

Originally posted on Hidabroot, Israel, 4.29.2020

## **They wake up at noon, and spend the entire day on their phones: How do adolescents deal with the Corona crisis?**

How many hours do youth spend on social media during the Corona pandemic? What do you do with those who wake up at noon and go to bed at 3 AM? And how, in the midst of all this anxiety, do you handle a teen who only cares about the fact that her driving license test was postponed? Irit Aloni, head of the Youth Centers Field at ELEM, has the answers.

Written by Tamar Snider.

Yosef, a teenager, had a rough go at home. His relationship with his parents was rather shaky, and often led to arguments and screams. Lucky for him, he'd only come home from Yeshiva once every three weeks, suffer through the short inconvenience, and move on back to the place which served as his escape. A calm, comfortable place. That is, until the Corona crisis arrived and changed the rules. Suddenly, he found himself in the powder keg that was his home constantly, with no privacy or personal space, often coming head to head with his parents. The feeling of suffocation and added boredom made matters worse, and he didn't know how to escape anymore. ELEM, which helps at-risk youth, see many cases like Yosef's (and others that are even more complex) every single day. Irit Aloni, who holds an MA in social work, is a parents' counselor, and manages ELEM's 26 centers across the country, tells us about the hardships the youth experience during this crisis. She offers solutions, too.

### **15 hours on social media, 4000 messages per day**

"Ever since the Corona crisis begun, many youth find it hard to handle the situation," Irit says. "They're at the age when their identity is formed, when a distance is created between them and their parents, even to the point of some sort of rebelling. They need their space to develop on their own, and society plays a big part in that space. The Corona crisis we're currently facing sure doesn't help. Suddenly they can't meet friends, the reality at home is at times that of a crowded family dynamic, and the extensive boredom can lead to unhealthy tendencies. Many adolescents spend hours upon hours on social media right now, with their room door locked behind them, sometimes accompanied by a sign that says "no

entry.” They sit with headphones so that no one hears what they’re doing inside, and they also switched their schedule around, and they stay up while their parents are asleep.”

According to Aloni, social media usage comes with complex dangers. “In the past, in the era before mobile devices, every phone call a youth received had usually gone through their parents, meaning they had some sort of monitoring over the kids’ communication,” she explains. “Nowadays, however, with the mobile devices and the social media platforms, parents have no way of knowing who their kids are talking to. In addition, if pre-Corona youth only used social media for 5 hours a day, now it’s more like 15. Polls have shown us that youth who are a part of 40 social groups, get about 2000-4000 messages per day. That’s a lot to maintain. They experience FoMo, Fear of Missing Out, on experiences, information, or events that others know about or experience, which results in intensive use of the social media platforms. Furthermore, there’s an overlap between the amount of hours youth invest in digital technology, and increased levels of stress and depression.”

Another problem that exists within the social media platforms is the lack of empathy. “We switched to short messages and written correspondence, and when that happens, we can’t see the facial expressions and body language of the person in front of us, and there’s no way for us to know how that person feels in regards to the words that were said,” Irit explains. “For example, when you tell a girl that she’s fat, you can see that her body clenches, and her face contorts in pain. In contrast, when these words are written, you don’t see the pain they’re causing, which makes typing hurtful things all the more easy. This is also why a child who usually feels socially rejected, and at this time need friends even more, won’t find them on the empathy-lacking social media, on the contrary – he’ll actually be more at-risk of being used and abused through social media. A 14 years old from one of our centers, who recently lost her mother, showed me that she received 700 texts with crying emojis, but no one visited her or called to say they were sorry for her loss. Youth really live inside of the social networks today.

All of the above is true for all youth, and for at-risk youth reality is now more complex than ever. “Most youth are currently in a warm, loving home,” Irit points out, “but for at-risk youth, home can be a much greater danger than the virus. Their parents are under pressure and worry about their own health and financial situation, and at un-protected homes, best case scenario is that kids become invisible, worst case scenario is that they become a punching bag for their parents.”

This situation leads youth to seek an escape. “They have two forms of escape available to them,” she describes, “either escape within, into their rooms, and there they use social media and other problematic things to numb the pain, or escape outside, to the street, and seek thrills to numb the pain. There are many street groups right now that find empty buildings such as schools and kindergartens to stay at. This last week, for example, we got a call from the police that asked us to talk to youth who started chasing police cars with their bikes. We located the youth and explained to them just how serious it was to do so, with the hope that they’ll find something better to do.”

### **What about an ultra-Orthodox youth who spend less time on social media, if any at all?**

“In that sense, the situation within the ultra-Orthodox community is indeed better, but we must remember that being an adolescent is hard no matter what, and to be an adolescent during the Corona crisis is even harder. They need friends right now, and they don’t have those. They need to create distance between them and their parents in order to develop their own identity, and not be the same as their parents, and that’s hard when everyone is at home for a long period of time. Yes, a big family is a blessing because siblings keep each other occupied, but it can create hardships as well, like the burden of taking care of younger siblings, the feeling that there’s no personal space, and parents-related stress, parents who are themselves under stress and worry way more than during normal times.

