

THE PRESCHOOL PROGRAM IN A JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

by ROSE GOLDHAMMER

Jewish Community Centers, Cleveland, Ohio

THE Jewish Community Center's program in recent years has broadened to serve all ages—almost, as it were, “from the cradle to the grave”—certainly from preschool to Golden Age.

An examination of an existing program will illustrate these points, which will be the main divisions of this paper. However, in order to do this in the most profitable way, I should like to give a little background of our situation in Cleveland.

Background

It has been my good fortune to work as Director of the Preschool Program at Heights Branch of the Jewish Community Centers of Cleveland for the past four years.

The preschool program has been one of the newer developments in the Jewish Community Centers of Cleveland. This department was opened five years ago in the three branches—Arlington, Shaker-Lee and Heights Branch. Each branch carries from 2 to 4 groups of 12 children each, which meet either on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, or on Tuesday and Thursday from 9 to 11 a.m. The advantages of this 2 day or 3 day week schedule are:

1. The preschooler adapts himself to school gradually and this seems to fit into his developmental stage.

2. Since the branches serve wide neighborhood areas many parents have transportation difficulties. These are minimized with a 2 or 3 times a week schedule.

3. The cost of a 2 or 3 times a week school is within the means of our members.

In addition the JCC's preschool program has been maintained on a 2-hour session basis, as recommended by the Cleveland Association for Nursery Education.

In Cleveland JCC's preschools operate on a cooperative plan. One of the aspects of a cooperative is the role of the “assisting mother.” According to the Cleveland Association for Nursery Education standards which we observe, there must be 2 adults for every group of 10 to 15 preschool children. By having one paid teacher and one volunteer mother, a salary is saved; the school can maintain high standards, the child can have plenty of individual attention and still costs can be kept at a reasonable level.

Orientation periods in the form of an institute or meeting are held for parents at the beginning of each year. This serves to explain the school program thoroughly and to present some of the principles back of the thinking and doing in the nursery school. Here, also,

the assisting mother learns what is expected of her. Attendance at these meetings is a required preliminary to entrance in the preschool.

Our fees are \$10 a month for the Monday-Wednesday-Friday group and \$7 a month for the Tuesday-Thursday group. In addition to this, parents are required to become family members of the Jewish Community Centers (\$12 for the year) upon registration. The regular fee covers the cost of the teacher's salary plus necessary equipment for the program. Therefore the program is largely self-sufficient. This follows along the lines of the newer philosophy of the JCCs—that since we serve people who are in a position to be able to pay for these services, they should do so.

Because there is no commercial aspect to the program and therefore no need for profits—the JCC's fee is lower than that of most private nursery schools in the neighborhood while agency standards are actually higher. This helps to bring nursery-education within the means of more families.

For the staff of the nursery school the JCCs secure either a trained group worker or a certified elementary teacher but preschool experience is considered essential with either one. The worker should have a basic understanding of the values of a Community Center, and should also have a specialized educational background, since the job is one allied to teaching as well as group work.

It is felt that nursery teachers should take part in the professional group that will help in the exchange of experience and educational processes. Therefore in Cleveland we relate ourselves to the local group—the Cleveland Association for Nursery Education.

The nursery teacher is considered a regular staff member of the JCCs and as such is invited to staff and advisory committee meetings. Here the teacher

reports the current problems and progress in the school. The teacher also confers regularly with the branch director about the school. The president of the group of mothers becomes a regular member of the advisory committee of the branch and therefore takes part in the policy making of the branch.

Values for the Child

The preschools in the Jewish Community Centers of Cleveland, being on a co-operative level, encompass the value of the usual nursery school, and in addition provide several significant advantages of their own.

In general, the child is helped to grow and develop according to his individual needs. He is stimulated to make social adjustments and growth, to gain emotional control and independence, to respect the rights of others and still defend his own rights, to learn to share and to cooperate, to develop leadership while still developing a sense of belonging to the group; and while all these developments are taking place—to have a worthwhile time with companions his own age.

In the preschool the child has an environment suited to his age group so that he can:

1. Play at his own mental and physical level.
2. Have opportunity for creative expression and imaginative play with a variety of materials and equipment.
3. Enjoy literature and art on a child's level.
4. Discover joys of music and responding thereto.
5. Because the JCCs is a Jewish agency, the program includes Jewish aspects of living with knowledge, associations and attitudes which are forming.

One of the purposes in the JCCs, naturally, is to develop a Jewish feeling in the child. Of course, in accordance with the development of the child, content is limited to the amount he can absorb. This has included simple Jewish songs, games and stories for the holidays. Past Jewish history and the concept of yesterday and tomorrow are too confusing for the youngsters to understand.

We try to give a *feeling about*, an *association with*, rather than specific knowledge. For example: the children dress up to parade in fancy clothes for Purim. On Chanukah they light candles and spin a large dreidel. They also make gifts for their parents and have a party. For Lag b'Omar, they may plant little carrot tops and watch them grow. But throughout celebrating all these holidays, the main focus has been to have fun and acceptance in being part of a Jewish group.

