

## Thinking Like a Teen

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You want to influence the lives of Jewish teens? First and foremost, focus on the adults who will be their “leaders,” mentors, coaches, advisors and teachers during those critical high school years. Here's my advice for them:

Think like a teen.

Do you want to relate to adults? Not really.

Are you selfish sometimes? Yes. Not because you mean to be this way, but because it is natural that during a time of so much growing, you are self-conscious, scared, confused, and probably a little self-absorbed due to these other qualities.

So, in order for an adult to make a real difference in a teen's life, the appointed individual must have the number one quality needed to engage teenagers: “relatability.”

But why? Because teens listen to what they *know* and what they *want* to know, and not to something or to some person whose words contradict their mindset and beliefs during the teen years.

I grew up in a family with parents much, much older than me, and much older than other parents of children my age. There was a large and noticeable generation gap, and I would be lying if I said we didn't have difficulties getting along and even sometimes completing different tasks. In many situations, neither side understood the opposing argument, and often never wanted to. I was stubborn and ignorant while they were stubborn and educated -- never a good match.

I steadily disliked adults (and thought I was better than them) until I met my acting coach for college theater auditions. His name was Brian Kimmel and he worked extensively for Jewish Theatre of the South. At the time I totally didn't care about his Jewish connection because while I was growing apart from my parents, I was growing apart from Judaism as well. In fact, I found his affiliation with it to be an annoying parental ploy to reel me back in. However, we met multiple times and he never brought it up. He cared about me, my life, and my success as an acting student. That's it. There was no manipulation and no mention of my parents or Judaism, which actually made me more attracted to the theatre.

Over time, I found I actually enjoyed the “company j” Theatre Company affiliated with the MJCCA and was in many of their shows with other Jews in the community. Without even realizing it, I finally had invested in something. And I liked it. I even found myself

wanting to improve my Hebrew and discuss with my dad his feelings on religion, which allowed for a much more relaxed relationship with my family in general.

Brian's efforts to *relate* to me and an activity I love – theater – led to a friendship based on the commonality of Judaism as well. And he always engaged me in Jewish topics in the same way he related to me as an actor – with a personal touch, an openness, and a willingness to discuss anything. This type of “relatability” was also one aspect I enjoyed about my participation in the focus group with Jewish funders last October to discuss Jewish teen education and engagement. The idea that people really wanted feedback from *teens* and only teens was so important to me. Finally, somebody understood that if you want us to engage, all you have to do is ask. And be cool about it. We don't like manipulation, and if we start to get annoyed with a situation, then forget about it. It's over! But when an adult takes the time to invest energy into our opinion, that is when care, intent, and love begin to shine through to us. And that is the only credible way to get the job done.