

Jw/ 6/3

Ask Miriam...

Individuals and families in the community are faced with challenging issues and concerns regarding their social, emotional and psychological health. Through the cooperation of The Jewish World, Jewish Family Services will offer responses.

Q. Dear Miriam,

I am a widow with two adult children. One of my children is married and lives out of town. My other child lives in the same community as I do in her own apartment. She is not married and has suffered from mental illness most of her adult life. I feel that she needs more of my help and attention than her brother does.

My son feels that she is just lazy and manipulates me. He doesn't understand. The problem is that he won't talk to her and prohibits his children from having any relationship with her. This makes family celebrations impossible and painful for me.

I won't always be around and wonder if I can do anything to make this a better situation?

Upset Mother

A. Dear Upset Mother,

This is a problem with a long history and no quick fix.

Instead of trying to convince your son to have a relationship with his sister, you might get further by trying to understand what impact her illness has made on him. You might not realize how your added attention to your daughter has made your son feel. It will be a painful discussion to start, but I think you may be able to have a dialogue with your son if you are willing to listen and not be defensive.

In regard to your daughter, you might find it helpful to get some counseling. You have been a protector and caregiver for her for her whole life. Perhaps an objective view will help you to understand what will be most constructive for her and help ease your concerns for the future.

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Q. Dear Miriam,

My wife and I have two sons, ages 20 and 17. Our older son has done very well in school and is now in college. He seems to have his act together and makes good decisions. Our younger son is just the opposite. He struggles with school, is impulsive, and defiant.

The problem is that my wife and I do not agree on how to handle the situation. I feel that our younger son needs more structure and limits, but she says it is not fair to have different rules for him. I think she is afraid of setting limits because he would probably make our lives miserable.

What should we do?

Frustrated Father

A. Dear Frustrated Father,

Parents do not run a democracy. Each child in a family requires a set of rules and exceptions based on his/her needs and behaviors. There is great variation among children in their abilities to handle stress, obligations, impulses, etc. When a child is having difficulty over a period of time, you need to step in and impose a structure. This should not be done in a punitive manner. Children and parents need to understand that things such as driving, using the family car, going out, even working, are privileges that children must earn. Children must show the ability to handle their obligations by doing schoolwork and chores.

When parents disagree on how to handle their children and set limits, it can cause even more difficulty as the child learns to use the dissension for his/her own purposes. You and your wife must try to come to some compromise about what you need to do. Make sure that you support each other in front of your son and save your disagreements for a private time. It will not be easy or pleasant to deal with your son, but you are investing in his future.

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Miriam Adler, A.C.S.W., C.S.W., is assistant director of J.F.S. She answers most frequently asked questions. Please send questions to "Ask Miriam," c/o Jewish Family Services of N.E.N.Y., 877 Madison Ave., Albany, N.Y. 12208 or e-mail jfsneny@banet.net or call 518-482-8856.