



# HINUCH .O.A.C.H

Connections, Outlook, Approaches for Classroom and Home

*Shiffy Green*

## *Straight from the Heart*

How the Nurtured Heart Approach helps our intense and challenging children

When the Clifton Cheder decided to train its staff in a new method entitled the Nurtured Heart Approach (NHA), Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter was initially very skeptical. “It sounded so fake and flowery,” he says. “You wouldn’t catch me saying things from their lingo like, ‘I see greatness!’”

But Rabbi Alter’s class was comprised of an energetic bunch of boys who could be challenging at times. He admits he would often fall prey to a knee-jerk reaction of responding to them with negativity. “But negativity only leads to more negativity,” he says. “I wanted to put a stop to it in a more positive way.” He decided to try out a few NHA techniques, and today he’s an enthusiastic proponent, even telling other *Rebbeim* how they might apply this method.

Morah Gitty was also struggling with a student who was particularly intense. Her kindergarten class was comprised mostly of sweet, well-behaved little boys, but Nochum S.\* disrupted her entire day. He was extremely impulsive and would hurt other children or break what they’d worked so hard to build. “He throws tantrums,” Gitty says, “and when he does, he kicks whoever is near him at the time. I didn’t know what to do with him!” Nochum’s mother was having an equally hard time with him at home. When the mother discussed his behavior with her pediatrician, he suggested

Nochum might be suffering from ADHD and should be put on medication. It wasn’t until his mother started using the NHA method that Nochum finally began to calm down and cooperate in class.

According to Yael Walfish, an LCSW from Passaic, NHA should be the first line of defense in dealing with children who are especially intense. “It’s so tragic that children like Nochum end up on medications or kicked out of school!” she says. “There are better, more effective ways to handle such children!”

Four years ago, Yael and her husband Naftoli, also a social worker, attended a training session by Howard Glasser, creator of NHA. Glasser had found that when working with some children, he seemed to run up against a wall; the more he tried his usual techniques, the worse the children got. The techniques that worked fine with less challenging children fell flat with the really intense ones. Parents likewise found that the more they tried, the worse things got. “That had happened to me too,” Yael admits. “So I was all ears, both as a parent and a social worker.”

Glasser’s breakthrough came when he began to recognize the connection between a child’s behavior and the energy he receives for it. He was able to make progress with children diagnosed with ADHD, and then, before long, the most challenging children were being

referred to him: juvenile delinquents, gang members, fire setters. Glasser began educating other therapists and parents in how to apply his approach — eventually named the Nurtured Heart Approach — in their own lives and practices, not just for challenging children, but as a technique that can work across the board in all human relationships. “It’s a gift,” Yael says. “Why wait to connect with children when they aren’t doing well? Let’s reach them with connection instead of fear, giving them inner wealth and strength to face the world.”

## THE HEART OF NURTURED HEART

In his book, *Transforming the Difficult Child*, Glasser offers the analogy of a child who plays a video game. The child quickly learns the rules: He can’t go past certain limits, can’t make certain moves, is allowed other moves, etc. If he makes an illegal move, he’s bounced back on track. When he scores, the screen lights up and sounds ring out to herald his victory. The payoff for winning comes in the form of flashes of positive energy.

Glasser takes these parameters and applies them to intense children. These children need to learn limits, he says, but overstepping them should result in — as in a video game — dispassionate, categorical, and immediate redirection. He doesn’t believe in long negotiations or discussions; no is no, then it’s time to move on. Too much emotion on the part of the parent is counterproductive because it feeds the child’s need for energy and attention. For the child, getting negative attention is the equivalent of having the video game light up, because energy and connection is what he craves from parents and teachers. Instead, the parent-child video game should only light up when the child does something *positive*, encouraging him to pursue positive behaviors.

“You are your child’s favorite toy,” Yael explains. “No other toy he’ll ever have will approach your range of responses, with the full spectrum of emotions, moods, experiences, and reactions. You have buttons that elicit interesting reactions when pushed. Many children receive more intense and interesting reactions when they create problems. Instead, convert yourself to an interesting toy only when things are going well.”

Most approaches to dealing with children focus on ways to stop difficult behaviors, so that the child becomes less difficult for himself and others. NHA has a fundamentally different approach: It seeks to awaken children to who they really are beneath the veneer of bad behaviors, so they can step into their own greatness. The end goal is to help the child partner with his intensity and channel it in constructive directions.

