

Jewish Education and Jewish Identity: Findings from the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990

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Jewish education as it relates to Jewish identity and commitment has been the subject of much interest for many years. A particularly intensive part of this discussion has been the value of various kinds of Jewish education — supplementary versus day school, formal versus informal, the value of an Israel experience (see, for example, Bock, 1977; Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1990; Kelman, 1992; London and Chazan, 1990; Sidorsky, 1977). Understanding the role of Jewish education has become even more urgent since publication of results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Kosmin et al, 1991). Its findings of a diminution of Jewish identity and observance and heightened levels of intermarriage have made concerns with Jewish continuity a priority item on the community's agenda.

Unfortunately, little systematic research exists and few data sets have been available for an unbiased assessment of the relation of Jewish education to facets of Jewish identity. NJPS-1990 provides such an opportunity, within the limits of the information it collected. Exploitation of this data source on the Jewish education of adults and children, when used in conjunction with data on individual characteristics and household practices can provide important insights on the role of Jewish education. The ability to undertake these analyses for various segments of the Jewish population — those born or raised as Jews, those currently identified as Jews, children who are being raised as Jews or non-Jews — adds considerably to the value of the data. This paper will first examine the relation of Jewish education to the strength of Jewish identity of adult respondents. It will then turn to the Jewish education of the children, describing their Jewish education and assessing the impact of their parents' Jewish education on the children.

1. The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study on Jewish education undertaken in collaboration with Sylvia Fishman of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. For full reports of the study, see Fishman and Goldstein, 1993, and Goldstein and Fishman, 1993.

The Data²

NJPS-1990 asked a series of questions dealing with Jewish education, but the content of the questions differed for the respondents and for the other members of the household. Respondents were asked the number of years and type of Jewish education they had received and about their participation in programs of Jewish education in the year preceding the survey. For other members of the household, information was solicited only on the number of years of Jewish education, if any. Only for children age 6–18 did the questions go further to encompass current enrollment, type of schooling, informal activities, and reasons for non-enrollment if not currently in a program of Jewish education. The extent of the current analysis is therefore constrained by the type of information available; it is further restricted to encompass only those segments of the population who are the appropriate individuals for a given focus.

When assessing the relation of Jewish education and Jewish identity among adult respondents, the analysis is limited to those respondents who were either born or raised Jewish. Excluded, therefore, are converts to Judaism, but included are those persons who were born/raised Jewish and who in the survey identified themselves as having some religion other than Judaism or no religion. Also excluded were those members of the household who had never been Jewish and who continued to be identified as non-Jews. Since, for all adult respondents included in this study information was available on years and type of Jewish education, it was possible to develop an index of Jewish education that incorporated both aspects.³ The index of Jewish education was then related to personal socio-demographic characteristics and to religious practices and participation in the formal structure of the Jewish community.

The data on adult respondents allowed assessment of changes in intensity and gender differences in Jewish education over time. It was also possible to relate the intensity of Jewish education (as defined by the index of Jewish education) to a variety of behavioral and attitudinal variables. For our purposes today, the focus will be on membership in Jewish organizations, membership in synagogues, and intermarriage. (For a more extensive analysis, see Fishman and Goldstein, 1993.)

The information respondents provided on the characteristics of children living in the household, and, for those age 6 to 18, on their Jewish education allowed assessment of the relation between formal and informal Jewish education of the children. In addition, we can relate the children's Jewish education to that of their parents. Of particular interest here is the relation of parents' education to whether

2. The methodology of the National Jewish Population Survey is presented by Waksberg, 1996.

3. Jewish educational experience was indexed into an eight-fold classification: none, less than 3 years of any type of schooling, 3–5 years of Sunday school only, 6 or more years of Sunday school only, 3–5 years of supplementary school, 3–5 years of day school, 6 or more years of supplementary school, 6 or more years of day school.

