



TAKING PARENTING TO

# nearit

CHANA KLEIN

COULD FOCUSING ON WHAT IS RIGHT IN EACH MOMENT STOP THE NEGATIVITY AND MISBEHAVIOR IN MY HOME? I WAS DETERMINED TO FIND OUT. AND THE NURTURED HEART APPROACH TRANSFORMED MY HOME

It

wasn't like I didn't try to be a good parent.

I took parenting courses and read up on all the methodologies recommended by *chinuch* experts. I worked hard on modifying myself to become the "regulated" textbook mom with all the answers.

But this just reinforced my feelings of inadequacy. All I saw was how much was lacking. What I needed to fix. I felt like a failure.

Until I met Yael Walfish. She showed me that what I saw as error in myself was really something to be celebrated.

I'd always viewed my intense personality as something to be tamed. Too often I became a volcano, ready to erupt at my husband, kids, and myself. I then fell into a cycle of self-shame, blame, compulsive overeating, and being too busy to let myself think. In doing so, I was rejecting my life force, my inner fire, Yael explained.

The Nurtured Heart Approach (NHA), Yael told me, had transformed her perspective. She and her husband, Naftoli Walfish, trained all the therapists in their counseling service in NHA, and she shared stories of parents, teachers, and clinicians, all of whom the approach had changed for the better.

How does it work? NHA is built on the simple observation that parents get more of whatever they energize – that is, devote their attention and emotional energy to. Children – especially intense or difficult ones – intuitively know how to get our full attention through negative behaviors. NHA calls for "flipping the script" and using our well-honed parental judgment to discern what is right instead of what is wrong. Mega doses of positivity, clearly defined rules, and a consciously low-key approach to negativity don't just modify children's behavior, but transform them into confident, resilient children who bring out their best and the best in others.

When I heard Yael and her husband were offering a six-week course, I was skeptical, but decided that since all four of my kids are intense, I ought to give it a try. Would this parenting class really be different?



December 7, 2016

At the first NHA training, I learned the importance of not responding with an emotional reaction when my children were acting negatively — not “giving them energy,” in NHA-speak. Most of my life, I assumed that highlighting what needed fixing in myself and those around me would inspire change. Fear and shame were the best motivators, I believed. Instead, NHA showed that negativity may get an immediate result, but at a severe long-term cost to self-esteem and relationships.

To demonstrate, we performed an exercise called *Sarah Experiential*. One woman played 12-year-old Sarah, and everyone else received an index card to read aloud to her. We were told that Sarah was bullied at school and, though her parents and teachers loved her, she never felt good about herself. She felt she only received attention when she was doing things wrong.

We role-played Sarah getting ready for school, with the group reading cards that showed the way we normally talk to our children:

“Sarah, the alarm went off ten minutes

ago. Never press ‘snooze’ on a school day! Why aren’t you up and dressed? You’ll be late!”

“Sarah, shake a leg! You should be done with breakfast by now, and you’re not even dressed and ready to eat. Stop getting distracted.”

Listening to five more of these cards in a row was debilitating. The woman who played Sarah shriveled in her seat. Yet most mornings I sounded just like those cards. Could my attempts to move my kids along actually crush them?

Next, women read cards that showed a more deliberate use of creativity to overcome our natural way of speaking — that is, the NHA way of highlighting the positive:

“Sarah, I appreciate that you chose to honor your bedtime and wake up on time. I see you’re getting ready to get out of bed. I love how you are trying to get to school on time. It shows me that you care about school and our family.”

“I want to tell you before you go into school that I saw how sweet and encouraging you were to your brother. You’re inspiring him to have a good day and you are showing him such an excellent version of loving-kindness. This

is a great quality I see in you.”

We all looked at each other askance. Obviously, this was the preferable way of speaking, but could any of us manage that in the early morning rush? And didn’t the language sound “put on”?

Still, I left class feeling committed to at least try our homework: not to give negative energy to our children at all this week.

Changing old habits proved exhausting. Chavi, my 15-year-old, was often preoccupied with her phone and friends, forgetting to clean up after herself in the kitchen. This was my pet peeve, since I didn’t want to be the maid.

“No way, Shira, did you really get stuck doing that extra assignment? That is soooo not fair,” Chavi said emphatically into the phone as she chomped her salad, ponytail bobbing. After eating, she left her plate and mess to run to her room to finish the conversation. This was my opportunity to show restraint.

I wanted to bellow out, “Chavi, get back here and clean up! Why do you always leave it for me?”

Instead, I remembered poor Sarah and swallowed my words. I had my chance when Chavi came back to the kitchen

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an hour later. Rather than addressing the dishes, I said, “Chavi, you ate such a healthy meal; that was a smart food choice. And now you’re doing homework. You’re so responsible.”

