



## **Children Learn What They Live** – Continued – By Rabbi Dov Silver

I'm not challenging the author, Dorothy Law Nolte, but the poem captures only half the picture. It is true that young children learn what they live. Equally important, they live what they learn. What they learn depends largely on us, their parents.

According to a recent Parenting study, teaching our children to value endless material possessions is not necessarily beneficial. The study suggested paring down overflowing toy boxes, involving children in purchasing decisions, and encouraging participation in charitable work—all of which help develop a healthy value system. Modern research thus reinforces the age-old wisdom expressed in the poem: "The best way to teach our children is to live according to one's values."

If we look to the deeper insights of Chazal, they clearly understood that "living our values" is the most powerful way to educate children. Children absorb what we do far more deeply than what we say. From a young age, they can detect inconsistencies between our words and actions. A first grader may challenge a parent by asking, "How come you did \_\_\_\_ when you tell me not to?" Parents must remain aware of the importance of consistency in daily behavior. How we live every day is critical in raising morally and emotionally healthy children.

In today's world, a growing number of children and teens struggle with social anxiety—feelings of fear around peers, making mistakes, or being judged. Much of this may stem from the subtle messages children absorb from the adults around them. Chazal teach that a person's surroundings shape their inner world, and that children internalize not only what we say but also how we carry ourselves. When a child hears, "It's okay not to be perfect," yet observes a parent who worries excessively about others' opinions, avoids situations out of discomfort, or reacts strongly to minor missteps, the child learns to view the world through a lens of fear. But when parents model *menuchas hanefesh* (peace of mind), *anivus* (humility), and *kavod ha'briyos* (respect for others)—even in moments of stress—they transmit a sense of emotional security. Living our values doesn't only teach middos; it builds within our children a sense of safety, resilience, and confidence to face the social pressures of today's generation.

This principle is reflected in this week's parshah, Yaakov Avinu returned for the small jugs, though he easily could have replaced them, because he understood that everything given to a person is purposeful—no more and no less. Just as Hashem provides exactly what we need for our mission in life, so too must we teach children to value what they are given.

Unfortunately, many people today do not live according to this belief. We live in a generation of plenty. Hashem has blessed us with tremendous material bounty, yet we have not always been faithful stewards. People often borrow money to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, to impress people they barely know. We no longer repair; we replace. We accumulate more and more. With every unnecessary extravagance, we risk raising children who "know the price of everything and the value of nothing." This behavior is wasteful and inconsistent with proper values.

Pirkei Avos (4:1) teaches: "Who is honorable? He who honors others." Why is this the measure of true honor? Because true *kavod* cannot be purchased or extracted from others. The only lasting honor is the inner dignity a person develops through humility and respect for others. This is the attitude we must instill in our children so they can grow with good *middos*.

Rav Yisroel Salanter, zt"l, once visited a wealthy donor who opened a drawer full of money before momentarily leaving the room. Rav Yisroel left the room as well—not because he was tempted, but because he taught that we must distance ourselves even from the slightest possibility of wrongdoing. His message is clear: guarding our *middos* happens in the small, often unnoticed decisions. A child who "borrows" a friend's pen without asking mimics what they see at home. Just as the snake tempted Chava in gradual steps—first touch, then eat—so too do minor lapses weaken our *middos* over time. One misstep leads to another, and eventually the consequences can be significant.

The Vilna Gaon compared teaching *middos* to a large vessel filled with water overflowing into smaller cups surrounding it. When we fill ourselves with good *middos* and praiseworthy actions, they naturally overflow and reach our children. Chazal teach us how carefully we must behave as parents and educators every single day, in both big and small ways.

When we fill our homes with honesty, humility, gratitude, and emotional steadiness, our children absorb not only good *middos* but also a deep sense of inner security. In a generation where so many children and teens struggle with social anxiety and fear of judgment, this emotional security is one of the greatest gifts we can give them. By consistently modeling calm, dignity, and confidence in Hashem's plan, we teach our children how to navigate a

complex world with resilience. In this way, our daily actions become the foundation on which our children build both their values and their emotional well-being.