

CREATING EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR TEENAGE PROGRAMMING

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To create an effective environment for teenage programming, Jewish Community Centers need to understand the changing nature of the transmission of ethnic identity, the psychological needs of teenagers, the Center environment necessary to attract and involve teens, and the issues on which teen programming should focus. This article presents elements of a national curriculum for enhancing teen programming.

One of the greatest challenges confronting the Jewish Community Center (JCC) Movement as a whole, as well as most individual Centers, is the need to enhance and expand services to adolescents. This article discusses several salient points that JCCs must address to position themselves to actively involve more teens in the Jewish community.

In order to create an effective environment for teenage programs JCCs need to understand the changing nature of the transmission of ethnic identity and enculturation, the psychological needs of teenagers with an emphasis on identity formation, the Center environment necessary to attract and involve teenagers and, finally, several areas on which our programs should focus.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE TRANSMISSION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ENCULTURATION

In the past, enculturation, which is defined as the process by which an individual is initiated into all aspects of a culture, including its language, values, beliefs, and behavior (Aron, 1994), was mainly transmitted by the family. However, the changing nature of the family in the twentieth century—as reflected in dual career couples and single working parents who spend less time with their children,

extended families that are often dispersed, increasing numbers of nuclear families, and the large number of children in intermarried families—requires other community institutions to assume responsibility for transmitting these values, beliefs, and behavior through formal, informal, and experiential programs.

Once upon a time most people in this country adhered to the faith and ethnicity of their parents. Their cultural identity was determined largely by their descent. Now religious and ethnic loyalties are more commonly matters of choice. Identity, to a considerable degree, is based upon consent. Jews who accept the notion of descent think of their Jewishness as something irrevocable, as much a part of them as their blood type; Jewishness by consent, by contrast, is something completely revocable (Sarna, 1994).

In this new climate, the JCC movement must address the question of whether the Center is an effective vehicle of enculturation. The JCC, with its rich resources of early childhood programs, day and resident camps, community festival programs, parenting programs, and adult education, *can be an important instrument of enculturation*. However, although the Center may assume an important role, it cannot displace the family, the synagogue, and Jewish educational institutions. Rather, it must work in harmony and in collaboration with them.

This article is based on a paper presented at the JCCA Biennial Conference, Baltimore, May 1996.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF TEENAGERS

Those of us who have survived the adolescent phase of our own children know that the psychological needs of adolescents play into many different avenues of their lives. Eric Erikson (1968) states that the major task of adolescence is "identity formation." The road through adolescence should culminate with an appropriate self-identity that includes three components: (1) a positive ethnic identity: Who am I as a Jew?; (2) a proud national identity, as an American, Canadian, or Israeli; and (3) a global identity as a citizen of the world. Ideally, as Jews we would want this road through adolescence to culminate with a strong personal Jewish identity that is manifested within the home, community, and country and that includes strong connections to Israel and to Jews in the Diaspora.

Erikson (1968) states that "identity is formed through the individual's psychological integration as well as through the social environment which serves critical functions during this process." The Center can create the critical social environments that integrate specific values, attitudes, knowledge content, skills, and beliefs that form specific behaviors.

Adolescence marks the period of transition from dependence on the family to independence. It is a significant period of personality growth. However, in developing more individual identities, adolescents are not only moving out of the family sphere but are also incorporating new worlds and influences into their lives.

As part of this process the peer group becomes even more influential at the same time as the teenager is seeking greater autonomy from his or her family. JCCs seeking to engage adolescents in activities must recognize that teenagers require programs that will give them recognition from peers of the same and the opposite sex.

Opportunities for social development are also important to adolescents. Well-planned Center activities can address this need by creating appropriate leisure-time options and

by providing effective Jewish socialization experiences.

