

# Risk Navigation

## A Guide for Parents

“Kids at risk” seems like a murky, depressing topic with more questions than answers. However, experts in the field have isolated certain patterns and tendencies. That information can be used by the conscientious parent or professional to lower the risks and make it easier for children to find their way

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As the “kids at risk” phenomenon keeps on growing, the burning question that parents, educators and therapists repeatedly ask is “Why?” What is it that causes a child to go against all that he has been taught and become involved in self-destructive behaviors?

During my work at the Jerusalem Municipality, in the Department for Chareidi Youth at Risk, I was involved in a study to determine the profile of a “typical” at-risk chareidi youth. These findings hold true for chareidi youth worldwide. The findings of this study have not been fully publicized, but the top risk factors are very clear. (A risk factor is something that we can use as an indicator to foresee whether or not a child is **prone** to becoming at risk for engaging in self-destructive behaviors.)

Following are some of the top risk factors (not in order of prevalence):

- learning and concentration issues, such as learning disabilities or ADD
- socioeconomic factors
- abuse
- immigration to Israel
- a lack of *shalom bayis* in the home or a single-parent home
- parents who are *baalei teshuvah*

Mere knowledge of the risk factors is often, at best, depressing, and at worst, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some risk factors are not preventable, i.e. learning disabilities and ADD. Some are positive, i.e. becoming a *baal teshuvah*, or moving to Eretz Yisrael. However, each risk factor does have elements that can be dealt with in such a way so as to prevent risk materialization. In other words, if we study the elements of each risk factor, we can use our findings to learn how to fight against the odds. Studying the risk factors and determining which elements of these factors can be eliminated or compensated for is the key to damage control.

On the following pages, we will isolate the “risk” in each risk factor and give some prevention tips, based on this explanation. (I will refer to the child as feminine as I have more experience with girls at risk; however, all the information is pertinent to boys as well.)



## Learning Disabilities

Everyone has some areas within their learning skills that are stronger and some that are weaker. Our society places a great emphasis on our learning abilities. If our child has areas in her learning skills that are particularly weak, this could be a risk factor. Seeing the great emphasis on learning abilities in our society, a child with a learning disability could encounter many stresses, such as:

- a. parents' unrealistic expectations for success in learning
- b. teachers/*rebbeim* with unrealistic expectations for success in learning
- c. friends looking down on the child because of his/her inability to succeed in school

These can all lead to feelings of failure on all fronts. A child who feels like a failure is a prime candidate for the "at-risk" label.

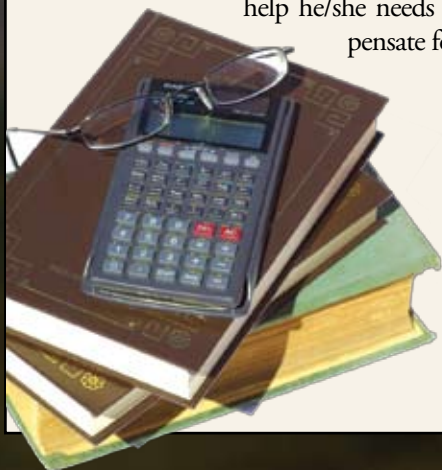
### PREVENTION TIPS:

A child with a learning disability need not feel like a failure. What can we do as parents/teachers to help the child succeed?

1. Find the strengths within the child's learning abilities and build on these strengths, i.e. memory, logic, etc.
2. Find other strengths to focus on and build up, such as chess, musical and artistic talents.

If you believe in the significance of these other strengths and help to actively engage the child in building and developing them, your child will not feel like a failure.

3. Don't deny the learning disability. Get the child the help he/she needs in order to compensate for the disability.



## ADD / ADHD

Many children with concentration issues will have a very hard time in school. They are also likely to have a hard time in their interactions with parents, teachers, and friends. This can create a negative self-image for the child. Failure to thrive in school, social difficulties, and a negative self-image are the elements that cause ADD/ADHD to be a risk factor.

### PREVENTION TIPS:

A child with ADD can thrive in school, can develop a positive relationship with friends, parents, and teachers and can have a positive self-image. How?

