



Protecting our Children – Part One

The Monster Inside

by [Rabbi Yakov Horowitz](#)

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1/15/08

A classic comedy routine involves a 'good guy' being chased by a villain. The good guy finally finds a safe haven, enters, slams the door behind him, and mops his brow with a sign of relief. However, he soon discovers that somehow the villain snuck in behind him. Now, he is alone in a locked space with the 'bad guy' – and nowhere to escape.

Whenever I hear people discussing the need to build higher and higher walls around our homes and communities to protect our children from the very real spiritual danger of 'Walmart' that I discussed in a recent column, I find myself increasingly playing in my mind a tragic version of this scene. Why? Because it is my strong and growing feeling that the number one risk factor for our beloved children abandoning Yiddishkeit is child molestation/abuse.

This is not to say that a majority of kids who are 'off the derech' were abused. But of all the complex and varied educational, social and familial factors that endanger to our children, the most damaging by far, in my opinion, is abuse. The very real threat posed by the external influences from which we all strive (in various degrees) to protect our children – such as media, Internet, and 'bad friends' – are all firecrackers compared to the atom bomb of sexual abuse.

Abuse robs children of their safety and innocence. Its ravages follow them through their teens and into adulthood, often shredding their marriages and complicating their relationships. Children who were molested harbor a simmering rage at the adult world that could not provide them with what should be the most basic birthright of every child; a sense of security. This anger displays itself in many forms – cultural, familial and spiritual. What is most dangerous, however, is when the rage turns inward and the children begin to self destruct by using drugs, abusing alcohol, engaging in self-mutilation ... even committing suicide.

A close friend of mine runs a shelter/group home for charedi runaway kids. I recently ran into him at a wedding and asked him what his thoughts were on the correlation between abuse and the off-the-

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derech phenomenon. His immediate response was, “Yankie, all I deal with is abuse [victims],” meaning that virtually all the teens in his program were molested.

Most frightening from a communal perspective is that it is difficult if not impossible to cure a serial molester, even one who goes, or is forced to go, for help. Furthermore, untreated abuse victims are far more likely to abuse others than are people in the general population. So what we have is analogous to the Midrashic frog in Egypt (Shmos 8:2; Rashi) that multiplied each time it was struck. Similarly, a molester typically harms dozens or even hundreds of kids – each in turn a prime candidate to molest others; on and on.

How bad is it? Very, very bad. To paraphrase Rudy Giuliani’s famous quote in his 9/11 press conference, the number of abuse victims in our community is more than any of us can bear. I do not keep records of people who call me, or speak to me in public settings, but I would estimate that in the past year months alone between fifty and one hundred abuse victims and/or their parents contacted me. It has gotten so bad that when parents who do not suspect any form of abuse call me to discuss their at-risk children, the very first thing I listen for are the classic red-flags for abuse/molestation. (If I do suspect abuse, I immediately refer them to mental health professionals, as I do not feel qualified to deal with these matters.)

Why am I writing about this subject in the context of the ‘Walmart’ discussion? Because as we talk about building walls around our children to protect them from the decadence of secular culture, we had better make certain that the ‘monster’ of child abuse is on the other side of the wall.

Abusers are nocturnal creatures, operating most effectively in the darkness of denial. What they fear most is the light of day and the righteous indignation of victims. Most predators have a sixth sense of which children are from homes with parents who are inattentive or not ‘complainers.’ They zoom in on them like a moth to light knowing that the odds are slim that their despicable acts will be reported.

So ‘walled’ communities are the dream setting for a child molester. A community where negative news is not reported and the fear of causing a chilul Hashem makes people hush things up is a community where an abuser can comfortably set up shop.

Much as I would love to pass on the sensitive matter of child abuse and molestation, I feel the burden of responsibility to squarely address it due to the life-threatening danger that it represents to our children. I write these lines because I am haunted by the images of the many abuse victims I have encountered over the years. I visited shelters and substance-abuse facilities where they attempted to recover from drug overdoses. I tried my best to comfort their parents who were going through their own personal gehenom, while their children confronted theirs. I paid shiva calls to bereaved parents and siblings of abused children who later committed suicide and to those whose children’s suicides were presented to the public as death by other cause.

In short, I keep seeing the horrific carnage that the monster of abuse is causing among our children. We have the capacity to banish it to the other side of the door. All we need is courage and conviction.

L'maan Hashem, let's finally do it.

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Protecting Our Children – Part Two

Safe and Secure

by Rabbi Yakov Horowitz

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1/23/08

Sad as it may sound, the painful reality is that you cannot provide your children foolproof protection from what are, in my opinion, the greatest physical and spiritual dangers that they might face during their formative years; abuse and molestation. Why? Because it is simply impossible to follow them wherever they go, all the more so as they pass through their pre-teen and teenage years. Furthermore, it is impractical and harmful to their sense of security to raise them to be frightened or suspicious of every adult that they meet. Finally, it is important to understand that although most of the high-profile abuse cases are school based, they are only a tiny percentage of the instances of molestation. Abusers are far more likely to be extended or close family members, older kids in the neighborhood, family friends, neighbors and peers.