Adolescence is also a time of sexual and moral development. Teens are eager to express themselves on these issues and need opportunities to discuss them. Although the topics of sex and morality should be part of JCCs' planned teen programs, discussions about them will more likely arise during casual conversations and as an outgrowth of off-the-cuff remarks. Because only trained professional workers will be able to use these spontaneous opportunities effectively, JCCs seeking to serve adolescents must have professional youth workers on staff.

JCCs planning teen programs must always remember that teenagers are not homogeneous. Therefore, programs must be designed to attract different segments of the teen population. Additionally, in designing programs we must differentiate among the numerous stages of adolescent development and ensure that appropriate groupings are targeted for different activities.

ENHANCING TEEN SERVICES

A strong teen program is highly dependent on "buy-in" from the youth. This fundamental fact requires JCCs to ask themselves (1) how they can create a teen community committed to the work of the community, its values, and each other and (2) how much of their independence teens are willing to suspend in the interests of the group. For some answers to these questions JCCs need to examine how "work is organized, without coercion, how decisions are made to everyone's satisfaction, how fulfilling relationships are established, how new members are chosen and socialized, and how individual uniqueness, autonomy and even deviance are accepted" (Kantor, 1972, p. 64). The work of JCCs is developing programs. How do we plan activities? How do we bring young people into leadership roles within our agencies? How are youth decisions made within adult-governed institutions? How do our programs establish effective relationships that are meaningful and ongoing rather than just casual cafeteria-

style experiences?

Once these programs have been identified, if we are to succeed in enhancing JCC services to teens, we must proceed with a carefully developed plan, using all the resources of the community and acting within an environment that is hospitable to our target groups. Let me share some of these environmental issues.

Teen programs must address timely and sometimes controversial issues. It is not possible to create a youth program within our JCCs that does not deal with sex, drugs, AIDS, substance abuse, or intermarriage. Staff must be knowledgeable on these issues, and the board must be aware that these discussions are taking place.

The role of caring adults is vital. Research has shown that "the difference in the lives of teens from troubled environments who end up as troubled adults as compared to those from similar environments who moved through adolescence in a continuous and healthy manner, has been the presence of a caring adult to provide support, and who can be an advocate for that young person" (Carillo, 1992, p. 122).

Communities must demonstrate that youth work is a priority, not just say that it is. Although community leadership often claims that work with youth is a high priority, that claim is not backed up by concrete measures to recruit, train, and pay career youth workers. "We must provide the funds and resources to develop and train a cadre of professional teen workers with the skills and the knowledge to move from cognitive to experiential, from sports to counseling, from individual needs to group needs with full knowledge of the opportunities each skill provides" (Boeko, 1993, p. 86).

Teens will be teens. Do you really want teenagers in your shiny facilities? Do you want to have a lobby crowded with teens sitting on the floor? Do you want the noise, the occasional graffiti? If not, stop now. JCCs must find ways of accepting teenagers without condemning their tendencies to counter-culturalism.

Teens must provide leadership for adolescent programs. Too often we have seen programs that belong only to staff. Often they attract large numbers, but the teens themselves do not have any ownership or ongoing responsibility for the programs. They must be empowered to plan their own programs.

Effective programming requires connections and coordination between activities. In the past we have often been successful in creating exciting programs for youth, but we have not created effective bridges from one program to the next. Do we ask ourselves what this new knowledge should lead to? We must create movement from episodic experiences to comprehensive, well-thought-out curricula.

JCCs must be strongly connected to other local Jewish organizations, and all must work toward a common goal. As national organizations are beginning to re-evaluate their own missions and are examining new partnerships, so must our local institutions. If our communal institutions are to have a role in the twenty-first century style of enculturation, we must cooperate with each other to avoid fragmentation and ambivalence. Our curricula must flow smoothly and in confluence with each other. We must build partnerships with local day schools, synagogues, youth movements, day and resident camps, and family agencies and create a national curriculum, with each of us playing an integral role in building strong Jewish identities within our youth.

