

Adolescents and money

Question:Submitted

My 16-year-old son came home from *yeshiva* the other day asking for money to buy cigarettes. He knows that my wife and I don't approve of smoking. He never before openly admitted to smoking, though it was pretty clear that he has smoked. What is more difficult is that he gave us an ultimatum. He said that if we don't give him money for cigarettes, he would possibly do some other things unbecoming for a *yeshiva* boy. We understand that he is at a transitional stage in life - adolescence. We are extremely supportive and encouraging, and try to discipline with love and care. We have several other children, *B"H*. We have never compared our son to his older brother or any of his other siblings - ever. We treat each of our children as individuals. We hope that our son will grow out of this stage and will eventually settle down, and we are willing to be patient. Right now he is going through a stage. We play up his positives. We show him how much we love him for who he is. We've worked with him and we've seen signs that he might turn a new leaf at any time. But that is why his recent request is that much more disheartening.

The question is, how much are we to give in and how much are we to say no? If we don't give him money, who knows where he'll go to get money and who knows what inappropriate things he will choose to do? Then again, even if we give him money, who knows if the money is only being spent on cigarettes? Smoking may be harmful physically, but we are likewise concerned about him harming himself spiritually. I know this is a difficult question, but that is why we are coming to you. We are at a difficult juncture. Any suggestions or pointers would be greatly appreciated

Answer:

Even though I am neither a *Navi* nor a *Ben Navi*, I am sure your son is "going through a stage" and will, sooner or later, drop the cigarette bit – let's hope sooner. Your inquiry gives many hints that it will happen sooner rather than later.

First and foremost, you say that you "show how much you love him for who he is." Secondly, you, *B"H*, never compare him to his siblings" and "treat him and his siblings as individuals". Thirdly, you say you "discipline with love and care" and that your relationship with him is on such a level that he "openly admitted to his smoking." The fact that he does not sneak behind your back, is a tremendous *maala* in your relationship, and allows you to work with him on an honest and trusting level. You yourself admit that after working with him "We've seen signs that he might turn a new leaf". All this is ample proof that changes are around the corner.

I think your son must understand that if someone wants to physically harm himself, you cannot give him a knife to do it with, even if he thinks no harm will come to him. Would you let an infant crawl near a hot stove? I therefore think you cannot give him the money needed. Furthermore, as a parent you cannot be "*mesayeah l'dvar aveira*" even if you receive a *heter*. If your son perceives that his parent is helping him, it will make him feel that it is permissible. However, you must allow him some kind of access to funds whether it is money he earned, or birthday money – use creative thinking for your particular case – so that he won't have to take

what is not his, or start begging others to acquire the cigarettes. Such friendships are undesirable. Furthermore, he should be made to feel that he cannot smoke publicly so that it won't be "*naaseh lo ke'heter*".

You mention that if he has access to money, it might be used for other inappropriate things aside from cigarettes. Why think negatively when you have such an open and honest relationship?

I think that I would worry more regarding the "ultimatum" that he gave you to give him the money. The *chutzpah* ("big time" in the vernacular) of giving an open and challenging ultimatum to parents must be addressed as it is affecting his character traits. It should be addressed in a non-confrontational manner until it is resolved. A sixteen year old should be able to understand that this is a big "no no" in *Kibud Av V'Em*, or in any sort of human relationship.

After writing the above lines, I read an article where a *shaila* was posed to the Brisker Rav by Rav Avraham Wolf regarding two girls who were up for expulsion from school – one for stealing and the other for *chutzpa* to her teachers. The Brisker Rav responded: "Do not throw out the girl who was found stealing. Hopefully she will do *teshuva*. However, the one with *Chutzpa* is a bigger question as her bad habits will influence her peers".