

# Early Childhood Jewish Education

## “If Not Now, When?” (Pirkei Avot 1:14)

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Judaism considers children a great gift and sees them “as perhaps the purest form of being in God’s image” (Shire 2006). The *brit milah* or *brit habat* welcomes a child into the world and signals to the parents and the community their responsibility to raise the child spiritually as well as physically. In addition to valuing children, our sacred texts cite the importance of early education.

*Teach a child in the way he should go and he will not stray from it even when he gets older.*—Proverbs 22:6

*What is learned in early childhood is absorbed in the blood.*—Avot de Rabbi Natan 24

*The most important and decisive age in education is early childhood.*—Yesodot ha Chinuch.

*Our children are our guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you.*—Shir Hashirim Rabbah, 1:24

For two decades leaders in early childhood Jewish education have maintained that this period of time is crucial for instilling a strong Jewish identity in children (Ravid & Ginsburg 1988) for engaging new parents (Feldman 1992) and for serving as a gateway for additional Jewish education and involvement in synagogue and community life (Holtz 1996). Current research in the field of early childhood Jewish education further corroborates these original findings (Beck 2002; Kotler-Berkowitz 2005; Auerbach CAJE 2005; Center for Policy Research 2006; Rosenblatt 2006; Wertheimer 2005; and Rosen 2006).

Research in the fields of child development and brain development validates the importance of focusing on the early years of life. Two of the key findings have profound implications for early childhood education. The first deals with the necessary conditions for proper brain development and the second with the role of interpersonal relationships.

Brain development is now understood to be a complex interaction between genetically timed periods of development (critical periods) and appropriate sensory experiences. “Every sight, sound, and thought leaves an imprint on specific neural circuits, modifying the way future sights, sounds, and thoughts will be registered” (Eliot 1999). This means the brain is literally molded by experiences. However, if the experience is not properly timed, some opportunities, such as vision and perfect pitch, are lost forever (Riken 2005; Kuhl et al. 2001). For example, children with innate musical skills never master perfect pitch if they aren’t exposed to formal music education in the first six years of their lives. Furthermore, since the brain is molded by experiences, the earlier problems are identified, the earlier they can be addressed, enabling the brain to “rewire” itself during critical periods of development. This results in a greater chance for a positive impact on the child (Stegelin 2004).

Interpersonal relationships also play a role in brain development (Shiota et al. 2004). There is a growing body of research that finds that children who are reared in healthy, nurturing and re-

sponsive relationships have fewer behavior problems and more confidence and are more capable of positive social relationships (Zero to Three 2006). While parents are children's first, most important and most influential teachers, 61% of children in the United States under the age of six are in non-parental care on a regular basis (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2002). Consequently, caregivers have a significant impact on the child's development, especially the child's sense of emotional security and trust (Bruner 2004). Early childhood educators are as critical to a child's brain development as the child's experiences and the child's parents.

The ultimate objective of the Jewish community is to build Jewish identity in the next generation. Since the experiences young children have and the competency of the adults who care for them impact how children will behave as adults, the Jewish community should ensure that every Jewish child and every Jewish family with young children have the opportunity to experience authentic, engaging and meaningful Jewish experiences. Not investing in early childhood Jewish education compromises future investments at later ages.

This chapter will discuss early childhood Jewish education programs. It will review current student demographics, the state of early childhood Jewish education and educators, the impact of early childhood Jewish education on children and families, new initiatives, challenges facing the field and, finally, recommendations for strengthening early childhood Jewish education and for building a strong Jewish identity in children and their families.

## **STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Documenting the number of Jewish children in the United States birth through five years of age is a complicated matter. Documenting the number of Jewish children in Jewish early childhood programs is even more difficult. It appears that there are currently 540,000 Jewish children birth through five years of age, approximately 90,000 per age cohort (Saxe et al. 2007). Of that number, approximately 78,000 (mostly three- and four-year-olds) are enrolled in early childhood programs affiliated with congregations (56,000), Jewish community centers (13,000) and independent schools (9,000) (Schaap 2004). Approximately thirty-two thousand four- and five-year-olds are enrolled in Jewish day schools (Schick 2005), and an additional seven thousand children under the age of four attend Jewish day school early childhood programs (Schick 2000). This data does not include children participating in congregational schools or in Jewish family (home-based) childcare. Enrollment in early childhood programs in congregational schools is generally stable and growing in some communities (Wertheimer 2007). Anecdotal information suggests there may be 13,000 children in congregational programs and several thousand in family home-based childcare. Therefore, the total number Jewish children in any kind of Jewish early childhood program is between 130,000 and 140,000. This is less than a quarter of the potential population.

