

Defining Excellence in Early Childhood Jewish Education

written by

**The Center for Applied Child Development Eliot-Pearson Department of
Child Development Tufts University Medford, Massachusetts**

February, 2004

for

The Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education

Executive Summary by

Ilene Vogelstein

April, 2004

The Executive Summary contains a synopsis of the full report, as well as a modification of the Preliminary Indicators in the full report. The modifications are based on initial feedback from the field. The Indicators are being made available for discussion and modification until December 2005.

*This research was made possible by generous funding from
the Rosenbloom Family Philanthropic Fund, the Jewish Life Network/ Steinhardt Foundation,
and the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education*

Authors and Contributors

Authors

Dr. Cynthia Krug, Senior Researcher
Lynn Rosen Schade, CACD Outreach Program Director
Dr. Sylvia Feinburg, Professor Emeritus, Eliot-Pearson Department of Child
Development
Eric Stevens, CACD Outreach Program Coordinator

Project Research Team

Dr. Francine Jacobs, Associate Professor, Eliot-Pearson Department of Child
Development and Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and
Planning
Martha Heller-Winokur, CACD Project Manager
Susan Solomon Stibel, CACD Outreach Services Specialist
Melissa Frankel, CACD Intern/Research Assistant
Sarah Cohen, Research Assistant
Nicholas Schade, Research Assistant

*With thanks to Ilene Vogelstein—for the support, guidance, passion, and
wisdom you've offered since the day we met. We are truly grateful.*

*With thanks also to Danny Marom—sharing your vision helped us better
understand our own. Thanks for coming to Tufts to help us learn.*

*With special thanks to the many teachers, directors, rabbis, community
leaders, and parents who participated in our focus groups, opened their
classrooms, and shared their love and knowledge of Jewish education.*

The authors can be reached at:

Center for Applied Child Development
Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development
Tufts University
177 College Ave. Medford, MA 02155

Email: lynn.schade@tufts.edu

Executive Summary

(adapted from Krug, et al 2004)

Reliance on childcare for young children is now an American norm (National Academy of Sciences, Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In 1995, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 80% of all children in families surveyed were in some type of formal care, outside the home, before they entered the first grade (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2000). Moreover, the critical importance of daycare *quality* is now well documented. An extensive review of the research conducted during the last three decades concluded, “the positive relation between childcare quality and virtually every facet of children’s development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science” (*From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, p. 313). Subsequent research documents the elements that constitute high quality and several organizations (i.e., NAEYC) accredit early childhood programs that demonstrate high quality.

Recent demographic data report there are now approximately 100,000 Jewish children between birth and six years of age enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs (Schick, 2000, cited in Vogelstein and Kaplan, 2002). This is roughly fifteen percent of the total population of Jewish children in this age range and is double the number reported in 1991 by the Commission on Jewish Education in North America. It appears, therefore, that, as reliance on daycare has grown, enrollment in Jewish early childhood programs has also grown. However, in early childhood Jewish education, there is no current research that documents what constitutes high quality in an early childhood Jewish education program. Although there are a few excellent early childhood centers throughout the country, most programs are neither accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) nor by their local Jewish educational agency. Many programs face challenges that substantially diminish the quality of education and care provided. These include such factors as low pay, lack of staff qualified in both current pedagogy for young children and in Judaic content, and a high rate of teacher turnover.

In the spring of 2003, the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) partnered with the Center for Applied Child Development (CACD) at Tufts University’s Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development in the first phase of a project called “Defining Excellence in Early Childhood Jewish Education.” The goal was to develop a set of quality indicators, anchored in relevant theory and research, for describing excellence in early childhood Jewish education programs. The research team began the project with four essential questions:

- What is known about the development of religious identity and religious Consciousness?
- What is known about the effects of religious education on later development?
- In what ways do early childhood experiences, and, specifically, Jewish educational experiences, contribute to the development of religious identity and religious consciousness?
- How is excellence currently defined in Jewish early childhood programs?

To investigate these questions, the researchers reviewed relevant literature as well as six existing Jewish early childhood accreditation/evaluation documents, visited nine programs around the country identified as “excellent” by Jewish educational leaders, and conducted nineteen focus group sessions with content experts (including parents, preschool teachers, day school teachers, program directors, rabbis, scholars, and community leaders). The report includes the literature review; a summary of the perceptions of excellence shared by many content experts; and a preliminary list of Quality Indicators based on the synthesis of the literature review with data from the school visits, focus group sessions, and existing accreditation instruments.

