

FACING FAMILY DIVERSITY IN OUR SCHOOLS

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The increase in diversity within the structure of the Jewish family has prompted Jewish agencies, synagogues, and schools to examine their attitudes and responses to members of non-traditional families in order to foster the feelings of acceptance and belonging that strengthen the family and its Jewish identity. This article addresses three areas of diversity—separation and divorce, intermarriage, and adoption—and recommends ways that Jewish schools can handle sensitively the needs of non-traditional families.

Although one might wish to assume that children and parents in our Jewish schools and institutions are members of traditional Jewish nuclear families, contemporary Jewish life speaks to a different reality. The Jewish family is experiencing increasing diversity in terms of both intermarriage and family structure. The degree to which non-traditional families feel a sense of inclusion in the Jewish community will affect their feelings of acceptance, formation of a sense of belonging, and hence a more positive Jewish identity. For children to grow into healthy adults they must experience a sense of belonging first within their families and then within their schools and communities. Their positive growth and identity formation must also include an understanding and acceptance of their own uniqueness. Too often, the language of educators or other professionals, their own values or stereotypes regarding forms of family diversity, and their lack of training in working with non-traditional families can contribute to communication and behavior that may not foster that necessary acceptance and understanding.

In the summer of 1995, the Jewish Family Services (JFS) of Central Maryland under the leadership of Dr. Lucy Steinitz brought together local Jewish educators and staff members of the Council of Jewish Educational Services in Baltimore and the Baltimore Hebrew University to discuss family diversity in Jewish schools. In two meetings, this group investigated concerns arising from family diversity that affect adversely feelings of belonging and acceptance of children and par-

ents in non-traditional families in Jewish schools and synagogues. The group also discussed the scope of inclusivity that can be fostered without sacrificing the central core of Judaism.

As a school psychologist in a Conservative day school, I undertook a further exploration of how Jewish schools can be sensitive to children and families experiencing three forms of diversity: separation and divorce, intermarriage, and adoption of children. Although these three situations hardly encompass the variability seen within non-traditional families, they are the most commonly experienced ones.

This article is based on my 10 years of experience in a Jewish day school setting, a review of the literature, and discussions with several staff members of JFS. I asked these staff members to address these three questions based on their own work with non-traditional families.

1. What has been helpful or beneficial to non-traditional families in their school setting?
2. What has not been helpful?
3. What would you like to see implemented in Jewish schools to make staff and curricula more sensitive to the needs of non-traditional families?

This article addresses each of these three questions in turn within each area of diversity. Note that some suggested responses deal specifically with Jewish day schools, whereas others are applicable across religious and

secular school systems. This overview does not address all the implications of these recommendations, but does offer some approaches to differences that can foster family acceptance and support and, it is hoped, encourage further investigation into ways to be sensitive to non-traditional families.

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Within the Jewish community, marriage and family have always been strong ideals. Yet, the Jewish divorce rate has been rising steadily in recent years. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS: Kosmin et al., 1991) found that 12 percent of Jewish households with children were single-parent families, in contrast to the national figure of 19 percent.

Divorce has a direct effect on Jewish identity. Sally Weber (1993) reported that Jewish children in single-parent families were less likely to receive a Jewish education and to belong to a synagogue than their counterparts in two-parent households. Moreover second marriages, especially those of divorced Jewish men, were "more likely to be interfaith marriages" (Weber, 1993).

In addition, when a marriage ends, all the relationships and roles within the family are altered. As Wallerstein (1994) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) have reported, the parent-child relationship can no longer be taken for granted by the child. For if parents can separate from one another, how can a child feel secure that his or her bond with a parent will remain intact? Wallerstein describes a child's immediate reaction to marital breakup as one of intense anxiety along with a hypervigilant monitoring of family members' relationships with one another; this hypervigilance can last for years.

Children's reactions to separation and divorce differ at different ages. Very young children, highly dependent on their parents, fear abandonment. Young children are more likely to take on feelings of responsibility for the divorce, concluding that their behavior or even their fantasy wishes caused the breakup.

