



Spotlight on: *Jewish Early Childhood Education*

I. A Brief History and Rationale for Jewish Early Childhood Education

Twenty years ago, most early childhood Jewish education was provided by synagogue “nursery schools.” Like other nursery schools of the day, the programs were designed to socialize the children and to meet their intellectual needs. In addition, the synagogue programs sought to develop positive Jewish identity in the young children. Typically, the half-day programs offered a few classes for 3- and 4-year-old children. Most of the faculty members were certified early childhood teachers holding Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. Teacher retention rates were generally very high. The programs were often directed by designated classroom teachers who also assumed the administrative responsibilities such as enrollment and ordering supplies and materials.

Over the past two decades, the status and scope of early childhood Jewish education has changed radically. Early childhood Jewish education programs are now found in a variety of settings including synagogues, day schools, Jewish Community Centers, Y’s and in independent early childhood Jewish education centers. Enrollment in early childhood Jewish education has grown dramatically due to several factors. Baby boomers have had children of their own, resulting in an “echo boomlet.” Jewish women, who are among the most highly educated in the United States, often postpone childbearing. When they do have children, they remain in the workforce (Monson, 1987) and therefore need appropriate childcare. When given the option, Jewish parents prefer to enroll their young children in programs that are under Jewish auspices. (Fishman, 1987).

Early childhood Jewish education programs now provide a full array of educational programs for children from the age of three months through six years, which range from infant care to “Mommy and Me” programs that meet two

hours per week to extended programs that are available from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Schools with 200 children, 10 or more classrooms and staffs of 40–50 comprised of professional teachers with Master’s degrees, assistants with BA’s plus aides are not uncommon. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly difficult to find sufficient numbers of Jewish teachers to teach in these programs.

There is growing awareness that early childhood Jewish education is an important venue for Jewish identity building not only for young children, but also for their entire families. Research shows that parents who enroll their young children in programs sponsored by the Jewish community report increased celebration of Jewish holidays, ritual observance, Shabbat candle lighting and recitation of Kiddush, as well as more Jewish friendships, greater awareness of the Jewish calendar, and a desire to learn more about Judaism. Conversely, Jewish families with children in nonsectarian child care report a decrease in the number of holidays observed and feel less involved Jewishly (Pinkenson, 1987). A similar study by Ravid and Ginsburg (1989) concluded that an early childhood Jewish program, which emphasized parent involvement, is associated with a positive change in the families’ Jewish practice.

II. Effective Early Childhood Jewish Education

A. Characteristics of a High-Quality Program

To succeed, early childhood Jewish education programs must be first-rate early childhood programs and compelling Jewish education and identity-building programs. The programs must not only conform to the standards of excellence found in the general field (i.e., providing the level of physical and psychological safety, educational sophistication, and qualified personnel found in competitive educational settings), but must also add valuable Jewish dimensions (by using Jewish symbols, stories and activities to communicate Jewish values and attitudes, by creating Jewish community in its young students and their families).

The Best Practices Project in Jewish Education (CIJE, 1996) was designed to describe and analyze models of excellence in contemporary Jewish education.

According to CIJE, the following are characteristics of a high-quality early childhood Jewish education program:

- a clearly defined philosophy of early childhood education and early childhood Jewish education.
- strong parental involvement.
- an environment in which parents feel welcome and not “threatened.”
- connections to the local community, particularly the synagogue(s).
- the school/program itself functions as a kind of community or family.
- a safe and inviting physical environment.
- the children go on to further Jewish education, either formal or informal.
- one feels good to be there and students enjoy being there.
- an educationally appropriate environment.
- an appropriate “Jewish environment.”
- a developmentally appropriate educational practice in an “emotionally safe” environment.
- a clear and articulated curriculum.
- an emphasis on teaching good values, and on teaching Jewish values.
- ongoing programmatic self-evaluation.
- good teachers who exhibit a high degree of professionalism.
- teachers who are good Jewish role models.
- a strong professional development program.
- teachers are valued and issues of morale, status and salary are addressed successfully.
- an effective director serves as a true educational leader.

