

CONTACT

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**ENGAGING
YOUNG CHILDREN
AND THEIR FAMILIES**



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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Photographs on the cover and on pages 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, and 13 by Sonya Shoptaugh. All other photographs courtesy of contributors and Photos.com.

ENGAGING YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

As the Jewish community continues its sometimes effective, often comical quest to capture the attention of younger Jews, it would do well to consider the enormous possibilities for engagement among new parents and families with young children. Many new parents are at a stage in life in which they are receptive to larger connections to culture, spirituality and community. It is a perfect opportunity for Jewish enrichment, and a potential windfall for those seeking to engage larger numbers of Jews.

In addition to forging connections to community, the birth of a child can free new parents from much of the discomfort they might have with Jewish life — whether it be memories of the inanity of certain rituals, tension over the endemic dysfunction of Jewish institutional life, or hostility at organized Jewish leadership for espousing policies that are inconsistent with the views of most American Jews. In this way, the life stage of new parenthood presents an opportunity for the community to free itself, quite literally, from itself.

The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the unique dimensions of new parenthood, early childhood, and the Jewish education of both children and adults. The authors consider dynamic ways of understanding this particular cohort, and examine existing and potential programs that hold the promise of creating and sustaining connections between families and Jewish life.

Eli Valley

Correction: In the Autumn 2006 issue of CONTACT, photographs on the cover and on pages 9, 10 and 12 were taken by Shir-Yaakov Feinstein-Feit, Artist-in-Residence at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, CT. He can be reached at sy@isabellafreedman.org. Our publications page at www.jewishlife.org/journal.html contains the corrected version of the issue.



Outreach to Parents with Young Children: STRATEGIES for SUCCESS

by MARK I. ROSEN

How should outreach programs be designed to meet the unique needs of new parents at this stage of life?

What features should programs include to attract unengaged and intermarried parents?

Although Jewish life begins at birth, there is no guarantee that a baby will grow up to have a Jewish identity. Jewish identity must be transmitted to children by parents.

The extent to which parents transmit Jewish identity depends on their own Jewish backgrounds. However, the Jewish community can have an influence on this transmission if it offers programs specifically for parents with young children.

Properly designed outreach programs for parents with young children can have a transformative effect. Parents are faced with a dramatic change in routine when they have a child, and this creates a desire for support and guidance and a receptivity to outreach efforts. When the organized Jewish community offers programming to new parents, they receive needed assistance and positive feelings toward the community are engendered. There is a greater likelihood that they will create a Jewish home and raise their children with a Jewish identity. Intermarried couples may be more likely to choose Judaism as their child's religion.

How should outreach programs be designed to meet the unique needs of new parents at this stage of life? What features should programs include to attract unengaged and intermarried parents?

For the past three years, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University has been studying parents with young children and the programs that have been created for them around the country. After studying communities with successful programs, we have identified several strategies that appear to be effective at reaching parents with young children.

Successful Programs Are Sensitive to the Unengaged and the Intermarried

A sizable percentage of parents are either marginally engaged with the Jewish community or are not engaged at all. Intermarriage is commonplace. Communities with successful programs make them as accessible as possible to parents on the periphery and are sensitive to those who have had little exposure to Jewish tradition.

To maximize attendance, programs are offered in neutral, non-religious settings such as Jewish community centers, shop-



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At this stage of their lives, parents are focused on their children. Learning must seamlessly weave Jewish texts and values into conversations that are relevant to being a new parent.

ping malls, bookstores or parents' homes. Community institutions recognize that parents don't like to drive long distances, so they offer programs in outlying areas. To minimize discomfort with unfamiliar terminology, they downplay the use of Hebrew or Yiddish. They also avoid fundraising. For many parents, these programs represent their first exposure as adults to the organized Jewish community. Solicitations are likely to be a turnoff.

Successful Programs Help Parents to Make Jewish Friends

Because of the changes that new parents undergo and because many have relocated and have not yet made new friends, they are especially eager to seek out relationships with other parents who are at the same stage of life. Peers can provide emotional support as well as practical information. Peers can also help with the sometimes bewildering choices new parents need to make regarding childcare providers, baby gear, parenting classes, early childhood programs and community resources.

The fact that social relationships with peers are so important to new parents gives these relationships a pivotal role in fostering Jewish engagement. Parents who have not been connected to the community may not be interested initially in community institutions, but they are interested in connecting to other parents. Programs that help them meet Jewish peers can therefore potentially also help them to connect to the community.

Parents who have not been involved with the organized Jewish community might be more willing to attend events with Jewish sponsorship if peers invite and accompany them. In addition, parents may be more likely to make Jewish educational choices if they have Jewish friends who are making these choices. Preschools represent the first

such choice parents make, and peers are a significant influence on whether parents choose a Jewish early childhood program.

Playgroups for new mothers organized and facilitated by the Jewish community are an especially effective way to create strong, lasting connections with Jewish peers. Mothers in these groups tend to stay connected with each other over the course of several years.

Successful Programs Highlight Current Knowledge about Parenting and Child Development

During their baby's early months, parents are focused almost exclusively on how to get through the day. They are preoccupied with diapering, dressing, eating and sleeping. As their babies continue to grow, new questions continually arise. There are many sources of information that parents can turn to for answers — friends, the baby's grandparents, lectures, books, parenting magazines and the Internet.