Guilty feelings arising at the time of the divorce may persist. The older or latency-aged child may take on the responsibility for providing for the emotional or psychological well-being of the distressed parent(s), a role that is burdensome to children. Loyalty conflicts arise as well. Divorce can interrupt the normal developmental tasks of adolescence—identity formation and emotional independence from parents—by pulling the child back into the family or by having an adolescent assume far greater independence than he or she is ready for emotionally. During the initial stage of divorce, the most well-meaning and previously competent parent often is unable to maintain the order, structure, and consistent behavioral guidelines that children need within the home. What results is a general disorganization that further undermines the security of the child.

What Has Been Helpful in the School Setting

During the period of separation and divorce, schools provide for children the consistency and continuity that can help them cope with a difficult time. Moreover, for those children who have been successful in school, this arena for gratification maintains their feelings of competence and control. Although some families choose not to notify the teacher or school counselor about a separation or divorce, when they do so, it is helpful in explaining some changes that school staff may be noticing in the children. It also helps parents when teachers may see and report changes that parents may not see at home. Parents who do choose to notify the school often describe feelings of support for both themselves and their children, thus enabling parents to feel more in control during a time of considerable life change and loss. Teachers sensitive to the needs of these families may be able to provide greater structure, support, supervision, and/or specific focusing strategies for the children. In addition, the teacher or school counselor could direct parents or children to resources in the school library that might be useful in understanding

and coping with changes brought about by divorce.

It is essential for school personnel working with families experiencing separation and divorce to maintain a neutral position for the benefit of the child. Neutral and supportive responses to all members of the family allow the child and parents to experience school as an environment free from the often adversarial issues and conflicts within the family. In particularly contentious divorces, this position can be difficult for schools to maintain. However, the ability of the school to remain outside of the controversy might help ensure a child's remaining at the school, thus providing the continuity so important for the child.

It is not unusual to have parents, on their own, contact me, as the school psychologist. However, sometimes the teacher suggests to parents that they meet with the mental health resource in the school for additional information or support as needed. The family's privacy is best protected if the teacher receiving the information from the family member about a change in family structure makes the parent aware that a mental health resource is available in the school or possibly encourages that contact should the parents or child appear to be having a particularly difficult time. However, if the school counselor or psychologist makes the first call at the request of the teacher, without the parents' consent or request, this well-meaning call of support could likely be experienced as betrayal by the teacher and a loss of parents' control or privacy.

What Has Not Been Helpful in the School Setting

Schools sometimes can exceed their boundaries in offering additional support. Some parents have expressed concerns about what the school might do with the shared information. Might they go beyond their professional capacity or refer the child to the school mental health resource without the child's or parent's desire or consent?

Adolescents have reported that they do not want anyone in school to know what is going

on in their families. Students of this age are particularly self-conscious and sensitive to differences and belonging. If parents of adolescents do discuss the family changes with school staff, adolescents will need assurance that they will not be treated in any way that calls attention to their specific situation or that undermines their personal or family's privacy. At the same time, parents might let the adolescent know who in the school is aware of the separation or divorce so that the student would have a supportive resource in the school should he or she want to initiate contact. Schools need to be aware of the special sensitivities of this age and not assume that supportive counseling would be appreciated without the child's or parent's request.

What Might Be Implemented in the Schools

Although, in general, children do not talk with one another about their families, young children do not always separate or compartmentalize their experiences. Sometimes the curriculum touches a raw nerve and prompts statements from children that require sensitive handling and perhaps staff training to respond appropriately. For example, during a recent workshop for children on conflict resolution, a child announced to the class, with more than a little irritation, that if his parents had known about conflict resolution strategies they might not have gotten a divorce. Without a moment's hesitation two other children responded, "Mine, too!" At that point three children felt the support of one another, and the presenter felt the need to acknowledge and accept the children's feelings. The presenter also felt the need to support the parents by acknowledging how in conflict resolution a decision to separate is sometimes the chosen resolution. Conflict resolution was promoted as a beneficial way to establish positive relationships, but also as the fairest way to disagree or decide to separate when things are not going well. Hence, although the topics of separation and divorce may not be written into the curriculum, schools

need to make sure their staff receives the guidance that enables them to be sensitive to the kinds of responses they may hear from children and to which they may need to respond.

