuss this with your child, but note that every situation is different and the conversation obviously will be different depending on your child's age:

-What's important in our family is that you are trying your best. Rabbi Cohen is very knowledgeable and sometimes when people are that type of smart, they just don't get it when kids don't keep up with what they are teaching. I see you trying your hardest; I will continue to help you; and most importantly—the number on the top of your test is not a reflection of who you are.

-Even teachers have buckets. (The bucket concept by Donald Clifton is used in my book Sara the Bucket Filler, which was reviewed in this magazine, Tammuz/June 2018. The basic premise is that everyone has an invisible bucket that holds our good feelings about ourselves. When our buckets are full, it is easy to feel happy. When our buckets are emptied by mean things others say, exhaustion, life circumstances, etc., it makes it harder to be happy and to be nice to others.) I know that what Mrs. Klein said to you was hurtful and I wish

when the Rosh Yeshivah yelled at you for being late to Chassidus this morning because you were still sleeping after the farbrengen. Even though I'm glad that your Rosh Yeshivah values being in class on time, even after a farbrengen, it would have been nice if he had said it nicely rather than yelling. Try not to let the inspiration from the farbrengen and the message about being on time get lost just because he yelled it instead of saying it nicely. Yelling is just some people's way of communicating, even though I know that's not what you're used to at home.

A few notes about these examples:

- Remember that this conversation is a delicate balance. It is always okay to say (in the calmest voice you can muster up), "I'm so sorry this happened to you, I need some time to think about this/talk to Tatty/talk to my mashpia before I decide on the best way to handle it."
- The way you deliver your response is as important as the words you use. It is important that you speak with empathy, and without anger in your tone of voice (even when all you want to do is call the teacher and yell at him about all the potential harm he or she might be causing children).
- These are actual examples of conversations that

≈ DOS & DON'TS ≈

I have had with my own children (with certain details changed, of course). In addition to being an educator for almost 20 years, I have also been on the parent end of these conversations for the same 20 years in a total of seven schools around the world. I fully understand the struggle that we are all going through. Although these struggles are not unique to our system, having a close-knit community, combined with a constant concern that a school will turn off our child from *Yiddishkeit*, makes us more likely to get emotionally involved in the situation. It is important to take a step back and utilize the steps listed above so that our response comes from our *moach* rather than our *lev*.

May Hashem grant us all the wisdom, patience, and strength to build good relationships with our children's schools and teachers so that our precious children get the care they need. 🕯



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Outstanding Teacher award for Judaic Studies and of the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Award for Excellence in Jewish Education. She has spent many years researching and implementing effective ways to minimize fighting between children and now coaches parents and runs workshops to teach parents and teachers how to bullyproof their children. Rivka is the author of *Sara the Bucket Filler*, a book recommended by teachers and parents around the world as an important tool to teach children (and whoever reads the book to them) how to be kind and stay happy. Rivka lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband, Danny, and their children.

DO respect the teacher's boundaries. It is always best to send an email asking when would be a good time to talk and what his preferred method of communication is for the future. While some teachers prefer texting, others would prefer that they not be contacted on their private cell phone. Catching a teacher (or administrator) at the grocery store, at a *simchah*, or at *shul* is never a good way to have a conversation.

DON'T be insulted when your child's school recommends testing and/or therapy. Although you may feel that the problem is the teacher (and it might be), a school only recommends this when they believe it is in your child's best interest. Speak to your trusted educator for advice and then follow through on their advice.

DO support your children's schools financially in whatever way possible for you. The Rebbe wrote often about giving *tzedakah* to chinuch institutions in the city you live in. Asking the teacher for a wish-list of books or other items that she would like for her classroom is a great way to spend your *maaser* money. If you can afford to sponsor a teacher's expenses to attend a chinuch conference, or to pay for a coach/mentor for a new teacher who has a lot of potential, then do that. So many of the issues in our schools could be corrected with more resources; a full discussion of exactly how is beyond the scope of this article.

DON'T skip parent/teacher conferences. Stay in touch with teachers even if you can only do so by phone from another city.

Attending the conference during the time that the school has set aside for conferencing and even when you feel like you'll hear the same thing you've heard for years, or maybe you'll hear things that are difficult to hear, is an essential step towards building a positive relationship with the teacher.

DO shower your child's teacher with gifts. These gifts don't have to cost any money. Carefully written, detailed, honest notes of appreciation are more valuable than mugs or even chocolate. If you don't have time for a long note, you can also write a quick response to the teacher in response to an email they send with an update, or in response to pictures that teachers post on a class WhatsApp group.

DON'T rush to move your child to another class or another school. Switching schools (especially mid-year) is destabilizing and should only be done when your *mashpia* and/or trusted educator confirms that it is best for your child. Additionally, you don't want to send your child the message that when the grass isn't green enough, you should go looking for somewhere that it's greener. It is just not a healthy life message. There are clearly situations when this is unavoidable and in these situations, be sure to get advice about how to explain the move to your child, even and especially when your child has been the one requesting the move.

DO say your child's *kapitel* daily and write to the Rebbe about their your struggles AND successes.