“Huh?” She looked at me. I repeated myself.

“Mommy, is this something from your parenting class?”

“Maybe,” I responded. “But it’s true.”

“Thanks.” She smiled.

Hooray for me. I stopped myself from the criticism and negativity I usually gave.

December 14, 2016

This week we learned techniques for finding the positive in any situation and ramping up the energy. This class was crucial because I had to retrain my eye to see the good. I also knew the compliments I was used to giving — “You’re awesome!” or “Great job!” — were empty and felt flat to children who were seeking a warm emotional connection from me.

“For praise to create emotional connection, we have to give evidence of the personal success and speak from the heart to the heart,” Yael explained. Each positive approach had the same basic principles: You must be in the moment, mindful of the details of what’s going right, and recognize with authentic, specific words what you’re seeing.

Aha! These were the ingredients I had been missing in my self-talk as well as talk to others.

Recognizing actual strengths and

positive actions in your child builds inner wealth (a.k.a. character strength). When kids feel strong, they make better choices.

As an exercise, we were shown a picture of a girl sharpening a pencil and told to list all the qualities she needs to sharpen it. *What special skills do you need to sharpen a pencil?* we thought. Yet when we began listing what it entailed, it was fascinating: hand-eye coordination, dexterity, strength, mechanical knowledge, understanding of spatial relationships, respect for her work, attentiveness, and perhaps even ambition.

So even if nothing out of the ordinary is going on, if I pay attention, I can notice many wonderful possibilities in each moment.

That week, we hosted a family for a Shabbos meal. Whenever one of the children did anything well, the mother said nothing. She saved her connection and attention for when they did something wrong. I asked her why she didn’t praise her son for sitting nicely and eating. “Why should I praise him for something he should be doing?” she asked.

That’s when my thinking shifted. We *should* be praised every time we do something right — otherwise we barely notice how good we are.

I began reframing *myself* every morning when I woke up. “What is your greatness today, Chanie?” I’d ask myself. Then I’d list my accomplishments, big and small. “You remembered to buy milk for breakfast, you washed *negel vasser*,

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you got up before the kids to help them get ready, you are warm, you are real, you are earnest.”

After energizing myself, it was much easier to energize those around me. All I had to do was diligently look for anything positive. Not only did I try to catch my kids doing something wonderful, I also had to energize them when they were just plain staying out of mischief.

When Baruch, my rambunctious seven-year-old, was playing quietly with Legos in his room, I stopped in to gush over how beautifully he was playing and ask about his creations. This meant he asked me to play with him and listen to every detail about his latest Batmobile. Although my “to-do” list was beckoning, I knew that sitting there was building warm feelings between us and pride within him. Soon I began finding him playing quietly in his room more often, rather than fighting with his sister.

My 12-year-old enterprising son, Aryeh, had started a lawn business. This gave me an opportunity to notice his extraordinary qualities. I drew my son a picture of a lawn mower and wrote over it: ingenuity, motivation, strength, ability to operate machinery, intelligence, willingness, sense of responsibility, etc.

I left this note on his bed. At dinner, I asked if he had seen it.

“Yeah, what was that?” Aryeh — not much for words — asked. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s a little note showing all the talents I see in you. I mean, how many 12-year-olds start a lawn business?” I replied.

He shrugged and then walked out to play basketball. I felt a bit defeated because I didn’t think he felt the deep appreciation I had for him.

The next day, however, when I was putting clothing in his closet, I saw that he had hung the lawn mower note next to his sports trophies. My heart swelled.

It meant something to him!

Even when it seems impossible to find something positive in the moment, NHA encourages you to find anything to turn the situation around. When Malky, my forceful ten-year-old, was pestering me to buy her markers, I ignored her initial barrages. Then it hit me. “I’m so impressed with your persistence and persuasiveness. You are going to be a great fighter for causes!” I exclaimed.

She looked at me and said, “That’s true, Mommy, but can I still have the markers?”

We both laughed and the pestering ended.

*December 28, 2016*

This week we learned about “resetting” and being clear with rules and expectations. When a child makes a mistake, NHA advises telling him to “reset” — meaning you unplug your connection with him until he starts following the rules again. Once he returns to positive behavior — his “greatness” — you energize and connect with him again.

Children need clear rules; without them, they feel confused and insecure and may start to test boundaries. Once you establish clear rules and the energy in your house is properly aligned to the positive, a reset is all you need as a consequence.

Accepting this idea was a leap of faith at first. I was never able to motivate my children without strict consequences or major incentives. Using the reset required letting go of my fear of needing immediate control.