In another situation, a young child was feeling so overwhelmed by her parents' separation that she began to talk about her family's problems indiscriminately to anyone in the school she encountered. This was taxing the time and skill of many of the school staff while not giving the child a reliable and trained source of support. In this instance, the mental health resource in the school was able to establish a relationship with the child and both parents. Since the school and parents recognized that this youngster's needs were greater than could be handled by school support alone, a referral to JFS's support group for children of divorce was recommended by the school psychologist. It is important that Jewish schools know of the resources available to families in the Jewish community. Where there are divorcing interfaith parents, the school needs to be sensitive to the diverse needs of the families and be familiar with a number of resources within the broader community.

I recommend that schools examine their policies and formulate strategies that facilitate both parents' involvement in a child's education. If both parents can be involved in the school process, the child's support and value of education will be increased. Moreover, both parents will feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in the school and perceive the school as supportive to them as parents. When possible, both parents should receive report cards, calendars of events, and parent conference schedules. Separate parent-teacher conferences should be offered and arranged for parents who prefer not to meet together. During parent conferences, especially when the child sees both parents regularly, both the parents would benefit from knowing about homework assignments, schedules, and long-range projects and how each parent might help the child plan and organize tasks. This would allow both parents to provide educa-

tional continuity for the child and to establish a balanced relationship with the child that includes both responsibilities and recreation. While achieving joint educational support for a child often is not easy, and in some cases not possible, schools should work toward that direction wherever possible and not simply abandon the effort.

Last, schools should be sensitive to avoiding the use of language that assumes that children live with or even have regular contact with both parents. When home assignments require a discussion with or about family members, we need to acknowledge to children that we have many kinds of families in our school. When we teach Jewish family rituals, we might consider how that ritual can be accomplished in a single-parent family. We do not want to remind children of their losses or differences by using insensitive language or inaccurate assumptions or by excluding their form of family when teaching traditions of Jewish family life.

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN OF INTERMARRIAGE

Over the past two generations, the proportion of Jews who marry Gentiles has increased enormously. Kosmin (1989) reported that 37 percent of Jewish men and 24 percent of Jewish women under forty years of age chose Gentile partners at first marriage. For second marriages, the rates rose to about 55 percent for men and 42 percent for women. In the 1995 Survey of Interfaith Families (Mayer & Miller, 1995), 2.2 percent of all married households in the United States were found to have two Jewish partners and 1.9 percent were found to have one Jewish and one non-Jewish partner. Thus, almost one-half of American marriages with a Jewish partner were intermarriages.

As expected, intermarriage directly affects Jewish identity. Winer (1985) found that 70 percent of intermarried couples report intending to give their children a Jewish education, but studies in different communities found that only 25 to 45 percent of these interfaith families actually put their plans

into practice. These statistics, along with other research exploring the causes and consequences of intermarriage, "have helped change the climate of Jewish opinion about intermarriage, from *"outrage to outreach"* (Mayer, 1990, p. 205).

Determining how we reach and teach the Jewish children of interfaith parents in our schools requires an understanding and blending of child developmental needs in general and the specific needs of these families. In examining the formation of a child's sense of self, Petsonk (1990) recognized that children need to incorporate features of both parents to form their earliest identity. If a child of an interfaith couple is to be raised Jewishly, one must be careful not to diminish the stature of the non-Jewish parent. In the preschool years, Petsonk encourages the "positive identification" with both parents, reminding a child that he or she is "like your Daddy in some ways and your Mommy in some ways" (1990, p. 264). Later, during the latency years as children remain concrete in their thinking but become more able to see different elements in a situation, one can encourage the Jewishly raised children of intermarriage to see themselves as members of the Jewish religion and also as a combination of different ethnic groups or cultures. In adolescence, all children begin their search for their own individuality and sense of separateness from parents. Should the Jewishly raised child of intermarriage seek belonging in a Jewish youth group or social peer setting, the degree of acceptance and belonging that youngster feels may either encourage or discourage his or her Jewish identity. The Jewish school must look at the sensitivity of its responses to these children and their parents. As Petsonk (1990, p. 261) reminds us, "Be aware of the psychological distance that the Gentile partner must travel to have a Jewish home."

