



VISTA

Fall 2012

Opening New Opportunities for Children Since 1976



Communication

Getting It Right!

Letter from the Director

With this year's newsletter we hope to impart an important message:

The Key to Helping Our Children is Communication.

Educators, parents, specialists and administrators can help children rise above their learning challenges by communicating honestly and constructively. Being honest means not to deny or minimize a problem, but to view it realistically as part of a larger picture. Being constructive means becoming educated and using the proper tools to deal with a problem.

Sharing ideas and knowledge, we meet, talk by phone and email, keeping the lines of communication open. Communication with mainstream teachers and support of mainstream classes is built into the program as well. Most important, we build resilient children through open and honest communication with the children themselves.

What is all this communication supposed to accomplish? First, the feeling – and the reality – of working as a team. When purpose and responsibility are shared, hope and expectations are high and more likely to be met.

Second, greater understanding of the children and the challenges they face help all those who have an interest in their successful education. A key part of that understanding is “demystification” – taking learning differences out of the realm of misinformation and fear and bringing them into the light of day.

Demystification is a process whereby an educator or clinician explains to the child the reasons he or she is having difficulty in school. One-to-one or in small groups, preferably with parents present, the child learns that he or she has defined problems that are not his or her fault, and that these problems have names and solutions. It is empowering for children to know the exact terms that describe their strengths and weaknesses. Demystification provides guidelines for parents and educators to become effective communicators with their children and students.

One of the key things that distinguishes P'TACH from other programs is its structure. P'TACH is a center-based program that provides a comprehensive team of education professionals, including a program coordinator,



Father and Son Day in woodworking class

reading specialist and psychologist, at each of its locations. Working together, the staff provides a full array of services for children with learning differences.

The team is uniquely positioned to know each child and to provide a foundation for a successful Jewish and secular education. For example, students in different grades are effectively grouped according to proficiency in a subject, thus, from the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic to the complexities of Hebrew, history and the sciences, P'TACH offers personalized expertise and commitment in the academic arena.

Equally important, P'TACH is dedicated to success in the personal and social realms. We build self-confidence through information, caring and reinforcing the positive. Teachers become partners with children and parents in the growth process. At the root of this alliance is the free flow of communication between them.

We welcome your participation. Whether you are a parent or you are considering a donation, our doors are always open and we are just a phone call away.

Judah Weller

Dr. Judah Weller

P'TACH - A Lively Place Where Everyone Gets Involved

Joey Zami says his mom made him go to P'TACH in the seventh grade, and that may be true. But he also says he's made great friends at P'TACH – he couldn't wait to run outside to be with them – and developed special relationships with his teachers, especially the program's coordinator, Rabbi Reuven Kamin. As he begins the eighth grade, Joey likes attending P'TACH and points to Rabbi Kamin's computer, where a fun photo of Joey on a surfboard is an inspiring screen saver.

"Joey is very proud of his surfing," explains Rabbi Kamin. "That is an area in which he is very successful. He spends most of his waking hours in school where his capabilities are challenged. I focus on his strengths, and I want to show him how much I value all of his successes." Rabbi Kamin points out that life is not always about school. Physical activities build healthy lives, trust among friends and teammates, and the thrill of new accomplishments.

Joey says his favorite classes are lunch and recess, typical for a 13-year-old. But, Joey, one of six children, is no ordinary boy. Smart, quick-witted and talented (he plays the guitar), he has advanced by leaps and bounds since enrolling at P'TACH. His struggle with dyslexia created hardships at his previous school. Here, Joey is steadily moving forward, which his parents attribute to the hard work and close attention that is a hallmark of the P'TACH program.

When the conversation turns to the theme of this newsletter – communication – Dolly and Eli, Joey's parents, immediately



Joey's parents, Dolly and Eli Zami

acknowledge its importance. Before making their decision, they toured the school with that in mind.

"The first thing I noticed was the lively classrooms. All of the students were engaged with the teacher. The kids were awake and full of energy; it was like a party," Dolly says. "There were seven children – a small class, and the Rabbi and children were all participating in the lesson. Joey needed a lively environment like that."