Many troubled and troublesome children end up with a

negative image of themselves. “We all have a sort of portfolio of who we think we are,” Yael says. “Challenging children have a portfolio based on all the negative attention they receive, so they see themselves as aggressive, anxious, oppositional, lazy, depressed, and so on. The challenge is to help the child create a new portfolio and transform the negative energy into positivity.” Instead of calling a child angry, aggressive, shy, emotional, or disrespectful, the parent or teacher works to identify and verbally express when he is focused, courageous, intuitive, expressive, or candid.

How do you help children transform their intensity? Since parents’ or teacher’s energy is the real prize for children, in the same way video games light up for victory, it’s up to the adult to transform their interactions into positivity. This is done using the core methodology of NHA, “The Three Stands”:

- 1) **Absolutely No!** Don’t give any energy to negativity — no sending out of the classroom or to the principal, no discussions (even loving ones) of what’s going wrong.
- 2) **Absolutely Yes!** Emphasize positivity, nurture any firsthand experience of success by remarking on it, no matter how small. Create and hijack success, helping the child create a new portfolio — do not wait to “catch them being good.”
- 3) **Absolutely Clear!** Maintain total clarity about the rules and consequences. Provide a brief, unenergized consequence any time a rule is broken. This is not punitive, but rather a “reset.” It’s just a way to get back on track, the same way an umpire in a game blows his whistle. With respect to the child, it should be seen as simply returning him to his true self.

## A TYPICAL ALMOST-FAILURE

Yael gives us an example of a boy — let’s call him Shuey — whose bar mitzvah year in yeshivah seemed headed for disaster. Shuey would ask questions in class, but his *Rebbi* wouldn’t answer him, because he felt he should be able to relay the material without interruption. But Shuey needed more engagement, so he simply started shutting down. His frustration expressed itself in small, annoying behaviors like clicking his pen incessantly or singing to himself at the back of the class.

The *Rebbi* wanted to teach without being sidetracked by distracting noises; he had a curriculum to get through. He tried reasoning with Shuey, and when this didn’t produce results, he’d send him out of class. But it didn’t help.

The *Rebbi* also tried positive approaches — prizes, encouragement — yet Shuey was still spending more time out of class than in. He tried to set limits with Shuey, but it just escalated into a power struggle. Both the *Rebbi* and Shuey



were at a loss as to how to shift the dynamic.

Shuey's parents knew with certainty that his misbehavior wasn't due to any learning difficulties. One day he even came home and said, "I actually think I really enjoy learning. I'm not sure why it's not going well with *Rebbi*. It feels like some days he just comes to class in a bad mood and before I know it, I'm out. I'm not even sure what I did."

When this Shuey's *Rebbi* read a book on NHA, he realized he had other options for handling him. Shuey clearly just needed connection from his *Rebbi*, and when he didn't get it, he elicited negative energy instead. The *Rebbi* realized he had to set clear rules: no pen clicking, no singing, no interrupting. He began noticing and acknowledging any step in the right direction: "I see you have all your supplies out," "I see you have your finger on the place," "I need you to set up the *siyum*" (which he knew Shuey wanted to do, and he could then build upon it with, "You did such a great job organizing the *siyum*. That was so helpful, and you took the responsibility seriously!").

Shuey began to thrive. He still had his moments, but the class now had a code — whenever they stepped out of bounds in the classroom, the *Rebbi* would quietly tap on their desks. He did not reprimand, he did not tell them what they were doing wrong; it was an unenergized reset, to let them get back on track. With time, Shuey got it, and needed very few reminders. By the end of the school year, Shuey was flourishing.

## MORE NHA IN ACTION

After training in NHA, Rabbi Alter tried putting it to use in his classroom. When one of the more difficult boys had a meltdown and came screaming to him, Rabbi Alter told him, "Calm down, and come tell me what happened." As soon as the boy paused, took a breath and began to say, "Rebbi, I..." Rabbi Alter interrupted him by saying, "Wow — you calmed down

already? I'm so proud of you! Such *gevurah*! It used to take you much longer to calm down!"

After that, the child was able to relate what happened calmly. "The instigating incident was something that was inconsequential, but for him, it caused a reaction, and it really *was gevurah* for him to calm down fast," Rabbi Alter says. "Now, I'll sometimes purposefully drop things on the floor and ask a student having a difficult day to pick them up, so I can give him good feedback.

"I know a *Rebbi* who had a student who wasn't thriving and it was hard to find moments of success to recognize," he continues. "The class went on a ski trip and the *Rebbi* was able to tell the boy, 'Wow, you ski so great!' He was able to catch the child doing something good and build from there."