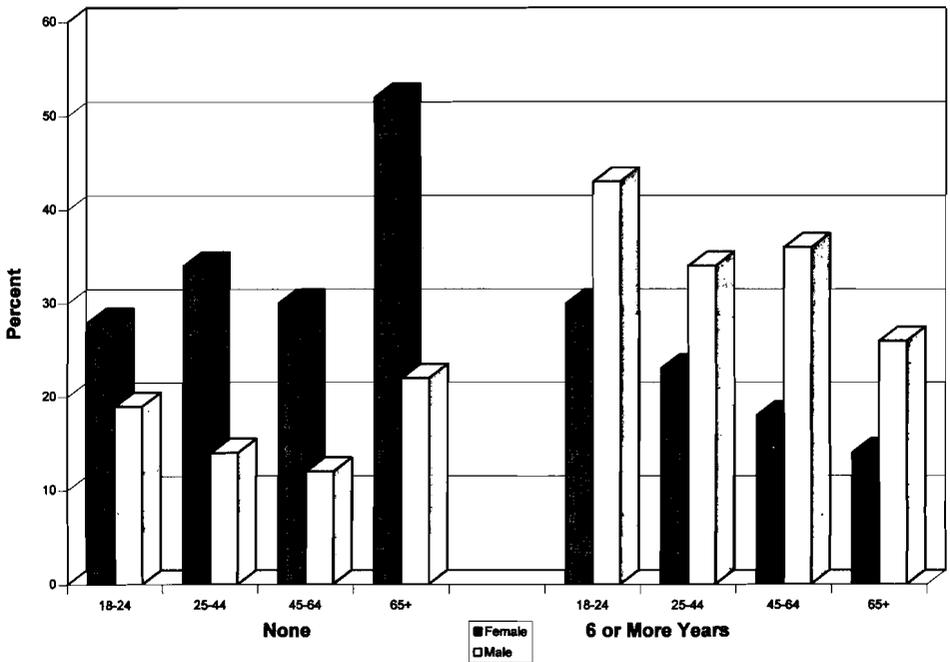
the child is being brought up Jewish. (Fuller discussion of factors related to children's Jewish education is found in Goldstein and Fishman, 1993.)

We turn now to the results of our analyses, focusing first on the adult respondents and then on the children age 6 to 18.

The Jewish Education of Adult Respondents

Of all adult respondents who were born or raised Jewish, 26 percent had received no formal Jewish education and 27 percent had received six or more years. These percentages vary considerably, however, by age and gender, and reflect both the growth of the day school movement in the United States and the increasing emphasis on equal Jewish education for boys and girls.

FIGURE 1. AGE AND GENDER DIFFERENTIALS IN RECEIVING NO JEWISH EDUCATION OR SIX OR MORE YEARS — ADULT RESPONDENTS

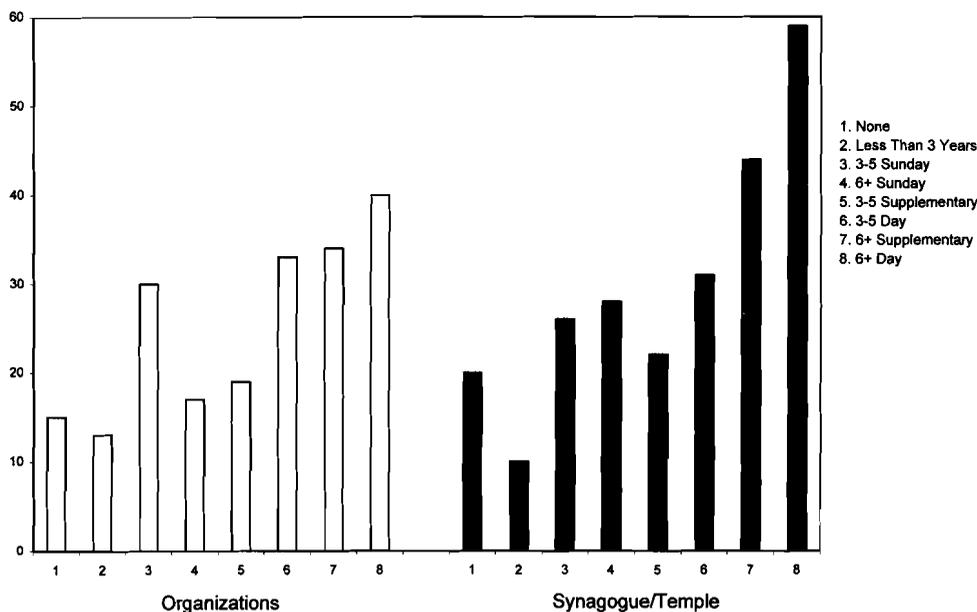


A substantial gender gap in Jewish education is evident (Figure 1). Women over age 24 are more than twice as likely as men not to have received any Jewish education and much less likely to have received 6 or more years. These differentials are considerably narrower among the 18–24 year old respondents, although women still lag. Data not presented in the figure also reflect the growth of the day school movement in the United States. Whereas only 9 percent of the men and 1 percent of

the women age 65 and over had had six or more years of day school education, among the youngest group of respondents, the respective percentages were 13 percent for men and 10 percent for women.