1. Have your child properly diagnosed and treated. Diagnosis must be thorough and a treatment plan should be discussed with a professional. A study performed at a Boston hospital and Harvard Medical School showed that the use of medication to treat ADHD symptoms decreased the use of illicit drugs by 84 percent!
2. Develop a healthy attitude toward medication. Ritalin does help a large percentage of children with ADD. It may take time to determine the right dosage. That said, Ritalin (or any other medication) cannot take the credit for your child's success (or failure). It can only help her accomplish what she *wants* to accomplish. Enable your child to understand ADD and the role the medication plays. As your child gets older, you will need to "update" your explanations and discuss her feelings about this.
3. Develop a healthy attitude toward ADD. *Society needs people with ADD!* People with ADD can be energetic and innovative. They build. They're curious, they're resourceful. World-renowned adolescent psychologist Dr. Pelcovitz told a story about a young man who had ADD — and probably hardly attended yeshivah — yet founded his own yeshivah as an adult! Again, believing in your child's abilities is vital, with or without ADD.
4. Many kids will need help with organizational skills. They will need clear boundaries. This can actually help parents with their own organization and boundary issues, thereby helping the entire family form a better schedule and routine structure.

*Reframe:* Look at the child as a whole. Hashem gave each of us a unique role, together with the tools that we need for this role. Your child's strengths (and weaknesses) are exactly what he needs. This includes LD/ADD and any other challenges that she faces.

## Socioeconomic Factors

Money also plays a role in contributing to the risk factor and includes both ends of the economic spectrum. Children may feel different if they don't fit into the economic standards of their peers. A sense of belonging is a key to risk prevention. Children who feel deprived, who don't have what everyone else has, or can't afford help for learning issues feel that they don't belong. Similarly, those who are "spoiled," owning every new gadget on the market, are likely to be "at-risk" candidates, since they have the same sense of being outside the group.

### PREVENTION TIPS:

1. Living in a neighborhood that fits your economic standards and sending your children to schools where you are part of the norm (economically) is wise.
2. For those who are blessed with financial means, make sure your child still fits into his surroundings. If no one brings more than a dollar to school, don't let your child walk around with ten dollars. Make sure to instill a sense of responsibility and a proper value system along with any money or gifts that you want to give your child.
3. For those who are struggling with financial issues, your attitude spills over to your child. If you feel deprived, so will she. Make sure your child has what she **needs**, and understands the difference between needs and wants.
4. When it comes to real needs, find out about available rights and benefits as well as resources for clothing, toys, etc. — i.e., clothing/toy *gemachs* — as well as nonprofit organizations, community centers, and social services that can help in various matters.

*Reframe:* "Who is the rich man? One who is happy with his share!" Money is not the yardstick for happiness. An understanding that Hashem gives you exactly what you need provides true joy. A poor man can feel rich when armed with this attitude, and it is this attitude that must be instilled into ourselves and into our children. Our value system may determine a significant percentage of the potency of this risk factor.



## Victims of Abuse

Unfortunately, anyone who has worked with children at risk has encountered children who have been abused. This risk factor is much more prevalent than we would like to believe. Abuse can happen within a family or by an outsider. Symptoms will vary depending on the type and severity of the abuse and the relationship to the perpetrator. Girls who are not dressing or behaving modestly may in fact be victims of abuse displaying a (clinical) reaction of victimization. Many victims will develop PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and can also develop a personality disorder. Needless to say, such victims can drop out of school. Interaction with any part of their environment might be difficult, and even impossible, from their perspective. Victims of abuse who are recognized and helped can function in school and beyond. They are not doomed. How can we help?

### PREVENTION TIPS:

1. Be aware of changes in your child's behavior, at home and in school. We don't want to become paranoid, but we must keep our eyes open. Abuse does happen in our communities.
2. Develop an open relationship with your children. Stories abound about children who were too scared to tell their parents. Make it clear to your child that she can discuss anything with you. Explain proper boundaries between people (even relatives) in the physical and emotional realms.
3. If abuse has occurred, steps must be taken to minimize the damage. The longer the abuse continues and/or is ignored, the more difficult it can be to repair.

*Reframe:* Abuse does occur in our communities. I have the power to help my child by disclosing the details to the appropriate professionals. This can stop the cycle.





## Immigrants/Children of Immigrants

In almost all cases, aliyah, or moving from any country to another, is not recommended for families with teens. Joy Epstein of Nefesh B'Nefesh confirmed that their experts on aliyah generally discourage those families with teens from making the move. Teens are hyper-dependent on their peers; a step like aliyah — which necessitates leaving all of one's friends and learning new social rules in a foreign language — can be a recipe for disaster in a teen's life. The aliyah risk factor is actually not limited to teens; it also affects children of *olim*, even those born in Israel. When I think back to my school days, I remember the “foreigners” (actually children of immigrants) in my school. My crowd called them “Russians” or “Persians.” They somehow (usually) didn't quite fit in. This could be happening to your child. Children of Americans in Israel may be called “Amerikaim” and yet, they'd be referred to as Israeli if they moved to America. They may not fit in fully in either culture! This may create a lack of connection and belonging, the source of the risk factor. Parents who are frequently absent due to economic considerations or any other factor may engender feelings of deprivation in their children, or even neglect. This is obviously a risk factor. A child whose needs are not being met at home will look to have these needs met elsewhere.

