
Raising Jewish Babies: Community-Based Programs for New Jewish Parents

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Introduction

The Newborn Gift program, a joint venture of philanthropies and Federations, intends to provide a generous gift to Jewish families with young children in the United States and Canada. Although a number of Jewish communities have developed gift programs and educational programs to engage new parents, no systematic information about them has been collected. To learn more about these programs and to assist with the development of the Newborn Gift program, the Cohen Center at Brandeis University conducted a series of phone interviews with Jewish communal professionals involved with such initiatives.

To locate programs for new Jewish parents, Jewish communal professionals in every North American community with a Jewish population of 20,000 or greater were contacted. Telephone calls were made to the four major agencies in each community most likely to sponsor programs for new parents: Federations, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Family Services, and Jewish Boards of Education. Although it was impractical to contact every synagogue in each community, calls were made to specific congregations when relevant programs were identified. Interviews were also conducted with some of the regional offices of the Reform, Conservative, and Chabad movements to learn about programming conducted under their auspices. Preschools were not contacted, since the focus was on programming for families with children 0-3. The material that follows is based solely on interviews with professionals and does not include observation of programs or interviews with participants.

This report provides an overview of programs for new parents across communities, describing the motivations for implementing them and the agencies offering them. It also presents a typology of programs being offered. It concludes with a set of recommendations.

Birth – A Time of Opportunity for the Jewish Community

There are a few times in life when conventional routine shifts radically. An old way of life comes to an end and a new one begins. For young couples, the birth of a child is such a time. The birth of a baby is an especially joyous event. It is a time of intense feelings. Parents are excited, exhausted, and full of anticipation. There is celebration and wonder, gift giving and baby naming, reorientation and realization. Friends and family reach out. Connections are made with other new parents, and parents naturally begin to seek support and guidance on how to raise their child.

Jewish tradition has many profound teachings and rituals for the birth of a child. Yet, as more and more Jewish families become less and less connected to the Jewish community, Judaism's richness and depth is increasingly neglected. Jewish babies, more often than not, are born without a proper welcome from the Jewish community, and parents, unlike past generations, increasingly choose not to have a *brit milah* or baby naming ceremony to formally bring their child into the community and covenant.

The Jewish community has increasingly recognized these trends and has mobilized resources and expertise. Jewish education has been a major recipient of this attention. As yet, however, there have not been any systematic, national efforts to reach Jewish parents earlier, before education for their children is an option, when a child is born.

Karen Kushner, co-author (with Anita Diamant) of *How to Be a Jewish Parent* and director of the Reform Movement's Jewish Choice Initiative/Project Welcome in San Francisco, offers four reasons why reaching parents at the time of a child's birth is important:¹

- Birth is a milestone event with the potential for spiritual connections, but parents do not have a framework for the experience. It is the responsibility of the Jewish community to introduce parents to Jewish rituals and customs that can provide them with a structure for the emotions and feelings that arise, and to offer a way for them to express their spirituality.
- Parents in the United States are giving birth later in life and families generally do not join synagogues until their children are in the third grade. It is therefore potentially the case that families will not join until the parents in the household are in their late 30s or 40s. This deprives synagogues of the energy of young members, and increases the likelihood that new parents will find synagogues irrelevant.
- For interfaith families, contact with the Jewish community at the time of birth can be a second chance for couples to make Jewish choices. If Jewish choices were not made previously, the community can help to overcome any uncomfortable feelings about Judaism that may have arisen earlier. If Jewish choices were made, they can be reinforced. If, for example, a rabbi required a commitment from an interfaith couple to raise their children as Jews so that they could have a Jewish marriage ceremony, the decision to have a Jewish birth celebration is the couple's first chance to demonstrate this commitment. The non-Jewish partner also has an opportunity to experience the joy and richness of Jewish tradition.
- Expectant couples take childbirth classes, and new parents look for guidance in raising their child. The Jewish community has an opportunity to demonstrate that it and the Jewish tradition can provide them with support and guidance that goes beyond the resources of the secular and medical communities.

In the following sections, we offer an overview of Jewish programs for new parents.

¹ These points were adapted from a memo written by Karen Kushner, director of Project Welcome in San Francisco, about *Baby is a Blessing*, a workshop she helped to develop. Project Welcome is an outreach initiative of the Pacific Central West Council of the Union for Reform Judaism.