American Jews have clearly had a wide variety of experiences in the intensity of their Jewish education, with many factors contributing to the length and kinds of schooling obtained. Does this childhood training bear any relation to the kinds of commitments and strength of identity of the respondents as adults? NJPS data have been explored to provide insights on this question. They indicate that intensity of Jewish education is directly related to levels of Jewish commitment as measured by a variety of behavioral and attitudinal indicators. Our focus is on three facets of community involvement: membership in organizations, membership in synagogue, and intermarriage.

FIGURE 2. PERCENT BELONGING TO ANY JEWISH ORGANIZATION AND SYNAGOGUE/TEMPLE, BY INDEX OF JEWISH EDUCATION — RESPONDENTS AGE 25–44

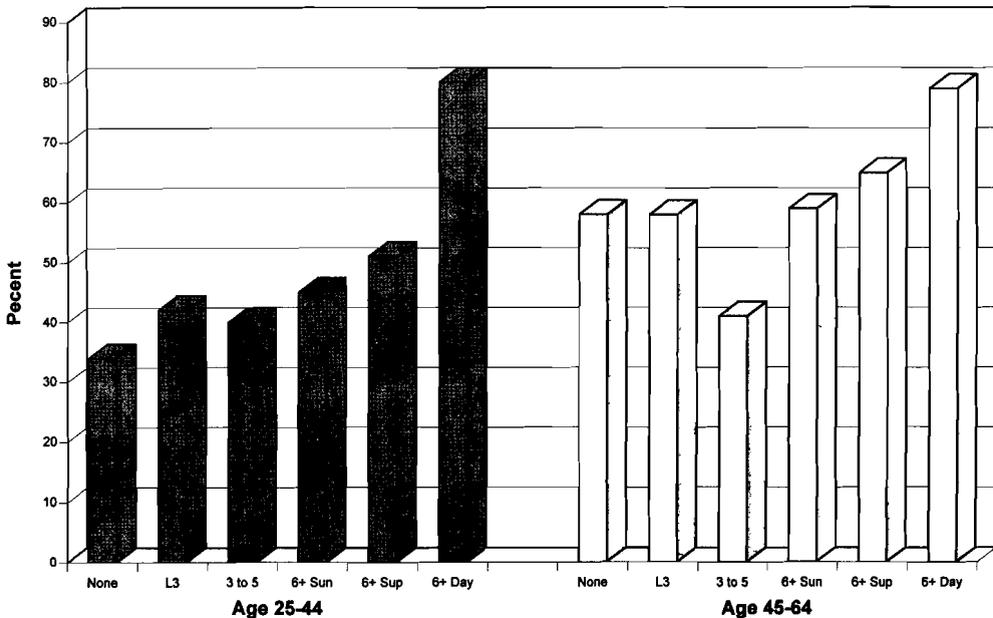


Membership in Jewish organizations is clearly related to intensity of Jewish education (Figure 2). Persons with day school education or 6 or more years of supplementary schooling are much more likely to be members of Jewish organizations than others, with the exception of those with 3–5 years of Sunday

school. Further exploration of this relation was undertaken through a multiple regression analysis that allowed for controls of age, sex, foreign-born status, marital status, and region of residence. Also controlled were branch of Judaism, whether friends were Jewish, and whether the household was mixed or not. Even with all these controls, Jewish education remained significantly related to the number of memberships: Persons with 6 or more years of day school education on average held 0.7 more memberships than those with no Jewish education at all.

A similar relation characterizes synagogue membership. The overall pattern here is clear and strong: Increasing intensity of Jewish education is related to higher levels of synagogue membership. This pattern is even more pronounced for the younger cohorts among the respondents. For example, the percentage of respondents age 25–44 who are synagogue members rises from 10–20 percent of those with less than three years of Jewish education to 45–60 percent of those with 6 or more years.