Jewish institutions that offer expert information about parenting and child development based on the latest scientific research attract parents to programs in large numbers. If programs of this type are not offered by the Jewish community, parents will turn to the many secular programs that are available and will not view the community as a resource. Thus, the opportunity to bring them into a Jewish setting, potentially leading to Jewish friendships and later enrollment in programs with Jewish content, is lost.

Successful Programs Provide Jewish Content That Matches Participants' Degree of Receptivity

Many new parents possess little knowledge of Jewish tradition and are not prepared to pass it on to their children. Experience

across communities has repeatedly shown that when programs over-emphasize Jewish themes, attendance is low compared to programs that focus on secular themes. Yet if programs are primarily secular in content, no Jewish knowledge is imparted and parents are not inspired to learn more.

For parents taking their first steps toward engagement, it is important for community institutions to calibrate Jewish content. Too much can scare some parents away. Too little doesn't inspire. Content at a level suitable for very young children doesn't convey Judaism's richness.

At this stage of their lives, parents are focused on their children. Learning must seamlessly weave Jewish texts and values into conversations that are relevant to being a new parent.

Successful Programs Foster Caring Connections Between Parents and Jewish Community Professionals

While relationships with Jewish peers can create tentative connections to the community, most parents need further encouragement to explore Judaism, acquire more Jewish learning and/or join synagogues.

This is best accomplished when community professionals build personal relationships with parents. Repeatedly, parents in focus groups have told us that warm, caring interactions from local professionals made the difference between engagement and indifference.

Professionals in successful programs have told us that they spend many hours of their time meeting with parents, learning about their lives and teaching them about Judaism, both in intimate classes and one-on-one. The relationship draws parents in, and learning from someone they like and respect keeps them involved. If parents have personal connections to rabbis and Jewish educators, they are far more likely to consider participating in adult learning.

It is therefore important for communities to make sure they have professional outreach staff who have adequate time to establish and facilitate these relationships. In addition, outreach staff must be chosen carefully. It is the quality of the program staff more than the program content that draws parents in and keeps them coming.

In conclusion, our research indicates that communities do not need to wait and hope that families with young children will show up and participate in Jewish life. Well-conceived and well-designed programs that incorporate these strategies on a coordinated, community-wide basis have the potential to bring thousands of new families into Jewish organizations each year, setting parents and children on a Jewish trajectory for life. 🌸

THE NEWBORN GIFT: The Next Revolution in Jewish Communal Life



by STEVEN B. NASATIR and DAVID GEDZELMAN

Families with very young and newborn children should be a constituency of the highest priority for the organized Jewish community. Not only do the years directly following the birth or adoption of children represent a time of openness to community and a search for meaning, but having children for the first time helps one to understand the power and value of being part of an historic chain of life and wisdom. Our newest demographic data also show that in recent years, the numbers of Jews among our youngest age cohorts are on the rise. Young children and their parents are a population the organized Jewish community cannot afford either to ignore or to take for granted.

Michael Steinhardt understood the importance of this population innately when he conceived the idea of reaching new families with a gift at birth in order to welcome them to Jewish life and connection. A few

years back, he asked the authors of this article, together with Joanna S. Ballantine of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, to convene a working group of federation and foundation professionals to explore what such a gift should look like in order to maximize the community's contact with and involvement of this important population. The original idea was that upon the birth or adoption of a new child, parents would be contacted by the Jewish community with the news that an account, preferably held in an Israeli financial institution, had been credited in their child's name eventually to be used for a future teen trip to Israel. Michael asked us to explore the concept and to examine its feasibility.

After an initial round of research with young families, we reported back both good and bad news. The notion of a Newborn Gift coming from the Jewish community could have a profound effect on a family's openness to involvement with Jewish life. However, a future trip to Israel in the teen years was simply too far away to have any meaning for a family with newborn and very young children. The gift would need to relate to the immediate

and near immediate experience of the new family if it was to inspire their attention. Instead of being frustrated that certain elements of his original idea did not test well, Michael charged us to come up with ideas that would work. The working group, consisting of senior professionals from six large city federations, five leading foundations and United Jewish Communities, set to work to determine what such a gift or gifts might look like, how they might be delivered and through what kinds of structures such an initiative would be best implemented and funded.

After several rounds of research, what had begun as a program idea related to a gift at birth grew into a new understanding of how local communities and federations could best engage a crucial population in Jewish life.

Through our work, the idea of the gift evolved to comprise two essential components. Not only would local communities be encouraged and incentivized to provide families with Newborns with a full range of gift memberships and benefits connected to programming for families with very young children; but a signature gift of a \$1,000 voucher towards

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As envisioned, the Newborn Gift Initiative would in itself be a catalyst for participating communities to re-imagine how they work with families with very young children.

