

Case Study

Stepping Stones . . . to a Jewish ME

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"Stepping Stones" is a 2-year educational program designed to build Jewish identification and self-esteem in children of unaffiliated interfaith families. Through weekly sessions, children and their parents are exposed to elements of basic Judaism in an atmosphere of caring, sensitivity, and warmth. Emphasis is placed on experiential activities, values clarification, parental involvement, and the development of a "Stepping Stones" community. In the coming year, the program will be replicated in six communities across the country.

"Stepping Stones" is a community project designed to build Jewish identification and Jewish self-esteem in children of unaffiliated interfaith families. Developed and implemented by Congregation Emanuel, a Reform synagogue in Denver, and funded in part by the Allied Jewish Federation of Denver, it serves children from kindergarten through high school age whose parents desire to give them an opportunity to learn more about their Jewish heritage. Over a 2-year period, 30 educational sessions are held from September through May on Sunday afternoons from 1:00 to 3:20 p.m. Parents share in the educational, cultural, and religious aspects of the program, and their interest and involvement serve to bind

all family members together in the program. There is no charge for participation.

The course of study provides an introduction to basic Judaism, focusing on holidays, life-cycle events, Jewish culture, and religious symbols and practice as examined through Jewish literature, art, and language. Although Christianity is not taught in the program, respect for other religions is emphasized in all areas of the curriculum.

THE NEED

The Allied Jewish Federation of Denver Demographic Study of 1983 showed an unprecedented number of interfaith marriages. In the age group between 18-29, 66% of the marriages were interfaith, and in the 30-39 age group, 40% were interfaith.

A long-range planning committee of the federation was charged with the task of developing a plan for needed communal services in the 1980s and beyond based on the demographic study findings. The committee designated several target populations and requested that programs be developed to strengthen Jewish identity and increase rates of affiliation among their members. Interfaith families were one of the targeted populations.

One service to that targeted population that was already in place was ongoing interfaith support groups conducted by Congregation Emanuel. The overriding concern of most couples in these groups was the Jewish upbringing of their children. Because of their own lack of Jewish knowledge, many parents did not know how to provide that Jewish upbringing. They worried whether their children could feel a

sense of belonging, comfort, and acceptance in the Jewish community and whether they would be able to develop Jewish self-esteem and a secure Jewish identity.

Support groups for Jewish parents of children in interfaith marriages were dominated by similar feelings of concern. These grandparents were fearful of losing their grandchildren and requested help in providing Jewish avenues of involvement for them.

In response to the concerns expressed in these support groups and to the federation's request for programs, Congregation Emanuel developed a proposal for a school for children of unaffiliated interfaith children. Such a school would provide these children an exposure to elements of basic Judaism in a congregational setting. This proposal received the support of the Central Agency for Jewish Education, the American Jewish Committee, and the Liberal Rabbis of Denver. After serious debate, "Stepping Stones . . . To a Jewish ME" was one of six proposals approved by the federation on a pilot basis to begin in September 1985. Because the project required additional funds beyond those provided by the federation, Rabbi Steven Foster of Congregation Emanuel agreed to raise those monies from private sources and the synagogue board committed the provision of in-kind services by his synagogue.

An Advisory Committee to serve as liaison between "Stepping Stones" and the broader community was then established with representation from the federation, Congregation Emanuel, and members of the Jewish community. At the end of 3 years, the committee wrote bylaws, expanded its membership, and became the "Stepping Stones" board.

One of the first tasks of the Advisory Committee was to establish criteria for participation in the program, which are as follows:

1. One partner in each marriage is Jewish, one partner is not.
2. Family has no previous congregational affiliation.
3. Family has expressed an interest in Judaism.
4. Both parents are willing to embark on the program.
5. Parents do not plan to send children to church Sunday morning and to "Stepping Stones" on Sunday afternoons.
6. Family is healthy and in no apparent crisis.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The first challenge was to reach the unaffiliated interfaith population who, by their very nature, were not on any organizational mailing lists and rarely read the Jewish press. At the same time, it was necessary to build awareness and understanding of the interfaith population in the general Jewish community.