FIGURE 3. PERCENT MARRIED TO BORN JEWS BY INDEX OF JEWISH EDUCATION — RESPONDENTS AGE 25–44 AND 45–64



Of major concern in the American Jewish community have been the levels of intermarriage reported by NJPS-1990, especially those for the most recent marriage cohort. Does intensity of Jewish education bear any relation to these levels? Again, the data from NJPS (Figure 3) suggest a dramatic decline in intermarriage as

intensity of Jewish education increases. The percentage of respondents age 25–44 who were born Jews and married to other born Jews rose from 34 percent of those with no Jewish education to 80 percent of those with 6 or more years of day school. The pattern for the older cohort is less pronounced and the overall levels of in-marriage are higher, but 6 or more years of day school remains clearly associated with a higher level of in-marriage. When a variety of characteristics are controlled through regression analysis, the strength of the relation continues to hold: For each step increase in the index of Jewish education, the likelihood of intermarriage is reduced 2.5 percent.

These data for the respondents therefore suggest that Jewish education has an important relation to strength of Jewish identity and commitment to the organized community. Given the nature of the data, it is not possible to infer cause and effect or to identify other factors — including Jewish practices in the home, informal Jewish educational experiences, travel to Israel — that would correlate with Jewish education in affecting behavior and attitudes. In order to do so, we would need, among other data, information on the respondents' childhood experiences. The information collected by NJPS-1990 on the Jewish education of the children in relation to characteristics of the parents and households can help to provide some limited insights on these relations.

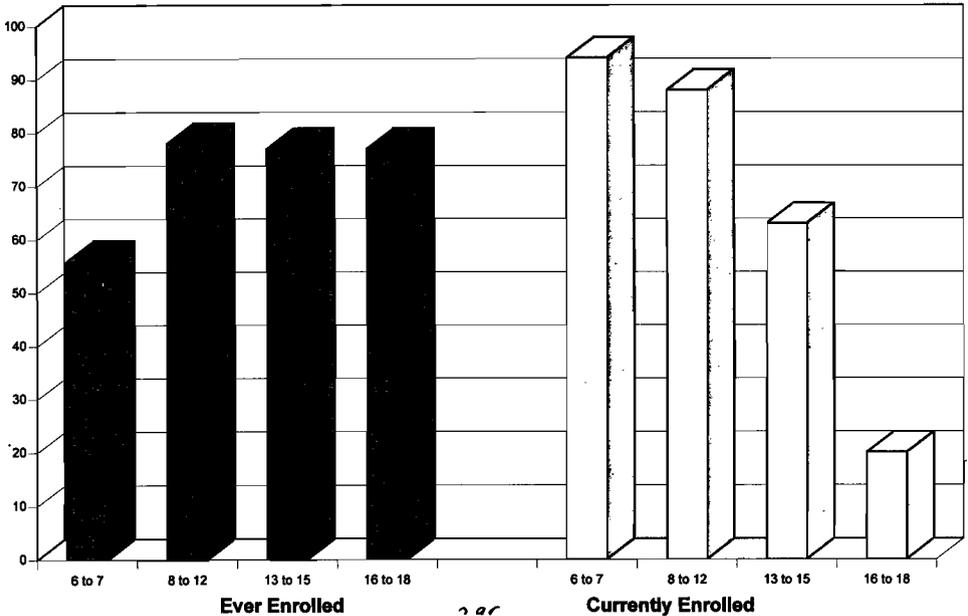
The Jewish Education of Children

We turn now to the children age 6–18 in the survey. For the initial analysis, all children will be considered, whether or not they are being brought up as Jews, although much of our later analysis will necessarily focus on those children who are identified as Jewish. Attention is restricted to those age 6–18 because these are the ages at which children are enrolled in school and for which the survey collected a variety of information related to Jewish education: number of years ever received; current enrollment and type of school; participation in Jewish camps or youth groups.

The survey encompassed some 1,084,000 children age 6–18, of which 46 percent are being raised as Jews. Of all children, 37.6 percent have ever been enrolled in a program of Jewish education, but this varies from 73 percent of the Jewish children to only 7.6 percent of the non-Jews. The percentages vary by age as well.

Among the Jewish children, just under 6 out of 10 six and seven year olds have ever received any Jewish education (Figure 4). By ages 13–15, this has risen to just over three-quarters. Such a pattern is not surprising since many congregational schools do not begin religious education programs for children before age 8. Differences by gender are minimal, except among 8–12 year olds, where 86 percent of the girls have received Jewish education, compared to only 71 percent of the boys. This finding is unexpected, given the strong emphasis placed on Bar Mitzvah among all branches of Judaism.