With that in mind, I suggest that you view things from a broader perspective and think of protecting your children from abuse/molestation in the following four domains:

- 1) Training your children about healthy and appropriate norms for behavior between adults and children;
- 2) Equipping your children with the knowledge of what abusive behaviors are;
- 3) Empowering your children with the self-confidence to assert themselves when their personal space is violated; and
- 4) Supporting your children if and when they report to you that they are feeling that things are out of order.

In the broadest sense, the time for fathers and mothers to begin protecting their beloved children from abuse/molestation is the moment they begin their married life together.

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Think of it this way. Children who are raised in homes that are havens of safety, love, mutual respect and tolerance are far more likely to immediately notice when they are treated in an abusive manner. Emotionally healthy, self-confident children who appreciate their sacred right to privacy and personal space are far more likely to hear the warning bells blaring whenever that space is invaded. Children who grow up with the notion that they can be comfortable discussing **anything** with their parents will, in all likelihood, inform them the very moment that something is amiss.

Conversely, children who are bullied into submission by their own parents or those who regularly view one parent being cowed into silence by the other may think that abusive behavior is quite normal. Children who are denied their personal space or whose individuality is crushed or suppressed by their parents or the educational system of their parents' choice may not think much is amiss when outsiders do the same to them. In fact, as I mentioned in the previous column, most predators have a 'sixth sense' of which children have grown up in these trying conditions – and zoom in on them like a moth drawn to light.

Therefore, the most effective thing that parents can do to keep their children safe is to model healthy interactions between adults (that's you) and children, and to empower them to speak up if they feel threatened or uncomfortable.

Here are some practical tips:

- Encourage your children to share the events of their day with you when they arrive home each day. Spend time with them, make eye contact, and listen – really listen – to what they have to say.
- Tell your children – early and often – that they can discuss anything with you, no matter how disturbing or uncomfortable those things are. Be aware that this means that you must develop true tolerance for their misdeeds if you want this to continue.
- One of the most effective methods of protection is to teach your children that no adult is ever permitted to tell them a secret that they cannot tell their parents. This is a huge 'red flag' for predatory behavior, since part and parcel of the depraved strategy of molesters is to keep things secret from parents. There is no acceptable set of circumstances where any adult should ever be telling a child to keep secrets from his/her parents. Teaching your children that this is wrong is a powerful tool in their protective arsenal. Likewise, parents who keep secrets from each other are also modeling poor values (the kids figure it out quite soon).
- Encourage the notion of personal space in your child's life. Tell your children to knock before entering a room if they think that someone there may be undressed (do the same yourself). Give your children a drawer to keep their private possessions, and ask their siblings to respect that privacy.
- "Your body belongs to you," (or, "Your body is on loan to you from Hashem") is a theme that should be stressed with children. While bathing young children, for example, is often a good time to discuss privacy matters in a calm, matter-of-fact manner. Tell them about 'good touching' and 'bad touching'. One way of expressing this concept is to explain to them that no

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one except for parents can touch them in a spot covered by a bathing suit. Please do not alarm them. Frame the discussion as one of safety, and use the same tone that you would use when informing them not to take candy from strangers and not to cross the street without an adult.

- Another supremely important thing to convey to children is that they should not ever be forced to do things that make them feel uncomfortable. Tell them that if they are asked to do something that “doesn’t feel right,” they have the right to say no – even to an adult. (Many, many victims report that they felt they had no choice but to go along with the demands of the abuser.)

If you suspect that your child was molested, please seek the counsel of a trained mental health professional, preferably before you speak to your children.

As I noted earlier, foolproof protection is virtually impossible. But implementing these practical suggestions will dramatically increase the odds that your children will remain safe and secure.

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Protecting Our Children – Part Three

Human Problems

by *Rabbi Yakov Horowitz*

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1/30/08

Recommended Reading: [The Monster Inside](#) and [Safe and Secure](#)

Cognitive dissonance: “The uncomfortable tension that may result from having two conflicting thoughts (cognition) at the same time ...that conflicts with one’s beliefs (dissonance is defined as “lack of agreement, consistency, or harmony”)... In popular usage, it can be associated with the tendency for people to resist information that they don't want to think about, because if they did it would create cognitive dissonance. They usually have at least partial awareness of the information, without having moved to full acceptance of it, and are thus in a state of denial about it. (Encyclopedia Britannica).

In the late 1990's, shortly after I began writing and lecturing about the topic of at-risk teens, a colleague informed me that Orthodox kids were selling significant quantities of drugs to other frum children. Here's basically the way it worked: If you were an adult or teen who wanted to purchase drugs, you would go to designated pay phones in the Boro Park/Flatbush sections of Brooklyn and pretend to make a phone call. Then, using prearranged signals, you would indicate the type of the drug you wanted to buy. For example, placing a hand in your left pocket meant that you wanted to purchase ecstasy pills, while a hand in your right pocket signaled that you were looking for marijuana. Then, after you would flash hand signals informing the pusher of the exact quantity you requested, someone would approach you and close the deal.

