



Musings of a Mom in Middle School

By Elisheva Schlam

Teachers today expect a lot. I haven't done a formal survey, but anecdotally I have come to the conclusion that schoolwork in the twenty-first century is a family experience. And why not? Parents are so frenzied running to work, organizing "supperettes" for the PTA, soothing crying babies and chauffeuring kids to *mishmar*, hockey, ballet and orthodontia that the one unifying force is homework. Note the use of the word force—regardless of what else is going on in our lives, the one constant is that we are compelled to sit down every night and facilitate the homework getting done. There have been wedding and Bar Mitzvah invitations I have had to decline because they happened to take place on school nights.

But let's face it, there are some advantages. Last year in fourth grade, I learned a lot. What I never knew about the stability of ecosystems, what I forgot about isosceles triangles and

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what I didn't care to know about fossil fuel mining all came together at the end of the year. Along the way we came in second in the Willie Wonka "Design Your Own Confection" contest. After reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the boys in my son's class were asked to create their own candy, complete with packaging, nutrition facts, net weight and pricing. It took three generations of Schlams four weeks to conceive of and produce our white-chocolate covered sour bears, soon to be marketed in your local supermarket under the name Polar Bear Blast. The baby cried, the chicken burned, the bills lay unpaid, but hey, we won second prize.

Nobody said parenting was easy. But what they forgot to mention was the education you were in for. If you thought you had seen the last term paper and were free to hit your internal delete button on fraction conversion, you had better think again. And perhaps get a tutor, because not only is there more homework these days, the stuff has gotten way more complicated. Math is not just adding, subtracting, multiplying and

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Illustration by Caryl Herzfeld

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dividing with the occasional word problem thrown in. In my day (and it was not during WWII, contrary to my children's beliefs), math was only right if you had the exact answer. Now, they have you predicting probabilities and solving logic problems designed for the advanced calculus major. Apparently, no one has informed these syllabus-creators that this is middle school.

And what about the phone bills? During one particularly expensive week this year, I called my father in Israel to solve a third grade "Torah Detective" question (when were the Jews praised for eating on Yom Kippur?) on behalf of my mother-in-law who was babysitting for my nephew in Teaneck whose parents happened to be away. I then hung up and called my sister in

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Cincinnati, who had always been a *dikduk* expert, to see if she knew why and how a *kamatz katan* was treated differently from a *kamatz gadol*. When she could not recall this critical bit of information, my niece phoned her Hebrew teacher from last year who had since relocated to Baltimore. At that point, we got an answering machine and it was 11 P.M. so we just gave up.

I used to think all this would change as my kids got older. But now I know better. My friend has a son in high school, and the first thing she does at orientation is look around the room and check out her competition for the science fair. What really rankles her is a parent body heavy on medical professionals who have an obvious edge when it comes to creating unusual science projects.

Most of my friends can't wait until the summer. All year, we look forward to two months of peaceful evenings when we can actually talk to our kids, catch fireflies and throw balls around in the backyard. Or even go to a *shnur* or for a walk with our husbands without feeling the urge to race home to study for the history test or type a book report.

So what to do about all this? Aside from the obvious—informal group therapy sessions with all the like-minded women running after toddlers in *shul* on Shabbat—I vote for complete and total abdication. Call me crazy, but I have a hunch that if everyone "just said no" to homework, kids would actually be forced to do it themselves and teachers would have to accept work that was truly on grade level. This might be radical, but I am going to take advantage of the fact that I am writing in a national publication and ask all of you reading this in cities across the US to join me in the Parents Revolution of 2001. Our slogan could be "Give us Back our Nights." We could march on Washington, lobbying for legislation designating September as National No Homework Month. (Why not? There is a federally mandated National Pet Dental Health Week.) We could create a web site, www.parentsarepeopletoo.com, and offer monthly online chats and support. We'd be free to do all this since our kids would be home fending for themselves. Schools would be forced to set up a mentoring system, where strong students could help the weaker ones and perhaps those same weak students could in turn, tutor the geniuses in art or basketball or whatever. We could learn to celebrate the different talents, academic and non-academic, that all of our kids have and stop expecting everyone to produce at the same impossible level all the time.

I have to warn you that our kids will most definitely need an adjustment period. Those among them who are accustomed to getting off the bus, slamming their books on the dining room table and calling us over before they even put pen to paper will need some retraining. But with a lot of sweat, a few tears and patience all around, I am confident they will discover strengths that have been long obscured due to parental over involvement.

So, what do you say parents? Without the cooperation of everyone, it just won't work. If you still insist on writing the term paper, then my kids will suffer for turning in the best effort a fifth grader can be expected to put forth, left to his own devices. I say we try it for the first two months of this school year and see where it takes us. Hopefully, it will be to the local zoo or museum where we can enjoy true family time, and not into the principal's office. 