An Overview of Programs

In recognition of the important role that programming for Jewish parents might play, Jewish agencies and organizations in communities across North America have developed an assortment of offerings. Perceptions of need have arisen from findings of the National Jewish Population Surveys in 1990 and 2000, and from local studies that have identified this group as being in need of services.

Program titles, content, format, and sponsors vary widely. Although virtually all communities offer at least one program, rarely do communities have a set of coordinated programs across agencies. Typically, individual agencies – JCCs, Jewish Boards of Education, Jewish Family Services, Federations, and some synagogues – offer separate programs. For the most part, a single agency takes the lead in a particular community. Which agency this turns out to be differs depending upon the nature of the Jewish organizations in the community. In each community, there is a different dynamic among the organizations.

Motivation for Offering Programs Agencies have varying motivations for offering programs, which can be categorized as *outreach*, *in-reach* and *marketing*. Although these categories are not mutually exclusive, it is nonetheless useful to understand the primary motivations behind these programs because an agency's rationale for offering the program shapes content, target audience, publicity, enrollment, cost, and duration.

Outreach Outreach programs are designed to reach Jews who are either marginally affiliated or unaffiliated. These programs can be successful in finding and attracting the former, that is, those who have had some positive contact with the community in the past, but who are not currently involved with the community. Such contacts take place mostly through Jewish friends and publicity efforts. Families can be reached through ads in the Jewish and general press, through flyers posted strategically at doctors' offices, JCCs, and restaurants, and through word of mouth from friends and family who are affiliated. According to professionals who run the programs, the most successful method seems to be through word of mouth from peers. If couples are encouraged to attend with someone they already know, they are much more inclined to enroll.

However, reaching those who are truly unaffiliated – those who have little or no connection to the Jewish community, or whose previous connections have been negative – is quite difficult. While some of these families may encounter the same publicity materials as marginally affiliated families, they generally do not want to be reached and do not enroll. Yet, even in such cases, agencies still believe that it is important for the programs to be visible so that if such families do have a change of heart they will know where to go.

Outreach programs can also target interfaith families. There are *havurah*-type programs that attempt to reach out to this population, and the Reform Movement has developed several programs. The level of such programming and the degree of success vary widely from one community to another.

In-reach In-reach programs are similar to outreach except they target parents who are likely to become future members of a JCC or synagogue, but who have not yet joined. Some families wait to join a synagogue until their children are Hebrew school age, and some wait to join a JCC until they need to enroll in preschool. This happens for two reasons – either they cannot afford to join, or they do not perceive that there is any benefit to joining earlier. Agencies address both of these situations with specific programs. For example, some JCCs have drop-in parenting centers with a library and a wide range of programs for parents and very young children. Parents are given an opportunity to join the parenting center at a reasonable cost without paying for a full JCC membership. Synagogues similarly offer memberships to new members at a substantial discount, but do not have the resources to offer the same level of services as a JCC.

Marketing Marketing is a third motivation. Federation gift basket programs for new parents perhaps best represent the prototype. Federations recognize that new parents have other priorities and are not inclined to get involved with Federations or make contributions. Nonetheless, Federations hope that when these families are older and more secure financially they will remember the gift basket favorably and give money.

Sponsoring Agencies As mentioned above, in different communities, different agencies take the lead in offering these programs. In this section we discuss the roles played by various agencies, and the advantages and limitations of each for fostering Jewish continuity.

Jewish Community Centers In communities that have the most developed new parent programming, JCCs seem to be the driving force. Every community with strong new parent programming had a JCC centrally involved. JCC programs for parents of very young children are a natural offshoot of existing JCC programs for preschool age children and families. The facilities and expertise are already in place.

One shortcoming of JCCs having a central role is that once children move beyond preschool age, JCCs can only offer membership, rather than the type of Jewish education children receive from a supplementary program or a day school. In addition, JCCs do not offer the same sense of community that families experience in a synagogue and are not suitable for life cycle events. But perhaps more problematically, we found little indication that JCCs were referring families to synagogues.

Synagogues Synagogue programs are usually intended for families of members, but are usually open to all. Occasionally, synagogues advertise programs in the general community, but word of mouth still seems to be the most powerful advertising. There is hope for future membership and affiliation, but in many cases, the synagogues want to educate families and bring them into deeper Jewish involvement and higher quality programming without an expectation of future membership.

