

JECEI - Community Support June 2010

“I see a level of excitement from parents that I didn’t see before. There’s a higher caliber of learning, a lot more hands-on learning.

– Congregational Rabbi

“When I was a child, Hebrew school was about learning the stories of the Torah. This is much broader, a way of living your life, the way you approach learning and living...”

– Mother of two JECEI “graduates”¹

“The adult learning program in my child’s preschool allows me to pause for a couple of hours and think about very important issues that are close to me about family, home and religion and community.... things I wouldn’t necessarily think about through a Jewish lens. It’s a nice way for a community of parents to come together to learn about Judaism – having interesting, smart people talk about great topics.” - Parent in a JECEI center

“Not only did the JECEI families engage in parenting programs at a higher rate, they also engaged in adult Jewish learning at a higher rate.”

- James Comer – Michael Ben-Avie – Yale Child Study Center – April 2010

THE CHALLENGE AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Families with Jewish children place a high value on their children’s education, though it is estimated that no more than one out of every 5 children are enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs. Unfortunately, when parents do consider or finally select programs located in local Jewish institutions, often the quality of Jewish programming is inadequate.

¹ Wiener, J. (2010). Planting the seeds of family education. *The Jewish Week*, February 23, 2010.

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With Jewish content that is positive and accessible, these centers can attract and inspire families to seek meaningful and vibrant Jewish lives. **Early childhood programs offer an unparalleled gateway to Jewish families searching for meaning and connection.**

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

Children's entry into a center setting introduces them and their parents to new relationships, ideas, and experiences. That means relationships with Jewish peers, ideas reflecting Jewish values, and Jewish life experiences.

The early childhood years are also pivotal for parents, and are critical in promoting their ongoing Jewish involvement:

- ***Parents are defining themselves in a larger, communal context***, deciding how they want to live their lives Jewishly, what values they want their children to learn, and what community they want to be part of. An educational environment filled with Jewish values and ideas triggers exploration of and connections to Jewish life.
- ***Parents are highly motivated to be involved in their children's education***. If their children are excited to explore and experience Jewish life, they will want to learn and join with them, too. A program that teaches them what their children are learning and then extends the learning experience by offering opportunities to delve into the material on a higher level will find a ready audience.
- ***Parents connect to other parents through center's Jewish family experiences resulting in long term friendships***. Establishing relationships with other families with young Jewish children helps develop a long-term engagement with Jewish life.
- ***Parents are confronting new challenges***. They often seek guidance from their children's teachers, who have both the professional expertise *and* an intimate knowledge of their children. A response that reflects Jewish values and ideas has the potential to strengthen the family's Jewish identity and engagement.

Clearly the opportunity cannot be missed. Creating a superlative early childhood educational program infused with Jewish values and ideas can make a profound difference. **JECEI (Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative) is just the right program at just the right time.**

JECEI has successfully brought quality education and vibrant engagement with Jewish life and learning to thousands of children and families in centers and communities across the country.

Furthermore, JECEI's focus AND impact are unique among early childhood models with four targets – the child, the parents, the center and the community. For supporters of JECEI this expanded impact, working with all four targets, creates a value added set of benefits that are highly leveraged.

JECEI: EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG JEWISH CHILDREN

JECEI was launched in 2004 by a group of visionary philanthropists, in an effort to engage Jewish families in Jewish living and to encourage ongoing participation in their Jewish communities.

The focal point of JECEI's work is the children and parents in Jewish early childhood education programs. JECEI generally works with multiple centers in a community or region. In order to create a sustainable change in pre-schools, each project JECEI undertakes requires a significant communal commitment: the formal involvement of *at least three preschools* and the support of *local Jewish institutions* over a *four-year period*. JECEI creates a synergy in which stakeholders of all ages, backgrounds, interests, and perspectives work together, long-term, toward a shared goal. Structuring its program this way, JECEI is able to maximize the return on its efforts as each element of the program optimizes the impact of the others.