The publicity campaign had several thrusts. Advertisements were placed in both secular and Jewish newspapers and in their calendar listings. A high-quality brochure describing the program was designed by a professional volunteer and sent to individuals on the federation mailing list, who were instructed to "read this folder and pass it on to an interfaith family." Because of effective networking by family and friends, this brochure proved to be a very useful marketing tool. It offered interfaith parents a partnership opportunity in developing this pilot project.

All forms of advertising invited interested persons to call for further information. Those who met the criteria for "Stepping Stones" were then invited to participate in an orientation designed for parents and children of junior high and high school age. At this orientation, the program was explained in detail, questions were answered, and registration taken.

The response to the initial advertising campaign was much better than anticipated. The program staff expected a first class of 25 children, but soon found themselves in

the unenviable position of closing registration at 60 children, with a waiting list of eight families. The program was actually funded for only 45 children.

In each of the succeeding years, an additional 60 or so children have been served. Although the age distribution varies somewhat from year to year, most of the children are in the lower grades. However, in each year there has been either a strong junior high or high school class, many of whom then have gone on to be a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Some of the high school students saw the advertisements for the program, and it was they who convinced their parents to attend the orientation.

In the 1987-1988 school year, the age distribution was as follows: kindergarten, 12 children; first and second grades, 18; third and fourth grades, 14; fifth through eighth grades, 6; and ninth through twelfth, 6 children.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

"Stepping Stones" does not assume as does a typical Hebrew school that its clients are Jewish. In fact, its major goal is to create that awareness and develop a desire for involvement in the Jewish community. Because it does not have the luxuries of time or continuity that most Hebrew schools enjoy, "Stepping Stones" emphasizes experiential activities that engage the affective realm, values clarification, parental involvement, and the development of a "Stepping Stones" community within the overall synagogue community. An introduction to basic Judaism is provided through the presentation of cognitive material on a developmental and age-appropriate basis, experiential activities, and the modeling of the sensitive, caring faculty.

The program operates on one track. That is, the curriculum is the same for both years and for all age groups. However, because the material is presented in a developmentally appropriate manner, it will necessarily be more advanced in the second year when the child moves to the next grade level.

The school year begins in September with a unit of study on the holidays. This unit is followed by one on Synagogue, Synagogue Symbols, Torah, and the Service (prayer), which lasts between 5-7 weeks. The Home, Jewish Home Symbols, and Shabbat is the next unit. Life Cycle is the final unit of study. Two sessions are devoted specifically to the State of Israel, although it is also covered in context during other units. At the beginning of each unit, parents receive an explanatory letter and guide to the material that their children will be exposed to in class.

At the start of each school year, children receive at least three age-appropriate books on themes of Judaism. The teachers do not go through these books cover-to-cover during the year, but rather choose those parts that enrich the unit subjects. The aim in providing these books is to help each child become comfortable and familiar with them, which will form the nucleus of their Jewish home library. It is hoped that the children will come to see these books as helpful friends and resources.

About ten family programs are presented during each school year. Parents are expected to join their children for all these programs, and siblings and grandparents are invited as well. In the last school year, these family programs were offered:

1. Get-acquainted picnic at which Hebrew songs and dance are introduced.
2. Birthday party for the world: Rosh Hashanah; Missing the Mark: Yom Kippur.
3. Jewish Book Fair at the Jewish Community Center and a visit to the Allied Jewish Federation.
4. Sukkot Fair: ecology and Jewish values of appreciation of and care of the earth.
5. Introduction to Synagogue and Symbols program.
6. Chanukah program: families make menorahs together, as well as other activities.
7. Friday night children's service.

8. "Shabbat Fantasy": 24-hour Shabbat experience in 2½ hours.
9. Parent visitation.
10. Pesach seder: "Stepping Stones" families prepare all the food before the seder.
11. Shavuot culminating celebration.

In addition, a 15-minute all-school community time ends each regular classroom session. This time is spent either in Jewish singing, dancing, or storytelling. Parents and siblings are always welcome to participate in this community time as well.

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE PROGRAM

The educational approach of "Stepping Stones" is based on the theories of confluent education and cognitive developmental education. The faculty are primarily concerned with how children make sense and meaning of what they experience, how their world views are constructed, and how what they learn in class will affect their everyday lives. Education is seen as more than the traditional transmission of knowledge.

