

## *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

### **Parenting Group Guide**

Welcome! This on-line guide was developed to help parents who would like to participate in a parenting class using the concepts in *The Blessing of A Skinned Knee* as a foundation. There are many ways you can benefit from the ideas in the guide, however, and I invite you to use it for:

- Book club discussion groups
- Grade-level parent meetings at your child's school
- Faculty in-service workshops
- Community center or neighborhood parent support groups
- Individual guidance while reading *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

#### **Setting Up A Parenting Class or Discussion Group**

If you're interested in gathering a group of parents together to discuss issues of concern, below are some general guidelines you may find useful.

#### **Size & Participants**

Parent groups can range from a minimum of six members for informal parent support groups to up to twenty participants for professionally led parenting classes. With fewer than six members you run the risk that typical rates of attrition, plus one or two parents home with a sick child or a competing commitment, may leave the group with only two members – intimate but without the potential for the same vitality and shared learning that a larger group affords. My

favorite group size is twelve. Classes work best when the parents have children in the same age range: early elementary, later elementary, middle school, or high school.

### **When & Where**

Groups can meet in members' homes, at synagogue, church or after drop-off or pick-up at school. Weekdays usually work best, but another good option is a Saturday or Sunday morning class that meets while children are in religious school. When possible—for example, if the class is sponsored by a synagogue or school—provision of on-site child care is a wonderful asset and will increase enrollment.

### **Length & Frequency**

No matter how dedicated and enthusiastic, every group needs ten minutes for the arrival of stragglers and for settling in and warming-up. An hour and forty-five minutes to two hours is an ideal class length. With less time the class is not worth the effort of investing in child care and travel.

Weekly meetings for six consecutive weeks work well for parenting classes with a designated leader and structured curriculum. Havurot (family friendship groups) and leaderless support groups often meet less frequently (biweekly or monthly) but continue for months or even years. I led one group that lasted for two years. My colleague, parent educator Marilyn Brown, has a continuously running class that began with mothers of new babies and toddlers and now consists of mothers of pre-teens.

## Rules For Parenting Groups

No one would want to attend a parenting class that followed Roberts Rules of Order, but some guidelines for conduct and attendance will help things to run smoothly. During the first meeting, the group can decide whether or not a set of explicit guidelines is needed. Here are some rules other groups have adopted:

- Meeting times will be established during the first meeting and won't be changed to accommodate the schedules of individual group members.
- No taping of the group for spouse or friends.
- Each group member is obligated to call if they are unable to attend and to leave a message with the leader or designated person in charge of organizational details.
- Since latecomers distract others, everyone will make the commitment to arrive on time.
- For classes held at the school attended by the children: the topics of the administration, teachers, and curriculum are off limits.
- Maimonides teaches us to rebuke and at the same time to elevate. Translated to parenting class etiquette, this means that we phrase comments in positive terms, do not criticize one another, and respect opinions that diverge from our own.
- Parents agree to keep what is said in the group confidential. Confessions, harangues and problems will not be repeated outside of the group.
- No one should be pressured to reveal anything about themselves or their family if they choose not to. If group members are responding to questions "around the table," any member can decline to speak by saying, "I pass."

## **What Can You Expect From A Jewish Parenting Group?**

Martin Luther King, Jr. described the goal of his ministry as comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable. A Jewish parenting class should also accomplish these goals. A Jewish parenting class examines the everyday challenges of child rearing from the perspective of the beit din (the ancient court of Jewish law). Every decision we make as parents has not only psychological dimensions but moral, ethical, and spiritual ones as well. Using a Jewish perspective to understand parenting problems gives us a long view and reveals the underpinnings of the problem, not just the surface cuts and scratches. In a Jewish parenting class, the goal is not to put a Band-Aid on the current difficulty—to simply comfort the disturbed—but to stretch ourselves by learning basic Jewish principles of living.

### **You can expect to leave a Jewish parenting class with:**

- A deeper understanding of Jewish thought
- Insight gained about your individual child: his or her temperament, natural endowments, interests, and inclinations
- Resources for finding basic information about different stages of your child's social development
- An understanding about how certain aspects of our culture impede parents who are trying to raise self-reliant, compassionate, optimistic children
- Guidelines about defining appropriate expectations for children
- Insights about how your own psychological needs may be hampering your child's growth

A good Jewish parenting class is profound but never solemn or staid. Pilpul (from the Hebrew, “pepper”) is a dialectical method of Talmudic study and debate, consisting of drawing out the broadest range of logical possibilities in the text. The purpose of pilpul is both to deepen the participants’ understanding of the applications of the law and to sharpen their wits. Disagreements, laughter, tragic stories, laughter, juicy stories, laughter, teasing and tenderness — a good Jewish parenting class is peppery.