### **Being in tune with the emotional need of the adolescent**

#### **So how can we help youth during this time?**

“First of all we must understand that the parents themselves are concerned with the state of their children. They see them sleep during that day, and up during the night. The kids have nothing to do and they approach their parents with unrealistic dreams, and the parents don’t always know how to handle that. A teenager can come and say “I want to be a fashion designer,” or “I don’t need to study right now, I’ll launch a start-up when I’m 30 and get rich,” and the adults are scared by these ideas so they belittle them, from a place of concern. The thing is, what these kids need is for us to tell them just how incredible their ambitions are, and then and only then, in order for them to not be lost in imaginary wishes, we can start making them think in a practical way, ask what they need to do in order to achieve these dreams. For example, there was one mother who told me her son said he wants to become a

pilot, and she thought to herself “let’s see him pass his finals first and then we can talk.” But the truth is, this teen only needed his mom to be impressed, for her to show faith that he can achieve that goal.”

### **How do we handle the adolescents’ growing boredom at this time?**

“When kids tell us that they’re bored, we usually tend to give them replies such as ‘what am I? An entertainment crew?’ or make up solutions such as ‘do some chores around the house’ or ‘read a book.’ Truth is that neither rejecting the way they feel nor directing them to do something are the right call. Instead, we have to be in tune with the emotional need of the adolescent, to see that all he’s asking is for us to see him and what he’s going through. There’s no school at the moment to keep him occupied, there are no friends, who are so meaningful at this stage of the adolescent’s life, and it really is hard. Once we give space to his hardship, we can start a conversation about it – ask what he usually does when he’s bored, and help him expand these options. You can offer them to cook, or play with the younger siblings, or even for all of you to do something together. What matters is that they feel useful and important, and it’ll give them the power for positive action moving forward.”

### **But parents themselves have a lot to deal with at the moment, how will we manage all of that?**

“It’s true that we don’t always have the time and can get to everything, and there will be many hours during which our kids will still be bored, but at least we’ll have the understanding of their needs and hardships, and won’t reject them. When a child says “I’m having a hard time,” instead of telling him “you think you’re having a hard time? Look at us,” we’ll legitimize his feelings. One mother, for example, told me that the only thing her daughter cares about is the fact that she can’t take her driving license test at the moment. I told her, “yes, she might be 17, but she’s still a child, and that’s the thing she cares about at the moment, not the financial and health concerns of her parents.”

### **What about setting some boundaries for the adolescents at a time that lines are blurry?**

“When it comes to boundaries, it’s important to choose your battles. For example, it’s pointless to tell teens to wake up at 8 AM, because it’s not going to happen, but you can insist that they wake up at noon instead of at 3 PM. Sometimes, adolescents are especially angry and aggravated, and it’s important not to respond with anger in return. If it appears to them that we see them, and understand how they feel, it’ll decrease the aggravation. We must remember that we’re also under immense

pressure, we have more worries, and we might become angry at the kids faster. So every time this happens, it's best to count to 10, or at the very least 4, and only then talk back."

### **And of course we have to ask, what about remote studying during this time?**

"As for studying, there are parents who become anxious and ask themselves if their kid will amount to anything if he doesn't study. So we have to remember that remote studying isn't going to make anyone a professor, so there's no need to get scared. We can make them study, but we can give them control over how to do the studying – let them choose which hours fit them best, and allow them to focus on the subjects they like better. Choosing is a very important word at this age, because it puts the control back in their hands and allows them to feel like adults, which is ten times more important during a period when we all feel helpless."

For households where kids lock themselves in their rooms, Irit suggests that parents still come in. "The fact that the door is closed doesn't mean that they don't want us to show interest. No need to barge in, but you can certainly knock, and ask how they're feeling and if they need anything. Loneliness can lead to depression, and even worse - dangerous place within media, and in the light of that, the relationship with us, and that sane adult voice we bring with us has the ability to sooth.

### **Maintaining operations and survival**

Many NGOs have shut down this past month due to lack of donations and income. "These demographics that are already vulnerable, that the NGOs serve, are even more vulnerable now due to the crisis," Irit says. "Yet we at ELEM manage to maintain operations and survive, with 300 professional staff members and 2000 volunteers. We shifted greatly to working within the social media platforms, and we have presence there so the youth have somewhere to turn to, and also to locate those who are in distress. Our Outreach Vans, which are our way to reach youth in different areas, still operate, and there are some centers open to offer help. It's important to us that the world won't come crushing down on the at-risk youth, that they know there's someone who sees them, who cares. On Passover eve, for example, we distributed thousands of food packages to young single mothers, many of whom lost their sources of income."

### **Do you also see youth who come from "normal," at least on the surface, households?**

“Absolutely, yes. Because some things are out of the parents’ hands. Sometimes they want the best for their child, but the child is being socially shunned or experiencing hurt outside of his home, and in order to numb the pain, the kid resort to bad solutions. Some parents want to make good, but can’t create that feeling, and their adolescents experience different hardships. The teens look for relief elsewhere, outside, instead of with their parents. This is why it’s important that we be there. For example, we recently helped a teen who is currently staying with a foster family and it’s not a good fit. He used to manage the day-to-day because he was at school. But now he’s at that point of complete desperation, so much so that he doesn’t want to live anymore, and we had to find a replacement home for him and help him confront these things.

In summary, Irit says, “it’s important to keep our eyes open and ask the teens how they are, pay attention to changes in their behavior, and if there’s a child who keeps to himself and can’t find his place, help him find a way out of that feeling. We have the ability to take this challenge and turn the fear into initiative, and what we need to do is listen to our parental inner voice and trust the strength of our children. Our youth have many strengths and I hope that they’ll manage to come out on the other side of this crisis stronger.”