The development of Jewish rituals and memories is critical. Programs must incorporate bonding experiences that will unite the participants and provide a sense of trust within the group, thus enhancing the sense of community. Community experiences and beliefs are more compelling than individual experiences. Every time someone does some Jewish act, a little may remain with them. Do it twice and the chances are that a little more might remain with them. Do it many times and it will remain within the individual, and the memory can be ignited time and time again. Make this a Jewish ritual and you are building

a Jewish memory. Rituals must be built into our local, national, and international programs. Kabbalat Shabbat, Havdalah, special memorial programs, watching the sun rise at Masada, a special moment at the Western Wall, or an opening ritual at meetings are experiences that can connect our youth to life and Judaism.

We are in the business of Jewish continuity. My associate, Simon Jaffe of JCCA (1996), refers to us as "commodity brokers dealing in Jewish Futures. Our task is to create a bond of shared Jewish memories—memories that recognize that we have a shared story, an unbroken chain that extends beyond the time of Moses and the Israelite exodus from Egypt and promises to continue through our descendants, far into the future." Memories are critical to the development of commitment and are basic ingredients in connecting individuals to ideologies and movements.

Retreats are a great vehicle for teen programming. Regular retreats can bring teens together to relate to teens from different denominations, to have good times, and most important to create community.

Adolescents should be Jewishly politicized. Local youth collaborations must be established with the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), the Center on Mid-East Studies, community relations councils, and other influential organizations to create programs that will educate our youth about the value of their involvement within the political process. They must be encouraged to speak out on important issues.

Adolescents need help in coping with being Jewish in America. We must create environments that inculcate skills and knowledge that deal with the ambivalence of being Jewish in the Diaspora. We must develop programs that explore the relevance of Jewish values within contemporary America. And we must create a JCC where kids can move effortlessly from formal education to informal, from social experience to experiential, and have fun in so doing.

JCCs can offer a unique venue for Jewish

education. We must create supporting environments where kids can see Judaism in ways that they might not see it in the classroom and in the synagogue, or in natural ways that support their formal education. Look at your teen staff office. What Jewish symbols are within that office? Menorahs? A mezuzah on the doorpost? Jewish books, posters, or pictures of Israel? Jewish music and tapes? Is there a *tzedakah* box on the desk?

North American teens should learn more about the rest of the world. Our programs must help teens become more knowledgeable about other Jews who live in Israel and the Diaspora. Teen programs must create interactive encounters between American Jewish teenagers and their counterparts in Israel and elsewhere.

Israel remains the center of Jewish life. Most significant among these encounters must be Israel. In this regard we can look to the effective work of the Charles R. Bronfman Center for the Israel Experience, which forges strong personal connections to Israel. However, we must rewrite our tour itineraries to create interactive, experiential reenactments that enable teenagers to see Israel as a part of their daily lives and as intertwined with Jews in the Diaspora. Rabbi David Hartman (1996, p. 11) states,

In my view Israel is the Sinai of our generation. It gives meaning to our suffering, it transforms the Holocaust event to something more, and it shows the Jewish people taking responsibility for their lives and not just as the victims of history.... The problem with the 18-year-old kid is that he has no narrative, he doesn't know what he is identifying with, he doesn't know the story of his People; he needs an understanding of what it is to belong to a particular nation. An Israeli-based identity would arrest the so-called continuity crisis.

Meaningful Israel experiences must be part of a continuum. Although Israel is a significant focal point in recapturing the involvement of youth, its impact will be even greater if the Israel experience is part of an extensive

continuum of experiences and the climax of a well-designed curriculum of community involvement.

Jewish programming should touch the soul. "Unless somebody already sees oneself as part of the Jewish story, a trip [Israel] is apt to have little impact" (Spiegel, 1994, p. 54). Jewish programming must "immerse and challenge" the participants (Breger, 1995). For example, in 1995, 600 American Jewish teenagers boarded a ship in Brindisi, Italy to reenact the 1947 Voyage of the 4,500 refugees who were aboard the Exodus. Said one of the teens, "This will remain with me forever" (Dorf & Jacobs, 1995, p. 8).