Summary of the Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to establish a research-based context for improving Jewish early education. Jewish programs must, of course, be grounded in the same quality indicators that characterize secular programs. At the same time, Jewish education has a broader mandate. In addition to nourishing social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and linguistic development, Jewish educators seek to foster religious and cultural identity, and to transmit specific religious content. They are interested in spiritual consciousness and in moral development. The literature review includes a discussion on:

- How Jewish identity is defined and what this means for early childhood educators;
- The role of the family on Jewish identity development.
- Information on attachment theory, gender, religious and moral development in regard to transmitting Jewish values.

Research on the effects of Jewish education and the relative contributions of family and school has generally shown that Jewish education positively impacts on Jewish identity. To have a sustained influence, however, schooling must include many hours and continue for several years, particularly if students come from homes where there is little or no Jewish observance. For early childhood educators, this research suggests that daycare programs, which service children for many hours a week over the course of several years, have greater potential to influence identity development than programs that offer fewer hours. Moreover, the opportunity for early childhood programs to educate parents and influence their practice of Judaism in the home may provide a powerful means of cultivating Jewish identity in young families.

Key literature review findings include:

- In order to effectively cultivate Jewish identity, Jewish early childhood educators must define it and determine the kind of identity they deem important. Thinking carefully about what Jewish identity means will leave teachers better prepared to cultivate in their students.
- Family background, importance of being Jewish, are a major contributors to children’s sense of connection to Judaism and Jewish life.
- Children’s participating in early childhood Jewish education often strengthens their parents’ Jewish identity and practice.

- The importance of authenticity in teaching, as well as the need to explicitly state and reflect on cultural assumptions.
- Early childhood educators are in a unique position vis-à-vis parents. They often serve as consultants to parents who seek information about discipline and other developmental issues. It is therefore important for teachers to be well educated about topics of child development in general, and Jewish education in particular.
- Women appear to have a stronger influence on children's identity development, yet girls traditionally received less Jewish schooling than boys. NJPS 2000 shows that this trend is changing.
- The quality of parent-child relationships also appears to play an important role in transmitting Jewish values.
- Familiarity with research on parental discipline and its influence on moral development, religious affiliation and images of God may help early childhood educators support parents' growth and development.
- Children's experience with God is influenced by the relationship they have with their parents. *Warm and fuzzy is good*. This may inform how teachers (caretakers) should behave towards the children.
- Young children may be capable of deeper spiritual experiences than is commonly believed. By building on children's curiosity and natural sense of wonder, and linking this experience to God, Jewish educators can begin to instill *ahavat shamayim* (love of G-d), and create a foundation for later spirituality.

Summary of Focus Groups

When focus group responses are viewed in light of the literature review, a portrait of American early childhood Jewish education begins to emerge. At the heart of this picture is the cultivation of Jewish identity. The goal for many educators, therefore, is twofold. For children, they seek to create an emotionally based Jewish foundation that will either sustain on-going Jewish education, or coax their young students to return to Jewish life if they later choose to leave it. For parents, educators provide information and resources to help them create a Jewish home for their children. Research on early childhood Jewish education suggests that children's participation in Jewish programs can have a marked impact on the Jewish identity of these parents (Feldman, 1987) and on their home observance. Focus groups participants express a similar pattern. Several parents said they chose a Jewish program as a vehicle to extend their own knowledge, and to find support in setting up a Jewish household. As with parents cited by researchers, they offered examples of how their children's attendance at a Jewish preschool influenced their family own practice. Educators, too, stated that creating a "seamless transfer of learning from school to home" was an important element of the Jewish education they provided. Although they considered family education important, most focus group participants emphasized school-based activities as the primary contributor to children's identity development. The research, however, suggests that the role of the family may be substantially more important than what happens in the classroom.

- There is widespread agreement over the importance of Jewish identity, but discussions of early childhood education do not attempt to define it. A clear vision is essential to effective Jewish education. There needs to be a better understanding of what constitutes a Jewish identity if educators are to instill it. American Jewish identity reflects the enormous complexity within American Jewish life. Each early childhood program, therefore, faces the challenge of defining its own vision, and the type of Jewish identity it seeks to cultivate.
- The importance of immersing children in *authentic* Jewish experiences was repeated throughout the focus group discussions. As they described excellence in their schools, parents energetically described examples of Judaic curriculum that resonated deeply for them. The emphasis on “authenticity” raises questions about the large number of teachers with limited Jewish education/knowledge employed in Jewish programs, and non-Jewish children attending them.
- If cultivating Jewish identity is the central mission of early childhood Jewish education, educators must carefully consider the social context of their schools and how suited they are to meet this goal. Again, it is important to conceptualize and explicate a shared vision, so that all members of the school community are working toward the same goals.
- When they discussed teaching children about God, several focus group participants articulated the need to build on children’s curiosity and natural sense of wonder to instill a sense of spiritual wonder. When asked, “How do you explore God in a developmentally appropriate way with three year olds?” the answer is by helping children link their natural experiences of wonder- and awe-with God.