### **CURRICULUM FOR A SIX SESSION PARENTING CLASS**

#### **Each class has:**

- a central topic
- one or two chapters of required reading to be completed before the class
- a reflection assignment to be thought about before the class
- a quote or quotes of the day to be written on a board or read aloud before each class
- a list of discussion questions that will be handed out at the beginning of each class

Each member can download or photocopy this entire guide and review the reflection and discussion questions before each class. I’ve intentionally provided more questions than even the most ambitious and organized group can cover in a two-hour class. The leader or group members can select from among the questions listed based on each particular groups’ interests and concerns.

Name tags should be provided for all participants for each session.

## **SESSION ONE**

### **Topic**

Helping our children realize their potential without creating stress.

### **Reading Assignment**

- Chapter 1. How I Lost One Faith and Found Another
- Chapter 2. The Blessing of Acceptance: Discovering Your Unique and Ordinary Child

### **Reflection Assignment**

Look at a photo album with pictures of you when you were your child's age. Try to recall your natural interests and passions at that time. Think about how the expectations of your family and the environment you were living in helped these inclinations flourish or wither.

### **Quotes of the Day**

- “If your child has a talent to be a baker, do not ask him to be a doctor.” (Hasidic)
- “When I reach the world to come, God will not ask me why I wasn't more like Moses. He will ask me why I wasn't more like Zusya.” (Early Hasidic leader, Rabbi Zusya)

Begin the first class with introductions around the table. Participants should tell the names, ages, and grades of their children and mention any topic they hope to cover in the course of the six meetings.

## **Discussion Questions**

- Think about your child's talents, inclinations, passions? How would you describe his nature? Is he like you? Different in tempo, interests, volatility?
- What opportunities does he have to express his natural inclinations?
- Are there telltale signs (bedwetting, fears, apathy, irritability, sleeplessness, nail chewing, hair-pulling) that you may be pressuring your child to achieve at a high level in areas in which she is not endowed?
- Reflect on whether you are accepting "good enough" or looking for perfection from your child? From yourself as a parent?
- Think of a family where the kids have turned out well. Ask them for guidance about their expectations (for grades, for music practicing, for help around the house) of their children. Share what you learn with the group.
- Share strategies you've used for resisting the "flu bug" of competition with other group members.

## **SESSION TWO**

### **Topic**

Granting our children freedom: Where do wise parents draw the line?

### **Reading Assignment**

- Chapter 3. The Blessing of Having Someone To Look Up To: Honoring Mother and Father

- Chapter 4. The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Why God Doesn't Want You to Overprotect Your Child

### **Reflection Assignment**

When you were growing-up how did you address your parents and their friends? How did you address teachers? If you were required to be more formal than your children are, what were the advantages and disadvantages?

Think back to your childhood. On a summer night, were you able to play outside until dark without adult supervision? Could you ride your bike freely in your neighborhood? Recall the bones you broke, the adventures you had. What were the benefits of this degree of freedom? Any harm? Compare your experiences to your child's current level of freedom.

### **Quotes of the Day**

- “When a person honors the parents, God says, ‘I consider it as though I lived with them and they honored me.’”(Talmud, Kiddushin, 30b)
- “Do not to put a stumbling block before the blind.” (Leviticus,19:14)

### **Discussion Questions**

Take an inventory of honor by asking yourself these questions:

- Do you allow your children to interrupt you when you are on the phone?
- Do you have a designated place at the dinner table? Do the children sit in your place?



- Do your children consistently contradict you?
- Do they talk back to you in public?
- Do you give your children enough opportunities to help out? To demonstrate thoughtfulness? To take care of you?
- Do they respect your privacy? Do they enter your room or take your things without asking?
- Do your older children commandeer the remote? Tie up the phone line? Forget to give you phone messages they have taken?
- What are your family's rules of hakhnasat orchim (hospitality to guests and playdates)? Compare your ideal to your real situation.
- Do you set an example in the way you treat your own parents?
- Share strategies around the table for combating rude talk and entitlement. Share consequences and rewards that have been effective.
- What creative ways have group members found to give children freedom while still keeping them safe?

### **SESSION THREE**

#### **Topic**

Giving and receiving.

#### **Reading Assignment**

- Chapter 5. The Blessing of Longing: Teaching Your Child an Attitude of Gratitude

- Chapter 6. The Blessing of Work: Finding the Holy Sparks in Ordinary Chores

### **Reflection Assignment**

When you were growing up, did you have as much stuff, clothes, books, vehicles, athletic equipment, and toys as your children do? Was the stuff in as many places in the house? Did your family try to repair things before replacing them? If yes, what lessons did this teach you? What chores did you do? How did you help your parents in other ways? What did you learn from having these responsibilities? What did you sacrifice?

### **Quotes of the Day**

- “He who has one hundred wants two hundred.” (Jewish saying)
- “Slavery is responsibility without authority.” (British psychoanalyst, W.R.Bion)

### **Discussion Questions and Activities**

- Make a list of those things you believe your child is entitled to and those that are privileges to be earned. Compare lists with other group members.
- Does your family have a ritual for expressing gratitude?
- Do you let your children know what makes you grateful towards them?
- Do you frequently lift your spirit by going shopping? How often do you buy something and then regret it or find you already have the same or a similar thing at home?
- Does your child know which charities to which you contribute? Does she know why you’ve chosen them?

