

# Educating Children

“Spare the rod and spoil the child” goes the old English saying. It is based on the book of Proverbs 13.24 “He who holds back the stick must hate his child”. The idea is that if you care about your child, you really should discipline him or her. Not to do so, is an act of selfish indulgence and cowardice. But how far should we go? Should we still use corporal punishment?

The sixteenth-century code of Jewish law, *Shulchan Aruch* in the section dealing with teaching Torah, says that “A teacher must not hit his pupils cruelly with staffs and rods but with little straps” (*Yoreh Deah* 245.10). Yet the Talmud warns against overdoing physical assault on children for fear of driving them away and into bad company. And Maimonides recommends disciplining a rebellious wife, the most the Talmud allows is a show of temper and a husbandly tantrum.

The Bible may be very firm about respecting and honoring one’s parents. One of the most important principles in Jewish Law and much debated in the Talmud. There was a time when parents expected to be obeyed unconditionally. And one did not dare to use one’s parents’ first names. I still come across parents who expect adult children to obey their wishes regardless. The command to “honor your father and your mother” is often ignored. I see parents struggling all the time to find a balance between excessive permissiveness and unpopular discipline. Many parents capitulate and sacrifice discipline for an easy life. And peer group pressure is very powerful, for better and for worse. It is tough being a good parent. And the Bible is full of examples of bad dads!

In most civilized countries corporal punishment is now forbidden, happily, and the stick is no longer a tool of education. Unless your child goes to a very Charedi school (or a Madrassa) in which case the chance of his being hit by his teacher rises significantly. Even so, nothing like the way it was a generation or so ago. During my lifetime counseling, psychiatry, and medication have come to be the norm for dealing with difficult children. Yet overmedication has become a serious problem and too often is an easy way out. In many families, children run wild and out of parental control. In many circles, it is considered positive to allow children complete freedom of self-expression regardless.

Just as detrimental is the excessive materialism, indulgence, and expectation. The addiction to phones, pads, and social media starting at a young age is frightening. You rarely see a kid without, and this has led to a huge increase in depression, suicide, and an inability to concentrate.

A recent study on the use of electronic media by children in the US found that nearly one-in-five parents of a child 11 or younger (17%) say that their child has their own smartphone and more than one-third of parents with a child under 12 say their child began interacting with a smartphone before the age of

5. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/childrens-engagement-with-digital-devices-screen-time/>

The thought of surviving for 25 hours without a cell phone is unthinkable. And I hear that even in some modern orthodox homes, parents have given up the fight. Orthodox Judaism was once made fun of for banning electronics on Shabbat. Yet increasingly people are coming to realize how wise the rabbis were in trying to make some days different from others. Even the late Steve Jobs insisted his children manage without their pads and phones at least one day a week.

The Talmud reminds us that children once faced a much harder life. They were lucky just to get food and shelter. Technically according to one opinion a person's *legal* obligation to support one's children ends when they reach the age of *six* (*Ketubot* 50a). Parents then only had a moral obligation to give their children water, food, and clothing. If a parent refused to support a child, the courts could exert pressure to do so. But the Talmud considers the support of minor children to be an act of *charity* rather than a legal obligation. Try bringing that argument up the next time your child asks for a cell phone.

Talmudic law is clarified by the later codes.

A person is only obliged to support his sons and daughters until they reach the age of six. From that age, he is required by rabbinic decree to support them until they grow up. If he does not wish to support them, we admonish him until he complies. If he still refuses, we announce to the public: "So-and-so is a cruel person and does not wish to support his children." We cannot force him to support his children. But if we assessed him and found that he has the money to give to charity and this would allow the children to live, we take the money from him by force, in the name of charity, and support the children until they grow up. Otherwise, it becomes a communal responsibility (*Shulchan Aruch Even Ha'Ezer*71:1).

On the other hand, spending on children is one of the most direct ways that parents can invest in children. And even possibly get a payback on their investment in old age or infirmity. It can enrich experiences that build human and cultural capital and enable them to live successful and secure lives. But where do you draw the line between helping, educating, and spoiling so that the child grows up to be incapable of coping alone financially or emotionally? Perhaps education is the most important gift a parent can give, and the Talmud says that parents have an obligation to teach their children Torah, to educate them spiritually just as much as materially. Someone who teaches a child Torah is like a parent.

One of my favorite Talmudic passages on education strikes a balance between emotional support and educational expectations.

"The celebrated Rab came to a certain place suffering from famine and decreed a fast, but no rain fell. A modest reader then went before the ark and prayed, "He causes the wind to blow", and the wind blew. Then he prayed, "He causes the rain to fall" and the rain fell. Rab wondered why he had such

credit with God. The reader replied " I am a teacher of young children and I teach the children of the poor as well as those of the rich, I take no fees from any who cannot afford to pay, further, I have a fishpond and anyone reluctant to learn I bribe with fish from it and thus I appease him so that he becomes eager to learn (*Taanit* 24a).

Humanity, kindness, and sensitivity go hand in hand with discipline.