FIGURE 4. PERCENT OF JEWISH CHILDREN AGE 6-18 EVER ENROLLED AND CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN FORMAL PROGRAMS OF JEWISH EDUCATION



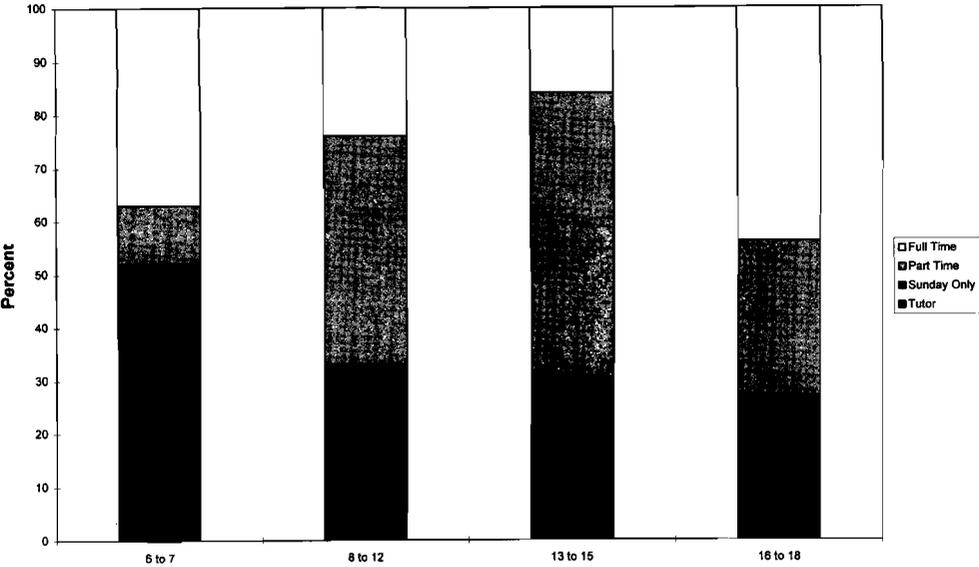
Nonetheless, the data suggest that among children being raised as Jews a very high percentage have been exposed to some form of Jewish education by their teen years. What the data on ever being enrolled fail to tell us is the ages at which the children received their Jewish education. Given the finding for adults regarding the importance of such education beyond elementary school (that is, of having Jewish education for 6 or more years), the age at which children are exposed to religious schooling becomes a crucial issue. Some insights are provided by information obtained from the question on whether the child had been enrolled in a program of Jewish education during the year preceding the survey. The question was asked only for those children who had ever received any Jewish education.

Of these 372,170 children, 71 percent were currently enrolled. This was true of at least 90 percent of the children under age 13; the percentage dropped precipitously thereafter, to 60 percent of the 13–15 year olds, and to only one-quarter of the 16–18 year olds. Jewish education for children still seems to be heavily at the elementary school level and oriented towards Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

For those currently enrolled, the survey also determined the type of schooling — full time, part time, Sunday only, or tutor (Figure 6). For all ages together, full time school involved some 27 percent of the children; about 35 percent were in part time

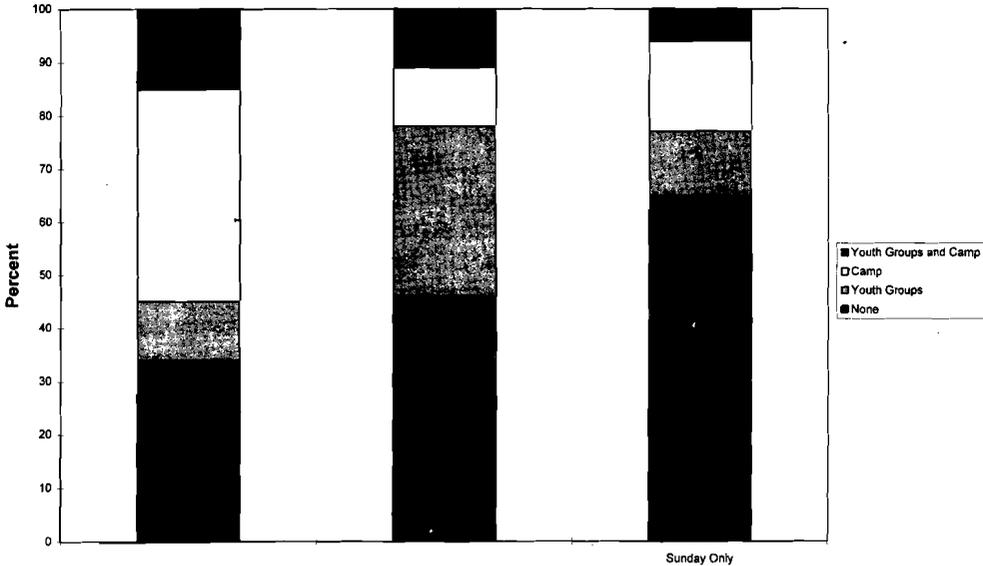
programs, and 30 percent enrolled in Sunday school only. Fewer than 10 percent of the children used a tutor, and these were concentrated among the 8–15 year olds, probably mainly for Bar/Bat Mitzvah training. Enrollment in the three other types of programs varied considerably by both age and gender.