Jewish Early Childhood Education in an approved Jewish preschool would send a resounding message to new families that the Jewish community welcomes and cares about them. The gift idea was tested in three cities, with the result that the availability of a \$1,000 voucher for Jewish preschool would have a “wow” effect on young families. Even those who could not take advantage of the voucher would find its availability an encouragement to take advantage of the complementary platform of gifts and opportunities, from a free introductory membership at the local JCC to inclusion in the innovative PJ Library program. The \$1,000 voucher would also be a catalyst for increasing enrollment in Jewish preschool settings, giving the community substantial opportunities to further engage the parents of very young children in Jewish life and living. Of course, that would only be the case in Early Childhood Centers that take advantage of the opportunities for family engagement represented by the enrollment of the children of those parents. We recognized that just about all Jewish children in North America will have a preschool experience. The challenge is how could the community better ensure that it would be a Jewish preschool experience.

Through the planning process, it became clear that no matter how encouraging a series of gifts to Newborn families might be, if the educational infrastructure of the community was not positioned as a wall-to-wall coalition of all those with offerings for young families, the gift would generate a temporary effect of good will but would not have the traction necessary for engaging families in real ways. Therefore, local participating communities would need to bring together all agencies and contexts working with young families as a “community of practice” committed more to the overall work with this population than to any narrow interests they might have. Ongoing communication between professionals would be a necessary minimum norm. Sharing of information and ongoing program partnership would need to characterize communities that would be eli-

gible to receive a grant covering 60 percent of the cost of the program’s signature gift. As envisioned, the Newborn Gift Initiative would in itself be a catalyst for participating communities to re-imagine how they work with families with very young children. Synagogues, JCCs, Day Schools and other institutions would be encouraged to work together so that young families would never fall between the cracks of Jewish life.

While research showed that a gift at birth or upon adoption would move new families to be receptive to Jewish communal involvement, how that gift would be delivered was paradoxically a sensitive matter. Especially for families not involved with Jewish institutions, the offer of the gift could be experienced as intrusive and off-putting. Over and over, families told us that they would be wary of a gift announced at their doorstep, in their mailbox or through their telephone or computer. The gift would have to be brought to their attention in a way that left them completely anonymous up until the point when they would choose to let their eligibility be known to the local community. Reaching out to this population would be seriously compromised by any program in which the Jewish community would try to directly approach Newborn families with a gift and a *mazel tov*. Therefore, a comprehensive marketing strategy bringing the gift to the attention of the target population without invading a family’s privacy would need to be developed. Given that so few families in this population are in contact with the organized Jewish community, the vehicles for communicating the gift and eligibility would have to be the same kinds of media outlets and experiences young families avail themselves of in the dominant culture — magazines for new parents, brochures left in pediatric and OB/GYN waiting rooms, etc. Once the possibility of the gift would be brought to their attention, families would be invited to opt

into the program through the mechanism of a robust website that would connect them to the coalition of agencies implementing the program in their local community.

In order to contain the project’s costs, eligibility for the signature part of the gift, the \$1,000 voucher, would be limited to families that had never previously sent a child to a Jewish preschool. Furthermore, only one child per family would be eligible. The point here is that it is the family the project seeks to engage, especially the family that has not been previously engaged. However, through the range of complementary experiences, the initiative sets as a goal a far larger population than would take advantage of the \$1,000 voucher. The national administration of the gift would require the collaboration of philanthropists and foundations with participating federations. The philanthropists would enable the funding of 60 percent of the signature gift as well as national administrative and marketing costs, while participating federations would fund 40 percent of the signature gift as well as local implementation costs.

The “pay to play” formula for Federations’ participation is an excellent format for initial roll out in test communities. Over the long term, this represents a guaranteed income stream that will help ensure financial viability for the program once proven successful.

The Newborn Gift planning process represented a breakthrough by which professional leaders from the Federation world and senior professionals from the Foundation world joined forces to devise a program that would represent a partnership on every level. Our hope is that moving this project forward could very well reflect not only the next big idea in Jewish life but a new way of doing business together. 🌸

Jewish Values, Jewish Family: A Vision for Jewish Early Childhood Education



by MARK HOROWITZ

In 2004, the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) was created as a partnership of philanthropists and philanthropic organizations to transform the experiences of families in Jewish early childhood centers so that they became a vital portal for increasing numbers of families on their journey into a committed life of Jewish living and learning.

We realize that the family is not the primary concern of most early childhood centers, where the focus of everyday work is almost completely on the child. While in no way lowering the importance of the child, Judaism understands that a child's growth and an adult's continued welfare depend

upon the health and strength of their relationships with other family members (and with other families). JECEI advocates a paradigm shift in the goals of Jewish early childhood education from the child to the family.

To fulfill this critical yet challenging goal, JECEI has worked over the last two years with a group of vanguard schools and a think tank of outstanding academics and Jewish educators to develop a new model and language for Jewish early childhood education. Central to this ongoing project is the integration of the best in progressive education, represented by the world renowned schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy, with the core values and ideas of Judaism. One such core idea is the covenant.

The Jewish Idea of Covenant (*Brit*)

Judaism offers a worldview of being and becoming human that is grounded in both a sense of individual dignity and obligation. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches, since we are all born *b'tselem elokim* (in the image of God),

we are all infinitely valuable, equal and unique. Concomitantly, we are born into a web of responsibilities to the people and world around us. Being and becoming human involves shouldering the responsibilities of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).

In Judaism, the human is not alone in pursuit of these responsibilities. We need to work together with others who share a common purpose, provide mutual support, live by a shared set of norms, and feel bound together throughout life. We require a covenantal community to which we can belong and within which we can realize our divine potential and fulfill our eternal responsibilities.