"Joey's parents are amazingly devoted to their children," says Rabbi Kamin. These are parents whose presence is felt in the school. It's as if you can almost see Mr. and Mrs. Zami walking right behind Joey all day. They are there. Whenever we need to work on something together, they are responsive, supportive and a pleasure to work with."

Communication is integral to learning, and the P'TACH
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Joey surfing. "Life is not always about school," says Rabbi Kamin



Physical activities like zip-lining bring about healthy lives and the thrill of new accomplishments for a classmate

Listen to the Voices of the Children



Here and at bottom, Bechina from Rabbi Shimon Yanovsky, Menahel, Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin

Rabbi Reuven Kamin is at his core a philosopher and visionary whose ideas reflect more than twenty years of bringing hope and happiness to children with developmental challenges. Now at the helm of the P'TACH program at Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin Elementary and High School, this tall, slim man brings vast experience and determination to the task of enhancing the lives of students who struggle with learning.

To improve the learning experience for his students, Rabbi Kamin breaks down what is really happening in each child's life. He takes a microscope to the child's abilities, behavior and family life and uses his own emotions to, as he says, "paint the picture of that child's life; walk a mile in his shoes."

The main tenet of his philosophy is communication, first and foremost listening to the child himself. The child is the center of the universe and his point of view is crucial – yet often left out when problems arise. Teachers, parents and administrators can move a child from one school or program to another looking for the right fit while still undermining that child's progress. Altering the environment and making suppositions about the root of a child's problems without understanding the child's perspective leads to misleading conclusions.

Rabbi Kamin's advice is to "pile on the empathy. Give the child the opportunity and the space to talk – a consequence-free zone."

"Look at their actions, too," he says of the children who come to P'TACH from mainstream schools. "They are exhausted and frustrated that there is no output for all their effort. The shame is that the children think they are doing badly, when in fact they are trying and working their hardest."

Next, communication between parents and school professionals is crucial. Family life is so fast-paced – everyone is multi-tasking – that balancing positive and negative emotions can be difficult without the help of the P'TACH program. Rabbi Kamin speaks eloquently of the challenges: "Families often face conflict in their natural tendency to bond and find common understanding versus the complexity of relationships and high expectations. Parents wonder, 'Can't you be like every other kid?,' while children say to themselves, 'I'm distracted, I'm dumb, I'm not doing well in school and family relationships. Parents fear disappointment and children often act out because they have nothing left to lose.'"



Rabbi Reuven Kamin



Rabbi Kamin has a saying, "It's always better to succeed and comply than fail and defy." Finding ways for a child to work with parents and teachers offers a more beneficial path to learning; setting up a child for failure by demanding the impossible leads to low self-esteem and misbehavior.

Anger, according to Rabbi Kamin, is a mixture of failed expectations and anxiety, emotions felt by the entire family. He tries to bridge that anger by educating parents and children about the child's specific learning differences, demystifying and destigmatizing those differences, and offering parents and students a compassionate ear. Rabbi Kamin sees his job, and that of his staff, as managing and aligning parents' expectations with their child's needs and emotions. Children must be allowed to function at their own level while parents must understand that success in life can be achieved by many different means. Some children, for example, study more effectively by listening to a tape recording of a textbook than reading from it. Offering effective alternative methods of learning is key.

Rabbi Kamin constructs and implements programs that challenge students on their own level, rather than an unobtainable school-wide standard. Every day, each student rates himself – and is rated by his teachers - on a set of core behaviors: safety, respect and responsibility. The brilliance of the strategy lies in its simplicity and usefulness. The children's goal is to beat their own average, which they work at tenaciously. Rabbi Kamin's goal is to track those daily averages for strengths and weaknesses and use the information to coordinate with teachers and parents to make classroom learning productive and fun.

