



PRIZMAH

Center for Jewish Day Schools

Supporting At-Risk Children in Jewish Schools

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Prizmah Thought Leadership

It seems that programs dealing with teens at-risk are popping up at an alarming rate in the Jewish community. Parent support groups, teen drop-in centers, addiction programs, and community conferences seem to be a new norm that have become a part of our society.

There is overwhelming anguish in the experience of so many community adolescents and young adults who are struggling psychologically, emotionally, personally, or religiously. As an educator, it is painful to sit with parents who are devastated and confused, trying to figure out how the children to whom they have devoted so much are now lost, disengaged, and deeply troubled adolescents. Even harder is the conversation with the parent of the child who has been kicked out of or not accepted into a yeshiva; one cannot overstate the damaging effects of the sense of rejection from our community, which is supposed to be characterized by chesed, love, and caring.

The question we need to ask ourselves is, what is it that we are doing to address the needs of these children whose youthful behaviors put them at risk of all sorts of problems later in life? The implications of this question affect not only individual children, but really our institutions and communities as a whole. By not addressing this population of students at a young age, we are likely setting ourselves up to face significant problems down the line. If we are not positioning ourselves to address the needs of these children at a young age, what will be the implications for them, their families, and our communities as they progress through their developmental years?

Identifying At-Risk Students

Experienced teachers and administrators who have seen the trajectory of students over their educational journeys can often, from early stages, easily identify students who are at risk of academic failure, emotional problems, religious disengagement, and overall detachment from their school experiences. How does this happen? Studies show that in the majority of cases this was not a one-time occurrence or a sudden change, but rather the culmination of a long process unfolding over the course of many years.

Anyone involved in the day-to-day life of middle-school-age children will certainly be familiar with the following representative phenomena:

- The seventh-grade boy who never seems to be able to follow directions and is always doing something to disturb the other students.
- The individuals in the class who do not grasp the material as quickly or as fully as most of the other children, get poor grades, and generally “hate school.”
- The sixth-grade girl who sits quietly during davening, and who does not sing with the other girls, open a siddur, or seem to care very much.

These phenomena are not at all uncommon and may be seen as "par for the course" in a regular school or camp day. Typically, in our yeshivot, they are handled in ways that help to manage the behavior and allow for the educational school program to continue as planned. Punitive measures discourage students from disturbing; perhaps behavior charts are used to encourage them to do the right thing. Lower-level classes are created to teach struggling students, and expectations are modified to allow these students to pass from grade to grade despite their lack of achievement and growth. Students are taught to avoid disturbing other students during davening and class, even as they remain disengaged themselves.

However, the fact is that these behaviors are not mere annoyances, but actually serve as glaring signals of things to come that we all-too-often ignore. The book *Dropout Prevention* (Goss and Anden) surveys research showing that behavioral problems during middle school years are closely associated with truancy and academic struggles in high school years. Lack of development of executive functioning skills in preteens is

associated with lack of achievement in later years. Disengagement in the lower grades is associated with lack of motivation and development as children get older. High school students dropping out of school is, in the authors' words, "not an event, but a process." The good news is that, when addressed early enough, it is a process that can be realigned with the proper educational approaches that are needed for these children.

Strategies for Success

There are many well-researched steps for early intervention that will help support these children long before their situation becomes entrenched. Three proven steps to help struggling youth find their path are personalizing academic learning, teaching behavioral skills, and allowing students to pursue their own personal passions.

Personalized Learning

Over the years, our institutions have increased our focus and rigor on academic achievement. As our days schools continuously "raise the bar," often those students whose strengths do not lie in academic areas are left to feel inadequate as they struggle in school, earn low grades, and in general spend their days doing things that they feel that they are not good at. The damaging psychological effects of high-stakes testing and consistently poor grades can have serious ramifications later in the development of young children.

We need to carefully consider how to support the learning of these students according to their individual needs to make sure that they are able to taste academic success, as success generally breeds more success. Creative assessment strategies such as projects and presentations that allow students who do not score well on tests a chance to still be "good at school" can go a long way in helping struggling students. Allowing more autonomy in learning builds motivation and sense of purpose in learning. Teachers need to be trained and supported in these methods in order to allow their students to remain positively involved in their learning.

Behavioral Skills

Behavioral skills come naturally to some children but not to others. For children whose behaviors lag at a young age, providing them with the extra help they need in developing those skills is essential. For these children, shifting the focus from academic learning to practical life-skills building can be vital. The short term effectiveness of strict punishments and harsh discipline often comes at the frightening expense of the damage done to the overall well being of the child. Keeping a child's well being and long term development in mind—administrative support, appropriate teacher preparation, and

collaboration between parents and teachers—are low cost but crucial factors that can bring about major changes in the child’s overall development.

Passion-Based Education

Finally, when an institution supports children in pursuing their passions in authentic and meaningful ways, tremendous strides can be made toward helping children at risk. By broadening the scope of the educational program to truly embrace children who excel in areas such as art, music, outdoor skills, and hand-on learning, a school can change a child’s entire self image. When a school encourages these avenues to our students, it allows them the opportunity to become the proud exhibitors of special and unique talents; this is in direct contrast to a child being labeled as “the kid in the low class” who is expected to make trouble, as so often becomes the case in our existing models. The risk of students developing “at risk” behaviors as adolescents and young adults is greatly reduced when their need to develop a positive self-image is addressed at younger ages.

While the challenge that lies before us is formidable, there are many steps that we can take to truly embrace and support all of our children. If our yeshivot will allow themselves to truly address the issue with the wellbeing of these children in mind, this will allow for highly effective interventions in changing their trajectory and development. It is incumbent upon our community to ask the hard questions and make the hard decisions that will give a chance for each and every one of our children to reach their fullest potential.

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