Covenants bind individuals together in fulfillment of shared purpose along a common path. Moreover, they bind people across generations together. When God entered into the covenant with the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, it is said that every living Jew and every Jew yet to be born were there that day. To live within a covenant is to be bound together with our extended family (real and

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metaphorical) across generations in fulfillment of our human responsibilities.

The Family

In contemporary society, families are free to observe Jewish practices as they so desire. And, they are free not to. They can choose to belong to a synagogue or other Jewish community, or not. Moreover, belonging to any one community is only a part of their lives. They often associate with many different groups, and their commitment to each one varies in strength as well as circumstance. As a result, the traditional Jewish family bound in covenant to other Jewish families has slowly been disappearing from the shores of contemporary society.

Fulfillment of the mission of the Jewish people is dependent upon the existence of families living a covenantal relationship among their family members and with one another. Ideally, to live as a family within the Jewish covenant is to create an environment that allows each family member to express his/her divine creativity, freedom and love to its fullest, and to treat one another with the dignity that is accorded one created *b'tzelem elokim*. To live covenantally means to strive toward developing each family member's capacities to master and tend the world as an act of *tikkun olam*.

A covenantal family is on a journey that did not begin with them, nor will it end with them. They are walking along this journey hand-in-hand with other families. They partake of the joys and sorrows of the families in their community (and to a less immediate extent those of the wider Jewish people and the entire world.) They share life-cycle

moments and holiday celebrations. They share everyday tasks and feel bound to offer help when it is needed. Both children and adults learn together. They share stories and life, weaving together their familial experiences into the larger narrative of the Jewish people. And, they do this across generations, bringing together grandparents, parents and children.

The primary goal of a Jewish education should be to nurture and guide a family towards living in a covenantal community with other Jewish families and across the generations. Yet, this is not primarily because the family is the essential vehicle for the continuation of the Jewish people or for nurturing young life towards its divine capacities. It is both of these; but, it is also and foremost the place in which we express our divine capacities and dignities and fulfill our obligations to those around us and the world.

The Jewish Early Childhood Center

We at JECEI believe that it is the primary responsibility of Jewish early childhood education to nurture and guide Jewish families into embracing the value of covenant in their relations among family members and with other families. To work towards achieving this vital goal, Jewish early childhood centers should emulate the following principals that integrate core Jewish ideas with the best in progressive education.

1. The center should be devoted to serving all members of the family (separately and together) through informal opportunities and formal programs (including adult education), which embody respect for every person's dignity and aims to

develop their divine capacities.

2. Centers should guide families on their continual journey of becoming fully covenantal families in their internal relations and in relationship to other families.
3. The center should develop relatively seamless connections with the home life of its families involving consistent and clear communications and learning that bridges the divide and is propelled as much by what happens in the center as what happens in the homes.
4. The space and time of the center should be constructed in such a way as to promote family engagement and simply be welcoming for families to gather.
5. Center programs, procedures and communications should cultivate formal and informal family-to-family and cross-generational connections.
6. The center should endeavor to connecting families to the larger Jewish community (especially synagogues, community centers, day schools and other places for continued Jewish learning and living) through advertising or hosting communal events, creating awareness of professional services, and nurturing informal connections.
7. Parents should be empowered by the center to work in partnership with the professionals in governing the center and in designing and implementing the various programs of the center.
8. Parents and staff should enter into a partnership devoted to the education of the children and the parents, and to the ongoing personal and professional development of the staff. ❁

Where Has Early Childhood Gone ?

by LESLEY KOPLOW

Early childhood is an important time of life. It is a time of unfolding development, when changes in a child's physical, social and cognitive being occur daily. The emotional foundations for well-being and learning that begin in infancy and toddlerhood are still in the process of crystallizing in the early school years. Therefore, early childhood educational experiences must not only support the child's exploration of the physical world, they must also support the child's developing sense of self and her ability to engage in the world of relationships. In order to do this, excellent early childhood programs promote strong teacher-child relationships, many opportunities for open-ended peer interaction, play and community building and opportunities for symbolizing and constructing the meaning that children make of their lives. Simply put, the agenda of the early childhood teacher must follow the developmental agenda of the children.

As the director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street College, I frequently have the opportunity to visit classrooms for young children. I have visited infant and toddler rooms, classrooms for three- and four-year-olds, kindergartens and classrooms for children in grades 1-3. Most of the programs I observe are in the secular world. Some are in the Jewish world. What I see is a huge continuum of practice, from programs that provide developmentally-based early childhood experience to only the youngest members of their centers (infants and toddlers) to programs that extend early childhood practice into the middle grades of primary school. Most often, some version of early childhood practice lives in the pre-school classroom of three- and four-year-olds, but is forbidden to enter the kindergarten room, where children are expected to transform into students who can focus on an agenda that is external to themselves.

The National Association for the Education of the Young Child defines early childhood as the period that includes infancy, toddlerhood, pre-school, kindergarten and grades 1-3 of primary school. Our professional understanding that young children need pro-

tection from the pressures of the external world very early has traditionally inspired us to offer them nurturing educational environments in which they can explore their emerging abilities. Yet, in the 21st Century, we are losing hold of this rich tradition and demanding more of our youngest students. Respect for a young child's way of learning by doing is on the decline.