Synagogue programming has its own set of limitations. First, such programming is invariably limited to synagogues that have a preschool. Preschools do increase synagogue

membership, since preschool parents receive preference in enrollment and lower tuition. However, synagogues frequently view preschools as “cash cows.” They are self-supporting and may also generate revenue that can be used to support other synagogue activities. Thus, it is often the case that money that could be used for the development of preschool staff or for parent programming is instead diverted to other purposes.

A second limitation is that synagogues have many constituencies and priorities. They are not likely to do the sort of publicity necessary to draw new parents in sizable numbers. So, paradoxically, while synagogues have more to offer than other agencies with respect to the creation of a sense of community and Jewish education, they may be in the weakest position to reach the larger community. This is offset to some extent when movement regional offices offer support for programming at synagogues. These efforts appear to be growing, especially among Reform congregations where experience with outreach to interfaith families is already strong and new parent programming is a natural next step.

Bureaus of Jewish Education Bureaus of Jewish Education (BJEs) are involved in new parent programming in many communities, either directly or indirectly. In some cities, BJEs do not provide direct service to community members, but provide teacher support and training. In other communities, it is part of the mandate of BJEs to work with families directly, and they sponsor high quality educational programming, with both Jewish and general parenting content. When BJEs offer programming it is often state of the art, but since BJEs are not membership organizations, there is no immediate opportunity for parents to engage in any further Jewish activities under the BJE umbrella.

Jewish Family Services Jewish Family Services also offer excellent programs. Like BJEs, the mandates of JFS agencies also vary widely among cities. In some places, JFS is a very secular organization, providing direct counseling and social work services and receiving funding and third-party payments from a wide range of sources. In other places, these agencies offer parenting classes, sometimes with Jewish content and sometimes without. We found a number of instances where a local JFS partnered with the JCC.

Federations When Federations are involved in new parent programming, there appear to be two different models. The most common model is to offer gift basket programs. Some Federations scan synagogue newsletters to locate new parents so that they can send the parents a gift basket. A second model is for the Federation to support programming at other agencies so that they are not directly involved in the delivery of services, thus working “behind the scenes.” This might, for example, involve funding a JCC program.

In some communities, Federations did not appear to be involved at all and did not seem to know what was happening in other agencies. In our conversations with Federations around the country, some Federations were familiar with the newborn programs being offered, while others were unaware of the programs that were being offered.

Community Factors Whether communities offer programming, which agencies offer it, and the nature of the programming vary widely. One of the primary determinants of

programming is the demographics of the community. Programming for parents of newborns is more likely to be found in the following types of communities:

- Where intermarriage rates are high
- Where Jewish population growth rates are high
- Where there is a younger, transient Jewish population
- Where funding is specifically designated for these types of programs

Our research found that most of the communities with the strongest programs are in the West and Southwest, where all of these factors apply.

Community size does not seem to be a significant factor in whether new parent programming is strong. We found programs in communities of all sizes – some large Jewish communities had very little programming while other, much smaller communities had very impressive programs.² Size does, however, affect the frequency of programming. Such programs are entirely dependent on the “crop” of new babies – there needs to be a critical mass of Jewish families who are pregnant around the same time in reasonably close geographic proximity.

The cohesiveness of the community seems to be a critical factor. Programs appeared to thrive when agencies have a history of cooperation and the focus is on strengthening the Jewish community as a whole rather than on strengthening an individual agency or organization.

Transience is also a relevant community issue. Some communities have a highly mobile Jewish population. These young Jewish parents have babies without any family nearby. Even though they only expect to live in the community for a few years, there is an especially strong need for a support system.

Needs of New Parents Having a baby and becoming a family create a need on the part of parents to connect with others who are in a similar life stage. There is also a need to connect with more experienced parents and professionals who can guide new parents through normal development and its rough spots. Most communities offer programs for parents of very young children to meet one another. A few communities offer multi-generational programming through synagogue sisterhoods, library programs, or tot programs meeting at housing for the elderly.

Many programs are primarily social in their orientation. They give parents a chance to meet, connect, share experiences, form play groups and carpools, or find a good pediatrician. Sometimes, Judaism plays a part – parents will extend invitations for a Shabbat meal. The parental friendships formed when children are young are often very long-lasting friendships. Synagogues, JCCs and other organizations are aware of this and design educational programs with plenty of opportunities for socializing. Many report that the formation of play groups and carpools can last for a number of years, extending from children’s earliest years to the time when they start Hebrew school.

² For example, Los Angeles has very little programming while Charlotte, North Carolina has a very active set of programs for new families.