Regular communication among the staff is crucial to a child's success. At P'TACH, educators and specialists, such as psychologists and speech therapists, know each child well and come together to assess the child's progress. They work to pinpoint weaknesses and improve on strengths. The knowledge gained is used to develop learning strategies for teachers and is imparted to parents through in-school meetings, phone calls,

notes sent home and via email. Parents get to know their children from different perspectives and in turn can more effectively communicate with their children.

The difference between P'TACH and mainstream schools is evident. "We're doing something regular day schools can't do. With a high teacher to student ratio, the expertise to use the latest teaching methods and a good dose of creativity, we can educate every child. Everyone has good intentions, but here at P'TACH, we have a multi-faceted approach based on communication."

Rabbi Kamin has a wish list. To be most effective, he wants to add to the array of technologies already in the classrooms: more computers, smart boards and software. He also wants more resources for exploratory learning, such as additional field trips and materials for science experiments.

Put it all together and Rabbi Kamin's philosophy advances the reality that success is a product of robust communication. Broad issues of school, family and success are narrowed to the point of view of the child, his parents and the necessary structures provided by a program like P'TACH, which makes learning a positive and fulfilling experience for children with learning differences.



Al Pi Darko

A N.E.R.C. Program

The Al Pi Darko Program, a signature program of P'TACH's National Educational Research Center (NERC), is an intensive professional development program for K-12 educators taught by our director, Dr. Judah Weller. Workshops utilize a neurodevelopmental model, giving mainstream educators and learning specialists greater insight, knowledge and training in

the teaching methods that work best for individual children, no matter where on the learning spectrum those children lie.

To learn more and schedule training at your location, call P'TACH at (718) 854-8600, ext. 102, or email Dr. Weller at PTACHdrw@aol.com.

35th Annual Scholarship Dinner

P'TACH once again honored its faithful supporters and featured its impressive students at the 35th Annual Scholarship Dinner on April 29th. The Hilton Hotel's ballroom was a sea of enthusiasm and gratitude for all those who make Jewish and secular education a priority for children with learning differences.

Perela Waldman, an 11-year-old student at Bais Yakov D'Rav Meir Elementary School; Eli First, a recent graduate of Yeshiva University High School for Boys; and Naomi Ducat, a recent graduate of Yeshiva University High School for Girls, introduced the evening's honorees. They spoke of their achievements, sending a clear message of the benefits of a P'TACH education: overcoming the hurdles of learning differences with the care, attention and high level of expertise of P'TACH's talented and devoted educators.

This year, P'TACH paid tribute to Dr. Joel and Mrs. Bea Dickstein with the Educational Achievement Award. More than 35 years ago, Dr. Dickstein was the founding program coordinator at Yeshiva University High School for Boys, and most recently at Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin. An integral part of the P'TACH team, his professionalism and profound understanding of the unique needs of his students and their unlimited potential have been the gold



Perela Waldman

Naomi Ducat

standard that enabled P'TACH to grow from a grassroots organization into an internationally recognized leader in special education. He is also the co-director of P'TACH's

National Educational Resource Center, which provides professional development to regular and special education teachers. Dr. Dickstein continues his association with P'TACH as a consultant on growth and educational programs.

Bea Dickstein supports her husband's passion, tirelessly working on projects for P'TACH's programs over the past three decades. A case editor at Physiologic Assessment Services, her commitment to P'TACH is deeply appreciated.

Leo and Shoshanna Kimmel received P'TACH's Community Service Award. Mr. Kimmel, a highly respected attorney, is also the treasurer of COJO in Flatbush, secretary of United Lubavitcher Yeshiva, board member of the Young Israel of Avenue J, Court Street Shul Gabbai, and supports COLPA and the Manhattan Terrace Civil Association. Shoshanna Kimmel's 20-year career as a science teacher and coordinator in Shulamith School and Mesoras Bais Yakov is even more impressive when considering her philanthropic efforts for Emunah and many other chesed organizations and projects.