The reader may be thinking, "Well, Jewish children are smart. They typically meet the challenges imposed by the school communities that serve them. Certainly by kindergarten they are ready for academic achievement! Why not push them to their full potential as soon as possible? Some of our children have been in preschools since they were two years old! Why not fill up their minds with knowledge at an early age?"

The answers to these questions can be found in recent brain research as well as in the cranky demands of the stressed four-year-old who is exhausted at the end of a long school day. Research is showing that children's brains develop their capacity for higher-level executive functions as a product of social and emotional regulation and integration. While we once assumed that the regions of the brain that empowered learning were different from those regions that developed social and emotional abilities, we now know that the region of the brain that develops social and emotional intelligence is also the foundation for executive function. (S. Greenspan & S. Weider, *Engaging Autism*, 2006; D.J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 1999.) The implication of these findings suggests that early childhood practice that encourages children to explore learning actively, to express thoughts and feelings in a myriad of ways, and to use dramatic play to integrate the confusing experiences they have in the adult world is literally giving children food for thought. Children need this "food" for as long as possible to support their developing brains.

This gives educators cause to reconsider their definitions of early childhood as well as their school policies concerning the education of children from birth through the primary grades. This research should be used to inform the educational reform movement that has been pushed by politicians in



recent years. Frequently, the powers that be have called for "evidenced-based educational practices," but they seem to ignore the evidence.

The reader may wonder what early childhood practice can offer to a bright seven-year-old child who is capable of reading, writing and multiplication. The second-grade classroom that considers this student to be an early childhood student is still interested in bringing the child's mind to life. It is still interested in inviting self expression in the classroom. It is still interested in providing children with emotionally safe classroom environments where teachers know each child in a deep way and children relate to each other as community members. Instead of using dress-up clothes to make sense of life experiences, second-grade children might be encouraged to use writing and reading. Instead of being made to feel that they are old enough to know better or do better independently, second-grade children might be encouraged to do their best as individuals and to feel free to collaborate with classmates to find inventive solutions to complicated problems. Perhaps most important, the open communication style of a good early childhood classroom helps to decrease emotional isolation in children and thus acts as a protective factor against adolescent depression and anti-social behavior.

Educators in the year 2007 need to understand the value of early childhood programs and to define them as inclusively as possible so that our children reap the most long lasting benefits. Decisions that influence educational practice in the secular world have recently been influenced by a political agenda that is counter to what research is showing us. The world of Jewish education has another option. It can integrate the traditional right to a good early childhood education into its infant, toddler, preschool and early primary school programs. It can lead the way back to a healthy education for young children. ✿

Lesley Koplow, M.S., LCSW, is the Director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street College of Education, a psychotherapist in private practice and the author of several books on child development and child mental health.



The **PJ** Library

a **JEWISH CHILDHOOD** from **COVER to COVER**

by JOANNA S. BALLANTINE and GALI COOKS

Once upon a time, while sitting on a plane waiting to take off, Harold Grinspoon watched a young mother help her fussy toddler settle down. The mother pulled out the classical storybook *The Little Engine That Could* from her backpack. Almost instantly, the child rested her head in her mother's lap and listened intently to the soothing words. "I think I can. I think I can..." By the time the plane took off, the child was fast asleep.

Recognizing this mother/daughter experience as a nurturing and powerful moment of childhood, Harold wondered, "Could this moment be transformed into a Jewish moment?"

Some weeks later, Harold learned about the Imagination Library, a nationwide literacy program created and administered by Dolly Parton. The initiative sends a free age-appropriate book each month to every child under five in her community. The Imagination Library has numerous financial partners across the country who see it as an effective way to bring books into the homes of families who are in need of such resources. Within months, Harold became a partner in the Imagination Library, offering free books to inner-city, preschool families in his home community of Springfield, MA.

On his way to a lecture about the state of Jewish demographics, Harold thought, "We can use the model of the Imagination Library to send Jewish children's books to Jewish families." A few weeks later, at a Grinspoon family Seder, children were delighted when they received beautiful Jewish children's books upon finding the *afikomen*. At that point, Harold realized that we have jewels that must be shared with Jewish families. Thus, the PJ Library was born.

The PJ Library (PJ for pajamas) mails a monthly Jewish children's book, CD of Jewish music or select parenting book to Jewish families with children aged six-months through six years. Launched in our local area of Western Massachusetts in December 2005, the PJ Library has attracted more than 750 children (525 families), which represent nearly 60 percent of the eligible population in Western Massachusetts.

Having successfully established the program locally, Harold and the Harold Grinspoon Foundation wanted to extend it across the country. Just as Imagination Library

Joanna S. Ballantine is the Executive Director of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation (www.hgf.org) and a mother of two. **Gali Cooks** was the founding Director of the PJ Library (www.pjlibrary.org).

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takes on the task of negotiating prices for bulk purchases with publishers and centrally handles the distribution and warehousing for local communities, PJ Library has taken the hassle out of the process and allows donors to make a real and lasting gift to their local communities with ease.