Agencies that offer programs and observe these bonds have an added incentive to continue them. Families are more likely to stay affiliated with institutions where they have friends. When needs assessments are conducted both formally and informally, institutions report that first and foremost families are looking for ways to connect with other Jewish families.

Synagogues and JCCs need members in order to exist. As well, there is a strong sense in the Jewish community that membership in an institution is part of what makes one fully Jewish in America. Many of the programs are designed to get families involved earlier than they would normally be, and, in the process, attract some who would not otherwise become involved at all.

New Families and Judaism Families also want to connect with their Judaism. It is useful to make distinctions among three different types of families; there are families in which both partners are Jewish, one partner is not Jewish, and one partner has converted. Families in all three of these categories seek out and benefit from newborn programming.

There are many Jewish couples who were raised with little or no Jewish practice in the home. When these young men and women have children, they seek knowledge of rituals that they did not have growing up. At first, a program such as a *Tot Shabbat* or playgroup is the sum total of their Jewish knowledge and involvement. Organizers of these types of programs report that they lead to more home observance and foster connections to the community. However, there are no research data to support these observations.

Families in which one partner converted to Judaism, particularly if it is the mother, are looking for guidance on how to navigate observance and the community. They are quite receptive and highly motivated. Families in which one partner is not Jewish also seek to explore what it means to be part of a Jewish community. Non-Jewish mothers who have made the commitment to raise their children as Jews are especially in need of guidance.

Conventional wisdom and prior experience suggest that the best way to attract mixed married and other unaffiliated families to these programs is to host them in a non-threatening setting such as a JCC, and to sponsor low-key holiday programs for Chanukah, Purim or Passover. Rabbi Avis Miller, a Conservative rabbi in Washington, DC, describes the strategy. “This is like offering them dessert first. They won’t want anything else at the time, but it won’t be satisfying for very long, but they think that’s all there is.” It is increasingly apparent to the Jewish professionals with whom we spoke that such approaches are insufficient to support Jewish continuity. Rabbi Miller and others advocate an alternate approach. Synagogues should be the primary focus because they offer more substance, and they are designed for life cycle events. It is important for these families to learn that Judaism means serious commitment, but, as Rabbi Miller tells them, “you’re going to love it!”

Types of Programs

Communities offer a variety of different programs, each reflecting the resources of the community and the needs of families. Descriptions of each type of program follow.

Gift Baskets and Visits by Volunteers Gift baskets are usually funded and distributed by the local Women's Division of the Federation or the local Jewish Community Center under the name *Shalom Baby*, although *Shalom Baby* programs are not necessarily limited to gift baskets and often include other programming.

Baskets are sent to both affiliated and unaffiliated Jews. Expectant parents, relatives, or synagogues notify coordinators of a new birth and request a basket. Some *Shalom Baby* efforts happen in two stages. First, the parents send in a card saying that they are expecting and get a small gift. Then when the baby is born they receive a basket.

Most gift basket programs have websites with information about how to send a basket. Baskets are also advertised at synagogues, doctors' offices, kosher establishments, Jewish organizations, and in both local Jewish and secular newspapers. The extent of the advertising depends on the local resources. Different *Shalom Baby* coordinators/directors describe different levels of success contacting doctors and hospitals viewed as being in the best position to give information to those not in contact with the Jewish community. Some *Shalom Baby* programs have networked with hospital chaplains and visit the new parents there.³ Others find even Jewish doctors and hospitals lacking in interest and follow through. Baskets range in value from \$75-100 and are always free to the recipients.

Baskets generally include: information on local Jewish resources; information related to the baby's developmental issues; a gift such as a bib, bag, or Jewish board book; and information on Jewish rituals and/or parenting. Most baskets include coupons donated by local Jewish organizations. These offer discounts on Jewish preschool or daycare, JCC membership, or on an adult education class. More active directors solicit additional donations enabling the community to include ritual objects like candlesticks, grape juice, or Jewish prayer books. Baskets may also include books on Jewish parenting such as *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children* by Wendy Mogel.

Program directors are usually Federation or JCC employees. Generally they are supported by volunteers who help solicit donations for the baskets, put the baskets together, and deliver them. Volunteers sometimes go beyond just delivering the basket and spend time with the new parents at home. In several communities, home visit programs extend for a considerable length of time. These visits prove critical when mothers are new to the area and have little to no support system. In other communities, *Shalom Baby* programs feel that sending a volunteer to the home may be viewed as intrusive by the parents.