FIGURE 5. TYPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED BY THOSE CHILDREN CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN FORMAL PROGRAMS OF JEWISH EDUCATION, BY AGE



To some extent, the distribution of enrollment by age reflects the availability of various kinds of programs of Jewish education. Thus it is not surprising that among the youngest children (age 6–7), a majority are enrolled in Sunday-only programs, and another 38 percent are in full-time programs (Figure 5). Those age 8–15 are more likely to be in part-time schools — the kind of Jewish education offered by congregational schools of all three branches of Judaism. Nonetheless, about one in five of these elementary school children are enrolled in a full-time program and about an equal percentage attend Sunday only. At the older ages (16–18) those still enrolled in programs of Jewish education tend to be in full-time schools (44 percent), with the remainder about equally divided between part-time and Sunday-only programs. Day schools are clearly retaining youngsters in their programs for longer periods than are the part-time schools.

FIGURE 6. PARTICIPATION IN INFORMAL EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES, OF JEWISH CHILDREN CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN FORMAL PROGRAMS OF JEWISH EDUCATION, BY TYPE OF SCHOOLING



Despite the very low overall enrollment of the children who are not being raised as Jews, some variations in ever having received Jewish education do exist. Among younger children — those age 6–12, about 10 percent have had some Jewish education, compared to only 2–4 percent of the older children. The younger children may well have been enrolled in Jewish-sponsored preschools, many of which accept non-Jews and often have a reputation for providing excellent training. Since such programs have proliferated in the past few years, they have been more available for children currently in the younger ages. Among the Jewish children, the percentage involved in informal activities rose with age, from about one-fourth of the youngest group to half of the oldest. Among the older groups, many more were reported as having participated in youth groups than having gone to camps. The reverse characterized the younger groups, and especially the very youngest, among whom 24 percent had already had a camp experience, but only 3 percent belonged to a youth group. Again, this pattern largely reflects the availability of programs for young children. Nonetheless, it also suggests that the Jewish camping experience is becoming more widespread; as high a proportion of the youngest children have already attended a Jewish camp as was true of the teenagers. Since the percentage is

likely to increase over time, Jewish camping can be expected to become a much more common experience.

Jewish education extends well beyond the formal classroom to encompass informal experiences both in the home and in organized activities such as youth groups and camps. The survey asked directly whether any of the children age 6–18 had ever participated in a youth group or camp. Of those children being raised Jewish, 38 percent had been involved with at least one such activity; among those not being raised Jewish, only about 5 percent had ever been to a Jewish camp and virtually none had ever joined a Jewish youth group.

Not only is age related to informal educational experiences, for those who are currently enrolled in a formal Jewish educational program, type of school also bears a direct relation (Figure 6). Whereas only 35 percent of those in Sunday-only programs have ever participated in a Jewish youth group or camp, this is true of 55 percent of those in a part time program and 66 percent of those attending day schools. Informal programs of Jewish education therefore strongly augment the more formal experience. They form an educational cluster that is undoubtedly a key to understanding the role of education in enhancing Jewish identity.

