



## Spotlight on: *Jewish Family Education*

### I. A Brief History and Rationale for Jewish Family Education

There was a time when Jewish enculturation and identity development was a more spontaneous, organic absorption process. The Jewish calendar determined the rhythm of Jewish life. Home celebrations and neighborhood observance of Shabbat, holidays and Jewish life milestone events were the contexts in which Jewish children first became familiar with Jewish customs and traditions, as well as law, language, literature and lore. Formal education was a complement and extension to the Jewish identity forged in the home and neighborhood. However, as generations of Jews became more acculturated into diaspora society (especially in America), the relative balance between home and school shifted. For most non-orthodox American Jews, the school became the primary, rather than complementary venue for Jewish education.

Jewish family education, as we know it today, grew out of the convergence of several forces. Heightened concerns about assimilation led to increased anxiety about Jewish continuity. Jewish community leaders came to view Jewish education as the “last best hope” for ensuring Jewish perpetuation and enhancement. Professionals in the Jewish community, primarily educators and rabbis, sought ways to increase the Jewish and educational effectiveness of their institutions and educational programs.

At the same time, these leaders perceived discontinuities between family observance, identity and values and what was being taught in the schools and synagogues. Recognizing the family as the primary influence shaping children’s Jewish identity, and observing that children rarely view Jewish learning and practice as relevant or functional in their lives unless it is modeled in the home, Jewish educators sought to devise and provide Jewish

educational activities that would impact on the entire family unit.

### II. Models and Approaches

Today, Jewish family education is found in multiple institutional settings including congregational and day schools, JCCs, synagogues, early childhood education centers, summer camps, retreat centers and museums. Numerous models and approaches for the field have emerged over the past two and a half decades. They include:

#### A. Parallel Classes for Parents

The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism’s PEP: Parent Education Program, and the PACE program created by Jo Kaye are notable examples. In these programs, parents (usually of students in the lowest grades) attend classes to learn the content their children are covering, albeit on an adult level.

#### B. Commercial and movement-based materials for parents and children to use together in their homes to learn about Jewish topics and to trigger discussions related to Jewish values. Such materials include

1. *Home Start* (activity kits for preschool children and their parents) by Hy Chanover was developed by Baltimore’s Central Agency for Jewish Education and marketed by Behrman House Publishers.
2. Vicki Kelman produced *Windows* (activity packets for pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah age students and their parents) through the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education.
3. Torah Aura Publishers produced a series of *Building Jewish Life Activity Books* for young children and their families.

#### C. Community-wide “mega-events” that bring together large numbers of families from across the Jewish community for exciting experiential educational activities such as sukkah-building workshops at Home Depot, Hanukkah learning expos at the zoo, or family

mitzvah days. These programs are vehicles for community-building, outreach, and inter-generational learning, and often serve as models and catalysts for ongoing follow-up programming.

Exemplary programs of this type have been developed by central agencies for Jewish education, federations and JCCs. Examples include: JEFF (Jewish Education For Families) in Detroit and MetroWest NJ as well as programs developed by SAJES (the Suffolk Association for Jewish Education), and Philadelphia's Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education.

**D. Grade-level parent/child events** that involve parents in learning activities related to the grade curriculum (e.g., a simulated or real Shabbat meal for kindergartners and their parents; a Havdalah program that includes learning about the ceremony, making the necessary ritual objects, and performing the ceremony for third graders and their parents). Variations on this approach include holiday celebrations, series of thematic programs, congregation- or school-wide events or series, and/or a year-round program which explores a specific theme or area of study.

**E. Jewish Family Curricula to Achieve Articulated Educational Goals**

For example:

1. The Cooperating School Network of The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation developed a multi-year inter-generational curriculum for its schools and congregations dealing with key values in Reconstructionist ideology including *kedusha* (holiness), *hiddur mitzvah* (enhancing *mitzvot*), *Tzionut* (Zionism), etc.
2. Vicki Kelman's *Family Living Room: Linking Families into A Jewish Learning Community* is a curriculum for family-learning havurot.
3. BBYO's Center for the Family developed a series of curricular units for parents and teens to learn together.

**F. Inter-generational or family schools that augment or replace traditional religious school programs.**

For example:

1. Families at Baltimore's Beth El Congregation may either enroll their children in a traditional afternoon religious school program or in Mishpacha which combines parallel learning for parents and children with intergenerational learning.

2. All families at Congregation Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley, PA participate in a Shabbat-centered educational program that incorporates learning and prayer for all ages.
3. *Explorations* is an experiential education program for parents and children at Temple Sholom in New Milford, CT that is organized around exploration of fundamental Jewish themes.

**G. Intensive Venues**

Retreats and Shabbatonim, havurot, family camps and carefully designed family Israel trips can be powerful experiences to propel families on their Jewish journeys, especially when care is taken to bridge these experiences with other more ongoing involvements.

**H. Online Resources**

Web sites such as [www.jewishfamily.com](http://www.jewishfamily.com) and [www.interfaithfamily.com](http://www.interfaithfamily.com) offer families convenient ways to learn about new and ancient Jewish ideas and engage Jewishly from the comfort of their own homes.

**III. What It Takes to Implement Effective Jewish Family Education on the Institutional Level**

The effectiveness of family education in any setting depends on a number of inter-connected factors including:

**A. A Fertile Environment and Leadership Team**

There must be lay and professional idea champions to serve as advocates and cheerleaders for the idea of Jewish family education, and to provide the initial planning and labor necessary to implement and ingrain the initiative.