³ San Jose, California is the best example of a community where this occurs.

Some communities view the initial contact as a way of engaging parents in additional programming. Sometimes the director will take a more active role connecting mothers to local rabbis and resources.

Volunteers may also have parents fill out interest forms. This information may be entered into a database and is maintained to support further contact. Relatively few communities actually analyze the data in the database to keep track of parents or assess the effectiveness of the gift baskets and programs.⁴ Agencies may not have the expertise or resources to properly use the information. Most feedback about program success is informal. Preschool directors, for example, say that they have enrolled parents using coupons from the gift basket.

Shabbat and Jewish Holiday Programs *Tot Shabbat* programs consist of Shabbat rituals with developmentally appropriate programming. They occur in synagogues, synagogue preschools, Jewish Community Centers, and occasionally are affiliated with Bureaus of Jewish Education. There are generally two age levels of programming – one level for children under 2 and one for children 2 to 5. The younger programming includes Shabbat songs and Shabbat rituals such as play-acting, candle-lighting, saying *motzi*, and a *kiddush* with challah and cheese. When programming occurs in the synagogue and is for the 2-5 year olds, it may include more rituals related to the service. For example, there may be a story time related to the week’s Torah portion, marching with a stuffed Torah, and an abbreviated prayer book that includes the pattern of the service. Some synagogue groups have made up their own *Tot Shabbat* prayer books and may include creative rituals with the rabbi like the blessing of a baby sibling. These services for the older toddlers are usually about 20 minutes. Programming for the younger group in the synagogue context is shorter and does not include much more than the singing and Kiddush rituals. Sometimes there is only programming for the older group, but parents of newborns come for the companionship of other parents.

The synagogues may use *Tot Shabbat* programs/services on Saturday mornings as a way to draw new parents into Jewish practice. Sometimes parents will take turns telling a story related to the Torah portion or will take a leadership role. Synagogue *Tot Shabbat* services can be open to the public, and are a source of outreach to new members. *Tot Shabbat* services may serve the same purpose at JCCs – separate programming that feeds new parents into the preschool. Both synagogue and JCC preschools talk about *Tot Shabbat* programming as part of their Jewish content instruction.

Training Wheels is a similar program sponsored by Hadassah that also covers Jewish holidays.

Educational Programs for Expectant Parents There are three programs run in multiple communities for expectant parents: *LaMazel Tov*, *In the Beginning*, and *Jewish Baby University*.

⁴ One notable exception is the *Shalom Baby* program in St. Louis. They report that approximately 70 percent of parents receiving a gift basket and home visit subsequently come to an event sponsored by the community.

LaMazel Tov programs, offered in a number of communities in the West, were initially developed by a BJE. They are held in synagogues, hospitals, and through *Shalom Baby* programs. In these courses, a rabbi or Jewish educator teaches about Jewish ritual and traditions surrounding childbirth, and a certified childbirth educator or nurse provides medical information. These fee-based programs run approximately six sessions of about three hours each. Leaders report that participants have very positive reactions to the programs when they are run.

In the Beginning is a regional program delivered at the synagogue level consisting of a train the trainer program for individuals who will run *Baby is a Blessing* programs in Renewal, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative congregations. Eventually, the program will be expanded to receptive Orthodox congregations. Participants pay a very modest fee.⁵

The objectives of the course are to: “welcome and bring unaffiliated and assimilated couples into synagogues; to get couples involved in the synagogue at a younger age; and to help interfaith couples raise their children as Jews.”

The three-session course meets for two hours:

- The first session covers the notion of personalized blessings. Parents are taught how to give a blessing when they first hold their newborn. This acquaints them with ritual and helps them appreciate the value of religion.
- The second session discusses *brit* and *bat milah* and provides a resource list of *mohelim*.
- The third session covers Jewish naming practices.

Jewish Baby University is a six session program that is jointly taught by a hospital chaplain affiliated with a local medical center and a rabbi.⁶ It covers such practical matters as techniques for pain management, medical interventions, hospital procedures, birthing options, care of the newborn, breast and bottle feeding and selecting a pediatrician; in addition, the program includes six hours of Judaic instruction.

All three programs face the problem of finding a large enough group that is pregnant at the same time.

