

IMPACT OF JECEI

MICHAEL BEN AVIE

It was an exciting day in the lives of the four-year-old class. They had planned and prepared for this event for months. It was time for 24 children to leave their safe, secure and serene environment and move on to the next step in their lives. Parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends were entering the building with cameras, flowers and presents. The energy was palpable. The teachers were in the classrooms with the children sharing their last minute instructions. The children could hardly contain themselves.

Behind the scenes that same morning, I had the privilege of working with Jared who was distributing the programs. After the programs were placed on approximately 90 chairs, Jared realized we were ten programs short. He came to me with a very specific directive. "Joanie, we need ten more programs, go upstairs and make ten more copies, okay?" Realizing, after all, that Jared was just turning five, I asked him if he thought we should make more than ten copies, in case other visitors showed up for the celebration. He looked at me in such a way that I will never forget, and repeated his directive, but this time used his hands and all ten fingers to emphatically state, "I counted the chairs, we are ten short, and we need only ten." I reluctantly said, "Okay, I will be right back with the copies." As I stood at the copier for what seemed like an hour trying to decide if I should respect Jared's decision and make ten more copies, knowing I would probably have to go back upstairs to make more when more people arrived, I pressed the number ten on the copier machine. As I watched Jared proudly and competently place each program on the remaining ten chairs, I realized how empowered and capable this young boy felt.

Joanie Smeltz, Director of Early Childhood Programs, Ohr Kodesh Congregation. Ohr Kodesh is affiliated with the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI)

Jared's story is about quality in Jewish early childhood education (JECE). The research that we present for the first time in this chapter demonstrates that JECE impacts the engagement of families in Jewish life. The analyses also revealed that this is a far more complex process than simply intensifying the Judaic content of the educational program. The key factor is the level of excellence of the JECE program's underlying "operating system." It is worth considering that the parents who rate that their children's JECE programs operate at a superb level are more open to enhancing their lives with Jewish connections. Thus, for many parents the promotion of children's Jewish identity is not an important criterion when choosing a JECE program.

However, if they perceive and experience the JECE programs as excellent and well-run, they will become more engaged in Jewish actions after they enroll their children as a “side effect.” While Joanie Smeltz’s finger was suspended over the copy button, she was making a cross-road decision. The decision that she made to listen to children, respect them, and provide them with opportunities to make decisions for themselves exemplifies the level of excellence essential to influencing the lifepaths of the children and their families’ formation of a strong relationship to the Jewish people.

Page 1-2 from the chapter: *Excellence in Jewish Early Childhood Education* by Michael Ben – Avie, Ilene Vogelstein, Roberta Louis Goodman, Eli Schaap and Pat Bidol Padva.