The children say a little "thank you" or Brocha before they have their juice—not that the child can understand what the Hebrew words mean, but he becomes familiar with the sound of the words and learns that this is a gracious way of saying "thank you."

Values for the Parent

One of the great values of the co-operative school is that it provides a developmental experience for both the child and the mother. The child takes the important step out of his sheltered home together with his mother, who contributes to his independence by her understanding.

The mother finds, in our school, a workshop where she is welcome, and where she can see the educational process going on. Through regular participation under a skilled teacher, she has an excellent opportunity for observation and understanding not only of her own child, but of other children in the same age

bracket. Sensitivities and insights are developed, often new attitudes taken on, which are valuable to the child and mother both at school and at home. Parents sometimes set up standards which are above or below the child's reach and so create unnecessary strain and confusion for themselves and their children. In a cooperative school, the participating mother often becomes more sure and relaxed in her attitudes as she learns what other children are really like at various ages. The school program is based on the child's natural pace. The mother who experiences the unhurried, yet meaningful, flow of events at school may find herself making adjustments in the family routine in order to more nearly meet the needs of the child.

Furthermore, the mother may share her problems with the child's teacher and seek her guidance. The teacher may be able to help the mother resolve the problem, if it does not appear deep-rooted, or she will help the mother to secure guidance from other sources, such as physicians, social workers, and the child guidance center.

Very often the school has been able to serve the mother as much as the child. Many times young mothers have necessarily been kept close to home and have had little group experience. Because this is a cooperative, each one must undertake some job. By having a share in the responsibility of the school, the mothers develop along with their youngsters. It has been gratifying to watch both mother and child grow in the program.

These are benefits that are seldom possible within the scope of the ordinary nursery school.

Of course, how to use the mother effectively in the school is very important. The mother's task should not become just a "fetch and carry" one. Yet there are mothers who are not good at handling children and might be a detriment.

Here the teacher has to use her skill and judgment in deciding how much responsibility she can allocate to the individual mother.

In addition to the enrichment which comes from actual observation and participation in the children's class, the parent education program is further carried on through their monthly meetings. Here they are just as one of the regular parent bodies of the JCCs working with staff on policy making. They elect their own officers and plan their own programs with staff consultation. For the most part programs are centered about the preschool child, and various phases of child development are discussed by competent specialists in their own fields. This year, our program includes a social worker discussing with us the emotional growth of children, a librarian to discuss children's books, a physician to discuss safety in the home, a music teacher to discuss the when and why of music with youngsters, and one of the JCC's staff members to discuss the fun of Chanukah.

All the meetings are open to the community and JCC's family members are welcome as well as the preschool parents' group.

Values to the Agency and Community

The agency has had excellent cooperation from the parents of children in the preschool. The parents are for the most part not yet involved in public school PTAs, Hebrew, dancing and music classes, and they are vitally interested in this program, which concerns their child's first step out of the home.

Furthermore, once they become active, willing members of the JCCs through the nursery school, they keep up their memberships. Many valuable members of the regular parents' organization and advisory members were introduced to the JCCs through the preschool. Since we in the nursery school get to the

parent first—we serve as sort of a combining-out process. The mothers who develop leadership with our group carry on this leadership right into other groups of the JCCs. For example, this year, with but one exception, all the officers of the Heights Branch Parents Organization have had their start in the JCCs as parents in the nursery school. Staff and lay people should begin to recognize this tremendous source of new strength which now comes to the JCCs first through the nursery program.

Since the parent now becomes a JCCs member earlier than before, JCCs have a younger group of parents with perhaps different interests. This means that programming needs for younger parents should be considered.

The preschool, further, serves the agency in a purely physical sense. It provides a constructive use of the house at a time when other activities are at a low ebb, namely in the morning when older children are at school.

Today, in many communities, as in ours, kindergartens are overcrowded and understaffed. No child can begin to relate in a group that is overwhelming in size to him least of all—the preschooler who is just beginning his group experiences. This is where the Jewish Community Centers can offer a needed service to the community and to the child in bridging the gap between the protective home and the difficult school situation.

The nursery school, as all other JCC groups in Cleveland, works closely with all community agencies such as Jewish Family Service Association, Cleveland Speech and Hearing Clinic and Child Guidance Clinic. Referrals are discussed originating from these agencies or from JCC's preschool itself.

Because the JCC's preschool is set up primary for so-called normal groups, only one or two special children can be accepted per group. The preschool

teacher should be alert to detect anything out of the ordinary in the child at the preschool level, for to be helpful to a child at this early age by discovering areas of difficulty might shorten considerably whatever special treatment is necessary.

I have tried to paint the broad canvas of the nursery program in a Jewish Community Center. In my brief presentation I have omitted illustrations which would have given flesh and blood to it.

In summary, the first area of the nursery program is common to all nursery programs—service to the child.

The second area, true of some nursery programs, not necessarily all, however, is service to the parents in broadening their horizons of understanding and sometimes leading to treatment where problems exist, by referral to more specialized resources.

Finally, and this is unique in the Centers setting, the program feeds into the group work agency general program by providing a source of supply—of children and adults who participate in various Community Centers activities, and another and very important source of supply of new blood for leadership.