



RESET #6

Building Baila, Part 2

Yael Walfish, LCSW

Recap: Fourteen-year-old Baila E. had not gotten into the high school of her choice, and when her parents found her a new school, she refused to go. At home, she was angry, argumentative and even physically aggressive with her siblings. Her parents had sought help, and we were working to support Baila in resetting her challenging behavior and thriving!

WEEK FOUR

Baila's inner strength and goodness had become hidden, a result of her disappointment at not getting into her preferred school and her self-imposed social and academic isolation. We needed to create a new mindset and vision of success.

"We are going to help Baila build a new story in the words we say and the energy we give her," I told Mr. and Mrs. E. "We can take just about any moment that's positive — even neutral — and build strength

around it. We aren't going to wait for success. We're going to create it!"

I explained that our children become connected to the energy we feed them, even when most of it is negative and comes in the form of lectures, reprimands, warnings or long discussions about what's going wrong. All this just fuels the fire of the behavior we want to stop. Right now, Baila was seeing herself as angry, oppositional and a truant. We needed to be relentless in helping her create a new identity, a new sense of herself.

To help the E.s better understand how my method works, I shared a story from my early days using the Nurtured Heart Approach. At the time, I was working in schools, juvenile detention homes and youth psychiatric hospitals. It was in a detention center that I met Latasha, a 17-year-old who had been living with her grandmother until the grandmother sent her away because she was violent. Latasha was placed

in a shelter, but when she lost her temper and broke a worker's nose, she was transferred to detention.

I tried to engage with her, but Latasha made little or no eye contact. She would respond with one word or a nod. Finally, I said, "Latasha, what do you want to be one day, when you are no longer in this place?"

There was a pause. Then she said, "A nurse."

I was amazed. This young woman, who was so aggressive, wanted to become a caregiver! "Latasha, you want to be a nurse," I repeated. "That shows how kind and caring and compassionate you really are."

Latasha responded, "Yes, I am." With that, she smiled. She looked up, and I could see the beginning of a ripple effect, and after that we were able to work together. When we really believe and see the good in someone else, they can begin to see it for themselves.

I related this story to Mr. and Mrs. E. to show them that we needed to identify Baila's strengths and build on them, replacing the negative with the positive. "Together, we're going to help Baila see that she is responsible and compassionate and is capable of doing hard things. We will help her remember that she does well academically and knows she belongs in school. In her pain, she may have forgotten that."

We started brainstorming, speaking about things Baila already does at home that can be built up to encourage her compassion, kindness and contribution to the family. Were there moments she was fun to be around?

Mrs. E. said that Baila liked to read and go to a neighborhood library. "Maybe I'll take her," she proposed.

"That sounds great," I said. "You can recognize Baila for coming and keeping you company. When she chooses books you can say, 'Baila, I know you love reading and you love to learn. You're a natural student!'"

Our session was taking place on Zoom, and during that time Baila came by for a few minutes. When I work with parents, I don't always meet their children, but it's helpful when I do. It gives me further insight and context.

"Hi, Baila, I appreciate you saying hello!" I told her.

We chatted briefly about her life and home.

I said, "Baila, I just want you to know that I see that your parents will do anything to help you through this challenging time."

I could feel her taking it in, and she gave a slight nod as if she agreed.

While she only stayed a few minutes and looked like she wanted to run off during most of it, I saw that she was at least open to saying hello. That revealed a certain courage and interest in making things better.

WEEK FIVE

I began by asking the E.s for any success stories. It turned out Baila was going to school from time to time. They told me that a teacher from Baila's school whose daughter had been a friend of Baila's in elementary school called Baila to ask if she could come over to help her daughter with a project from school. Baila spent two afternoons at the friend's house!

"That's major!" I said. "Do you think that, secretly, Baila is struggling to figure out how to go back to school regularly?"

Mrs. E. smiled. "Baila got herself a bunch of books, and she started reading. One day we were cleaning her room together, and as we worked, I seized the chance to say, 'I know things are hard for you now, and you're so angry about how things worked out with the school. But you're very strong, and you do hard things. You will get back on track and go every day. You know you enjoy learning, and little by little you'll make new friends.'"

At home, things were still up and down. Baila was still escalating, but it was less frequent, and she was less physically aggressive and kinder to her siblings.

"There are more pleasant moments," Mrs. E. acknowledged. "On the days she goes to school, she seems more peaceful. It seems to me our other children are following our lead and not emphasizing negativity. They just let her comments go, and that helps a lot."

"Yes," Mr. E. agreed. "Our Shlomo, who is 10, has great comebacks! When Baila used to tell him he's weird

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and would make fun of the way his shirt is always untucked, he would get very upset. But this week he replied, 'I can always count on you, Baila, to care about me and tell me the truth!'"

We discussed more ways to respond to Baila, and at the end of the session I told the parents, "You are clearly being intentional in building strength with Baila and your other children. I see you working hard to implement my approach, and *baruch Hashem*, Baila is beginning to reset to who she is. She is very lucky to have you as her anchors. You are the champions behind her, never giving up on her!"

WEEK SIX

Progress was three steps forward, two steps back.

The school called Baila's parents. They wanted Baila in therapy. They wanted her to be in school every day, full-time. If she didn't come consistently, they said, they could not guarantee her spot in school the following year.

Ouch! Baila was making an effort, as were her parents, and we were seeing results. But our progress was not fast enough for her school. I understood the school's point of view. On the one hand, the school's hard line made me wish I had a magic wand to wave away all the problems. On the other hand, I thought, maybe this pressure will create clarity and further reset the family.

Mr. and Mrs. E. arrived for their session deeply discouraged. "What are we going to do?" they said. "Baila refuses to go to a therapist! Yet, we feel we *are* making progress."

We spoke about having a real conversation with Baila: not a long sit-down, just a quick run-by to say, "Baila, you've been doing great. You've been handling your siblings and this major crisis in your life, and you started going back to school. The school wants you there every day, all day. What are we going to do?"

Mr. and Mrs. E. looked fearful. What if Baila reacted badly?

"You have already reset the relationship," I said. "Even though Baila is still testing you and getting angry, my gut tells me that she knows you're behind

her. The clear expectations from the school and from you as well will be good for her. It will show her you believe in her."

WEEK SEVEN

Mr. and Mrs. E. went home and were upfront with Baila. They updated the school and set a schedule with Baila. They worried she wouldn't go, but I brought them back to our initial goals and expectations: We can't *make* Baila do anything. We can just build up her strengths and communicate our expectations.

But Baila did go. Life was calmer at home. Things were not perfect, but let's face it: They never are — especially with teenagers! The E. family had new tools to keep building Baila and their other children, and Baila's own narrative had changed. She had started making friends and knows that her parents have got her back.

MONTHS LATER

I received a message from Mrs. E.: "Thanks for everything! Baila is back in school, no issues!"

How wonderful and reassuring to learn that Baila had reset to a healthy, happy adolescence!

TAKEAWAYS:

- When we as parents become clear about our limits and expectations, our children have more clarity as well.
- Limits and clarity do not equal punishment. Clarity means having rules and expectations, and believing a child is capable of handling them. When we believe in our children, they will flourish and thrive. The sky's the limit! ●

All identifying info has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Yael Walfish, LCSW, is a therapist based in Passaic, New Jersey. She works with parents of children who are explosive, oppositional and anxious. She and her husband also train and support educators in an approach called NHA that transforms intense behavior and helps children thrive.

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