Dr. Michael and Esther Steinhardt have been personally involved in P'TACH for many years, and received this year's Professional Leadership Award. Dr. Steinhardt is a clinical neuropsychologist practicing in the greater New York/New Jersey/Rockland area. He is



Leo J. Kimmel, Shoshanna Kimmel, Dr. Joel Rosenshein

on staff at Hackensack University Medical Center, a teaching hospital, and in his private practice, evaluates children and adolescents with learning and behavioral difficulties and assists in their educational and treatment planning. Michael has lectured at P'TACH's professional development programs, among other venues. Esther Steinhardt is a speech-language pathologist who works with developmentally delayed children and adolescents. She previously served as a special education teacher at P'TACH's branches in Baltimore and Jerusalem.



Esther Steinhardt, Dr. Michael Steinhart, Dr. Judah Weller, Itzi Laub

as always, and we thank those who continue to give throughout the year as well. Tonight's honorees represent the best of Jewish giving, offering children with learning differences a P'TACH education - a love of learning and a "can do" attitude that extends to areas beyond the classroom.



Eli First

The Steinhardt family has a long history with P'TACH. Dr. Steinhardt's parents and grandparents, pillars of the Jewish education community, served as advocates and founding board members for P'TACH at its inception. His aunt, Mrs. Symie Liff, is co-founder and co-director of P'TACH-Israel, which boasts 15 school-based special education programs in Jerusalem.



Bea Dickstein, Dr. Joel Dickstein, Dr. Judah Weller, Itzi Laub

- In Memory of Dr. Melvin Hyman - ה"ע

The Board of Directors, parents and children of P'TACH acknowledge the passing of Dr. Melvin Hyman, ה"ע, with deep sadness.

*Dr. Hyman was a founder of P'TACH,
its first president and later, chairman of the board.*

May the merits of his lifelong dedication and superb efforts on behalf of the children of P'TACH be a source of comfort to his beloved wife, Dr. Cynthia Hyman, and their children.



When asked about the importance of communication in educating children with learning differences, Miriam Serkez jumps right in. “I have a lot to say on this topic,” she says. The 25-year program coordinator for P’TACH’s elementary and middle school program for girls at Bais Yakov D’Rav Meir in Brooklyn gets right to the heart of the matter.

There is an aura of failure that children can sense – whether spoken or swept under the rug. They and their parents don’t know that, in their situation, mainstream schools inadvertently teach to their weaknesses. Children get the message that they are not working hard enough, no matter how hard they try.



“This is where demystification comes in,” Mrs. Serkez says. “The next step in communication is letting the children and their parents know what is really going on. They need to understand their child’s strengths as well as the weaknesses that are getting in her way. We don’t talk or plan behind the child’s back. She must be included because with greater understanding of self, the child begins to succeed for the first time in her life.”

“Communication is the critical piece,” she said, explaining her approach from the moment a parent calls to inquire about the P’TACH program. The first step is building trust. Parents have to be on the team, but there is a wall of anxiety, lack of information and, sometimes, shame.

At every grade, the P’TACH program teaches to a child’s strengths, which are determined by constant communication among P’TACH’s professionals. Mrs. Serkez holds formal meetings once a month with her staff - a social worker, speech therapist and religious and academic educators - for a roundtable of discussion and evaluation. On an informal basis, she meets with each of them nearly every day. With the team coming in and out of her office, communication is steady, making sure everyone is on the same page.

“It matters how parents feel when you get off the phone,” she says. “Parents know their child is precious, but they are vulnerable because their child is an extension of themselves, and they are calling because there is a problem. It is integral to develop relationships with parents based on trust.”



Miriam Serkez with a student

Mrs. Serkez recounts the story of a mother who brought her daughter in, frantic that the child’s school wanted to hold her back from entering second grade. “Do you know why you’re here?” asked Mrs. Serkez of the little girl. “I’m a failure,” she responded.



“We cannot get too comfortable with a method or approach,” Mrs. Serkez says. “We have to be flexible to move with the child’s tempo. Life for the children is constantly changing – behaviors become evident, family issues surface - so the staff has to be on top of it all.”

