

JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER SUPPORT GROUPS FOR SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

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Jewish Community Centers are uniquely equipped to provide support groups for single-parent families that enable participants to develop the inner strength necessary for healthy survival as a single parent or as a child of divorce. The Suffolk Y Jewish Community Center serves 400 to 600 single parents and children each week through a variety of support groups led by certified social workers; Jewish content permeates these programs.

In the course of research on Jewish family policy, I found that with the possible exception of the Jewish Center movement, the communal organizations of American Jewry have not faced up to the magnitude of the issue of single-parent families, its significance for the American Jewish community as a whole.

Chaim I. Waxman (1980), *"The Impact of Feminism on Jewish Community Institutions"*

The rapid growth in the number of Jewish single-parent families poses profound demographic and programmatic challenges to the mission of Jewish Community Centers (JCCs). The Jewish community has deliberated long and hard on proper responses to such demographic crises as intermarriage and declining birth rates. However, for the Suffolk Y Jewish Community Center on Long Island, few demographic changes have had greater practical influence on the program activities and even staff assignments than the dramatic increase in the numbers of Jewish single-parent families.

The growing needs of Jewish single-parent families have closely paralleled the growth of the Suffolk Y JCC and the evolution of its mission as a Jewish Community

Center. The Suffolk Y JCC, a beneficiary agency of UJA-Federation of New York, was established in 1975 in an 8 x 12 foot office with a budget of \$23,000 including the director's salary. When it was first established, its sole professional social group worker provided activities at various synagogues to address the needs of the newly divorced and separated.

Today, the Suffolk Y JCC serves 400 to 600 single parents each week with a complement of one full-time social group worker and six part-time social workers dedicated to serving Jewish single-parent families. It is housed in the second largest facility in the United States and the third largest in North America. This full-service facility is located on a 37-acre campus and has a \$4 million operating budget. The executive director has been with the agency since its inception.

As the Suffolk Y JCC grew during the 1970s and 1980s, so did the population of Jewish single-parent households. According to the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study, the percentage of Jewish single-parent households in the New York area — the five boroughs of New York City, as well as Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties — nearly doubled from 4 to 7% of Jewish households. For Suffolk County, this

percentage corresponds to approximately 2,200 Jewish single-parent households. Jewish single-parent families also comprise 7% of Jewish households nationally.

The Suffolk Y was established at a time of two significant communal developments. First, there was a surge in the number of divorces by Jewish couples in Suffolk; second, synagogue and community leaders were reaching consensus on the need to respond to this changing suburban lifestyle. Suffolk's synagogue leadership seemed to agree that no single synagogue could attract the numbers necessary to develop a viable program and professional services for singles.

As a result of these converging realities, the Suffolk County Board of Rabbis, the Suffolk County Jewish Communal Planning Council, and the Suffolk Synagogue President's Council asked the new YM-YWHA — at the time and still the only JCC in Suffolk County — to begin a program of activities for Jewish singles in local synagogues. Indeed, the Suffolk Y was the first agency in the county to provide support groups for Jewish single parents led by a certified social worker.

VARIETY OF SUPPORT GROUPS

Currently, the Suffolk Y JCC offers a variety of support groups for separated and divorced individuals one evening each week. Bereavement self-help groups meet on another evening. Since individuals deal with problems in different time frames, both open and closed groups are offered. Participants move in and out of the open groups as needed. Closed groups start with a specific enrollment, and the participants recontract to continue every 10 weeks.

An important component in providing appropriate support is the intake process. Intake interviews are conducted by certified social workers or social work graduate interns. During the intake interview the worker makes an assessment as to whether a group situation is appropriate. If the worker concludes that the individual could not benefit from a group, a referral is made

to a Jewish mental health agency — Jewish Community Services of Long Island. Assignments to particular groups are made on the basis of the intake interview, and the participants are involved in the decision-making process to determine the placement.

Each group is led by a certified social worker or a social work graduate intern under social work supervision. Group leaders use the "social goals" model advanced by Catherine P. Papell and Beulah Rothman (1966).

The model assumes that there is a unity between social action and individual psychological health. Every individual is seen as potentially capable of some form of meaningful participation in the mainstream of society. Thus, the social goals model regards the individual as being in need of opportunity and assistance in revitalizing his drive towards others in a common cause and in converting self-seeking into social contribution. The therapeutic implications of social participation makes the application of this model available to group work practice with groups of varying illness and health.

In 1980 Papell and Rothman wrote that the conception of the group as a mutual aid system has become a universal one in all group work practice.