Harsh consequences most often caused defiance. Either my kids kept testing boundaries, forcing me to increase the consequences, or I had to look the other way because I couldn’t think of harsher punishments. Strict rules and discipline, NHA teaches, only give the illusion of control because we can never prevent

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## The Three Stands of NHA

**Absolutely No!** I refuse to energize negativity. I do not give any heat to the child when he is acting negatively.

**Absolutely Yes!** I relentlessly create and energize positivity and success. I energize and nurture firsthand experiences of success and connection; in fact, I refuse not to.

**Absolutely Clear!** I maintain clear rules and always give a brief, non-energized reset when a rule is broken.

children from breaking the rules. I’d seen that the consequence system did not work for me and perpetuated the cycle of negativity in my house.

With the reset, it was goodbye to negativity and punishment. The reset also reinforced the idea that connection with a parent is the most valuable commodity. It allowed the child to see that he could make a mistake and then restart at any moment, coming back to receiving love and recognition without harshness. It reminded me of the concept of teshuvah, the most benevolent form of correction — a self-correction because you want connection.

One day Baruch forgot to close the front door when he came in from school. I said, “Please reset on the front door.” He ignored me, but then I didn’t help him with any of his requests until he closed it. Once he finally did, after about a half hour, I gave him a red-hot connection, by bending down, looking deeply into his eyes, and praising him effusively for doing the right thing and following the rules now. If he remembers to close the front door right away, I energize that. I also energize all the other kids who close the front door right away to teach Baruch that closing the door is a way to get my attention.

Baruch used to have a chart for closing the front door. For about three days he’d close the door on his own, until it wore off.

“Don’t you want your star on the chart?” I’d beg, chasing him to close the

door as he ran away, laughing. He seemed to enjoy watching Mommy run after him more than he wanted the prize. Now we’d moved past that.

I began to use reset with myself whenever I made a mistake. Instead of berating myself, I’d just say “reset” and move on. This gave me a gentle and forgiving perspective of myself and others, allowing us the space and time to grow at our own pace.

*January 4, 2017*

Resetting myself and teaching my children to reset is a lifesaving gift. This week we learned what to do when feelings of Worry, Misery, or Doubt (WMD) are so overpowering that we want to lash out and be negative to our kids. WMD is also an acronym for Weapons of Mass Destruction. It’s our choice, Yael and Naftoli taught, to use them as fuel for success or fuel for destruction.

I have many moments where these feelings are so overpowering, I don’t know how to channel them. For instance, my Malky is quite chubby and it always upsets me when she makes poor food choices. I’ve taken her to nutritionists and had many discussions with her about making healthy eating choices, but it all seems to backfire, leading to her eating more.

I decided to try NHA to help me and her. Whenever we’re having an uncomfortable interaction with food, I know that my WMDs are indicating that I need to establish a rule. This time the



## Ways to Recognize Your Child's Greatness:

- **Active Recognition:** Pretend you're describing your child to a blind person. Use words like "I see," "I hear," "I notice."
- **Experiential Recognition:** Say what this behavior shows about the child's character.
- **Proactive Recognition:** Acknowledge when a rule is *not* being broken.
- **Creative Recognition:** Make a request for a child to perform a task that he's about to perform or is in the process of performing, or make a request that's impossible for the child to resist. This creates a culture where the child is constantly getting positive feedback for following rules.

rule was for *me* not to make any negative comments about her eating and to energize her only when she makes healthy food choices. I'd energize myself and the other children when we make healthy food choices, establishing that as a priority in our house. Furthermore, I realized I needed to tell myself what a good mother I am for working on this in the most loving way possible.

I try to exercise together with Malky and encourage her to be active. We go on walks and bike rides, and I recognize her effusively when she takes good care of her body. I have accepted that this is a long-term process — no quick results.

Of course, many times my WMDs get the best of me and I overreact.

"You can't have a second portion of noodles; that's too much. Do you want to get fatter?" I blurted out without any filter. Right away, I caught myself. "Oh, that wasn't nice. I'd better reset."

In such moments, I take a deep breath, perhaps go to my room or do something to try to reframe myself, then come back and do it right. This teaches my children that they can also make a mistake and then "step back into their greatness," as Yael says.

Sometimes we need to work hard to reset.

Malky gets easily angered by her little brother and has learned to draw or jump on the trampoline when she feels she'll react badly to him. I'm trying to teach her to reset without eating. When she gets aggravated or overreacts, I just say, "Malky, you need to reset."

Sometimes she cries, "I don't want to reset; I want to be mad," but often she agrees with me and goes somewhere to cool down. When she comes back to her delicious self, we reconnect and I energize her so much for coming back to her greatness.