Conferring amongst professionals becomes the basis for better learning. At every grade, children are taught to play to their own strengths, which becomes easier for them as they grow older. When auditory skills are stronger than reading skills, Mrs. Serkez says, “We tell them, don’t take so many notes. Listen!” Some children tape lessons to listen to again later, and others take oral exams. If the issue is attentional, children are advised to

sit up front in class, while teachers work on reasserting attention during lessons.

Teachers aim to communicate with parents every week, whether in person at drop off, by phone or with notes in homework folders. Even when nothing seems to be new, important information goes both ways. A note from home can initiate or answer many questions, while written notes with compliments and acknowledgements can make a big difference in a child’s behavior and self-esteem.

“Communication in writing is very powerful,” says Mrs. Serkez. “Small notes exchanged by students and teachers establish a rapport separately from the spoken word. Children in the elementary school grades have personal mailboxes in the classroom. They are encouraged to write notes to each other, whether to say something nice or to tell a classmate their feelings were hurt by something said or done. This fosters interpersonal relationship skills.”

With 30 children in the second to eighth grades, Mrs. Serkez knows the hard truth about her students. “Unfortunately, given the structure and design of mainstream schools, most children will experience failure before they come to P’TACH.”

The clear message for parents is to communicate early, learn about your child’s strengths and weaknesses and become part of the team that will build self-esteem and inspire achievement.

A Tribute

Rabbi Burton Jaffa, P’TACH’s former national director, retired in 2011. For his 35 years of service since the organization was founded, we owe him a great debt of gratitude that can never be repaid. In a time when the educational system, secular and Jewish, failed to recognize the significance of teaching to the strengths of children with learning differences, he ushered in an era of understanding that became part of the lexicon of special education.

Rabbi Jaffa insisted that children be recognized alongside their peers and receive the Jewish and secular education that was their right. The revolution of Jewish special education began with P’TACH’s first program at Yeshiva University High School for Boys 35 years ago, and since then P’TACH has been the model for such programs all over the world.

Rabbi Jaffa can certainly look back with pride that his vision not only took root, but flourished.

P’TACH has grown in quality and quantity since then, in no small part due to Rabbi Jaffa at the helm, guiding P’TACH in fulfilling its mission and enabling thousands of children to find their many talents and to accomplish what the rest of society had given up on. It was his unwavering support of the best teachers and professionals that encouraged staff to join the P’TACH team.

We wish Rabbi Jaffa and his wife, Sharon, many more years of giving to the K’lal. The names P’TACH and Rabbi Burton Jaffa will always be interwoven into the fabric of Jewish education.

N.E.R.C.

National Educational Resource Center at P'TACH

Professional consulting, staff development and continuing education for K-12 educators in the Jewish Day School community.

For over 30 years, through workshops and intensive training, NERC has offered teachers, rabbis and school administrators the tools and strategies to meet the diverse educational and social needs of their students.

To learn more about upcoming workshops or to schedule training in your school or community please call Dr. Judah Weller at 718-854-8600, ext. 102.

2011-2012 Schedule

Presented by Dr. Joel Dickstein

November 2011

"We Already Know Social Skills are Essential: Now What?"

"Susie CAN Do Math"

"Memory: The Overlooked Learning Tool"

National Association of Jewish Day Schools

Presented by Dr. Judah Weller

December 2011

"Hidden Sparks"

Coaches Retreat – New York City

"Strengths and Struggles in Judaic Studies, Neurodevelopmental Demands and Core Strategies"

Presented by Miriam Serkez, M.A.

May 2012

"Meeting the Needs of All Students"

Two-Day Resource and Instructional Evaluation
Torah Day School, Atlanta, Georgia

P'TACH - A Lively Place Where Everyone Gets Involved

(continued from page 3)

program encourages dialogue between everyone that has a stake in the child's education, including the child himself. Rabbis and school professionals know the students and their parents well. Teachers communicate with parents regularly to monitor and manage academic performance. During the school year, information is exchanged by phone, fax and one-on-one discussions. Comprehensive meetings are held twice a year, attended by the student, parents, teachers, administrators, and the school's psychologist and speech therapist. "In those meetings, I can be real and not afraid to express my thoughts and opinions," Dolly says. "I know the staff at P'TACH is going to help. They are honest and on our side. I have recommended the program to people I know who could use the same support."