Educational Programs for New Parents Many *Shalom Baby* programs offer educational classes for parents once they have received a gift basket. Other classes are offered without an initial gift basket, such as those sponsored by Jewish Family Services. Topics and titles vary widely – programs have such descriptive titles as *Mother Matters*, *Miracles and Mayhem: The Realities of Motherhood*, *Baby Safe*, *Boot Camp for Jewish Dads*, *Arts and Tots*, and *Bagels, Blocks, and Beyond*. Programming is generally a mixture of classes or events with Jewish content and classes that address the parents’ or

⁵ Developed by Project Welcome of the Pacific Central West Council of the Union for Reform Judaism.

⁶ This description is based on the program conducted in Denver, although other communities conduct programs under this name.

baby's developmental needs. Classes vary considerably with respect to Jewish content – some have little or none while others have a strong Jewish orientation. The degree of Jewish content depends upon the receptivity of the target audience, the backgrounds of those teaching the program, the sponsoring agency, and the funding available.

Some programs start out being similar to the educational programs described above, but include children and evolve into playgroups. Such programs are generally sponsored by Jewish Community Centers or Jewish Family Services. Groups of 10-15 new mothers meet with professional educators, social workers, or developmental specialists for 6-8 sessions. Child care may or may not be offered. The leader shares content on such topics as the birth or adoption experience, feeding, playing, and changes in relationships between parents. There is ample time for questions. Once the formal sessions end, parents often arrange amongst themselves to continue to meet as a playgroup. These groups can continue for years.

Playgroups Sometimes, groups begin as playgroups without a formal educational component, or mothers create their own programming. Often, they are started by a facilitator who stays with the group for 1-10 sessions. They may be part of *Shalom Baby* programming and there may or may not be a fee for joining. Playgroups are seen by some as creating a critical network that attracts some who are not affiliated and who are not interested in Jewish programming. The mothers develop friendships and trust which influence decisions regarding Jewish rituals in the home, choice of a preschool, and synagogue affiliation.

Parenting Centers Parenting centers are physical facilities with appropriately designed space and a resource library. They are located in JCCs and often work in partnership with Jewish Family Services. Needs assessments indicate that mothers often feel isolated at home and need to go somewhere to get out of the house. Parenting centers offer mothers a destination where they can drop in anytime to meet other parents, get emotional support, and attend educational programs, playgroups, and discussion groups. Books and information on community resources are also available. Memberships can be purchased independently of JCC membership. Parenting centers appear to be an especially successful model and are growing rapidly in JCCs across the country. Facilities range from one room to a much larger space.

Child Care for Infants and Toddlers with Parent Education One JCC has a program of child care for infants and toddlers ranging in age from 6 weeks to two years that also includes a Jewish educational component.⁷ This program, which costs parents over \$1,400 a month, integrates an early childhood developmental curriculum with an accredited Jewish curriculum for parents, most of whom are working. Children are in the program from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Parent education is individualized the first year, with some group education and consultation with a social worker the following year. Efforts are made to make sure that the home environment is as consistent as possible with the school environment. Parents go through an orientation and needs assessment, as well as an interview process. If parents are unaffiliated, staff works with them one on one. The

⁷ The program is offered at five JCC sites in the Chicago area.

curriculum includes Shabbat, holidays, learning about Israel, and some Hebrew vocabulary.

Mentoring for New Mothers Although currently at a pilot stage, a promising program for new mothers is being conducted jointly by a Jewish Family Service and a JCC.⁸ *Mom2Mom* supports new mothers during the critical first months after the baby arrives through personal contact with a volunteer. Volunteers mentor mothers, most of whom have taken a class on empathy skills between infant and mother, are screened and selected by the local Jewish Family Service. They then receive eight hours of training over four sessions. The first session includes Jewish content taught by a rabbi, and other sessions address developmental needs of the mother and baby. Mentors meet with new mothers several times over a three month period. Jewish Family Service conducts the matching process between mentors and new mothers and supports mentors if a new mother's needs or issues are exceptionally complex. The mentors meet once a month as a group.

Havurah-Type Programming Programming of this nature assumes that some unaffiliated parents will not want to become part of the established Jewish community. Alternative structures and networking are viewed as ways to increase their Jewish involvement.

One approach is to give parents a primary role in educating themselves and their children. Parents actually develop and run their own educational "co-op" programs with the aid of a Jewish educator and serve as lay leaders, which creates a very strong feeling of community and a solid commitment.

One rabbi invites unaffiliated families to Shabbat dinners and has created a database which is used to connect new parents to one another.⁹ Other community leaders create *havurot* for unaffiliated couples that meet in people's homes. Although neither of these is specifically designed for new parents, such families do participate and informal connections result.

