

Methods of Discipline

Question:

I would like your advice on how to handle the following situation. My son received an assignment to write lines- that he will be more responsible- five thousand times! This particular child has an impulsive nature and has difficulty writing- though he is undoubtedly disturbing the class. He has previously completed many such smaller assignments, and this time the *Rebbe* wanted to make a point and gave him an assignment of 1500 lines. My son was 'not responsible' and left his assignment of 1500 lines at home, so the *Rebbe* increased it to five thousand times. When I called the *Rebbe* to discuss this impossible task, he said that it is time that my son stops trying to get away with things in life. The *Rebei* said that even if it takes all week, the message has to hit home once and for all. I told him that my son just feels extreme anger and doesn't want to go back to school. He said that my son should begin exerting himself and working seriously on the assignment and then I should call him back. My question is: is this likely to work, or are there other ways to teach a child responsibility and self-control?

Answer:

When reading this question, my blood pressure and temperature started to boil as it made me recall the bygone days, when I was in elementary school some 60 years ago or so. I was also of an "impulsive nature" and "disturbed the class" and I also "completed many (many) such assignments". I thought that this sort of "punishment" was discarded about a half a century ago for its worthlessness and outright damage to the recipient.

In order to have a child or, for that matter, any one of us, do *teshuva*, and that is our goal, we must recognize our *aveira* and be willing to correct it. The *raison d'être* of punishment is to encourage our willingness to correct the mistakes that we want to correct. The punishment of writing lines only causes, as you say, "extreme anger and (he) doesn't want to go back to school". By giving the punishment of writing lines, we, the establishment, are the losers. We accomplish absolutely nothing except the ruination of the recipient's handwriting, as it did mine, or of having him ask his friends to help him with this task. I once discovered a group of students who had created a *gmach* to help those "in need" and had all types of lines ready, or they were willing to share the burden by helping to write lines.

How can we possibly correct the wrong or, as you say, stop the boy from "trying to get away with things" or "that the message has to hit home once and for all". The only thing that will hit home, in your case, is how much the child will despise going to school.

In order for punishment to be effective, the recipient must understand that you are helping him correct his wrong while, on a personal level, remain his friend. If he doesn't understand that, then why punish him? Of course, the best punishment in the world is to be proactive. The teacher should understand his students and should create an atmosphere in the classroom which will take into consideration each individual's idiosyncrasies in order to avoid mischievous behavior.

When the infraction is minor, then one should ignore it completely. However, if and when a punishment must absolutely be meted out, it should be given outside of the classroom so that class time won't be compromised nor a tumult created. The child should not be unnecessarily embarrassed. A punishment should never be given out in the heat of the moment, as probably

was done in this case. (Der Alter Fun Slobodka used to put on his special “anger” coat before reacting). This is, of course, a tall order, but the educational community must work toward that end.

I do not think that your son should defy the *Rebbe*, nor should he get help in the writing of the lines. You should explain to him that this particular punishment may not make him behave better, as we see that his behavior has not improved with such punishments. However, your son should understand that he frustrated the *Rebbe* to such an extent that the *Rebbe* gave this type of punishment only out of utter disbelief that the boy could behave in this way again and again. We do see a hint of *charoto* on the *Rebbe*’s part when he said that your son “should begin exerting himself” etc. and “then we’ll see”. Do take him up on that.

Your son should learn from the fact that he was a) punished, not how he was punished, b) why he was punished and that c) his wrong must be worked on and corrected. You must have an ongoing discussion with him as to how he can mend his unacceptable behavior.

You ask if there is any other way to teach responsibility. I think that in your case, which is certainly, *b’di eved*, I would have him go home and bring the 1500 lines he forgot, to school. Insult should not be added to injury by the addition of 3500 lines. If the lines were not written, then have him do it now, even at the loss of class time. In other cases of irresponsibility, I would never let him get away without doing the task at hand, until he realizes that to do what he must do, at the time needed to do it, is the easiest and best way. Don’t look the other way, or let him get away with it even once. Work at it and you will surely be *matzliach*.

When I was teaching grade 9 in a New York *yeshiva*, one of the students forgot his *gemorra*, from which he liked to learn, at home. After opening the classroom door to his elderly, *choshuva* father, who came by subway to bring his 15 year old son his favorite *gemorra*, I learned two lessons. A) The son will never forget the *chashivus* his father has for *limud HaTorah*. B) He will never learn responsibility, always hoping that someone will look after him.

I should also mention an incident with my youngest son when he was a young teenager. We received a gift of very expensive goblets. His mother asked him many times to use the goblets only for drinking and not to fool around with them. You guessed it. He broke one. He was told that he must use his Bar Mitzvah money and take a 30 minute bus ride to the only store which handled these goblets and replace it. He begrudgingly did it. A lesson had to be learned and it was.

The bottom line is that we cannot let the child, in any way, think that we are putting down the *Rebbe* because of this inappropriate punishment, as the child’s *aveira* is quite evident and must be addressed. Don’t wait until he grows up hoping that it will all go away. He might not grow out of it on his own.

Gut Shabbos.