- What chores does your child do daily? Weekly? Do you need to nag or remind?
- What methods have group members found to encourage their children to take initiative about helping out at home?

## **SESSION FOUR**

### **Topic**

Discipline.

### **Reading Assignment**

- Chapter 8. The Blessing of Self-Control: Channeling Your Child's Yetzer Hara

### **Reflection Assignment**

Take a moment to think about the way your parents disciplined you. Were they laissez faire parents? Guilt inducing? Overcontrolling? Trial and error? What aspects of their techniques of discipline were constructive and helped you develop self-control and a sense of security? What aspects caused you to feel anxious or rejected?

### **Quotes of the Day**

- “Be it ever your way to thrust your child off with the left hand and draw him to you with the right hand.” (Talmud, Sotah 47z)
- “What is the normal child like? Does he just eat and grow and smile sweetly? No, that is not what he is like. A normal child, if he has the confidence of his mother and father, pulls out all the stops. In the course of time he tries out his powers to

disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle and to appropriate. Everything that takes people to the courts (or to the asylums for that matter) has its normal equivalent in infancy and childhood, in the relation of the child to his own home.” (Pediatrician and psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott)

### **Discussion Questions**

- Think of your child’s worst trait: anything from a little annoying habit or attitude to a big problem that has his teachers exasperated or deeply concerned. Then reframe it—think of this trait as your child’s greatest strength. What are the good aspects of the trait? How might it benefit your child now and in adulthood?
- Ask yourself which aspects of your child’s environment are obstacles to this trait being expressed positively: An overly busy schedule? Inappropriate expectations for school performance? Sleep deprivation? Poor organization of his room, desk, supplies? School work that is too difficult? Too easy? Not enough playtime or downtime?
- Examine your discipline strategy: Are you pumping up small problems? Being inconsistent? Making empty threats? Sticking with an ineffective approach?
- Share strategies with other group members for consequences for misbehavior and rewards for compliance and good attitude.

### **SESSION FIVE**

#### **Topic**

Food and eating.

## **Reading Assignment**

- Chapter 7. The Blessing of Food: Bringing Moderation, Celebration and Sanctification to Your Table

## **Quotes of the Day**

- “The Jewish mother betrays an unusual amount of concern about the problem of feeding her children. In general, she should stop worrying so much about how much they eat and what they wear.” (A 1923 article in the Froyen Zhurnal, a Yiddish advice magazine for newly arrived immigrants)
- “Since the destruction of the Temple, every table in every home has become an altar.” (Talmud, Pesachim 4b)

## **Reflection Activity**

What are your most pleasant childhood memories of the tastes, smells and presentation of food? What were your holiday food rituals? What are your least pleasant memories of food tensions or battles with your family?

## **Discussion Questions**

- Explore the attitudes towards food that you bring from your childhood. Did you grow up with destructive attitudes that you don't want to pass along to your children? Are there memories you wish to preserve?

- Take an inventory of the example you set for your children. Do you eat leftovers from their plates? Do you eat standing up in front of the pantry where the crackers and cookies are kept? Do you frequently eat in the car?
- Are you so afraid of having fats and sugar in the house that you deprive the children of a normal range of foods?
- What are your children's' favorite foods? Do they know what foods you love?
- Are you teaching them how to cook?

## **SESSION SIX**

### **Topic**

What are our goals in raising our children?

### **Reading Assignment**

- Chapter 9. The Blessing of Time: Teaching Your Child the Value of the Present Moment
- Chapter 10. The Blessing of Faith and Tradition: Losing Your Fear of the “G Word” and Introducing your Child to Spirituality

### **Quote of the Day**

- “If you truly wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise they will not themselves study Torah, but will simply instruct their children to do so.” (Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk)

## **Reflection Assignment**

As a child, how much time did you have to daydream and reflect? What activities did your family do together that you enjoyed? What religious education and worship experiences did you have as a child? In what ways did they enrich your life? Did you feel frustrated and oppressed by them? Confused?

## **Discussion Questions**

- Has your home life gotten so pressured that you often prefer to be at work?
- What would be the obstacles to a “tech free” (no computer, no beeper or cell phone) day of the week at home? What would be the benefits?
- What aspects of your childhood religion do you want to pass along to your children? A predictable cycle of ritual events and celebrations? A lens on right and wrong, fate and justice? Sounds, odors, tastes, and beautiful images? What was missing from your childhood experience that you would like to provide for your family?
- Does lack of skill or self-consciousness prevent you from taking part in religious rituals?
- What obstacles are in the way of finding a community that shares your religious or spiritual beliefs? Geography? Snobbery? Shyness? Finances?

Class is over! Say goodbye, trade e-mail addresses, consider continuing your learning as a group by finding a rabbi or Jewish educator to teach you from Jewish texts or plan a parenting

book discussion group using the list of recommended readings at the back of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*.