- a particular early childhood educational program philosophy is effectively implemented.
- interesting approaches to specific Jewish content areas.

B. The Role of Personnel

As in every type of Jewish education, personnel is at the heart of early childhood education. The children (and their parents) are at an optimal phase, when they are highly impressionable and their experiences can set the stage for future learning and involvement. It is the early childhood teacher and educator who plays the pivotal role in this process. The most effective early childhood Jewish education programs have a high percentages of teachers with training and experience in contemporary approaches to early childhood education combined with strong Judaic knowledge, background and practice. These programs retain their teachers by means of nurturing, gestures of appreciation and monetary compensation.

However, early childhood Jewish education now faces significant challenges in the area of recruitment, retention and training of qualified personnel. Historically, early childhood Jewish educators have been severely under-compensated. Educators with Masters degrees and certification earn salaries comparable to parking lot attendants, often without benefits. As a result, increasing numbers of teachers without Judaic background (including non-Jews) are being employed to meet the growing needs of the field. This situation will be further exacerbated by an increased demand for early childhood educators in the public domain due to the establishment of universal public pre-school programs. Teachers who leave early childhood Jewish education for the public schools will immediately double their salaries. The Jewish community must immediately address the issue of compensation for early childhood Jewish education teachers if it is to have sufficient qualified staff for this significant form of Jewish education.

Professional development (including in-service education) and supervision and mentoring are also essential for personnel in effective programs. Such practice not only improves the quality of instruction, but also demonstrates concern for the teachers as professionals and thereby encourages retention in the field.

The educational leader plays a pivotal role in effective early childhood programs. The leader’s expertise in the field of early childhood education, Jewish knowledge and

commitment, supervisory skills, ability to work well with children and families, and political savvy to operate well within the organization are central to the program's success. For this reason, effective programs invest in the ongoing education and training of their educational leaders.

C. The Importance of Institutional Support

As noted above, Jewish early childhood programs serve as the portals for Jewish identity not only for the children, but also for their families. The programs set the foundation for lifelong Jewish learning and connection with Jewish community. The professional and volunteer leadership of synagogues, day schools and JCCs must understand the importance of early childhood Jewish education and what is involved in making such programs work. Effective programs receive the active support of rabbis, principals and JCC directors who understand the role that these programs play in influencing the lives of families — and also see them as outreach mechanisms to connect young families with the larger institution.

D. Encouraging Family Involvement

There are several life stages during which people are particularly receptive to engagement with Jewish practices and Jewish community. For young families, their children's early childhood period is one such time. Systematic efforts by early childhood Jewish education programs to involve the entire family are important for several reasons. The support of the family can positively influence children's relationships to Judaism. Children can influence their families. With the child's first

exposure to "formal" Jewish learning, parents are often inspired to start thinking about their own relationship to Jewish community, to Jewish practice and to other aspects of Jewish life. Finally, early childhood programs frequently become mini-communities for families that endure long after their children have graduated from the programs. In this way, early childhood programs can function as bridges to the larger institution and community in which the program is housed.

III. Conclusion

The potential of early childhood Jewish education to provide a strong foundation for lifelong Jewish learning and involvement is evident, and the field has made great strides in the last 20 years. Obviously, though, there is enormous opportunity for future growth. The entire Jewish community must develop greater awareness of the critical importance of the first five years of life for the development of Jewish identity. Every Jewish child should have the opportunity to participate in a high quality, innovative and stimulating Jewish learning environment, taught by educators who possess substantive Judaic knowledge and early childhood educational expertise that will foster permanent connections to Judaism. A Jewish early childhood education lays the foundation for the development of a strong Jewish identity upon which lifelong learning and commitment to the Jewish community is based. Understanding and acting upon these beliefs, will lead to even greater successes in the field of early childhood Jewish education in the 21st century.

For additional information on how JESNA can help you

References:

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