

Dear Parents,

Wednesday, October 31, 2007

Last Monday, we had the first of our Round Table discussions about early childhood and its specific goals within the spectrum of human development. Afterward, one parent wrote, "As always, I enjoyed being a part of the meeting. Regardless of the topic, I always learn something that helps me become a better person, parent and friend." Exactly the point!

Education, for any age, and any stage, is a perpetual process in which the learner develops and unfolds; for that process to happen we need to follow certain ground rules.

To educate, we need to meet the 'other' where *they* are. If we talk *at* them, instead of *to* them, the potential for growth is minimal. We need to *listen* to the other, to ascertain what they are *really* saying, even if it is not readily apparent in their words. And, we need to be open to hearing what the other is saying, in a non-judgemental way. Education can only unfold in a 'safe' atmosphere.

When we respect the learner's *process*, and create an ambiance where the discovery is more important than the 'right answer', we allow the learner to build **knowledge that he truly owns, as opposed to knowledge that he is merely regurgitating from an external source!**



Parents often ask for 'live' examples of what such a dialogue might look like. I am sharing with you a short episode that happened with my 4-year old son, Levik, right after the high-holiday season.

"Mommy, that picture doesn't belong here," Levik stated firmly, pointing to a painting of dancing rabbis hanging in the corridor at Chabad.

Okay... At the surface it appears that Levik is overstepping his boundaries in his unilateral declaration of what should or should not be hung on the walls of Chabad. However, I must recognize that Levik might be saying something different to his actual words.

So I ask, "Levik, what do you mean?" (Non-judgemental and authentically curious.)

Levik responds, "Simchat Torah (the holiday in which we traditionally dance with the Torah) is over. The picture should come down already."

Ah ha... Now, I hear what Levik is *really* expressing. I can 'meet' him where he is. I repeat his words to make sure I understood him, "Levik, the holiday is over, you feel the picture should come down?"

"Mm hm. It's not Simchat Torah anymore," he repeats.

A teachable moment! Levik can surely be brought to an understanding that the messages of the holidays 'have legs' and need not end with the calendar. "What did you like about Simchat Torah?"

"I danced. I played with Bobby and Mendle. I danced on Daddy's shoulders. It was so much fun. I ate candies. I kissed the Torah."

"What happens when you see the painting? Do you remember how much fun it was to dance with the Torah?" And off we went into a discussion on how the painting is a visual reminder of the messages of the holiday, and the benefits of revisiting memories...

But imagine how I would have shut down this conversation, had I responded to his initial statement with a judgmental assumption and said, "Levik, in your room you can choose what to hang on the walls. But here, Rabbi Yitzchok chose to put it up."

Sincerely,
Malkie Herson

PS Tomorrow, Thursday, November 1, I will be traveling to Israel to meet with a team of educators. I am excited to hear about the work they have been doing, and to share with them what we have been doing here at Zimmer. I will keep you posted!