

In Defence of the Child

An extract of a speech delivered at the Chief Rabbi's Enriching Tomorrow Forum which was also addressed by Graca Machel, on the topic of 'In Defence of the Child', during September 2008.

We must defend and strengthen our children. We must hold government accountable for its responsibilities, to protect children from crime, violence, disease and the ravages of poverty. In the moral and human sphere, I agree with Graca Machel that the three pillars of society, parents, schools and religious congregations must be at the fore-front of strengthening and protecting our children. We do that through educating them for life ?

The Book of Proverbs says, 'Educate a child according to their way, and when they are old they will not depart from it.' The Hebrew word in the original text for educate has its root in the Hebrew word for training and habit.

Parenting is training our children to be good people in the most practical way possible. Why do we assume that our children will just work it out? We are happy to train them that 1+1=2 but we assume that somehow basic good character information they will just get right. We are well trained in so many areas and we put such emphasis on training for careers and development and all those sorts of things. We train people to make money yet we don't bother to train them how to be good. Parents must train their children in the basics of being a decent human being. It's like the training to be a good sportsman: going over and over the right way to do things, until it becomes natural and easy. Judaism teaches that we all need training and habit to be good people.

Moral education has to be very practical. We need to train children to help other people and to move beyond self-centred living. We all ? even adults ? need constant training to develop good character traits, such as integrity, honesty, decency and responsibility. Judaism teaches that moral greatness is to be found in application to the detail of how to be a good person in all areas of life, and includes instructions on such matter as giving charity, speaking kindly, greeting warmly, being humble, protecting the vulnerable, praying to G-d ?

The Hebrew word for education is also rooted in the word 'dwell'. Education is about living in a certain moral space in the same way that we live in a physical space. A few years ago, I came across the phrase 'the basic furniture of the human mind' in a book I read by Paul Johnson. Furniture serves two purposes: functionality, you need a table to eat off and a chair to sit on. It also serves to create an atmosphere. It gives a sense of what is going on in that home. A person who walks into a home with no furniture sees it empty, soulless and lifeless. The furniture makes it come alive because it gives it presence and soul.

And the basic furniture in children's minds is the result of their childhood training. What a child grows up with, they will consider normal and natural. Because of this, we as families, schools and as congregations, have to pay so much attention to what we training we give our children and what influences they experience.

When a child grows up in a family where he or she hears loving interactions spoken with dignity, kindness and gentleness, in their mind this is the normal and natural the way to talk. However, if they grow up with the sounds of aggression and anger, this too is normal and natural. If a child lives in a home where hard work and commitment to family is the norm, then they will grow with a good work ethic and loyalty. Parents must set the tone in their house. I realize myself as a parent of young children that everything my wife and I say and do in our home becomes a point of reference for our children.

TV can do enormous damage by setting for our children their value system when it comes to sex, violence and the very definition of success in life, measured in money, good looks and status. We need to teach our children that real success is about being a good person. There is an ancient Jewish tradition when a baby is born. We pray that the child grows up to be committed to good religious values, family and good deeds. We don't say may this child grow up to fame, fortune, success, many degrees and status. We want our children to be good, but when they turn on the television, they are getting another definition of what it means to be good ? It's

up to parents, schools and congregations. These societal institutions all need to talk with the same voice that says: "We want the moral furniture of the minds of our children to become more wholesome, moral and simply better and we will make it happen." ?
We must stand together with confidence and clarity ?