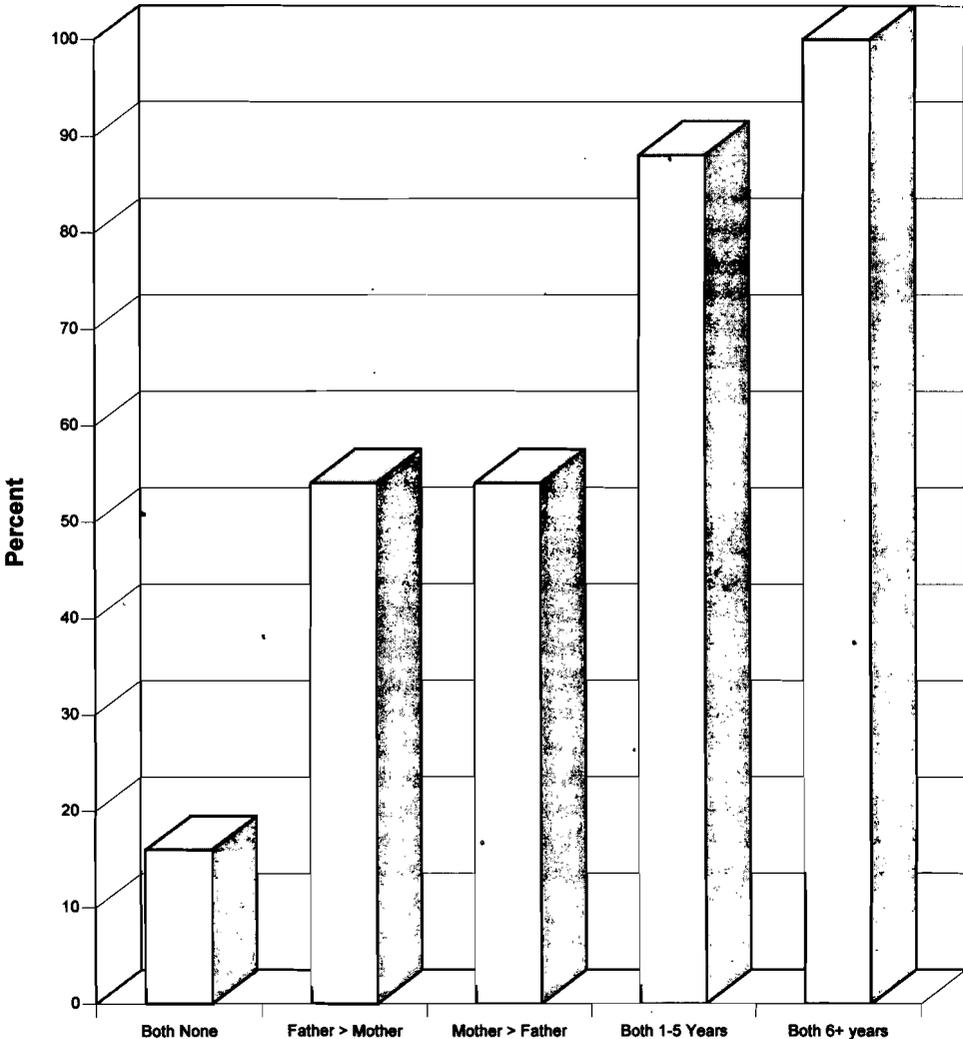
The data for the children in the sampled households thereby help to clarify some of the patterns identified for the adult respondents. The question for the adults that repeatedly surfaced with respect to the relation between Jewish identity and Jewish education was whether education was a sole influence or if, instead, other factors, such as informal programs of Jewish education, also played a role. If these findings for the children can be generalized to the parents, it is clear that informal activities form an important complement to more formal schooling. At the same time, we must recognize that many of the informal activities that are available to the children now were not as commonly available to their parents. Jewish youth groups have been popular for decades, especially Zionist organizations like Young Judaea, as have B'nai Brith groups, but organized, synagogue-based youth activities outside religious school are somewhat more recent. The popularity of Jewish camps would also have affected more of the younger respondents; only a minority of the older ones were likely exposed to Jewish camping.

Children's Education in Relation to Jewish Education of Parents

The Jewish education that youngsters are receiving may also be influenced by the kind and extent of Jewish education of parents. Jewish education may therefore have an "echo" or second generation effect. By analyzing the current Jewish identification of the children by the extent of parents' Jewish education, some initial insights can be gained into this long-term impact. For purposes of such an analysis, parents' education is defined as a) both parents having no Jewish education, b) both 1 to 5 years, c) both 6 or more years, d) father more Jewish education than mother, and e) mother more Jewish education than father. In those cases where one parent was reported as having more education than the other (in terms of the categories used), a sizable number who had had less education had had none at all. The

categories necessarily had to be in terms of years of Jewish education only, because no information on type of schooling is available for adult members of the household other than respondent.