After verifying from several sources that the 'intel' was correct, my colleague was faced with a dilemma: what to do with the information? After all, by going to the authorities, he would be committing mesirah, turning fellow Jews to the police. Additionally, we were raised to avoid anything that might cause a chilul Hashem – and having observant boys arrested for drug pushing would certainly be a

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colossal one. We decided that I would represent him and present the quandary to the leading gedolim of our generation, among them my great rebbi, Reb Avraham Pam z'tl, at a meeting that was to be held later that month on an unrelated matter. During their [private] meeting, I presented the information and was asked thoughtful, probing questions by the gedolim on a broad range of issues related to this matter. After a few moments of silence, the gedolim turned to Rav Pam, who was the eldest of the group and revered by all. With great pain in his eyes, he softly but firmly said, "Zei ale hobin a din rodef," meaning that the pushers were presenting a clear and present life-threatening danger to the public and must be stopped at all costs. Then, like a Sanhedrin, they each rendered their p'sak, unanimously agreeing with Rav Pam.

My colleague shared the information with the appropriate authorities, an investigation was launched, and within six months several frum kids were arrested along with the ringleader, a 50-year-old Charedi man who was caught selling the drugs in the basement of a Boro Park shul, of all places. The arrests made headlines in the New York tabloids and were the lead item on virtually every radio station in the New York metropolitan area.

I mention this story in the context of the 'Protecting our Children' series [The Monster Inside](#) and [Safe and Secure](#) for two reasons. Firstly, to make public the da'as Torah of our gedolim as it pertains to setting aside mesirah issues when lives are threatened. And although I did not raise the issue of abuse in that meeting, I did receive clear and unequivocal p'sakim from gedolei rabbanim that verified abusers must be reported, as that is only way to insure public safety. (Note: I am not issuing a psak, merely sharing the ones I received. As with other matters, every individual who has a sheilah should ask his Rav and not rely on second-hand p'sakim.)

Another issue of great importance was the reaction of our community to the arrests – which I am sad to say, was a collective, "Wow, can you believe that? ... Please pass the salt." It is noteworthy that for many months before the arrests, several of us lectured to standing-room-only crowds in Brooklyn practically shouting that frum people were pushing drugs to our children.

We kept speaking about it, but people didn't seem to get it. It took a while – and a few deaths of frum kids from drug overdoses – for people in our community to get their hearts in sync with the facts that their eyes and ears were telling them. It was a classic example of cognitive dissonance. After all, we were raised with the notion that these things just don't happen in our Torah community. So, when we were faced with irrefutable evidence to the contrary, part of our minds just shut down, not willing to accept the harsh truth. But, as we are painfully realizing, the problems we face don't shut down while we struggle to adjust to new realities.

In addition to the 'standard' cognitive dissonance described above, two factors contribute greatly to its staying power in our community. The first is the fact that we are, Baruch Hashem, surrounded by evidence of the astounding successes of our Yeshiva/Beis Yakov systems; thousands of wonderful, spiritual teenagers. How can the negative information we hear about compete with the superb things we see? Additionally, there is a virtual media ban in our charedi papers on any negative news. Few things add to the disconnect and cognitive dissonance more than hearing frightening things about an event such as the arrest of a frum drug dealer or pedophile in the secular media, while our papers

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completely ignore its existence. We ought to be enormously proud of the first factor, but I suggest that we must end the practice of the second.

The only way to combat cognitive dissonance is to discuss these matters in our public squares, painful as it may be; which is why Mishpacha magazine deserves our appreciation for publishing these columns. Trust me, I wish there was a more discreet way to do this, and if any of our readers have any suggestions for creating venues for this dialogue, please contact me with them. But in the meantime, I will continue to write these essays, as I feel that straight talk and education is the only way to significantly improve things.

In the darkest moments of our agonizing saga with the drug issue, I received a small measure of comfort and chizuk from a non-Jewish police officer who saw me close to tears during our discussions. "Rabbi," he said softly. "Your community is close-knit and family oriented, so you were lucky to avoid the drug problem for an entire generation. The [19]90's for you is what the 60's was to us. This isn't a Jewish problem, Rabbi. It is a human problem. It only becomes a Jewish problem when it is ignored."

About Rabbi Horowitz

Rabbi Yakov Horowitz is the founder and Menahel of Yeshiva Darchei Noam of Monsey, and founder and Director of Agudath Israel's Project Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services), and is recognized throughout the Jewish community as an authority on raising children in these troubled times. His bold and insightful presentations, tapes and articles have helped to mold a generation of parents and educators. He is the author of best-selling parenting tape, CD, and DVD sets and is a regular contributor on Torah, educational and parenting topics to The Jewish Observer, The Jewish Press, Yated Ne'eman, and Hamodia. He attended Yeshiva and Mesivta Torah Vodaas, where he developed a close relationship with Hagoan Horav Avrohom Yaakov Pam z'tl. He served as 8th grade rebbi for 15 years, in Boro Park, Brooklyn and later in Monsey, New York.

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