

A lifetime in a day – a typical day in the life of a children's home

Seen through the eyes of Shlomo Kessel, the director of EMUNAH's Sarah Herzog Children's Centre in Afula

Before 6am....

I open my eyes, woken not my alarm clock but by blaring Mediterranean music penetrating my consciousness. Oh no! Not again. How many times do I have to tell the teenage girls in the adjacent family unit to keep the volume down in the morning? "It's not a discotheque here!" I announced a few days ago, trying in vain to lay down the law. "No it's not; we live here," countered one of girls, "and we like to get up while listening to music. This is our home." I mumbled something about consideration for others but had to concede the point.

As I drag myself out from under my warm duvet I comfort myself. At least I was able to sleep the entire night. Twice during the past week I had been woken up during the night. On Monday at 2am a few of our seniors decided to hold a late night feast and when they got



out of hand, the night counselor called and asked for my help. On Wednesday night David, one of our 8 year old boys fell out of bed and hit his head. We decided not to take any chances and together with his counselor I took him to the local ER. Last week, after midnight our security guard woke me after having found Michael's father, prohibited from entering our campus by the Haifa Family

Court, trying to scale our fence illegally. It's all part of a day's work.

6.15am....

My wife Rachel is now up (we have 4 children to wake up and send to school – a full time job in itself) and we grab a quick cup of coffee. A few minutes later I'm out on the campus and greeting the staff (many of whom have already been up for more than an hour) and the children. Like in every home, the early morning is a critical time of the day, and the manner in which our house parents handle the children's rising will often determine what day they will have. Our volatile and emotionally laden children often wake up unsettled and helping them through the morning requires sensitivity and skill. We all need to be there for them.

7.00am....

Davening with the children....There is no better way to start the day than praying with these very special children. Their attitude towards davening is ambivalent. Some are angry and don't believe praying will help them in life whilst others say they have a great deal to pray for.

Then off to a hearty breakfast, the most important meal of the day. This is also one of my favorite times of the day - Sitting together with a few of the children and chatting over breakfast before the pressures of the day begin.

8.00am....

It is so quiet around here, as all the children are off at school. Well, maybe not everybody since there is always a child who has gotten up on the wrong side of the bed and needs a little encouragement, or someone who is feeling under the weather who must be visited and cared for.

This is time for meetings and deliberations – counseling sessions, discussions, multi-disciplinary committees – meetings, meetings and more meetings – with staff members, schools, social workers and parents – all vital to the progress of the children and the smooth running of the home. And so we sit. It is not coincidental that the Hebrew word for meeting is “yeshiva” – sitting.

Often we will use this time to visit one of the 25 schools attended by our children, receiving updates and often encouraging the teachers and school staff to "hang in" and not give up on them, despite behavioral challenges.

1.00 pm....



The children return from school full of experiences – some positive, others less so. School is a difficult time for our children, many of whom have learning disabilities. After lunch the children may be found doing their homework, or participating in an extramural activity. I can hear you saying: 'Great, now you can enjoy a little afternoon "shlafstunde.'" Wishful thinking? No,

not really. This is the best time of the day to meet the children, to ask how they're doing. Do they need any help? To sooth and assist hardworking staff members and to visit and take part in birthday parties, events and other activities. The parents of many of the children will visit during the afternoon – to ask advice (sometimes even on personal matters), to eat with their sons and daughters or simply to be in an environment where they feel welcome and important. So who wants to nap at such an important time of the day?

Living on the campus has many perks and during the afternoon I might enjoy surprise visits from Eitan, my 5 year old son. Jealous? How many of you have your kids visiting you at work?

Evening

As the evening approaches and the day slowly winds down, a certain quiet settles in. Can we now relax and enjoy the fact that another day has successfully passed? Not quite yet. For some children night is time to wind down and prepare for tomorrow. For others night is a scary time, lying in bed, alone with their thoughts and traumatic memories. And so we must be there for lights out and show both authority and empathy. So 12 or 13 hours after leaving home in the morning I'm back with stories, experiences and many thoughts. Try to remember how the day started.....**It's not easy - it was a lifetime ago.**