Eli, Joey's father, says he feels involved all the time. "After one month, I knew we made the right decision," he says. "We are

all on the same page. They listen to us, and Joey's education is a shared responsibility." Concerns about Joey fitting in with the other kids at P'TACH were also alleviated. His son gets along well with others, and feels part of the school community.

"Joey doesn't do anything that doesn't make sense to him," Dolly says. "Rabbi Kamin is good at explaining any situation. He uses stories to illustrate his point. He has so many stories! He's a gift to the school."

Joey agrees. He stops by Rabbi Kamin's office when he has a question or needs to work something out. Rabbi Kamin will listen and comment, and sometimes offer advice. "When he gives advice, it usually works," Joey says. But the exchange is a two way street. Rabbi Kamin also listens to Joey's suggestions – a snow tubing idea turned into a fun field trip for everyone last winter.

P'TACH's Formula For Success:

Center-Based Programs that Enhance Student Performance

The Case of Chaya:

Chaya was a sixth grade student who struggled with basic academic skills. She was a puzzle that was not easy to solve. Closely observed by all her teachers, it was P'TACH's knitting teacher who made a vitally important discovery. Chaya had a particular aptitude for knitting. While history and Hebrew gave her trouble, she was clearly ahead of her classmates when it came to following directions, sequencing tasks and overall creativity.

These talents were not merely tossed aside as the basics of a quaint hobby and irrelevant to her experiences in school. On the contrary, P'TACH's professionals saw an opening. The school's program coordinator met with staff members to strategize. With ongoing communication, these not-so-obvious affinities were transferred to academic subjects and social areas as well, giving Chaya a much-needed infusion of success in school.

What distinguishes P'TACH from other programs in mainstream yeshivas? Essentially, our 35 years of success is based on the unique structure of P'TACH's programs, which centralizes and maximizes communication between teachers, specialists, parents and students. This structure involves having an on-site program coordinator to consistently and clearly communicate the needs of students to the professionals that work with them. One can never predict when issues will arise, and having a program coordinator on site to navigate solutions is essential.



Matching Gifts Program

Does your place of employment offer a matching gifts program?

To make your donation go farther, simply obtain a form from your company's matching gift coordinator and send it to P'TACH at 1689 East 5th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11230. Your generosity is greatly appreciated.

A special note of gratitude

to Mr. and Mrs. Yussie Seif and Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Kramer of Lawrence, NY, and Mr. and Mrs. Michael Spitzer and Mr. Eli and Dr. Rona Miles of Brooklyn, NY, for hosting breakfast gatherings in their homes in support of P'TACH. Guest Speakers included Rabbi Yaakov Feitman, Rov, Kehillas Bais Yehudah Tzvi and eminent Torah scholar Rabbi Eli Mansour.



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Alumni Letter

Dear Readers,

I am a student at Queens College, and was a member of the P'TACH program in high school. Many people told me that during my four years at P'TACH I developed more than the average high school student - intellectually, academically, emotionally and socially. I believe P'TACH played a big role in this development.

P'TACH is very different from other academic assistance programs. It is more like a second home, where students who struggle academically, whether in one or all subjects, have a place to address their specific situations. No student or situation is ever the same, and the fact that P'TACH is a small program allows the faculty to give individual attention to each student. This close-knit community helps students and staff find methods that allow each student to learn at their fullest potential.

Additionally, any questions, concerns or ideas that come up are discussed with the student and her parents, teachers and the P'TACH program coordinator, Mrs. Jacqueline Welkowitz. We, as a group, strategically figure out a plan to help improve the student's situation. In P'TACH, everyone, including the student, is always "in the loop." This helped me and other students play a part in our own development.

Best wishes to the students and teachers of P'TACH,

Leah