What Has Been Helpful in the School Setting

It is helpful for Jewish school staff to acknowledge other religions and convey re-

spect for the non-Jewish parents, or in the case of conversion, for the non-Jewish extended family members. While striving to teach, strengthen, and preserve Jewish beliefs, Jewish schools must be sensitive to avoid direct or subtle judgments about other religious beliefs, thus creating loyalty conflicts or interfering with a child's relationship with non-Jewish family members. An acceptance of diversity within the Jewish school's ideology furthers the value and pursuit of respect in the school for other differences within the Jewish community.

The issue of assumption continues to arise when looking at family diversity. It is helpful for schools, especially Jewish preschools, not to assume that interfaith parents in the school have decided to raise their child Jewishly. In a number of cases, the religious decision has not yet been made, and the preschool was chosen for reasons that may range from the Jewish grandparents' paying for tuition to the school's logistical advantages. Jewish preschools need to communicate closely with interfaith families to understand where their religious leanings lie and to suggest resources in the Jewish community. Many communities have programs that explore intermarriage family issues and provide opportunities to learn about Jewish life and traditions.

It is helpful to encourage participation of non-Jewish parents in the school in areas that are not related to religious beliefs. Parents bring a wealth of skills, interests, and volunteer service to the school. Encouraging the sharing of their interests and time can create a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for the non-Jewish parent or family member. When the non-Jewish parent is involved, parental support for the child's education in a Jewish school could increase, and the whole family can experience a sense of belonging.

When an interfaith couple separates or divorces, keeping the non-Jewish parent as part of the educational process could be an important factor in that parent's decision to continue supporting, both emotionally and financially, the child's remaining in the Jewish day school.

What Has Not Been Helpful in the School Setting

Often the non-Jewish parent feels alienated from the child's educational and religious life. The non-Jewish parent does not understand what is going on in the religious service or in the Judaic curriculum. If the Jewish school does not extend itself to make the non-Jewish parent feel welcome in the community, the feelings of exclusion increase.

A particularly difficult situation for Jewish day school children of interfaith parents occurs when non-Jewish family members attempt to undermine the child's religious beliefs or even instill in the child fear of reprisal for one's belief. Although the school may adopt a policy of respect for differences, it cannot guarantee other's adherence to it. This kind of harmful situation for the child might arise when interfaith parents divorce, and differences are treated with less respect. In a Jewish day school setting where this issue arose, the school extended an invitation to the non-Jewish parent to receive communications from the school. At the same time, the Jewish parent was advised to initiate counseling to see if both parents might work out healthier religious parameters in their relationship with the child. In intact interfaith marriages boundaries may need to be set with non-Jewish grandparents and other extended family members.

What Might Be Implemented in the School

Schools might explore whether a group educational program or workshop for non-Jewish parents or family members (or even the less Jewishly knowledgeable parent) would be useful in helping them understand the Jewish aspects of ritual and the Judaic curriculum. This group forum could provide the opportunity to look at common concerns in raising Jewish day school children in an interfaith family, as well as sharing commonly experienced feelings.

If Jewish schools or youth group programs undertake discussions with children or parents about interfaith dating or marriage,

schools must be sensitive to the fact that a number of these children will come from interfaith families. The discussion must leave room for these participants' feelings and comments.

CHILDREN ADOPTED INTO JEWISH FAMILIES

According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, 2.7 percent of American Jewish families with children have adopted children (Kosmin et al. 1991). This figure includes both domestic and international adoptions. Adoptive families are normal, functional families whose bonds and attachments are as deep and lasting as those in biological families. What is unique about the adoptive family is that it is formed through loss. Thus, the role of the school in fostering feelings of inclusion and diminishing discomfort from feelings of difference is particularly important. Steven Nickman, in his article "Challenges of Adoption" (1996), discusses three kinds of losses that adoptees experience. Overt losses, often experienced by later-adopted children, include traumas associated with multiple changes in caregivers. Early-adopted children may experience more covert losses to self-esteem resulting from feelings of abandonment or rejection by birth parents. Status losses common to both early and later adoptees result from looking different from adopted parents (in the Jewish adoptive experience, hearing "You don't look Jewish"), not knowing one's family history, and not knowing how to handle school assignments such as "family trees." All these losses exacerbate feelings of difference.