Through partner communities and funding from local federations, foundations and/or philanthropists, the PJ Library is now available to families in 28 cities across the country, from Shreveport, Louisiana to San Francisco, California. The program is donor-recognized in each community, so while a PJ child in Western Massachusetts receives a book in an envelope that says the gift is from “The Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the Jewish Federation of Western Massachusetts,” in other communities around the country, the gift comes from the local donor/sponsor. The pace of expansion has been remarkable. Our goal is to engage dozens of cities and thousands of families in the program.

Parents have lauded the PJ Library’s simplicity and convenience. Within weeks after signing up, they begin receiving award-winning, high-quality Jewish children’s books at their mailboxes each month. The key here is quality and age-appropriateness. To assure this, the PJ Library has engaged a committee of world-class Jewish educators and experts in children’s literature who have carefully chosen books that will engage and spark the imagination. A six-month old receives a different book than does his or her five-year-old sibling. The committee constantly reviews new and re-issued books to keep the list updated and fresh.

The beauty of the program is that it — and the books — speak both to engaged as well as to marginally connected Jewish families. The program is particularly sensitive to families where only one parent is Jewish, families who may send their child to a JCC pre-school but do not carry out Jewish rituals in the home, parents who may have grown up in a synagogue but feel alienated from Jewish life, and parents who may have attended Jewish overnight summer camp but do not have the knowledge base to impart to their children the *yiddishkeit* they may have learned there.

We believe strongly in providing the PJ Library free for the first year because we want it to be clear that this is a gift. After that, there is an \$18 renewal fee each year, as an indication

that the family has a true interest in the program and is using the books in the home. What’s more, the monthly mailings come with guides to help parents access Jewish information in the books. For example, a book like *It’s Challah Time* comes with a challah recipe to make bread with children.

A family’s Jewish journey is intensely personal and multi-faceted. The PJ Library, through its gentle stories and user-friendly resources, aims to transform the special moments of childhood into Jewish moments.

The dozens of letters we have received from parents attest that it is working. Based on a survey of Western Massachusetts families conducted less than a year after our local launch, we learned that the PJ Library is having a transformative effect on a broad range of Jewish families. Survey highlights include:

- 44 percent of families responded to the survey (a very high response rate)
- 80 percent of parents read the books at least once a week
- About 50 percent of families are unaffiliated with any Jewish institution
- Over 50 percent of the parents are intermarried
- 84 percent of families give the PJ Library program top rankings and have recommended the program to friends

We know that reaching out to young families is critical to winning the future of American Jewry. Dr. Mark Rosen, senior researcher at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, has found in his research: “If the Jewish community reaches out to young Jewish couples when they have a child, there is potentially a three to five year window for influencing their future educational choices and the Jewish identity of their children.”

The PJ Library is ideally poised to fill this national need. It meets young families where they are sure to be — at home. It is a first step in a community effort to reach families when parents are most open to change. In the best of circumstances, it can and should be coupled with community and family education, developing a seamless approach to engaging young families in Jewish life. The PJ Library is a simple idea and one that is easy for communities to adopt around the country. It has tremendous potential to transform families’ Jewish journeys and affect the future of an inspired American Jewish story. ❁

Two recent initiatives, IKARIM and THE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAM, seek to involve parents of young children in Jewish learning and exploration.

IKKARIM

Four years ago, Hebrew College and Boston’s Combined Jewish Philanthropies launched Ikkarim, an innovative one-year program of intensive study for parents of young children. The course was created to facilitate the formulation of Jewish identity and strengthen the education of the next generation of Jewish children.

Ikkarim takes students on an inspirational journey through ancient texts and modern themes in a search for *ikkarim*, which in classical Hebrew refers to both “roots” and “principles.” The class explores basic Jewish values and their modern significance by bringing one’s contemporary concerns to the weekly text-based sessions. Students discover how these values apply within — and can enrich — our many circles of relationships: with our children, spouses and friends; with our fellow citizens and community; with our people; and even with ourselves and with God. This class is designed for parents of children, newborn to age five. Ikkarim is a joint program of Hebrew College and Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

Ikkarim is an exciting 19-week journey. Classes start in the fall of 2007 and meet at locations throughout the Greater Boston area. To find out more, please visit www.cjp.org/ikkarim, call (617) 457-8586, or email adultlearning@cjp.org.

THE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Parent Education Program (PEP) is an adaptation of the core Florence Melton Adult Mini-School curriculum, a two-year, 30-week per year opportunity for adult Jewish study. Like the core curriculum of the Mini-School, PEP is interactive, pluralistic and text-based. PEP is designed to match the Jewish learning interests of the parents of young children. Texts and discussions are devised to show the students how the concepts they learn in class are relevant and applicable to their lives as Jewish parents. One of the main objectives of PEP is to encourage students to take the conversation home.

PEP classes are energetic and interactive. Since they are at an identical stage of life, PEP students are eager to share their Jewish parenting experiences with their classmates.

PEP students learn about Jewish beliefs and practices. They study about holidays, lifecycle events and important events in Jewish history. They also have the opportunity to discuss Jewish approaches to ethical decision making. PEP students develop the skills to become the Jewish teachers and role models of their children.

For information about PEP, including site locations, go to www.fmams.org.il and click on the PEP button.



The **Need** Within the Community for Infant/Toddler **Child Care**

by **DIANA GANGER** and **CANDICE PERCANSKY**

It is often asked, why should the Jewish community invest in infant/toddler child care? The short answer is that only through intentional relationships can we bring out the infinite Jewish potential of both children and their families.