Confluent education assumes that learning is enhanced when many functions of a student—cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological—flow together in an encounter with the subject matter. Teaching methods should embody a number of learning styles because different students learn better with different styles. The role of the instructor is to facilitate the interaction of the student's (1) emotional, (2) rational-verbal-logical, (3) intuitive-imagistic-metaphorical functions, and (4) physical activity with the subject matter in an accepting, supporting, but challenging classroom atmosphere.

The theory of cognitive developmental education holds that content is interpreted differently at different ages and stages of life. Cognitive development, which can be defined as a change in the structure of thinking, can be influenced by (1) exposure to conflicts in reasoning, (2) exposure to the next stage of moral reasoning, (3) role

playing opportunities, and (4) a classroom atmosphere characterized by fairness and justice (Wilcox, 1979). The greater the exposure, the greater the cognitive development. The instructor needs to be aware of developmental theory so he or she can stimulate or pace the interpretation of this material through the presentation of age-appropriate content and methodology.

For example, the Bible is perceived differently at various developmental stages. During Stage 1, the preschool child conceives of the Bible as a big book, perhaps with magical qualities. At Stage 2, a child in the early grades may interpret it as a book of stories. At Stage 3, generally from ages 8–11, the Bible is seen not merely as a storybook but becomes a guidebook offering examples of good and loving attitudes. During Stage 4, the child is able to separate the concrete symbol from the meaning behind it. The Bible may then be understood in terms of abstract ideas, albeit oversimplified ones. In Stage 5, the Bible carries the commitments of a religious tradition and evokes strong feelings about that religion, but it is not the same thing as the faith that it represents (Wilcox, 1979).

Activities through which the tenets of confluent education and cognitive developmental education are implemented include role playing, values clarification, rule making, participation in small groups, presentation of moral dilemmas, and games. For example, a lesson on Israel may involve the children in simulating a trip to Israel. Arts and crafts activities might include making maps and constructing a marketplace or the Western Wall. The children could engage in role plays of experiences they might have in Israel, such as worshipping at the Wall or speaking Hebrew. Throughout these activities, the children would be encouraged to identify their reactions and feelings, share information learned with the group, review what they have learned, and then evaluate it.

At the beginning of each school year, class time is spent in the sharing of the children's feelings and interests. Children

are encouraged to talk about themselves, their families and hobbies, and why they wanted to come to "Stepping Stones." This sharing is particularly important because children come from different neighborhoods that may be 20 to 30 miles from each other, and they seldom know anyone else in the class.

A teacher may introduce this sharing by asking, "How many children have a Jewish parent?" All the children raise their hands in response. She then asks, "How many children have a Christian or non-Jewish parent?" Again, all the children raise their hands. Invariably, they look around in amazement and are excited to find that they are not only in a room full of children like themselves but in an entire school of such children. This first positive example of sharing sets the stage for sharing time, which becomes a comfortable part of the child's weekly routine. During each class, time is set aside for discussion and processing of feelings.

ROLE OF THE FACULTY

Instructors selected for "Stepping Stones" must meet a number of criteria, including professional teacher training, teaching experience, Judaic competency skills, interest and openness to the interfaith population, and the ability to be flexible, warm, and caring.

Although teachers receive a basic syllabus for each unit, content development and evaluation are ongoing processes. Weekly meetings are held to discuss those classroom activities that best serve the children, classroom management strategies, possible directions that an exploration of content material may take, and the teachers' own feelings about the material. These weekly meetings are supplemented by monthly in-service sessions, to which experts in the community are often invited.

The "Stepping Stones" program demands that the instructors be attuned to their own attitudes about the interfaith population and that they possess a deep understanding

of the concepts and material they are presenting to the children. Therefore, in preparing each unit, the teachers, both on an individual basis and in faculty meetings, examine their own biases and beliefs. For example, before beginning the unit of the Synagogue, Synagogue Symbols, Torah, and Prayer, all the teachers developed their own definitions of the Torah service and of prayer and what they meant to them. The monthly in-service meeting was devoted to an examination of important concepts in the unit. The teachers then were able to brainstorm together the concepts, activities, and skills they wished to include in the unit.