Print Resources Most communities have printed materials. One of the most widely distributed is a publication called *Apples and Honey* that has information for parents on how to create a Jewish home.¹⁰ Each issue has information on children's developmental stages, celebrating Shabbat at home, Jewish arts and crafts, recipes, and resources for parents.

Other communities have developed resource guides ranging from simple lists of community resources to 70-page books with extensive information of interest to parents. Topics include information on pregnancy, nutrition, lactation, childbirth preparation,

⁸ In Seattle.

⁹ This program, called *Gesher*, is held in Portland, Oregon.

¹⁰ Produced by the Denver JCC.

bonding and empathy issues, education consultants, diapers, support groups, circumcision, keeping kosher, special needs, local parks and playgrounds, and Jewish organizations that serve families in the area. Guides can be distributed in gift baskets, through doctor's offices, and in synagogues.

The book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* was mentioned as an especially helpful resource by a number of Jewish professionals. It is used by educators for family education, recommended by preschool directors, and is included in gift baskets.

Reading/Literacy Programs While not widespread, there are several programs that support reading and literacy by giving parents children's books or by sponsoring programs that involve reading aloud.

Recommendations

A number of important questions about these programs remain unanswered. Are the current offerings sufficiently attractive to parents? Do they foster long-term engagement? Do they have an effect on Jewish identity and the practice of Judaism? Our conclusion is that at present, newborn programming remains a promising "grass roots" effort that is still at an early stage of development. Some programs may indeed be attractive as evidenced by attendance but we do not yet know how they affect long-term engagement or Jewish identity.

We find that the uncoordinated nature of the programming is problematic. Current programs arise as a result of needs assessments by individual agencies and organizations to help attain their individual mission. A community-wide vision is rare and a national viewpoint is non-existent.

This is especially noticeable when comparisons are made to Jewish education. Jewish education has a number of national organizations like JESNA and CAJE that provide coordination, planning, development, and training at a national level. Nothing comparable exists for newborn programming. It currently consists of many well-intentioned but underfunded and uncoordinated efforts that have not been planned with a long-term perspective and have not been properly evaluated.

Support Programs and Program Providers Some of the existing programs for new parents are very promising and are in need of financial support to see if they can influence engagement with the community. In addition, they are offered only in certain communities and need to be replicated so they can be offered elsewhere. At the present time, word of mouth is the only mechanism for accomplishing this since there are no networks or resources for new parent programs. Several areas deserve attention:

- Resources are needed to support new and existing programs
- A national reference manual of successful programs should be created
- A conference of Jewish communal professionals who conduct new parent programming should be held so that they can network and share success stories

- Funding is needed so that interested Jewish professionals can attend training to acquire knowledge and skills to offer and develop these programs

Include an Appropriate Level of Jewish Content in New Parent Programs Another unanswered question from our observations can be expressed as “How much Jewish is too much Jewish?” One of the conclusions we draw is that there is a delicate balance with respect to the amount of Jewish programming that programs for new parents include. Agencies are afraid that if programs are “too Jewish,” they will scare potential participants away. At the same time, if programs do not have much Jewish content, then there is little chance that parents will be drawn to the community long-term, especially when they can get essentially the same information from secular and medical sources.

The question is whether “anything goes.” Does there need to be a minimum level of Jewish content for programs to be eligible for funding? Is it sufficient to simply foster some degree of identification with the Jewish community and connections with other Jews, or is Jewish education also important as a goal?

Support New Families at Synagogues Experienced Jewish communal professionals and rabbis that we interviewed felt that the best chance for long-term affiliation occurs when new parents become involved with synagogues, rather than with JCCs or other Jewish agencies. However successful and popular agency and JCC programs are, the environment does not offer the same degree of community and Jewish education as a synagogue. Furthermore, agency programs in particular tend to be one-shot efforts with little or no follow-up, guaranteeing that parents will need to go elsewhere if they want to continue their Jewish journey. The only “elsewhere” with a real chance at creating connections to the community is a synagogue.

Attracting new families to synagogues is an ongoing problem for the Jewish community and needs to be addressed to foster long-term affiliation. One way to accomplish this is to subsidize synagogue membership for new families beyond existing levels. Most synagogues offer a discount for the first year of membership, but it is likely that a disproportionate number of young families fail to rejoin when their membership fee doubles after the initial year. Families need more than a year to establish a financial footing that will enable them to maintain membership fees that cost in excess of \$1,000 annually, especially when they are also paying preschool tuition.