### PREVENTION TIPS

1. Language is probably the most significant part of a culture. If you want to communicate and understand your new society, you must be able to speak the language.
2. Learn the culture. There are elements other than language that comprise any culture. To be able to integrate and be able to advocate for yourself and your children, you will need to learn the system. Understanding the culture is a first step. Parents who are constantly “fighting” the system will probably find

their children “fighting” them. Find out the rules and work from within the system.

3. Do not put down the country or people where you have emigrated to. For example, if you've moved to Israel from America, do not put down Israelis. Do not aggrandize America. You made aliyah for a reason. Of course, there may be a naturally higher comfort level with Americans than with Israelis. Still, if you want your children to integrate, make it a habit to point out the reasons you made aliyah and even the negative within American culture. Parents who constantly idealizes their former environment may well be hampering their children's intergration.

4. Give your children support. As a first step, emotions must be validated. As a parent you will want to help your children cope with those feelings of frustration and anger. Just being present physically and emotionally can help children move beyond their negativity. A friend of mine recently made aliyah with teenagers. She had the children make scrapbooks and diaries of all their experiences, the good and the crazy! She had the appropriate expectations and preempted many would-be pitfalls.

5. Neglect is a topic that warrants its own article. It is a prevalent and serious form of abuse. Parenting teens after emigrating requires extra time and focus. Time and focus are difficult to supply. However, they are vital at this juncture. We cannot afford to “skimp” on these needs. Giving as much as you can at this time is the most effective prevention tool.

*Reframe: Aliyah can be the most beneficial experience for a family. However, aliyah is a challenge that continues long beyond the plane landing. It requires a consistent periodic evaluation of my needs and the needs of my children. Being realistic does not preclude being idealistic. It just keeps our idealism balanced. The same holds true for any immigration experience.*



## Lack of Shalom Bayis/ Single Parent Homes

As the divorce rate is on the rise, it is very important to understand the ramifications of this particular risk factor. Since some of the components that cause divorce to be a risk factor are true in homes with a lack of *shalom bayis* as well, I will discuss them together.

Children need a solid ground in order to grow: proper boundaries, parental guidance, and the development of an emotional relationship. A lack in any of these components is a risk factor. In homes where there is constant conflict, the guidance may be very confusing and the child may be pulled in different directions. The expression of love might be compromised and the boundaries will often be drawn in different places or not be there at all. In a single-parent home (i.e. divorced or widowed parents), where one parent tries to act as both mother and father, these components will often also be lacking (due to the same or other factors). Children who lack a mother or father figure as a role model can be at risk for filling this basic need in inappropriate or even dangerous ways.

### PREVENTION TIPS:

1. Work on *shalom bayis*; even seemingly impossible marriages have improved — even when only one partner committed to change. This is obviously the most powerful prevention tool.
2. Build up your self-confidence as a parent. This can be done via many forms i.e., support groups, counseling, a coach, or a mentor.
3. Paradoxically, find a relative or mentor for your child who can fill in the gaps. One parent cannot fulfill both parental support roles in every facet.
4. Find someone to support you through this difficult time. A child should be allowed to develop as a child as much as possible, even in extenuating circumstances. A child is not the appropriate address for you to vent frustrations about your spouse or ex-spouse.
5. Make conscious decisions about how and what to share with your child about her other parent. Discretion is important. Convey messages that are for the benefit of your child which can enhance her coping abilities.



## Children of Baalei Teshuvah

The *baal teshuvah* movement has returned thousands of Jewish *neshamos* to their roots. The ramifications are exponential when we consider *baalei teshuvah* marrying and creating their own homes and families. It is therefore painful to see so many children of *baalei teshuvah* reversing their parents' monumental decision and “going off the *derech*.” How could a child of *baalei teshuvah* revert to a lifestyle that his parents sacrificed so much to abandon?

To understand this troubling phenomenon, it is important to realize that a *baal teshuvah* is likely to have hurdles to overcome, aside from the initial resolve to change his lifestyle to one that fits his convictions, especially when raising a family.

Children of *baalei teshuvah* may be affected by a number of issues that can develop into risk factors.

- a. Lack of a family support system (i.e. grandparents, cousins) can create a void, at best. In situations where there is a pull against the parent's value system, children can become very confused.
- b. Lack of societal integration — as mentioned before, a sense of belonging is vital for a child. This is the base for her identity. If *baal teshuvah* families are not integrated into a society, their children might not have a sense of belonging.
- c. *Chinuch* — When raising a family, there are many issues that come to the fore that have not (and often cannot) be learned in a classroom setting. Parenting teens can become especially difficult and challenging to the parents' own value system.
- d. A lack of family support or societal integration can create a lack in our children's sense of belonging and their identity. An

improper *chinuch* system can lead to the child mimicking their parent's rejection of their upbringing and leave a child feeling confused and not supported.