The aim of each teacher is to create a classroom atmosphere that will

- be nonjudgmental so as to encourage the children to take risks in answering questions and sharing ideas
- promote the acceptance of differences and the unique value of each person
- have an atmosphere of fairness and justice
- promote warmth, caring, and sensitivity
- teach critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- help clarify values through structured exercises and discussion
- provide opportunities for the students to share their concerns, commonalities, and differences
- provide opportunities for children to have fun together, to enjoy each other, and to build a sense of community

PARENT TRACK

During the second year of the program's operation, a parent track was initiated at the request of those parents who wished to participate more actively in the program than attending the required family programs. Since its inception, this track has been very successful, with one-half to three-fourths of the parents attending weekly sessions from January to May. Each week, a rabbi from a different branch of Judaism and synagogue presents information on

basic Judaism, as well as describing the branch of Judaism he or she represents and the activities offered by his or her congregation. The book used in the first year was *Basic Judaism* by Milton Steinberg; this year, the adult study book is *The Book of Jewish Belief* by Louis Jacobs. In addition, all parents are given *The First Jewish Catalog* for their home library. Too, at each session, there is an information table on programs and events in the Jewish community.

Parents have also been given the opportunity to participate in interfaith support groups, which meet weekly for eight sessions. In these groups, they examine issues of religious identity and work toward heightened self-awareness and communication around those issues.

The congregational setting of "Stepping Stones" provides a built-in warm and accepting community for the participants, who gradually become familiar with the synagogue in its many aspects. Families have also been invited to view a wedding ceremony and Bat Mitzvah service at Congregation Emanuel. They are encouraged but not required to participate in services and holiday celebrations.

RESULTS

About 50% of the families who have participated in "Stepping Stones" since its inception have either joined congregations, attend Jewish schools, or have entered the Jewish community actively in some way.

However, the benefits of "Stepping Stones" can be conveyed more meaningfully in these two case studies.

Jane, a lapsed Catholic, brought her family to "Stepping Stones." She was receiving ambivalent messages from her husband who had been raised in Conservative Judaism, but had little use for organized Judaism after his Bar Mitzvah. Yet, he was sending covert messages that he wanted to raise the children within Judaism. Both Jane and Mike were professionals. Jane felt a propensity to the

precepts of Judaism, and its legal aspects were important to her. Mike, although a Ph.D., thought of Judaism in terms of a 13-year-old child. Neither side of the extended family lived in Denver.

The family attended "Stepping Stones" faithfully. During the first year of the parent track, Jane fought mightily for the maintenance of the Christmas tree as a secular symbol that brought her memories of warmth, family, and comfort. Even during the second year of "Stepping Stones," Jane was still struggling with the symbolic aspects of Christianity and their transference into Jewish symbols and meanings. Yet, she studied and questioned diligently. Mike came to most parent track sessions where he displayed warmth, but remained passive. The three children, bright and outgoing, gravitated toward Judaism with excitement.

After the "Stepping Stones" experience, the family joined a synagogue where Jane and the children converted to Judaism. During the first year following her conversion, Jane continued to struggle with transference to Judaism. She was sure that people saw her as less than authentic. Her process of becoming Jewish was and is exciting to watch. It was as if she were surrounded with a Jewish suit two sizes too large and she is growing into it. As she began to understand how symbols have the power to inform our lives, the transference to and fulfillment of Judaism became more and more meaningful to her.

Because of Jane, Mike became more open toward relearning Judaism. Becoming a participating member of the congregation required his letting go of preconceived notions about his past Jewish experiences and allowing himself to benefit and enjoy his new spirituality. The family observes Shabbat and Jewish life with joy and unity.

The family's thoughts concerning their "Stepping Stones" experience are as follows:

Jane: "When we first married, we thought religion wasn't important. Once we had children, we knew it was something we had to think about. My "Stepping Stones" experience taught me a great deal, allowed me to question, and encouraged me to share my point of view—even when it was dissenting.

It put things in perspective for me, and informed decision making was then possible. Once I got over the feeling that I'd never be accepted, my entrance into Judaism was an accelerating process. We all have found meaning in synagogue participation. Conversion for all of us was a beginning positive step. I love staying home on Friday nights and sharing with my family in Shabbat. The children know that it's our special family time to reflect, express our appreciation through prayer, and do things together."