Symptoms related to these issues of loss are more likely to appear after the age of six or seven when children, developmentally, can begin to think about their adoption from the perspective of their birth parents' decision not to parent them. Hence, those working with the school-aged child should be aware that they may just be beginning to develop grief reactions to the losses and that these reactions are normal and necessary and not an indication of unhappiness in their

adoptive families (Melina, 1990). At adolescence, when identity issues are intensified, children may have a more complex identity formation task as they try to sort out their similarities and differences from two sets of parents, one set about which they may know very little or nothing (Hettleman, 1995).

When a child is adopted into a Jewish family, the choice of school raises new challenges and questions. When a family adopts internationally, this decision must address whether to increase a child's sense of belonging by choosing a culturally and racially diverse setting where Jews are in the minority or whether to choose a Jewish day school where the child's Jewish identity contributes to the child's sense of belonging but his or her cultural or racial heritage may confer minority status. Just as parents weigh their decision, schools also must decide the best way to approach curriculum and to relate to parents and children with an understanding of the adoptive family and a respect for their differences and challenges.

What Has Been Helpful in the School Setting

The forward section of an adoption education curriculum (Illinois Committee for Adoption, 1993) recommends that although teachers may or may not know whether there are adopted children in their classes, it is best to assume that there are. This approach not only allows for sensitivity to the needs of adopted children but also models respect and an awareness of family differences to all of the children.

Using Positive Adoption Language (PAL) in the classroom (Johnston, 1996) affords the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and adoptees maximum respect and allows others to understand the responsibility, care, and commitment involved in the family planning decision. Adoption is a method of joining or planning a family. Such words and phrases as "real parents," "natural siblings," or "children of your own" do not describe the genuine or enduring quality of family relationships in the adoptive family. To differentiate between

two sets of parents, it is preferable to use "birth parent, birth mother, birth father" to describe the woman and man who conceived the child; the parents who nurture or raise the child should be referred to as "parent, mother, father—mommy or daddy." Johnston reminds us that adoption is not a "condition" or a "disability." Hence, to refer to a child's adoption, it is appropriate to use the past tense ("Mary was adopted"), referring to the way in which the child entered the family, rather than placing the description in the present tense ("Mary is adopted"). When referring to the decision made by birth parents, the correct term is "made an adoption plan" or "chose adoption," thereby acknowledging birth parents' responsibility and control. Terms to avoid are "give up their baby," "release their baby," or "put their baby up for adoption," as these terms are less positive and more emotionally laden. Should a child ask why birth parents would "give up" their baby, it is best to explain the decision with this answer: "The birth parents couldn't take care of *any* child born to them at that time. They knew their baby needed and deserved to be cared for in a better way. The birth parents made an adoption plan so that other parents could take better care of their baby. When a baby is adopted he or she becomes part of that family forever." This language allows all children to see adoption as initiated because of the birth parents' problem, not because of any inadequacy in the child. Another caution in discussing adoption with children is avoiding the concept that birth parents "place children for adoption because they love them." This well-meaning explanation can create fear that their adoptive parents who love them could do the same (Melina, 1990). Recognizing that in our society some words have more of a negative connotation than others, it is recommended that adopting a child from another country be termed an "international adoption" rather than a "foreign adoption."

In addition, Jewish families who have adopted a child of a different race would find it beneficial if teachers in Jewish schools can remind children that the Jewish community

is made up of many kinds of families and people from many backgrounds and with different physical appearances. When textbooks and posters with Jewish content are purchased, schools should look for those materials that present diversity in appearance.