FIGURE 7. PERCENT OF CHILDREN BEING RAISED AS JEWS, BY YEARS OF JEWISH EDUCATION OF PARENTS



The results show the critical importance of Jewish education of parents on the identity of their children (Figure 7). In those families where neither parent had received any Jewish education, only 16 percent of the children were being raised as Jews. Conversely, when both parents had had 6 or more years of Jewish education,

virtually all of the children were identified as being Jewish, as was also largely true when both parents had had 1-5 years of Jewish education (88 percent). Interestingly, when one parent had less Jewish education than the other, whether it was father or mother, just over half (54 percent) of the children were being raised as Jews. These data therefore strongly document the far-reaching impact of Jewish education (and those characteristics that are correlated with it) of one generation on the Jewish identity of the succeeding generation.

FIGURE 8. TYPE OF SCHOOL OF CURRENTLY ENROLLED JEWISH CHILDREN BY YEARS OF JEWISH EDUCATION OF PARENTS



Jewish education of the parents also has an impact on the kinds of school in which Jewish children are enrolled (Figure 8). Parents who have had no Jewish education enroll their children primarily in Sunday school programs and to a somewhat lesser extent in part-time programs. By contrast, those parents who have had 6 or more years of Jewish education are most likely to enroll children in full time programs: 52 percent of their children were so enrolled, compared to only 20 percent who were in Sunday schools. The children of parents who had 1 to 5 years of Jewish education or where one parent had less education than the other were most likely enrolled in part-time programs, and more were in Sunday — only than in full-time schools. The impact of parents' Jewish education therefore extends beyond the

way in which children are being raised to the intensity of their Jewish education. While many other factors impinge on the type of educational programs in which children are enrolled, including the simple availability of choices in any given location, parental orientation as measured by years of their Jewish education has a strong effect.

Conclusions

Our analysis of data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey on the Jewish education of adults and children points to both the importance of Jewish education in enhancing Jewish identity and to the complexity of the relations. A strong relation appears between intensity of Jewish education and level of involvement in the formal structure of the community; more education means more organizational memberships and greater likelihood of synagogue membership. Conversely, more Jewish education relates to lower levels of intermarriage.

When our focus shifts to children who are being raised as Jews, the data show that a very high percentage of Jewish children have ever been enrolled in programs of Jewish education, but most are enrolled only through their Bar/Bat Mitzvah years. At precisely those ages when Jewish education appears to have the greatest long-term effect on adult Jewish identification, levels of enrollment drop steeply. Moreover, formal and informal educational activities appear to have a "cluster" effect: Children with continuing formal Jewish education are also more likely to be exposed to Jewish camping experiences and to Jewish youth groups. The intensity of children's Jewish education also seems to be a reflection of the experience of their parents. Parents with extensive education are more likely to provide Jewish schooling into the high school years to their children than are parents with minimal Jewish education.

The data available in NJPS-1990 allow only a limited exploration of the factors involved in the relations between Jewish education and Jewish identity. In particular, we did not assess the impact of the respondents' childhood home experiences on either their intensity of formal Jewish education or on their current commitment as Jews. If respondents with six or more years of Jewish education in a supplementary or, particularly, a day school are selective of those persons who come from highly committed, identified, and observant Jewish homes, then it may well be the home milieu that was the greater influence on their adult levels of organization and synagogue membership and on intermarriage rates. Furthermore, if the pool from which day schools draw becomes less selective, then the impact of day schools on the commitment of their students as adults will, in turn, be diminished.

The web connecting the various elements that determine Jewish education and, in turn, the importance of that education for Jewish identity is complex. It suggests that a multi-tiered approach will be necessary if the Jewish community wishes to heighten the involvement of its members. Since Jewish education is one of the few areas in which the community has direct control, these findings from NJPS-1990

should be helpful in setting the agenda for the future. Some areas for consideration include the need to extend Jewish education into the teen years and beyond; the advisability of strengthening opportunities for informal Jewish education, including camps and trips to Israel; extending opportunities for adult education and especially involving parents in Jewish educational programs. Finally, our analysis points to the need for much more extensive data on the factors associated with Jewish education so that clearer inferences can be drawn between the importance of Jewish education (formal and informal; in school and in the home) and strong Jewish identification.

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