

Sharing Information, Resources, and Strategies: The CAJE Early Childhood List-servs

by Rebecca Swartz Scherba

How can we stay connected to each other after we return home from a CAJE Conference? At every conference, the CAJE staff and lay leadership remind our constituency that CAJE is more than a conference. CAJE is also a coalition for Jewish educators. Being a strong coalition means staying connected throughout the year, not only at the conference.

I have been moderating the CAJE Early Childhood list-serv since the summer of 2006. In the fall of 2005, I started to work as the pre-school teacher and early childhood director at the Boulder Jewish Day School, a small, progressive community day school. As a young Jewish educator, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to connect my knowledge in early childhood education with my passion for Jewish life and learning, and to work together with families, our faculty, and our community to build a day school.

In Boulder, Colorado, however, I do not have the connection to the *kehillah* of early childhood Jewish educators one might have in a bigger city. Thankfully, CAJE is a way that I can be connected to them. With the support of the Colorado Agency for Jewish Education, my school, and the Cathy Adler Memorial Scholarship from the Boulder Jewish Festival, I was off on a plane to New York for CAJE's Early Childhood Conference last June. I felt renewed and reconnected as I studied Jewish texts and talked about the latest trends in early childhood Jewish education.

I knew I needed to stay connected to the Coalition. I mentioned to Mary Lou Allen, Associate Director of CAJE's Early Childhood Dept., that I would like to do something for CAJE during the year, but was worried that living in Colorado would make it difficult for me. Thankfully, technology can bring us closer, despite long distances. As a young educator, I have had the opportunity to become technologically savvy throughout my education. I agreed to take on the role of moderator for the CAJE Early Childhood List-serv as a way of giving my "five hours" to CAJE, as well as continuing my learning. I was a little nervous about the commitment, but the list-serv community has been welcoming and supportive of me as I have explored my new role. I have even reconnected with teachers from my childhood and mentors from my college years.

The List-serv as a Page of *Talmud*

Sharing our early childhood experiences helps us refine our practices. In the Jewish community, we have a strong tradition of discussion, reflection, and questioning. I think of this list-serv as a page of *Talmud* that continues to expand outward, but is rooted in Jewish tradition and good early childhood practice.

In this age of technology, where we have nearly every kind of resource available to us through a variety of tools, we still want to reach out and touch someone for some help. Sometimes, we just want to talk with someone who knows exactly what we are going through by discussing an issue or get some strategies to help solve a problem. Sometime we want to share a success, receive acknowledgement for our feelings, or just get some empathy from

those who we know will understand.

That is what we offer in the three list-servs sponsored and moderated by the Early Childhood Department at CAJE. Via the list-servs, we share resources, discuss trends and best practices in early childhood Jewish education, and serve as a sounding board for each other when we encounter challenges or questions in our programs. We are a virtual *kehillah* or community of early childhood Jewish educators who have much in common. Our goal is to share ideas, resources, information and strategies all rooted in accurate Jewish tradition and text combined with best early childhood practices.

The three list-servs that the Early Childhood Dept. offers are:

- ♦ Early childhood Jewish professionals working with 3-to-5-year-olds.
- ♦ Early childhood Jewish education directors.
- ♦ JITP- Jewish infant-toddler professionals, working with children 0-3 and their families.

There are nearly 400 early childhood Jewish professionals participating in the list-servs. Members post messages that stimulate lively conversations about topics that are relevant to the members at that moment. Topics have included:

- ♦ Big ideas for holidays. These are not just activities, but deeper developmentally-appropriate practices for young children. (Are the 10 plagues really what we want our children to know about Passover?)
- ♦ Being sensitive to non-Jewish parents in our programs.
- ♦ Helping parents separate from their infants or toddlers.
- ♦ Ideas for directors to manage their time.
- ♦ Using Jewish text to drive staff meetings.
- ♦ The power of early childhood Jewish education to be the gateway to lifelong learning for many families.
- ♦ Creating welcoming Jewish environments for new families.

The list-servs provide safe forums for early childhood professionals to receive the support of colleagues without the cost of a plane ticket. They are available 24/7 and moderated by CAJE staff and CAJE volunteers.

Enriching our Understanding

As the virtual *kehillah* grows, the conversations deepen, and the questions become more complex. CAJE is a pluralistic organization committed to strengthening Jewish education across denominational lines. Members respect differing view points, cross all denominational lines, and enrich everyone's understanding through a variety of approaches and early childhood practices. There are many paths in Jewish learning and life, and multiple perspectives enrich our understanding. We come from a variety of training programs, schools, and community organizations. The diversity of our membership is our strength. 🌿

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