**B. Appropriate Organizational Infrastructure**

Jewish family education programs are most successful in organizations that have appropriate lay and professional infrastructure to support them. This includes a formal lay committee as well as a professional team including the Jewish family educator and all other appropriate staff (e.g., rabbi and cantor, head of school, executive director, etc.).

**C. A Skilled and Trained Jewish Family Educator**

Planning and implementing successful Jewish family education programs requires a multi-faceted experiential educator who:

1. has depth and breadth of knowledge of Judaica, human development, family and group dynamics;
2. can relate to parents, children and families as a whole;
3. has impeccable organizational skills;
4. and is utterly enthusiastic and energetic.

It is possible to receive a certificate in Jewish family education from a number of Graduate Schools of Jewish Education and some local central agencies for Jewish education.

#### **D. A Strategic Planning Process**

Depending on time frame, resources and organizational culture, the institutions should adopt a formal or informal strategic planning process beginning with an environmental scan and needs assessment to get a clear picture of the groups it wishes to reach with JFE, including their demographic composition, interests, educational and religious background, family composition, etc. Leadership should also reflect on where and how JFE can and should fit into the existing institutional landscape (e.g., should it begin in the school or be congregation-wide.) They should proceed to articulate goals and design programs that are consistent with them. Ongoing evaluation and mechanisms for making mid-course corrections should be part of the process.

#### **E. Financial Resources**

There must be an appropriate budget for JFE to cover staff, materials, program costs, etc.

- F. Access to community resources** for training, consultation, networking, programmatic materials, financial resources, advocacy, etc. is essential. Community resources can contribute greatly to the effectiveness of Jewish family education on the organizational level.

### **IV. How the Community Can Support Effective Jewish Family Education**

#### **A. Training**

Several communities provide courses to train Jewish family educators through their central agencies for Jewish education, sometimes in conjunction with a local institution of higher learning. Some communities provide funding for teams of professional and lay

leaders to attend the annual Whizin Institute at the University of Judaism for training.

#### **B. Salary Subventions**

Creating a new position for a Jewish family educator is often beyond the financial capability of an organization. Salary subvention grants provided by a number of communities encourage organizations to create JFE positions by offering multi-year matching grants to subvent salaries, and to give the institutions time to gradually absorb the costs into their operating budgets. These salary subventions also ensure that there will be positions available when educators complete the training programs.

#### **C. Consultation and Coordination**

More than a dozen communities have Jewish family education consultants on their central agency staffs. These consultants advise family educators in each of the local organizations, provide educational resources and training, develop programs and curricula, guide and facilitate strategic planning processes for organizations, coordinate networks of family educators, and sometimes plan and implement community-wide Jewish family education mega-events.

#### **D. Networking**

Jewish family educators benefit from sharing ideas and resources and from collegial mentoring. Jewish Family Educator Networks are often staffed and administered by the JFE consultants at the central agency for Jewish education.

#### **E. Educational Resources**

Community clearinghouses of programmatic materials and educational resources are valuable assets that improve the quality of JFE programs and make life easier for Jewish family educators.

#### **F. Financial Resources**

Numerous communities provide program grants to congregations, schools and other communal organizations for innovative Jewish family education initiatives. Funding is sometimes part of a Continuity/Renaissance & Renewal Grant Initiative.

#### **G. Mega-Events**

A number of communities have launched community-wide Jewish family education mega-events (e.g.,

Havdalah at the Planetarium, Hanukkah at the Zoo, Tishrei Train), especially in the early years of their initiatives. These highly visible, often elaborate extravaganzas raise community interest and excitement about Jewish family education, and serve as the catalysts for deeper, ongoing programs in individual organizations.

#### H. "Wrap-Around" Support

In truth, all of the above components are needed to provide effective and successful Jewish family education. Jewish family education is most successfully implemented on the institutional level when there is a "wrap-around" support system provided by the community. Boston's Sh'arim initiative provides the paradigm:

- Matching grants encourage and allow educational institutions to create positions and hire Jewish family education professionals.
- Each professional is required to enroll in intensive ongoing training and professional development and to participate regularly in a professional Jewish Family Educators Network.
- A community consultant mentors the JFE professionals, staffs the network, and provides consultation to the professionals and their educational institutions regarding strategic planning, organizational development and programmatic.
- The educational institutions are required to implement a strategic planning process that

includes needs assessment, goal setting and ongoing evaluation.

- The community has a clearinghouse to disseminate educational resources for JFE.
- Participating educational institutions are eligible to apply for program grants for innovative JFE programs.

#### V. Conclusion

In the short span of a few decades, Jewish family education has established itself as an integral part of the Jewish educational landscape of North America. There are few congregations, schools or educational institutions that have not offered some type of Jewish family education program at one time or another. Some truly stellar programs and educators lead the field. However, there is still great opportunity for growth. High-quality Jewish family education is not universally available, and the possibilities for providing creative engaging learning opportunities for families have only begun to be tapped.

For additional information on how JESNA can help you or your community make a difference in Jewish family education, please contact JESNA's Information Solutions Hotline 212-284-6897 or [questions@jesna.org](mailto:questions@jesna.org).

These Spotlight papers have been prepared by JESNA to provide funders and other community leaders with a brief overview of important areas in Jewish education.