Despite the myriad of issues, age groups, and dynamics that arise in each group, the agency's approach is guided by two fundamental tenets. The first is that the groups exist not as a dating service but as a means to enable each participant to develop the inner strength necessary for healthy survival as a single parent. Dating and even marriages between group members do occur with some frequency. In fact, there have been 125 marriages since the groups' inception. However, they are a secondary gain, rather than a goal of the program.

The second fundamental tenet is that Jewish content and continuity permeate the program. The activities are an opportunity for Jewish singles to meet one another. In appropriate stages, Suffolk Y single-parent

programs offer these activities designed to enhance Jewish continuity:

- dances with other New York JCCs
- Jewish holiday celebrations
- monthly Singles Shabbat Services at different synagogues
- lectures and courses on Jewish issues and concerns
- trips to the Holocaust Museum, Jewish Museum, Ellis Island, and other locations of Jewish interest
- Jewish cultural activities involving children
- programs led by rabbis and Jewish communal leaders and professionals
- referrals to Jewish social service agencies
- volunteer opportunities at Jewish communal agencies, including the Suffolk Y JCC, Gurwin Jewish Geriatric Center on the Y's campus, and the UJA-Federation's annual "Super Sunday"

The group structure loosely parallels the five stages of group development delineated by James Garland and colleagues (1965). Group I is designed for newly separated individuals who are dealing with the emotional impact of their changing status. Typically, Group I members display the dynamics of exploration, approach and avoidance, and establishing preliminary trust and commitments. The frame of reference is the expression of mutual fears, concerns, and satisfaction. Activities are developed to enable participants to get to know each other while allowing for support and distance and "inviting trust gently." Discussion over coffee and cake, for example, is a primary vehicle for facilitating exploration and networking.

Group II attempts to address more concrete and practical issues — financial and legal — while continuing to strengthen bruised egos. The dynamic characteristic of this stage is establishing both individual and group autonomy. Participants test their strength and authority in relation to other group members. In this stage, the danger of dropping out is highest.

Group III deals with re-entry into social and communal life. Participants are provided with support to move ahead with legal, physical, and emotional issues they will confront as a single person. The dynamic characteristic of this stage is mutual revelation and dependency. Ego-building activities are offered to reinforce self-esteem and to address feelings of rejection.

Group IV emphasizes "moving on" and addresses such advanced issues as dating, trust, and beginning to think of a commitment to a new relationship.

Group V is composed of single couples involved in serious relationships. They address such concerns and issues as remarriage, finances, children, stepfamily dynamics, and the reality of the "Brady Bunch" myth.

In addition to offering these support groups to the newly separated or divorced, the Suffolk Y also provides support groups for children: one for children aged 8 to 11 and another for ages 12 to 14. A prevalent concern in both age groups is relationships with both parents, as well as with persons with whom their parents may be involved. Activities are geared to the exploration and expression of the stresses of the changed parental relationships. Last year, the younger group staged a play about their parents' lives. The play was then used as a point of discussion with parents. The children and their parents are also involved in social and recreational activities as appropriate.

Life as a single parent presents unique issues for those with children in the Suffolk Y JCC's infant day care center. Because these individuals find it difficult to attend evening support group meetings, a special Sunday morning group was initiated. These meetings have been particularly helpful by encouraging networking and providing discussion on issues unique to the parents of infants.

Perhaps the most significant outgrowth of these single-parent programs is the Suffolk Y JCC's Annual Singles Conference, which attracts hundreds of participants each spring. The conference offers workshops,

speakers, and vendors of interest to single-parent families. Among the workshops offered at last year's eighth annual event were "How Important Is The Same Religion Dating?," "How To Make A Bar Mitzvah or Wedding With or Without Your Former Spouse," "Financial Planning," "The Get And The Single Jewish Woman," and "The Jewish Male In Today's New Men's Movement."

RECOMMENDATIONS

From 18 years of exploring innovative programming and applying established group dynamic principles to the unique needs of the Jewish single-parent families served, two important recommendations can be derived. First, it is critical that certified social workers lead support groups because of their highly specialized skills and expertise. Professional social workers provide more structure and a serious tone to the unique individual and group dynamics that emerge among the newly separated.

Second, these groups must first focus on support activities, rather than social programs. Dances, trips, and lectures are effective only when they are structured specifically to provide participants with the means to achieve healthy survival as singles, to repair bruised egos, and to nurture inner strength and self-esteem. There

is a vast difference between a social activity and a support group. For the rapidly growing population of Jewish single-parent households, that difference is a critical one and one that JCCs are uniquely equipped to address.

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