JECEI's comprehensive approach:

- Transforms early childhood programs through the marriage of the widely-regarded Reggio Emilia educational model (described below) and Jewish experiences.
- Integrates Jewish practices, ideas, and values into daily life; in center, at home, and in the community.
- Provides teachers and administrators of Jewish centers with ongoing support, professional development, on-site visits, workshops, and retreats.
- Fosters strong bonds within the parent body by facilitating social and educational events planned by and for parents.
- Enhances communication and social networking among parents and teachers within and across communities through JECEI Connect, an internet portal.
- Sets the bar high, requiring that communities make a long-term commitment leading to JECEI accreditation as centers of excellence.

JECEI: Child-Centered Learning based on the Reggio Emilia Philosophy

JECEI's educational approach is based on the Reggio Emilia (or Reggio) model, named for the town in Italy where it was developed in the mid-1940s. The Reggio model views children as the driving force in their own education, partnering with teachers to develop their emotional and social well-being as well as their capacity for literacy and learning. In the Reggio classroom, children are empowered to engage in self-directed exploration, collaborate with their peers to frame questions, evaluate hypotheses, and elaborate on their understanding of the world. Teachers serve as guides and co-learners, asking open-ended questions, making new connections, and encouraging critical thinking.

JECEI: Integrating Reggio Emilia and Judaism

The principles of the Reggio Emilia system mesh well with Jewish values and ideas, such as respect for each person's uniqueness and an appreciation of the natural world.

Here is an example of how JECEI engages parents in Jewish life and learning:

Jane, a parent in one of the JECEI centers, suggested that the teachers and families build a sukkah as a way of expanding the concept of welcoming guests, while providing an opportunity to deepen learning around the holiday. The planning and implementation was done in a collaborative manner by parents, teachers, center leadership and clergy.

Jane shared the story of her family's involvement in Jewish life. She described how Judaism was not something that she grew up with in a deep way; rather, her Judaism has grown as she became an adult and a parent. Over the last number of years, this commitment has also become extremely important to her husband as together they built a Jewish family. Sending the older kids to day school and bringing ritual into her family has enriched Jane's life immensely and has helped link the multiple generations in her life.

JECEI's influence has also had a larger intergenerational impact on Jane's family. This year her father helped build the sukkah at her son's preschool. Before this experience, he never sat in a sukkah in his life. Jane feels that for her father, the Jewish ritual was as important as spending the time learning and celebrating the holiday with his grandchildren. As a result of the sukkah building project he is much more interested in Sukkot. He even stayed for the learning part led by one of the parents.

Jane was so moved by her sukkah experience that she is hoping to build her own sukkah for the first time next year.

Over the course of a few months, a project such as building a community sukkah:

- Involved many different players who shared the design and implementation: parents, children, teachers, center leaders and the clergy.
- Provided opportunities for participation in Jewish life: building the sukkah, welcoming guests, intergenerational study of Jewish texts led by a parent.
- Realized valuable educational goals: designing and cooperating on a multi-step project, and learning by teaching.

It is important to note that the succession of events was not planned, but grew organically in the rich soil of creativity, curiosity, and thoughtfulness, nurtured by Jewish ideas.

Measuring Success

JECEI engages in ongoing evaluation and research, assessing its impact and fine-tuning its programs as they unfold.

A newly released study² by the internationally renowned Yale University's Child Study Center found that the "whole school change" approach that defines JECEI (Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative) was highly effective in impacting the life paths of participating families, strengthening their Jewish engagement, and supporting centers in their journey towards excellence. The study analyzed data from parents in JECEI and non-JECEI centers and found that JECEI parents in comparison to the other parents significantly:

- increased their celebration of Shabbat.
- increased their celebration of Jewish holidays.
- increased their contributions to Jewish organizations.

JECEI families are also expressing a desire to continue their children's participation in Jewish camps, day schools, congregational schools, Israel experiences, and community events beyond preschool. It is this commitment to ongoing engagement in Jewish life that will make a meaningful and sustainable difference in the strength and vitality of Jewish families and communities.