It is also helpful if teachers, counselors, and school psychologists, in working with adoptive parents who have adopted because of infertility, understand that these parents also have experienced feelings associated with loss. Like all parents they may or may not have realistic expectations of their child; they may or may not have realistic expectations of how "perfect" they can be as parents. What adoptive parents may bring to parent conferences is an increased intensity regarding their child's performance or their role as parents (Melina, 1990). Teachers need to be careful not to put adoptive parents on the defensive. Children's learning styles and school performances are a function of numerous variables, some of which are biologically inherited and some of which are situational. School-related problems in adopted children may result from their nature or their being distracted by feelings generated as they work through adoption issues. If a child is having school difficulties, it is a disservice to the child and the family to assume that adoption is the primary contributor. Adoption can be considered as a possible factor, but other factors must be explored as well. Adoptive parents benefit from seeing their child's academic and social growth or school-related problems from this multivariable perspective so that they do not assume unrealistic responsibility or blame for problems to which they have not contributed.

It is important in working with adoptive parents that school personnel, investigating any school-related problem, explain the reasons why questions pertaining to a child's birth history, developmental history, or current situation—questions that may touch a raw nerve in the parents—are being posed. Conferences might be prefaced with the statement that some questions may seem intrusive or insensitive, yet they are asked in order to

understand a child's learning or behavior style so that appropriate educational or supportive strategies can be called on to ensure the child's success. However, some parents may not want to share information about their children with others outside the family, and this decision must be respected. Information that is shared should be treated with professional confidentiality. It is helpful if the teacher is told whether the child knows the information shared and whether the child is aware the teacher was given the information.

School assignments that deal with a child's origin, family histories, family trees, or genetic inheritance should be introduced in ways that acknowledge that there are many ways to form a family and that therefore there are different ways to go about doing the assignment. It is best to present an introduction to the assignment that is sensitive to forms of family diversity to the entire class, rather than singling out the child from a non-traditional or adoptive family. For example, in a science unit on genetics one teacher began with the concept that there are different kinds of families. She continued: "Children may live with their biological parents. These are the parents who give you your genes and who you look like. Children may live with other parents who are not their biological parents. While you have characteristics from your genes, many characteristics come from the parents you live with" (Barbara Siegel, science teacher, Krieger Schechter Day School, personal communication, 1995).

Children should be encouraged to do assignments in ways that are most meaningful to them and their families. Teachers need to think ahead of time about whether these kinds of assignments are presented in ways that leave room for the responses of children in diverse family situations. If a teacher has had an open, forthcoming relationship with adoptive parents, it would be helpful to let parents know ahead of time about family-sensitive assignments so that they can be prepared not only for ways to help the child handle the assignment but also for the feelings that may be generated. In fact, it might be beneficial to

let all parents know in advance about assignments in sensitive areas (Lipsitz, 1995).

What Is Not Helpful in the School Setting

It is not helpful to assume that all adopted children have consistent or similar characteristics. Although there are many common issues in adoption to deal with, some adopted children will be more or less distracted by the issues, more or less intense in their responses, than others. At different developmental stages, preoccupation with these issues can increase, decrease, or change. Sometimes children may enjoy their difference and sometimes be embarrassed by it. Each child, whether adopted or not, will react to the world in his or her unique way.

Teachers must remember not to make an adopted child the spokesperson or representative of his or her diversity. A child adopted internationally may or may not know or be interested in the culture or country of birth. If the child is expected to be knowledgeable, he or she may feel guilty or embarrassed about not knowing more. When studying different countries, allow for open choices and not assume the child's interest in his or her country of origin (Melina, 1990).

As noted earlier, it also is not helpful to assume that an adoption issue is the primary cause of a problem, should a school concern arise. Adoption is one feature of a child, but only one among a host of other variables.

What Might Be Implemented in the Schools

When I asked the science teacher what prompted her to introduce her genetics science unit in such a sensitive and non-judgmental way, she responded that a parent-teacher program on adoption held in the school several years ago alerted her to issues she had not previously considered. From that time on, this teacher has considered family diversity when presenting sensitive material. Indeed, putting together the material for this review has been valuable in raising my own awareness of the need to increase non-traditional families' comfort level and feelings of

belonging. It is most important for schools to include as part of all orientation programs for teachers or school staff the kinds of information presented in this article. Adoptive parents themselves might be the best providers of this information to schools. Consciousness-raising programs, literature, books in the school library about adoption for children and adults, and school staff discussions will help eliminate assumptions and allow schools to be more sensitive and thoughtful in working with the adoptive family and, indeed with all families with special situations.

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