Chavi started a teenage *tzniyus*

rebellion, wearing skirts that barely covered her knees and only ankle socks. My WMDs were building, but I had to defuse any negative thoughts that this was my fault or that Chavi was going OTD. I also knew that harsher rules about dress code would backfire.

I took my WMDs and redirected them to fight my negative thinking and fuel my new campaign — to energize her every time she dressed properly and ignore the times she didn't. Like a laser beam, I focused on her other magnificent qualities and didn't look away from her face when we were speaking to check what she was wearing.

*January 11, 2017*

This week, Baruch started mimicking and making fun of my compliments, not allowing himself to hear any recognitions. He spent an entire afternoon acting out and disobeying me. Aryeh, too, rolled his eyes every time I noticed him doing something well. He actually asked when my positive talk was going to stop.

I was drifting into negativity and self-doubt. Was I not doing NHA correctly?

Was this another failed attempt at parenting? I could not reset for more than a couple of minutes. I felt like I was in quicksand.

By the time I got to the next class, I was a wilted flower. I sheepishly confessed the state of my home to Yael. She explained that intense kids like to test caregivers to make sure the positivity is permanent. "Hold on strong," she encouraged me, "and modify your praise to match your child's personality."

Baruch is defensive and doesn't like flowery praise. He responds best when I just give it to him straight with powerful, specific adjectives. Chavi, like most teens, prefers quick affirmations. Aryeh likes nonverbal expressions: notes, presents, or high fives. Malky is always receptive to torrential outpourings of love and emotion, verbal and physical. Still, I learned that no matter how I do it, even if I miss the mark, it's somehow always absorbed and goes straight to their hearts.

*January 18, 2017*

The first time I put all the pieces of NHA together was during this final week

of training. Aryeh was having trouble getting up for minyan, and my husband and I decided to use NHA to deal with it.

Our first step: clear explanation of expectations. We told Aryeh that we expect him to go to minyan every day and to leave the house by 7:30 a.m. We did not yell or scold him if he overslept (no energy for negative); instead we praised him enthusiastically for any positive moves he made to get out the door, even if he was late (recognizing the positive). Nonetheless, he wasn't motivated and was barely making it on time by the third day, so we decided to ramp it up.

That day, when he stumbled down the stairs into the kitchen before leaving the house, the other kids and I started clapping and shouting "Hooray!" (energize level 2). The next day we all roared like lions and said, "Aryeh, you are just like a lion: strong, tough, responsible. You do the right thing. We're impressed!" (energize level 3). He rolled his eyes, but that didn't deter me.

The next day, I decided to play the theme song from one of his favorite sports teams when he came downstairs to go to minyan. The kids and I cheered that *he* was the champion going to shul (energize level 4). I began doing

this daily for the next week. He began running down the stairs to the kitchen for his "triumph song."

Lastly, each Shabbos when my husband would give him a *brachah* before Kiddush, he'd whisper in his ear that he was so proud of him for having the strength to get up and go to minyan every day (energize level 5, major relationship connection!).

Around the second week, Aryeh was getting up consistently and happily. We kept up the music and affirmations for a while, but now we just continue reinforcing how impressed we are with him.

*July 18, 2017*

As time passes, the culture in my house is changing. My relationships with my family, myself, and others are centered around positivity and seeing their good. The Walfishes gave a class for couples that my husband and I just completed. My husband's learning the application makes implementation easier and more effective. It has also improved our marriage.

He recently remarked that I must have been an intense child. *No kidding!* I laughed to myself. But now he appreciates my intensity more. I try to

appreciate his good qualities more. On days when my WMDs are too powerful and I can't seem to reset right away, he takes over with fresh eyes, positivity, and renewed energy. This is invaluable.

The other day, I was angry at Baruch for leaving popsicle wrappers on our lawn. I had no patience to hold back my negativity, so I yelled, "Clean up that mess. Do you think our house is a garbage dump?"

Stunned, Baruch said, "Mommy, I don't want you yelling at me. Can we just reset?"

I realized then that NHA had penetrated my house. Baruch could reset me. I could reset him. We could erase that blip and go back to our greatness together. My outburst didn't have to become a permanent negative memory. His forgetfulness didn't have to be an indictment. Instead we could shift immediately, lovingly, back to who we wanted to be. He began cleaning up the wrappers and I praised him for helping keep the house neat and clean.

I can't believe it took me 47 years to appreciate myself. But today I know I am a strong, powerful mother, who puts effort, love, and creativity into her parenting. And that's what my kids actually need — the real me. 😊



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