Report Conclusions

There is a paucity of research on early childhood Jewish education. There is widespread agreement on the importance of cultivating Jewish identity in children. There are no substantial and penetrating examinations look at what goes on *inside* early childhood Jewish education programs, nor have researchers attempted to examine the effects of high quality teaching practices on identity development that this preliminary investigation can lead to the development of an evaluation instrument to help teachers and directors improve program quality to enable practitioners to address these and other important questions can be addressed.

The literature review, focus groups and research findings suggest that:

- Parents, especially mothers, play a major role in their child’s image of God, their moral development, and the transmission of Jewish values.
- Children’s identity is inseparable from their parent’s identity.
- Early childhood educators have the unique opportunity for building close relationships with parents.

- Children are capable of having, and are open to, spiritual experiences.
- While the primary focus of the early childhood programs seems to be instilling a strong Jewish identity, there is little discussion about what Jewish identity looks like and no means to evaluate if the activities in the program are successful in building that identity.

These five findings suggest that early childhood Jewish education programs may need to seriously examine their vision and the relationship they have with parents. This will entail increased parent and teacher education. Early childhood programs may choose to provide parent education classes to help parents understand the impact their behavior and their discipline has on their children. They may want to increase parent Judaic education classes in light of the influence parental practice and belief have on the transmission of Jewish values. This also means directors and teachers need to be well informed about these same issues. Since children have a natural openness for spirituality, early childhood Jewish educators will need to be knowledgeable about moral and spiritual development of children and comfortable with “God talk” These programs also will want to train teachers to build meaningful relationships with parents.

Preliminary List of Quality Indicators

Introduction: Review of Existing Accreditation Materials

Since 1998 when the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education (BJE) published the first accreditation manual for Jewish early childhood programs (Jacoby), leaders in many communities throughout the United States have developed accreditation tools, curriculum guides, and professional development resources concerning best practices in Jewish early childhood education. Like the Los Angeles instrument, the more recent accreditation tools and curriculum guidelines (e.g. Baltimore, Chicago, Boston, Washington DC, Miami etc.) describe the core values and essential concepts that the authors believe should be the focus of a comprehensive Jewish early childhood program. These resource guides provide detailed and easily accessible information concerning *what* to teach young children (e.g. daily rituals, Jewish values, holidays, Jewish life cycle, Hebrew, connection to Israel, prayer and Torah, etc.) and also include many practical suggestions for improving collaborations with parents, community, and the school's host institution.

In addition some of the accreditation documents describe *how* to teach Jewish values and concepts. Many include detailed lists of games, books, songs, dramatic play materials, Hebrew-English dictionaries, and multi-media resources that may enhance the school's Judaic components. Teachers will also find examples of art and science activities, community service projects, and interdisciplinary units of study that the authors believe will deepen children's understanding of – and connection to – Jewish values and Jewish life. Generally speaking, the existing accreditation and curriculum guides provide answers to these questions:

1. What are the essential skills, concepts, practices, observances and values that we should be teaching preschool children in a Jewish educational setting?
2. What instructional materials can and should be available to enhance the teaching of these concepts and values?
3. What are some examples of classroom lessons, projects, and activities that will make these abstract concepts and essential components accessible to very young children?
4. What resources are available to help teach all of the above, and how can we access them?

It is important to note that all of the accreditation guides refer to NAEYC standards of excellence, and emphasize the importance of “developmentally appropriate practices” (DAP). This somewhat overused term for excellence in early childhood education is rarely defined in detail; as a result, the phrase “developmentally appropriate” is subject to multiple interpretations. For example, some early childhood educators believe “developmentally appropriate” means that children are using “hands-on” materials. This simplistic definition may lead them to over-emphasize the importance of

“activities” even if those activities have no clear learning goals. Some teachers seem to believe that, as long as children are touching or playing with concrete objects related to a theme or concept, their curriculum is “developmental” and therefore of high quality. This limited view of “developmental appropriateness” may also result in ambivalence about, or even rejection of, the teaching of abstract concepts (discussion of God, spirituality, prayer, etc.) that don’t happen to incorporate the use of concrete materials. Children learn in a variety of ways – they learn through hands-on experiences, through language, through modeling, and through meaningful interactions with people they know and trust. Concrete learning experiences are important; however, not all concrete experiences are of equal value, and some highly valuable learning experiences do not necessarily involve use of concrete manipulatives.