Learning, even in the earliest years, is culturally specific and lays the foundation for identity and family connectedness, which are vital for emotional health and lifelong learning. Infant/toddler programs have a responsibility and an opportunity to promote the healthy development of Jewish identity.

There is a growing awareness of the critical importance of the first three years of life and its impact on later learning and life skills. New research on the correlation between early brain development and human relationships provides compelling evidence that we can no longer ignore. Infants and toddlers experience their world and develop their identities through relationships with adults. The quality of daily interactions between child-care teachers, parents, infants and toddlers also affects children's personali-

ties. In addition, these relationships affect all other aspects of their learning and development — social, emotional, intellectual, and moral — and help to define, for these very young children, who they are and who they will become. To be attuned to children's needs and wants is paramount to fostering secure relationships of trust, creativity, strength and mutual confidence. This takes time and energy.

There is also tremendous potential to reach families at one of the most critical periods of parenthood and involvement in their community. Entry into an infant/toddler program is the point at which a child and its new family can enter a covenant of mutual support with a Jewish institution. These first three years are a prime opportunity to engage families, support positive parenting skills and decrease parental stress. Bridging home and school early in a child's life can promote healthy development and continuity of a Jewish life.

More and more infants and toddlers are receiving out-of-home care, at younger ages than in the past, and for longer periods of time. The need for outside childcare in the Jewish community is increasing as more couples pursue dual careers and/or simply need to earn two incomes to meet expenses. Par-

ents often have a difficult time accessing affordable and high quality care. Investment in very young children and their families can result in sustainable benefits to the families, to the Jewish community and to society.

What Are the Markers of High Quality in an Infant/Toddler Program?

High quality infant/toddler programs recognize the centrality of relationships in all aspects of daily interactions with young children, families and staff. Staff members also demonstrate respect for the family and its culture and work in partnership with parents to create a close home and school relationship. In addition, in quality programs, there is a continuity of caregivers over time; caregivers are predictable, nurturing, responsive and well trained; the staff receives adequate time for planning, reflective work, supervision and professional development; and class sizes are limited to fewer than eight, with staff-child ratios of 1:3. In addition, effective infant/toddler programs include home visits to provide continuity between home and school. The physical environment of the programs convey respect, warmth and a welcoming atmosphere. Successful programs feature problem solving opportunities that

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INFANT/TODDLER PROGRAMS HAVE
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foster “thinking” related environments with collegiality and collaboration.

What Type of Support is Needed to Create a Quality Program?

New programming demands based on recent science, national standards, pedagogy and Jewish values are galvanizing agencies and centers to redefine how they serve young children and families. In order to meet the highest standards, it is necessary to strengthen the infrastructure of programs as well as to deepen the curriculum for children and families. Each of these efforts is far more labor and time intensive than program models of even five years ago. They require more highly trained staff with more time to develop in-depth relationships with children, families and each other for greater learning. This relational approach to learning is also critical to the development of a sense of self, community and Jewish identity for both children and adults.

Recognition that infancy requires the same level of professionalism found in education for older children is also necessary. For teachers, advanced levels of formal education combined with specialized training in child development have been found quite consistently to be associated with high qual-

ity interactions and advancements in child development. Compensation for teachers must also begin to reflect these new requirements.

The very nature of working with infants is complex and often elicits intense emotions in staff. Teachers require extraordinary support so that they can assume the development and deepening of relationships as their primary responsibilities. Sufficient time for teachers to reflect on their interactions with infants and parents is critical to sustaining quality staff and reducing burnout. Reflective supervision on an ongoing, frequent basis is integral to program design in infant/toddler care.

Considerable support, both financial and in terms of human resources, is needed to create high quality infant/toddler care from a host institution. In addition, the nature of infancy requires sensitivity and flexibility in program operations from an administration standpoint. Needs and motivations of infants, toddlers, their families, caregivers and teachers are often quite different from those of neighboring preschool programs, and they must be understood and adapted.

Clearly, the more intensive model that is now mandated requires greater financial resources than ever. However, there is recent

evidence that the cost of providing developmentally appropriate care is only 10 percent higher than the cost of providing mediocre care. Research also demonstrates that investment in the first three years of life can lead to the most long-lasting benefits.

What is the Jewish community's responsibility to families?

In sum, sacred spaces must behave in ways that denote a deep understanding of *B'Tzelem Elokim* — seeing everyone's uniqueness and preserving their dignities. At every step of the journey, people are greeted and contained, life is shared and supported, and a loving community becomes an expectation. Diversity within a non-judgmental environment is celebrated.

Intake that reflects these values (for example, asking parents to voice their hopes and dreams for their children) allows families' uniqueness and history to emerge and spurs parents to engage in the life of the school.

