

Preserving Tznius and Saving Lives

WHY OUR CAMPERS SHOULDN'T BE CHANGING IN PUBLIC

As a community, we cherish the values of tznius and work hard to imbue our children with an appreciation for the beauty and virtue of modesty in dress, speech and action.

From when they are so very young, we teach them that they are royalty, we prepare them for a dress code that will define their exalted roles and will allow them to focus on the neshama within.

They cover their knees and they cover their elbows.

They sit the right way and they walk the right way.

They watch their words and their entertainment and their reading material.

We teach them that their bodies should remain hidden, that this is the way of a bas or ben melech. Which is why it is so puzzling that at many day camps, children are encouraged to change into and out of their swimming gear in one big room, in front of everyone.

Children are often not given a choice in the matter, and even if they feel uncomfortable, there aren't other options, with many children, a few staff members and not enough private changing rooms for each child.

And then there is another issue, a safety one. We teach our children about boundaries, about appropriate touch and about protecting themselves from predators. We teach them to come to a trusted adult when they feel uncomfortable and not to be afraid to tell them anything. But then, when there is a situation where they are uncomfortable, we tell them, "this is how you have to do it," and disregard their comfort.

Dr. Shani Verschleiser, founder of Magenu, an organization dedicated to protecting children from abuse, says that it's not enough to tell children that no one should be touching you.

"It's about practice in real life situations that our words can be applied. When an adult in a child's life who is safe allows a child to speak their discomfort, respects the feeling, and tries to help them feel comfortable, the message to the child is that they have a voice," says Dr. Verschleiser. "If G-d forbid a predator walks into their life and tries the opposite tactic by saying or doing things like, 'it's no big deal,' or 'you have to because....' the child has a reference in their own experience, 'hey that doesn't seem right, my counselor said I don't have to.'"

To do otherwise is extremely dangerous. To teach kids constantly about tznius, about safe and proper touch, about respecting their bodies and not letting anyone violate them, and then to tell them, "Well, right now it is not convenient for us to respect your modesty, so right now you will need to change in public," it is confusing and harmful.

"If the message is your body belongs to whoever needs something from it right now, that's pretty dangerous for any child to get."

"There are too many campers who won't go swimming the entire summer. The reason: they don't want to change into their bathing suits in front of other children," says Shani. "Can you blame them? I wouldn't either and I'm willing to bet neither would you, but somehow, it's okay to tell our children that they must change that way because; everyone else is okay with it, there are not enough staff to take kids to the bathrooms to change and other seemingly valid reasons."

When you truly think about the ramifications of what this teaches our children, of how it negates everything we've taught them before and of how it takes people who are supposed to be safe adults in their lives and turns them into people who are essentially asking them to do things eerily similar things to what the evil predators we warn them about ask of them, it's terrifying.

So what are the options?

In a group of twenty kids, two counselors, one bathroom and forty-five minutes of swimming time, it's not exactly possible to have every child change privately in the bathroom, especially younger kids who need the counselor's help. Here are some tips that may alleviate the issues, but the main thing to remember is that whether or not it is convenient, it is so important that no child is forced to do anything that is uncomfortable for them.

A coat rack with a shower curtain can be used as a dressing room, suggests Dr. Verschleiser. A towel hung up, a sheet draped somewhere are just some ways to do this practically and for barely any money.

Campers can take turn holding up towels for their friends to hide behind.

Both parents and counselors should teach children how to put on their bathing suits in a tzniusdik fashion, with the least amount of exposure as possible.

For younger kids who need help, extra staff members can be on hand for precisely this purpose, changing each kid privately. This will cost extra, but money cannot be a deterrent when it comes to our children's safety.

"The point is not exactly how it is done, but the message behind the action. 'I understand you are uncomfortable, your body is private and should be kept that way. Let's figure something out to make you more comfortable.'" Shani concludes. "What an amazing lesson for every kid to know. Imagine the lives that could be saved with that simple sentence."

Dr. Shani Verschleiser is a noted speaker on the subject of child safety. She has educated thousands of individuals on the topic of protecting children from abuse through the curriculums created by her and Magenu.org, a national not for profit organization that Shani co-founded with her husband Eli Verschleiser.