Our challenge. Therefore is to describe “excellence in terms that are both more specific than DAP (and thus less likely to be misinterpreted) but also more current and inclusive of the diversity of Jewish people and practices throughout the United States. To do this, we have reviewed and adapted some of NAEYC’s accreditation criteria (1991) as well as quality standards outlined by NSSE (2002) and Feinburg and Mindess (1994). The preliminary list of quality indicators that follows does not attempt to delineate *what* early childhood Jewish educational programs should be teaching. It is not a curriculum guide because, as noted earlier, that information is readily available. Instead, on the basis of our review of relevant literature, as well as our interviews and observations, we focus our attention on the following questions:

What does teaching and learning *look and sound like* in the most outstanding programs, and how does this reflect the school’s vision of Jewish life and education?

How do teachers and school leaders in outstanding programs interact with children and families?

How do teachers and school leaders make decisions about what and how to teach?

What are the characteristics of the school and classroom environments?

DRAFT TWO
PRELIMINARY LIST OF QUALITY INDICATORS
(adapted from Krug, et al, 2004)

1. PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Standard 1-1: The school community collaborates to develop a shared vision that defines the school's mission, core values, goals, philosophy and culture. Teachers, parents and school leaders work together to craft—and periodically revise—the school's vision of what it means to be Jewishly educated, the role of the school in nurturing Jewish identity, and the relationships between home, school, and community. (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003)

Standard 1-2: The early childhood program serves as a gateway to life-long engagement with Judaism and the Jewish community by encouraging continued Jewish education in day school, religious school, and/or Jewish camps, as well as fostering participation and involvement in synagogue life, Jewish community centers and other Jewish organizations.

Standard 1-3: The school leader models and reinforces the school's vision and priorities. The leader actively seeks input from all members of the school community, assists teachers in classrooms, and interacts with children and families on a daily basis. The leader's words and actions demonstrate both expertise and passion about Judaism and early childhood Jewish education.

Standard 1-4: All staff are deeply knowledgeable about, and engaged in, Judaism, Jewish life, and Hebrew. Staff who are not knowledgeable about Jewish life and rituals receive additional professional development and support.

Standard 1-5: All staff participate in regular professional development experiences designed to deepen their knowledge and understanding of Judaism, Jewish education, child development, and early childhood education. Each staff member has a clearly written professional development plan reflecting his/her goals, development areas, and a specific plan to reach those goals within a designated time frame.

Standard 1-6: Teachers are reflective and analytical about what they do and why they do it. Team planning, peer observation, mentoring, and Jewish text study are an integral part of the school's adult learning environment. All staff members actively contribute to, and participate in, a professional learning community.

Standard 1-7: Staff salaries and benefits are competitive. Compensation is comparable to, or higher than, salaries and benefits for early childhood teachers in local public and private schools.

2. CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION

Standard 2-1: The curriculum (WHAT children learn) and instructional techniques (HOW they learn it) reflect and showcase the community's shared vision of Jewish life and learning. Classroom activities are based on clearly defined learning goals—related to their vision—and include skills, knowledge, dispositions (attitudes or habits of mind), and feelings. (Katz & Chard, 1989)

Standard 2-2: Children have opportunities to play, and to explore concrete materials on a daily basis. Abstract concepts (e.g. *tzedakah*, *mitzvah*, Israel) are shared through stories, drama, songs, rituals, authentic artifacts, and first-hand experiences.

Standard 2-3: Staff are knowledgeable about and responsive to differences in children's learning styles, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, abilities and disabilities. Inclusion of children with special needs is a high priority, and the school actively supports these children and their families. Teachers understand and apply strategies of "Differentiated Instruction" (Tomlinson, 1999) to challenge and engage diverse children in an inclusive classroom environment.

Standard 2-4: Creativity, originality, and self-expression are highly valued. The teacher elicits and encourages imaginative and inventive ideas as well as flexible, divergent thinking. Children explore key concepts, and demonstrate their understanding, through small group activities, two and three-dimensional art experiences, music, drama, and dance. Worksheets, coloring book pages, and copy-the teacher's-sample art projects should be discouraged and never utilized. (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994)

Standard 2-5: Interdisciplinary units of study, related to the school's vision, help children explore, revisit and make sense of key concepts. Such learning opportunities support emergent curriculum and are responsive to children's questions, concerns and ideas.

Standard 2-6: Teachers observe, record, and assess individual and group progress using anecdotal notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, portfolios, and developmental checklists.

