

VIGNETTES FROM JECEI PARENTS AROUND PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN JEWISH LIVING AND LEARNING

1. The JECEI Lens of *Brit*/Covenantal Relationships

A. Parents honor and welcome teachers

In planning for the beginning of a new school year, members of a JECEI Leadership Team spoke about the idea of parents welcoming teachers in addition to the annual tradition of teachers welcoming parents at back-to-school night. Parents organized a surprise welcome for teachers that included a short, interactive text study around the value of teachers and a ritual that included apples and honey.

Comments from a parent who attended:

“It was so meaningful for me to bring my child for our first Jewish experience with Rosh Hashana putting a finger and honey on the Hebrew letters. It was such a nice surprise for teachers, parents and kids. And bringing the kids before school even started was a nice way to introduce them to the teachers and the school”.

B. Changing relationships between parents and teachers

- 1) “Parent and teacher relationships have changed as a result of our work together on the JECEI Leadership Team. We never thought about how teachers feel when parents come into their classrooms. We always think from the children’s point of view. You could fairly say that the most meaningful collaborations and breaking down barriers is happening through JECEI meetings.”
- 2) “There was a classic sense of ownership- putting a program (i.e. Shabbat dinners hosted in families’ homes) into the hands of parents and into the hands of the children. The process started with the teachers and what they were doing in the classroom and then shared with the parents on the leadership team. Any project moving forward should be with the development of these ideas and the involvement of people [in the school community].”

C. Making social connections with other families

“I’ve been a parent in the school for the past three years. In the first year, I didn’t meet a lot of people. It may be a progression, as your kids get older you meet more people. Getting involved in the preschool committees has enabled me to meet other parents. For people who are timid or reticent to ‘jump in’, there are now ways for them to get to know the other parents through the committees that have been created as the school continues to change.

I’ve met so many nice people I didn’t know before. I’ve made so many friends that I couldn’t have met otherwise. I don’t have family here. The preschool is like my family. The first year, I had one friend. Now, I have so many friends it’s a challenge finding the time to

be with all of them. We plan playdates with the children and hire babysitters so the adults can go out to dinner. Most of my friends now are through the preschool.”

2. The JECEI Lens of *Kedusha*: Creating Sacred Family Rituals

A. Shabbat Experience

In planning for experiences for families to build social connections and engage around Jewish life, the JECEI Leadership Team planned an evening of Shabbat Dinners in people’s homes.

One parent shared her feelings about the experience and the opportunity to learn how other families celebrate Shabbat.

“For me, the fact that my son is growing up in a bi cultural family makes it even more important to me to make sure he is connected to Jewish values and Jewish living especially since I converted. It gives me chance to learn with him and practice with him.

We do Shabbat at home and I know how my husband does Shabbat. Do I know how other families do Shabbat? I know how the rabbi taught us. Going to other families for Shabbat dinner gives me a chance to have other experiences. In Jewish life, what does a Shabbat dinner mean? What goes into it? I know the academic version and my husband is my only reference point. To be involved with other families is very important to me. I may want to start new traditions with my own family.”

B. Sukkot Experience

The JECEI Leadership Team (parents, teachers, and administrators from host institution) spent 2-3 months planning a Sukkah Project that would embrace the JECEI outcomes of excellence in Jewish early childhood education and enhanced family engagement:

One parent shared her story about the Sukkah Project:

“Judaism is something that I did not grow up with in a deep way. My Jewish involvement has emerged as an adult. Over the last number of years, it has become extremely important to my husband and me in terms of building a Jewish family. We are sending our kids to day school and bringing ritual into our family. This has enriched our family life immensely. We have been bringing our extended family into our Jewish lives as well.

My father, who is a physician and also is skilled in wood-working, helped build the sukkah at my son’s school. He has never sat in a sukkah in his life. It was a gift to have a project where he could be helpful as well as spend an afternoon involved with his grandchildren in a Jewish experience. He stayed for the Jewish learning, led by a parent and he’s much more

interested now in Sukkot. He has come to the school to see the photos of the sukkah building on the bulletin board.

Next year, we are thinking about making our own sukkah for the first time. And now we know what that is.”

3. The JECEI Lens of *D'rash*: Examining Jewish texts and making meaning in our own lives

A. A Parent Book Club

Facilitated by the Assistant Rabbi and Preschool director for a seven week series, the parents read and discussed *Blessing of a Skinned Knee* by Wendy Mogel. The invitation from the school reads, “In a culture whose values are often at odds with the ones parents wish to uphold and instill, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* points the way to raising self-reliant, compassionate and ethical children.”

One “new” parent didn’t know any of the other people in the Book Club when she joined the group. She “got close with a couple of wonderful ladies”, and befriended one of the other moms who has an older child who attends a local day school. When the “new” parent and her husband were looking for a day school for their oldest child, she scheduled a visit to the school and her host “ambassador” was the parent whom she had befriended in the Book Club. The “ambassador” took her on a tour of the school, and introduced her to the teachers. The mother’s feedback on the visit: “I loved that the children were all Jewish and that they were writing in both Hebrew and English. My host made me feel so welcome”.

B. Participation in Learning Circles

Two parents spoke about their participation in the “Learning Circles” program at their child’s school.

Parent #1: The main avenue of Jewish connection for one parent is the “Learning Circles” program. This is the second year that she and her husband are involved and she described the experience as “amazing”. She continued, “It allows you to pause for a couple of hours and think about very important issues that are close to you about family and home and religious and community.... things you wouldn’t necessarily think about through a Jewish lens and it opens insights and ideas that we wouldn’t have taken the time to think about. It’s a nice way for a community of parents to come together to learn about Judaism - interesting, smart people to talk about interesting great topics.”

Parent #2: “Learning Circles” gives a sense of community that I love about the preschool. I have met so many friends. You even feel so connected to people you aren’t your friends. The last session we attended was about new rituals you want to create with family. I love the opportunity to tap into new people and Jewish thought and connect it to parents in Jewish life. “

4. The JECEI Lens of *Masa/Journey*: Moving Families towards Enhanced Jewish Living and Jewish Learning

A. Observations of a Congregational Rabbi

“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, as opposed to teacher generated learning. Kids and parents are very much involved in the learning.

During the last two years, we have more parents joining the synagogue. I haven’t seen this in the prior 10 years. The school and Jewish life were two separate things. JECEI has brought that together.

JECEI is doing an excellent job bringing excitement in learning and involving parents. I think they are doing a phenomenal job.”

B. Teachers and Parents Learning Together

“I attend the Tuesday Text Study session because the idea of being able to build on themes that are brought up in the classroom appeals to me. This is my son’s first time away from me (he is 2). He is in school by himself. I wanted to maintain a connection and know what he is learning about.

I want to relearn what I’ve forgotten over the years. I was involved in Mexico City (my birthplace) and moved around and became very disconnected. Sometimes we lived in places without synagogues. I’ve forgotten a lot. I wanted to learn for myself and connect with my son. I was surprised to find out how much more rewarding it is for myself as an adult.

It is a whole lot more rewarding for me to learn about different perspectives and what everyone brings to the conversation. It is my 45 minutes early in the morning of adult thoughts.”

C. Model of Clergy –Educators-Parents Collaboratively Designing and Planning

A synagogue rabbi wanted to plan, for the first time, a family *seder* for the congregation on the second night of Pesach. As a participant in JECEI meetings, he realized that “such a program will be most successful if there is a lot of buy-in from parents. Ideally, it should be a grassroots effort with a lot of volunteer energy. So, we’re planning to get started very early next year, by putting together a committee of parents who want to organize a *seder* and other family education programming.”

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