WOW WITH PAM
WORDS OF WISDOM

How to Build a Better Human: Using Playdough, Laughter, and Jewish Values

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

Let's face it: parenting young children often feels less like nurturing a soul and more like managing a tiny, demanding startup. You're handling HR (bedtime negotiations), logistics (snack packing), and security (preventing climbing catastrophes). Amidst the chaos of sippy cups and temper tantrums, the idea of intentionally building a **"good character"**—or what Judaism calls fostering strong *Middot*—can seem overwhelmingly academic.

But here's the secret: *Middot* (pronounced mee-DOTE) aren't abstract, lofty goals; they are the **everyday skills** required to navigate life and relationships. They are the character traits—like patience, kindness, gratitude, and honesty—that determine how your child interacts with the world, long after they've outgrown that demanding CEO phase.

From Chaos to Character: Why Focus on *Middot* Now?

We naturally focus on teaching our kids the "what" and the "how"—what to say, how to tie their shoes, how to count to ten. *Middot* focuses on the **"who"**—who we want our children to become and how we want them to treat others.

Think of *middot* as muscles. A toddler doesn't automatically possess *savlanut* (patience); they learn it over thousands of moments waiting for their turn or anticipating a cookie. If we don't offer opportunities to flex those muscles early, they won't be strong when they truly need them later, like during a teenage disagreement or a stressful job interview. As parents we want to cushion their growth both physically (catching them at the bottom of the slide) and often, emotionally (limiting their opportunities for disappointment).

The early years are critical because children are **observational sponges**. They are internalizing the scripts, reactions, and values they see modeled every day.

Three Playful Ways to Practice *Middot*

1. Transform the tantrum into a lesson in *Kavod* (Respect)

When a child is hitting or yelling, our natural reaction is to stop the behavior. The *Middah* approach asks us to acknowledge the underlying feeling while establishing a boundary.

- **The Script:** Instead of shouting "Stop hitting!" try, "I see you are angry because the block tower fell. You can be angry, but we use **respect (*Kavod*)** for people's bodies. We can stomp our feet instead."
- **The Result:** You teach them that all feelings are okay, but **respectful actions** are required. This separates the child's identity from the negative behavior.

2. The Great Gratitude Scavenger Hunt (*Hoda'ah*)

Teaching gratitude doesn't just mean saying "thank you." It means noticing and appreciating the source of goodness. This Jewish value of *Hoda'ah* (acknowledgment/thanksgiving) is best learned actively.

- **The Activity:** At dinner, ask everyone to name one thing they are grateful for that **tastes good**, one thing that **smells good**, and one thing that **makes them laugh**.
- **The Result:** You train their brains to actively seek the positive, moving gratitude from an automatic response to a heartfelt recognition of blessing.

3. Practicing Patience (*Savlanut*) with Playdough

Patience is painfully difficult for young children (well, possibly for anyone), but necessary. Instead of punishing impatience, build a daily routine that requires a small dose of waiting.

- **The Technique:** During an engaging activity like playdough, have one special tool (the best cutter or roller). Only allow one child to use it at a time. Use a small sand timer to show how long they have to wait.
- **The Script:** "I see you really want the star cutter, but Noah is still using it. This is a chance to practice **patience (*Savlanut*)**. Let's watch the sand fall while we wait."
- **The Result:** Waiting becomes a concrete, measurable task with a guaranteed, positive outcome, strengthening that patience muscle little by little.

The Ironic Ending

So, the next time you feel overwhelmed by the relentless demands of parenting—the constant mess, the endless neediness, the sheer weight of responsibility—remember this: you aren't just raising a child who needs to eat and sleep. You are intentionally building a magnificent *neshama*, one good trait at a time.

In all your tireless efforts to teach them patience, kindness, and empathy, you'll inevitably realize that the person who has grown the most and flexed the strongest *middot* muscle this year... **is you.** Now, go treat yourself to a snack. You've earned it.

#ShabbatShalom