Membership discounts will not attract families, however, if the synagogue is not attractive. Suitable programming for new families is one way to accomplish this. Regional and national efforts by the Reform and Conservative movements to develop programming need to be supported.

Preschools within synagogues are a natural attracting force, yet there is often a short-sighted perspective. As mentioned earlier, synagogues view preschools as “cash cows” because they are not only self-supporting but revenue-generating. Federations do not support synagogue-based preschools because they do not need funds. This is true only up to a point. Because synagogue preschools do not have additional funding, they are unable

to train their staff adequately and do not have the resources to do programming for parents. Preschool parents are an obvious population for adult education, but there is little done for them beyond such programming as *Tot Shabbat*. Financial support for adult education programming at synagogue preschools would draw in more parents and strengthen affiliation.

Foster Relationships with the Local Medical Community Some of the most successful programs we observed had tie-ins to their local medical community.¹¹ While HIPAA¹² makes it unlawful for physicians or hospital chaplains to give information about families to outsiders, there is nothing restricting physicians or chaplains from distributing information that can be voluntarily acted upon or ignored by parents. We see the medical community, when cooperative, as being an important partner in reaching families that would not otherwise be reached.

Recognize Distinctions Among the Unaffiliated A market segmentation approach needs to be taken when thinking about unaffiliated families. It is useful to make several distinctions.

First, there are families who are not affiliated simply because they have not found a place in the Jewish world that feels like home. Some rabbis and communities have attempted to address the needs of this group with non-traditional programming and non-threatening venues. These families are not negative about Judaism and the Jewish community, nor are they indifferent, but they have not yet found something positive that draws them in. Some may indeed be attracted to traditional settings and are just not aware of options.

A second group consists of the intermarried. Many parents have not decided at the time of birth what religion their child will be raised in – the Jewish community has an opportunity to influence the choice. The Reform Movement has the most experience with this group and their expertise should be consulted.¹³ Different approaches for this group may be necessary.

A third group consists of those who have a negative view of Judaism. This group cannot be expected to come forward and embrace the community at first, even if they do decide to take advantage of certain programs.

Programs Thrive When Jewish Communal Professionals are Passionate It has become apparent from our observations that new parent programs flourish when there is a combination of resources, skill, and enthusiasm. When Jewish communal professionals who possess early childhood expertise see reaching new parents and unaffiliated Jews as

¹¹ In Denver, for example, Jewish Baby University is held at the Rose Medical Center and is taught by the Jewish hospital chaplain.

¹² Health Insurance Portability And Accountability Act Of 1996.

¹³ See Chertok, F., Rosen, M., Sales, A. & Saxe, L. (2001). *Outreach Families in the Sacred Common: Congregational Responses to Interfaith Issues*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

a mission and a passion, they are much more likely to create successful programs and to generate the resources necessary to fulfill their mission. Such individuals need to be identified and supported.

Foster Coordination Across Agencies We found only a few communities where programming took place in the context of a community-wide vision. What we observed instead were a lot of very well-intentioned programs that were sponsored by individual agencies to carry out their particular mission. Cooperation was the exception rather than the rule. Studying those communities where cooperation and coordination does exist may yield useful lessons about how to achieve it.

Follow-Up with Parents and Conduct Research While there were many anecdotal stories about program success in our conversations, virtually none of the communities we spoke with had done follow-up with participants or research on the impact of their programs. We feel strongly that research should be conducted on programs so that lessons learned can be continuously used to improve programs as they develop and grow. We heard lots of stories about program success, but large attendance at a one-shot event is not necessarily a formula for Jewish continuity.

Communities should commit resources to the development of a database so that all contacts are recorded, and information in the database is analyzed.

Websites are a very useful way to inform parents about programs and put them in touch with other parents.

Foster Personal Relationships Personal relationships are the building blocks for everything else. Repeatedly, we heard that parents came to programs to meet other parents. Jewish content was secondary. We also heard from multiple sources that word of mouth from peers was the best way to bring in new people. Relationships are at the heart of community, and parents will become part of a community if they develop relationships with other parents, with Jewish communal professionals, and with Jewish clergy. Program content is likely to be forgotten. But friendships are potentially lasting. Jewish friends can influence future choices, teach about Jewish rituals, and give Judaism a positive face.