Standard 2-7: Rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew is preferable. Teachers speak Hebrew at various times throughout the day. In addition to using Hebrew songs and blessings, teachers imbed meaningful Hebrew phrases (greetings, family members, etc.) into conversations, stories, and word games. Many signs, labels, and alphabet displays are in both English and Hebrew.

Standard 2-8: Curriculum is often related to the Jewish calendar, rituals, and Jewish values. Activities are chosen because they help children understand the "big ideas". The emphasis is not on creating theme, units or project related products to take home.

3. SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Standard 3-1: The physical environment in all areas of the school (incl. classrooms, hallways, entry area, teachers' lounge, offices, outdoor play areas, etc.) reflects the school's vision. It should project a strong Jewish identity. Furniture arrangement, lighting, displays, signage, etc. all communicate to the public "what we really value here." Teachers and parents help to create the environment so that it reflects their values and priorities. (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003)

Standard 3-2: There is attention to beauty and aesthetics throughout the school. Children's artwork is displayed and mounted carefully; a sign nearby explains the purpose of the work. Plants, Judaic artifacts, adult artwork and other beautiful objects are present, often at children's eye level. There is attention to lighting, color, and texture. (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994)

Standard 3-3: The classroom environment supports excellence by a high degree of clarity and predictability in the furniture arrangement, storage of materials, and displays. The classrooms and common areas are neat and orderly; however, messiness is expected and accepted while children play. (Feinburg and Mindess, 1994)

4. INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN

Standard 4-1: The school's vision and most deeply held values are revealed through verbal and nonverbal interactions with children. Jewish values (e.g. peace, honesty, truth, study, respect, community, self-discipline, etc.) are visible, and virtually palpable, in the teachers' tone, gentility, and compassionate manner of speaking and acting. (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003)

Standard 4-2: Staff is warm and nurturing in their interactions with children. When talking to children, teachers approach the child at eye level whenever possible. The teacher's tone is gentle, supportive and respectful so that children feel safe, secure and relaxed.

Standard 4-3: Staff is intellectually vibrant. They understand the importance of motivational strategies and wait time in stimulating children's intellectual and expressive activity. Teachers provoke children's thinking by asking open-ended questions, modeling and encouraging unusual and divergent responses, and presenting unique materials for play and exploration. (Feinburg and Mindess, 1994)

Standard 4-4: Children's emotional issues are viewed as an integral part of the curriculum. There is a strong sense of community within each classroom and within the school as a whole. Teachers develop interdisciplinary units of study in response to children's social and emotional needs.

5. PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Standard 5-1: Parents/family members have input in the design and implementation of the school’s educational philosophy, policies, and procedures.

Standard 5-2: Parents/family members actively engaged in the design and implementation of curriculum and school environments. Teachers invite and encourage parents to identify potential topics for units of study, to assist with gathering resources and materials, to co-plan activities, and to participate in classroom lessons and projects.

Standard 5-3: Parents/family members are invited to participate in routine and specials events at school, Family events are planned to accommodate the schedules and needs of all families, including those who may not be able to attend during school hours.

Standard 5-4: School leaders and teachers communicate with parents/family members often and in multiple ways. Newsletters, phone calls, email, and interactive displays in common areas of the school celebrate children’s learning, clarify Jewish rituals and values, and elicit parent input.

Standard 5-5: The school is responsible for encouraging parents/family members to participate—and to serve as leaders—in an adult learning community. Book groups, Torah study sessions, and workshops (about parenting, Jewish life and rituals, and other topics) are designed for and with parents based on their interests and concerns.

Standard 5-6: Children and parents feel supported and “at home” in the school; teachers respect parents and family as the child’s first and most important teachers. Materials from home are often present in school, and vice versa.

6. PARTNERSHIPS WITH HOST INSTITUTION

Standard 6-1: The Rabbi, Cantor, Board of Directors or other agency leaders actively participate in school events. Rabbi and other leaders speak positively about the early childhood program and encourage others in the community to support it. The rabbi offers professional development for staff and serves as a resource to parents and school personnel as needed.

Standard 6-2: Administrative and financial decisions that affect the school are made in collaboration with the school director, parents, and staff.

Standard 6-3: School and synagogue (or center) leaders meet regularly to discuss policy, procedures, and common goals. Issues concerning membership requirements, recruitment, etc. are discussed openly.

7. ASSESSMENT

Standard 7-1: Teachers routinely analyze observations and documentation to evaluate their own teaching, to collaborate with parents, and to plan meaningful curriculum based on individual and group learning goals.

Standard 7-2: Schools allow for weekly individual and group staff planning time.