This strategy can even work with teenagers. One teen girl was rebellious, hanging out with defiant peers, and wearing non-*tzniusdig* clothing. Her parents were in a state of panic. Their relationship had understandably degenerated and become fraught with tension. "My husband and I took a course on NHA, and we started recognizing her for things like coming to the Shabbos table. We didn't energize the clothing that we didn't approve of," Mrs. Goodman\* relates. "We'd recognize her for dressing appropriately for school even though she didn't like her uniform. I used NHA relentlessly, pointing out the positive and resetting the negative, and slowly the issues disappeared. She's in seminary this year — she wanted to go! — and we are so thankful for NHA."

## EMOTIONALLY NUTRITIOUS WORDS

- Accomplished
- Adaptable
- Adventurous
- Aware
- Brave
- Cheerful
- Clever
- Compassionate
- Determined
- Dignified
- Energetic
- Fair
- Ferocious
- Insightful
- Intuitive
- Organized

## TOUGHER CASES

Intense children are all the more difficult when they have special needs.

For example, Mrs. Golden's son Rafi\* has a hard time managing his anger and dealing with any changes in his routine. When he's angry, he can be aggressive toward her and toward other children. With weekly encouragement and guidance from the Walfishes' online training, she decided to stop concentrating on controlling the negativity, and reinforce the positivity.

Whenever Rafi showed a glimmer of flexibility, she would compliment him and tell him that even though things weren't going the way he wanted, she was proud of the way he remained calm and flexible. When he

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wasn't hurting anyone, she would tell him, "This is great — you're not hurting anyone. That shows you have self-control and you know how to keep your hands to yourself."

"I also had tried to be very clear about rules, and having him 'reset' when he wasn't following them," Mrs. Golden says. "He used to get annoyed when I'd say, 'Reset,' but I found it helped if I would also reset myself, out loud, so that it was 'normalized' for him. I'd also make it into a joke sometimes, to lighten things up — like if he sneezed, I'd say, 'Rafi, you need to reset!'"

"NHA isn't perfect, but this is the best method I've ever found for dealing with my son, and it also helps me to be positive with my other kids," she finishes.

Yael's husband Naftoli uses NHA in his family therapy sessions and his work with the mental health division of Hatzolah. He was once called to help with a teenage boy who was out of control. "He was banging the walls and throwing anything in sight," Naftoli relates. "The other guys wanted to cart him off to the hospital."

Naftoli began by validating the boy's strong feelings, "I see you're very upset." As soon as there was a pause in the behavior, he would say, "You're upset but you're not throwing things now. You're breathing deeply. You're not yelling now. You're speaking to me."

"I acknowledged everything he was doing right," Naftoli says. "I asked him to sit down, and in about 20 minutes, we talked him down from his fit of rage. Hatzolah was relieved that we were able to avoid taking him to a hospital."

## NOT JUST FOR KIDS

Sometimes, one parent is enthused about using NHA, but the other parent resists or isn't interested. That's okay, Glasser says; you can start on your own. In 95 percent of cases, the other spouse will see changes and come around.

"If a parent feels inadequate and overwhelmed by the behaviors of her child, she is in no position to tell her partner how to do it differently," he writes. "Her voice will have no power... However, once the parent begins to feel competent and expert in parenting her child and she sees the change that her efforts have created, then that parent finds her voice... with her spouse, with the extended family, with the school, the sitter, and anyone else involved."

As relationships heal with a difficult child or spouse, the whole tone of a family changes. Everyone's positive sides are free to emerge. Glasser ends his book by urging readers to try using the NHA approach on themselves! We can "notice" ourselves doing positive behaviors and give ourselves a quick "reset" when we do something we shouldn't be doing. We can build a positive

portfolio for ourselves as we praise ourselves for doing things well.

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## WAYS TO RECOGNIZE YOUR CHILD'S GREATNESS:

- 1. Active Recognition:** I see, I hear, I notice: Moishie, I see you picked up your toys before I asked you to ! »
- 2. Experiential Recognition:** Add to the active recognition by saying what this behavior shows about the child's character. "Picking up the toys shows how responsible you are!"
- 3. Proactive Recognition:** Acknowledging when a rule is *not* being broken. "Wow, I see you followed Mommy's rule not to take out more than one toy at a time."
- 4. Creative Recognition:** Requesting that the child perform a task he or she is about to perform, is in the process of performing, or is impossible for the child to resist. This creates a culture where the child is constantly getting positive feedback for following rules. "Moishie, I need you to help with the toys — oh wow, you started before I even asked you!"