### PREVENTION TIPS:

1. Family support: If support is not coming from your given family, then “adopt” someone else's family. This can be a mutually beneficial relationship, i.e., have an older, lonely couple join your Shabbos table occasionally and become an adopted *bubbe* and *zeide* for your children. Or join a slightly older family for Yom Tov so your kids can also have “cousins” to model.
2. Learn the cultural language of the society you've chosen to join. Being a *baal teshuvah* can be similar to making aliyah in this sense. If we don't want our children to be outcasts, we need to learn the societal rules. For example: What type of footwear is allowed in school? Which extracurricular activities are accepted by Bais Yaakov?
3. Make sure you are getting support as a *baal teshuvah* parent of a teen. Parenting teens as a *baal teshuvah* can be a risk factor for the parents! Support is crucial. Your idealism as a *baal teshuvah* might crash right into your teen. If the support of a good friend is not enough, consult with your Rav or counselor, depending on the nature of your rough spot.

*Reframe: Teenagers are rebellious by nature. This stage in my teen's life will be challenging, but will ultimately force me to reaffirm my convictions and decisions. I can understand and collaborate with my teen through reflecting on my own “rebellion.”*

While the above treatment seems to divide all problems into neat boxes, in reality our children will often have a combination of numerous risk factors. The combination can confuse us and can compound the risk factors. The key is to give our children a sense of belonging and purposefulness, to accept them for who they are, and to help them realize their potential. The prevention tips are to be used as a tool to ascertain where we need to concentrate more effort and/or seek help and guidance. Reliable resources are essential.



## Key Chinuch Issues

The most effective method of prevention is to build the strongest home environment possible with our particular circumstances. Therefore, as an appendix to the prevention tips that I have connected to each risk factor, I would like to analyze two key *chinuch* issues that can help us balance our parenting skills.

### Issues #1 Shelter vs. Exposure

#### SHELTER

Sheltering our children is a natural and healthy behavior. However, when taken to an extreme, it can be very harmful. We must *insulate*, but we cannot *isolate*, ourselves from the world. It is incumbent on parents to develop an awareness of the exposures their children face outside of the home, and to “vaccinate” their children so that they are able to process the negative elements of that exposure properly. For example, every teenage boy living in Israel will hear about politics. If your family does not have political discussions, then speak only to your teenage sons about it within your *hashkafic* framework. This is a vaccination. Then, when he inevitably hears “election” talk, he can still remain firm in his beliefs. If this “shot” is not administered, he will not know how to process the exposure in a healthy manner.

#### EXPOSURE

In my role as mentoring supervisor for Kav L’Noar, I interview potential mentors. One of the questions I ask is “What challenges do youth face today that they need the most help with?” At least 75 percent of the applicants’ response is media exposure. Children are seeing and learning things that they are unable to process. As teens, they will inevitably experiment with new ideas and behaviors. If they are exposed to a flood of foreign ideas and behaviors, they can “drown.” They do not have the intellectual or emotional barriers necessary to protect themselves.

The balance between shelter and exposure lies within an awareness of your child and his needs, and how this fits into your family and societal framework.

### Issues #2 Simchah vs. Yirah

Dr. Pelcovitz recently presented the results of a study that researched the most likely predictors of a child’s connection to religion. The number one predictor was connection to *simchah*. When we are happy, we are able to connect more strongly with ourselves and our surroundings. True *simchah* is contagious. It is the result of religious “self-integration” — a state in which we use all of our G-d-given talents to serve Him.

The Rambam writes about the need to go the opposite extreme when trying to eradicate a certain behavior, with the aim of eventually arriving at the golden middle path. However, there is a tendency to remain at an extreme. This does not allow for religious self-integration. As parts of the person are being effaced, it is understood that they will swing to an extreme. For example, a rock star becoming a *baal teshuvah* will likely experience a period in which he is not involved with music. However, this stage usually is meant to be an interim period, as it is very likely that in order to be happy, his *neshamah* will need to find a different way to connect to music.

*Yirah* is an important part of our *avodas Hashem*. However, when taken to an extreme, it presents a danger as well. Nervous tension about mitzvah observance and a disproportionate abundance of *chumros* can be dangerous for us and our children. It can invariably turn children away from all observance as it feels confining and unnatural.

The balance between *simchah* and *yirah* lies within the awareness of who you are and how you connect to Hashem and your loved ones.

