

# Mental Health Days to the Rescue

written by Yarden Slater  
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***After having read John Gatto's book, Dumbing Us Down, I am now able to better articulate the need for mental health days, and what they are all about.***

My younger kids probably get more days off from school than the average kid. This is because I strongly believe in mental health days. Why would a child need a day off from school, AKA mental health day, you ask? For many years I couldn't quite express it other than the need for calm, quality time with a parent, and to simply be free to just BE. However, after having read John Gatto's book (an award winning 30-year New York City public school teacher), *Dumbing Us Down*, I am now

able to better articulate the need for mental health days, and what they are all about.

Now, I send my boys to a Talmud Torah, and in my personal opinion, things there are in much better shape than the average public school. The main subject matter – Torah, is clearly very relevant to the children; negative peer pressure is not as high-level as it may be in some other schools, and there is a lot more positive reinforcement by teachers, in my opinion, than at many other schools. That being said, the environment still leaves a lot to be desired – that is my personal opinion as a mom to the children that I have.

Let's begin with first things first: here's what a mental health day off is NOT about, which also happens to be part of the reason for the need for it in the first place:

A mental health day is not about confusion – learning about a myriad different subjects, many of which have no relevance to the child's present life. It is not about having to stay in one room for an entire day unless you get permission to go to the bathroom or play ball outdoors for 20 minutes. It is not about having a bell control your every move. It is not about being emotionally dependent on good grades, stars and check marks in order to feel good about oneself. Nor it is about fearing the disgrace of not having received one of the latter. It is not about waiting to be told what to do, think and learn by someone else. It is not about conforming. And finally, It is not about constantly being watched and controlled, with no private time or space to be your own person who thinks independently and creatively.

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So, what's a mental health day all about?

On a day off from school, I will first and foremost, even if for just a little while, bond with my child by looking at them in the eye and asking them how they are feeling and what's on their mind. I'll feed them a yummy fruit shake and a hot breakfast of their choice – an omelet or pancakes or cheese toast. If they are home, they know they have to do some morning chores to help around the house, so they get busy with that for a while. This gets them to re-attach to me and the home once again, rather than their friends, teachers, and school.

I learned at my homeschool-parenting mentor class that children become attached to the people that they are with for most of the day. If we want to change this, we need to pull them out for 1:1 time every once in a while, which includes focused bonding time.

We might read a Torah-related story together, paint something, play memory or a card game or go to the park. Other than that, they can just BE. They are free to figure out what to do with their day.



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I give them the space and opportunity to learn or practice something that they are very interested in. For example, playing basketball outside, going over their *mishnayos*, writing, painting, putting a puzzle together, preparing food, playing a musical instrument – whatever is in harmony with what is already going on in their brain.

I allow them the freedom to spend time in the kitchen, in their room, on the couch or outside – wherever they feel like they can relax, or be creative, or be active or curious, whatever it is they feel compelled to do. I give them the opportunity of open-ended time and total involvement when it comes to finishing something that they are working on. No bells to suddenly stop them mid-work or authority figures correcting them as they are fully engrossed in a project.

Free will to govern themselves is the name of the game. They are not hostages to good behavior but rather rulers of their own behavior, whatever it may be, and responsible for the consequences of that behavior, as explained by their parents ahead of time. Individuality and creativity is honored, independent thinking and curiosity encouraged. No waiting for an expert to tell them what to do. Love and self-confidence are not dependent on actions, attitudes, grades, tests, or report cards. No thing or person decides their worth – they get to decide that for themselves.

On a mental health day, you get to follow your own private drummer rather than that of a tightly controlled school system and society. And that, my dear ladies, is the ultimate reason I make sure my kids get them: to show and remind them that they have the power to break through the illusion of imitation and confinement that inevitably must be a part of any centralized system such as school. They learn by experience that it is possible to find fulfillment through discovering and developing their personal genius. And that they can have a genuinely meaningful life through learning Torah in a way that is enjoyable to them, connection to God, family and nature,

giving to others and acting with compassion towards others.

As my friend Ettie puts it – this is the way to bring up Geula-centered children. I hope you understand why and I couldn't agree more.