Growing JECEI, Growing Jewish Communities

Today JECEI is working with 22 centers in 7 metropolitan areas across the country. With over 500 teachers, JECEI provides the challenge and excitement of integrating the Reggio Emilia approach with Jewish values and ideas. For over 3200 children, JECEI offers a high-quality educational experience enriched by a vibrant and joyful Judaism. And for over 2300 families, JECEI means discovering a positive Jewish identity as they learn from and with each other.

JECEI COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

JECEI customizes its work with each community to meet the needs of the community and enhances each individual center's early childhood education and family engagement. The JECEI approach works intensely with at least 3 centers for four years and usually provides professional development and leadership development for all the preschools in the community. The JECEI change process involves early childhood educators and lay leaders, senior professionals in host institutions, and members of the broader community.

² Comer, J. P. & Ben-Avie, M. Promoting Community in Early Childhood Programs: A Comparison of Two Programs. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, April, 2010.

- JECEI provides seminars and meetings on professional development in all of the community's early childhood centers to increase educators' Jewish knowledge and educational competencies.
- JECEI works with directors and second-tier leadership in each of the intensive-change centers to improve the quality of the education they provide and to enhance their ability to compete with other private early childhood centers.
- JECEI brings the director and second-tier leaders of the intensive-change centers together with their counterparts from centers in other partner communities to create a national community of practice.

The JECEI community cohort budget is based on jointly engaging the local agency of Jewish Education in a comprehensive four-year transformative change process. This process works intensively with at least 3 Jewish Early Childhood Centers (ECC), and provides additional consulting with all of the community's Jewish ECCs. The community determines whether or not an agency is partnering with JECEI. The initiative's budget includes funding for consulting with 3 centers, community learning for all of the ECCs and half-time funding for a BJE Jewish Early Childhood Education specialist. The following deliverables would be provided for \$179,760 per year for four years.

Each of the 3 intensive centers would receive:

- 26 days a year of customized professional development and leadership training in the area of early childhood educational excellence and in ways of engaging families in ongoing Jewish living and learning.
- \$14,000 per center for center grants over 4 years to support each center's capacity for center change and professional development.
- Participation in four days a year of the JECEI national learning institutes.
- Use of the JECEI internet portal by the 3 intensive centers to provide ongoing communication between parents and the centers.
- Participation in six days of learning seminars held in the community for educators, lay people, and professional leaders.
- An opportunity for the intensive centers to apply for JECEI accreditation.
- JECEI evaluation of Jewish living and learning in JECEI families and excellence in early childhood education.

In addition to the services provided to the 3 intensive centers, all of the community's Jewish ECCs would receive:

- 6 learning days a year on best practices in early childhood education and ways to engage parents in ongoing Jewish living and learning.

The local Agency of Jewish Education would receive:

- Funding for a half-time staff person to work with the JECEI national staff and consultants in order to transmit the basic change skills so that the work can be sustained after the JECEI initiative.
- Participation in four days a year of the JECEI national learning institutes.
- Participation in the six days a year of learning seminars held in the community.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish community too often misses opportunities to seriously engage families with young Jewish children in Jewish learning and living. Jewish early childhood centers are not enough. Unless they are excellent, too many families will not be attracted to them.

JECEI centers achieve this excellence because they incorporate:

- The highest standard of early childhood education.
- Customized engagement of families in Jewish living and learning.
- Opportunities for parents to connect with other parents and with the host institution (synagogue, day school or JCC).
- Shared leadership among early childhood educators, parents, lay people and professional leaders.
- Increased competencies of educators in the best practices of early childhood education and Jewish learning.

JECEI works with centers on achieving measurable standards of excellence in all aspects of early childhood education while engaging families in Jewish living and learning. Focused on the whole family, JECEI strengthens its identity, setting children and parents on a path of Jewish learning and living that resonates with who they are now and what they aspire to be. By intensifying that early childhood experience JECEI solidifies a family's attachment to an institution and increases the long term connection to the Jewish community.

Too many opportunities have been missed. The generous support of philanthropists who care about the Jewish future can help JECEI make the most of every opportunity.