Mike: "The shared exposure in "Stepping Stones" helped us with bonding, but it also created a new situation for me. I had to struggle with new demands and behaviors for each of us in our family unit. "Stepping Stones" showed me that Judaism would meet me halfway. It provided the stimulus for Jane to act and for the children to develop Jewish roots. It was difficult for me to find my place in Judaism again. Our Shabbat evenings provide closeness and warmth in my family. It's vital and important. In fact, it's one of the most important things that happens to me all week. I am learning what Judaism really means."

Daughter Anita: "It's wonderful to know who I am and where I belong. I love to learn about my Jewish history. I am Jewish! Thank you, "Stepping Stones."

Son Burt: "My brother Gene and I get to say the blessings with Anita. I know them all."

One of the most rewarding aspects of the program is working with high school students whose burning need to know who they are is often the first impetus to participation. In many cases, the teenager who needs an understanding of what being Jewish means brings the parents who, because of their own inadequate Jewish knowledge and skills, cannot convey that to the child on their own.

Celeste had minimal exposure to her Judaism as no religion was observed in the home and her extended Jewish family lived in another state. Her close-knit family had

many shared interests and activities, but these did not include religion. However, her parents supported her interest in "Stepping Stones" and attended all activities with her. When she and her father explored colleges, a strong Jewish student body and Hillel were two of Celeste's priorities. The first year of college, her correspondence told of putting the leather mezzuzah that she had made in "Stepping Stones" on the doorpost of her dorm room.

Celeste has continued her pursuit of Judaism through classes and participation in Hillel. In her second year of college, she sent the "Stepping Stones" director a copy of the Holocaust Cantata in which she had participated. She maintains contact with "Stepping Stones," and while on school vacation from her third year of college, Celeste and her family attended a "Stepping Stones" Shabbat dinner.

After Celeste's "Stepping Stones" experience, she wrote: "It has been an experience that will influence the rest of my life. I would like to state that becoming involved in this program was my idea, with the consent of my parents. I can no longer see a point in my life where Judaism will not be a part. I understand that some members of the Jewish community do not support interfaith marriages. However, I do not feel that this should be the issue under discussion in this letter. The problem lies with the children of these marriages. The parents of these children must be able to discuss their options to expand religiously. It is not fair to deprive these children of the knowledge of their Jewish heritage. A person is incomplete unless he has the understanding of his past, and the knowledge to make important decisions in the future."

Her father also wrote a letter, which stated: "Last year, my daughter, age 17, saw an article in the Denver paper describing a program for children of interfaith marriages. The program was called "Stepping Stones." Up until the time she enrolled in the program, she had had very little religious training. Yes, she knew that she was part Jewish, and that we would light Hanukkah candles, but that was about it. As the Jewish parent of the marriage, I had received little if any religious training and thus was unable to help my daughter understand the traditions and heritage of Judaism. My daughter will

be leaving us this fall to enroll at a college in Ohio. During her college search, she was most interested in learning about the Jewish community on campus. I am sure that she will be joining the student Jewish group there. She has found something very meaningful and important in Judaism, and without the "Stepping Stones" program, this discovery would have never been made."

CONCLUSION

Although the children were initially conceived of as the clients of "Stepping Stones," it soon became clear that family systems were operative and that parental involvement was essential to its success. Thus, the entire family can be considered the client.

The program has provided the tools and the opportunities by which children and parents can gradually nurture their ties to the many aspects of Judaism, thereby creating a Jewish identity for themselves. The children become familiar with and comfortable in a congregational setting while learning to identify, define, and recall Jewish words, symbols, concepts, prayers, and holidays. The modeling of rituals and ceremonies is a very important part of the program.

The parent track, children's school, and family programs provide opportunities for families to make informed decisions about their religious future. Teens begin the process of Jewish self-discovery, often new meaning in Judaism is found by the Jewish partner, and the non-Jewish partner is given information, tools, and experiences about Judaism. The family unit is strengthened as family unity is enhanced. Jewish memories are created in a positive and enjoyable way as families are given the tools to link up with their Jewish heritage and the Jewish community.

The 60th General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation (UAHC) Biennial Conference in 1989 adopted the resolution to model "Stepping Stones" as a national program of the UAHC. In the fall of 1990, the program will be replicated in at least six communities throughout the United States under the auspices of the UAHC Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, thereby bringing its benefits to hundreds of interfaith families.

REFERENCES

- Wilcox, Mary M. (1979). *Developmental journey*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.