Outreach remains a crucial task. The JCC should be an effective force for facilitating links to unaffiliated teenagers and to teenagers from intermarried families. Very little has been done in this area. Youth from interfaith families and ones that are highly assimilated should be integrated into teen programs. All JCCs would benefit by networking and sharing experiences in working with these hard-to-reach populations.

For too many youth, adolescence is a time when they become less engaged in Jewish life. How sad it is that teenagers in the transitional stage toward adulthood move away from the Jewish community. They have less involvement with Jewish education, synagogue life, and other significant Jewish organizations. Our teen programs can begin to create new entry points or re-entry points for young people to reconnect them to segments of the Jewish community.

Community service, which has great appeal to teens, can be transformed into mitzvot. The *mitzvah* of honoring our elderly, for example, can be observed and experienced through projects with our Homes for the Aged and within our own senior adult programs. Several communities sponsor such programs as an annual *mitzvah* or *tzedakah* day to expose their families and teens to dozens of local communal institutions. More and more communities are creating appropriate roles for teens in their community telethons.

JCCs need to create strong links to cam-

pus-based programs. We are very fortunate that so many of our teenagers go on to college. College is one of our last arenas where we can influence young people. Our Center programs must inaugurate programs for youth that prepare them for life away from home and on the college campus. We must collaborate with college campus agencies, such as Hillel; Hamagshimim, Hadassah's campus program; Lights in Action, a college program created mainly to show students that fighting anti-Semitism is not the sole method of expressing one's Jewish identity; and the Jewish Heritage Program, which targets college leaders to develop programs on campus.

Jewish leadership development should begin with teens. Our leadership development programs must begin training teenagers as future leaders for the Jewish community and for our country through such means as dialogues with the Israeli embassy and participation in Jewish lobbying institutions. We must connect them to agencies that are concerned with the environment, AIDS, poverty, drug abuse, homelessness, and hunger. They must know that Judaism demands that they become involved. Before volunteering for service in a homeless shelter, have we discussed a talmudic tractate on Judaic responsibilities to the poor?

Effective Jewish teen programming can flourish in a pluralistic world. "If we are to succeed in bringing young people into the mainstream of Jewish community life, it must be done in the context of living within American society. It must not be isolated from the important issues impacting American society" (Boeko, 1993).

JCCs must be proactive in anticipating societal changes that will affect Jewish life. Judaism must create programs that meet the new conditions of the information age. As advances in electronic technology increase, more and more work will be done at home. Therefore, our work with teens must connect them to their families so that they will use this increased time at home in a richer Jewish environment. Other departments of our Centers and the community will have to focus on

teaching families the skills of using these new hours together. We will have to create innovative programs that link home to family.

Youth programs should use cutting-edge technologies. We must begin to use new technology in our programs. Wouldn't it be great if each of our Centers had Teen Webs so that kids could talk to our professional teen workers or other role models? How exciting it will be when we create Teen Diaspora Talk!

"IF YOU WILL IT, IT IS NO DREAM"

As we sculpt the changes within our teen programs, let us strive for programs that appreciate our past, honor our heritage, and pay tribute to the memories and accomplishments of previous generations. Yet, it is important that they also look to the future for strength. The future existential challenge to youth comes not only from outside our communities; it also lies in our ability to convince them that Judaism is the right choice, a choice seasoned by heritage and relevant to the realities of living today. They must know that Judaism demands crystal-clear waters, blue skies, untainted earth, food, and shelter for all, and respect and love for all of God's children and creatures.

Can all this happen? Yes, it can. It is happening today in several Centers within our JCC movement. Now is the time to rededicate and integrate our isolated efforts,

to create a national JCC curriculum and to join hands in our common cause.

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