Families crave and need these personalized encounters. It is paramount that we as a community understand the responsibility we have to provide families with purposeful Jewish education at every level. Excellence is in the process. 🌸





Making the Choice for Jewish Preschool

by MARK ROSEN and DINA SHINER

So as I am walking through Moriah Preschool to pick up Ari, my four-year-old son, a teacher says to me: “Do you know what your son did today?” Anywhere other than Moriah, my response would be one of concern for the impact of his actions, but at Moriah this is code for: “Your son’s inner self has shined on us today.” It turns out Ari volunteered me to repair all the kitchens of houses damaged by Hurricane Katrina. The impressive part of this anecdote is not a son’s faith in his father’s non-existent construction skills, but rather that this class of four-year-olds, guided by their instincts, would endeavor to help the victims of a natural disaster. These children spend their days in an environment that gracefully and lovingly uses Jewish values and traditions to guide and focus their energies. This is a blessing for our community which will be shared throughout these young children’s lives. Moriah preschool has shown my family the full potential of our children’s spiritual lives. It has inspired us to find every opportunity for them to continue on the path they have begun.

When we put our first son on the Moriah Preschool waiting list just after he was born, it was based simply on my sister-in-law’s recommendation. What was slightly unusual was that we lived more than one hour away, deep in the city of Chicago, while Moriah was located far in the northern suburbs of Chicago. A few years later, when we received a call from Moriah telling us that our son’s spot was open and asking if we intend to take it, we decided to sell our house and move to Deerfield. Looking back, it seems odd, given how little we really knew about Moriah, to base important decisions such as where to live and raise our children on the local preschool. But Moriah had a good reputation, and we had friends and family in the area. We were expecting our second son, and we had just about finished up the city phase of our lives. So we figured, why not?

Mark Rosen and Dina Shiner are the married parents of three boys, Ari (5 years old), Zachary (2.5) and Nathan (1). Dina is a school social worker and Mark is a kosher cheese entrepreneur (sugarrivercheese.com).

It really takes some time to completely grasp the impact of children on a fully functional, relatively complete adult life. At first, it’s about finding a place for all the stuff and taking care of the children. Then, lots of things always need to be cleaned. Then, there’s the constant effort to be entertaining. Then, there’s lots more stuff and, before you know it, questions and answers and new opinions from these tiny beings. At the same time, there are lots of places to be, and so on. Slowly, our new children teach us how to be their parents. Somewhere in there, it becomes clear that as parents we are actually responsible for much more than what we can see.

Our children are so much more than the totality of their physical needs. What will they become? Who will they be? How will they live? There is a whole world out there that they must learn to understand, navigate and thrive in. As parents, we have every opportunity to help create the values that will direct and inform our children’s lives. Our children are sponges and we get to choose what they will soak up. They are a captive audience at a command performance. Our only choice is what will attract and hold their attention. If we don’t make that choice, others will. One way or another, something will grab the attention of our children. As parents, these are our decisions if we want to make them; otherwise we get the default values of the entirety of our diverse society.

Fortunately, this parental truth does not reveal itself all at once, but rather slowly over time as we make small decisions and see their results — perhaps a music class, selecting a baby sitter, answering a question, making an observation. Soon the stakes get higher, as our children’s minds get bigger and they have more to learn, more to do. This is where I see the genius of Moriah’s approach to both my children and my family.

Moriah Preschool utilizes a philosophy of self-directed learning by creating an environment for the children to explore and develop what interests them. The environment is filled with Jewish themes and values such as the daily, weekly and yearly rituals and holidays. The teachers gently care for and guide our children with love and meaningful Jewish values such as *tikkun olam* and

tzedakah. For example, as the kids in my son’s class became aware of the damage and impact of Hurricane Katrina, they started to talk about possible responses. This led to a *tzedakah* project in which they donated toys to a synagogue that had been impacted by the storm. The children managed every step of the process, from counting the money they had collected to selecting and purchasing the toys. The experience was extremely meaningful for the teachers, the students and their families. I know that when my son thinks about the hurricane, he thinks about the *tzedakah* that his class gave, and he is empowered by the experience. Another example is how the teachers mediate conflicts between the children. They encourage the kids to feel like they are part of a community. As we see in the tiniest ways the outstanding people they can become, we also recognize the fundamental importance of the Jewish values that have guided them along with the confidence to continue on this path.

Both my wife and I were born in the mid 1960s. We had fairly typical Conservative Jewish upbringings. We went to public school, and religion played one role of many in our suburban lives. As adults, we both are strong supporters of the concept of public school — my wife from having spent the past fifteen years as a middle school social worker and I from the fundamental belief that education is the critical factor that enables all residents of our country to share equally in its benefits.

Our community has excellent public schools. They are well-funded and filled with exceptionally trained and dedicated teachers and staff. Given all this, we are in agreement that we would like to send our children to Solomon Schechter Jewish Day School (though we have absolutely no idea how we will pay for our three sons to attend). Both of us have come to the conclusion that an education based on Jewish values will benefit our children and allow them to live great and meaningful lives. More than anything else, this decision has been inspired by our experiences at Moriah Preschool. It was there that we saw and felt the results of Jewish values on our children and recognized the potential that an education based on our unique values will offer their lives. 🌱



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Properly designed outreach programs for parents with young children can have a transformative effect. Parents are faced with a dramatic change in routine when they have a child, and this creates a desire for support and guidance and a receptivity to outreach efforts. When the organized Jewish community offers programming to new parents, they receive needed assistance and positive feelings toward the community are engendered. There is a greater likelihood that they will create a Jewish home and raise their children with a Jewish identity. Intermarried couples may be more likely to choose Judaism as their child's religion.

— MARK I. ROSEN