## **ENROLLMENT OF CHILDREN FROM TWO TO FIVE YEARS OF AGE**

Enrollment in the majority of Jewish early childhood programs begins at two years of age and peaks at four years of age (Vogelstein & Kaplan 2002). The Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York noted a significant increase in enrollment between children under two years of age and children two years of age every year since 2002 (Figure #1). Enrollment between two-year-old programs and four-year-old programs almost doubles, and there was a significant (approximately 50%) decrease in enrollment between the four-year-old program and the five-year-old program.

**Figure 1: BJE of Greater NY Demographic Overview, Department of Early Childhood, 2006**

Age	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005	2005–2006
Mommy & Me	1,884	3,022	2,729	1,781
Less than 17 months	300	318	219	302
18 months to 2 years	469	737	540	830
2-year-olds	5,344	5,417	4,807	5,340
3-year-olds	8,288	8,818	7,900	8,337
4-year-olds	9,046	9,035	8,774	9,491
5-year-olds	4,512	4,648	3,939	5,096
Total	29,752	31,995	28,908	31,177

In Miami-Dade and Broward Counties in Florida there is little change in the enrollment in the early childhood programs between the two- (931), three- (1,185) and four- (1,110) year-old-programs, but they also noted a significant decrease in enrollment in their kindergarten programs (289) (Goodman, Bidol-Padva & Schaap 2006). Likewise, The St. Louis Community Study (2005) noted there were 205 children in their four-year-old programs and only 49 five-year-olds in Jewish early childhood programs, excluding day schools. This data raises three important questions. Where do the children go after their early childhood Jewish education? Where are the children birth through two years of age? And where are all the Jewish children who are not enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs?

According to Beck in *Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life: A Survey of Jewish Preschool Parents in Three Cities* (2002), 72% of the children enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs leave to attend public kindergarten. In Miami-Dade and Broward County 47% attend public school after Jewish early childhood education, 43% continue on to day school, 9% attend private school and 1% are lost to follow-up. In New York City almost half of the children who complete a Jewish early childhood program at the age of five go on to attend public kindergartens, and the other half attend day school. A small percentage attend private non-sectarian schools (BJE NY 2005). Many Jewish early childhood programs offered kindergarten classes prior to the availability of public kindergartens. Now very few programs offer kindergarten; most Jewish kindergartens today are part of day schools, with a few in JCCs.

As public four-year-old programs become accessible there is a possibility that families will choose free public four-year-old programs over Jewish four-year-old programs. Tuitions for full-day programs range from approximately \$6,000 to \$20,000 (Baltimore and New York, respectively) and \$4,000 (Atlanta) for half-day programs. This has the potential of significantly reducing the number of Jewish children enrolled in Jewish programs and reducing the number of children who continue on to day school and/or religious school education. Beck (2002) noted that 53% of the children who attend public school after completing a Jewish preschool continued their Jewish education in synagogue-based religious schools the year after completing an early childhood program, and 20% enroll in day schools. In the Miami-Dade and Broward County study, 69% percent of children completing Jewish early childhood education programs continued with some form of Jewish education; thirty-one percent did not (Goodman, Schaap & Bidol-Padva 2006).

## **JEWISH BABIES AND NEW JEWISH PARENTS**

If the majority of children enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs are three- and four-year-olds, where are the Jewish babies? Fifty-seven percent of mothers in the United States with children birth to three years of age are in the labor force (National Academy of Sciences 2003). Seventy-three percent of children birth to three years of age in the United States spend time in non-parental care (Honig 2003). Fifty-five percent of women with infants under a year old are in the labor force (Gardner 2001). This number is declining for the first time in twenty-five years. Women who are col-

lege-educated and earn annual salaries of \$50,000 and above are more likely to enroll their children in non-parental child care (Boushey 2003). At the same time, the decline in the percentage of women with infants in the work force is among “women who are white, married, over thirty and educated” (Gardner 2001). These figures suggest two things: first, that there are likely to be large numbers of Jewish children in non-Jewish childcare programs. Second, there may be an equally large number of young children at home with their mothers. The Denver study (2006) reported that the largest number of parent respondents with children enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs are home full-time (42%); 35% work part-time, and 24% work full-time. Nearly a third (28%) have full- or part-time nanny help. Only 13% of families have two parents working full-time with no nanny. The Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York reported 2,948 or 2.9% of the potential Jewish population of children two years of age or younger were enrolled in Jewish early childhood programs in the greater New York area during the 2004–2005 school year. This phenomenon raises a number of questions. Is the percentage of Jewish women in the workforce less than in the general population? Do families choose non-Jewish childcare centers over Jewish childcare centers? Is there a need for full- or part-time Jewish infant care? What is the Jewish community doing to reach out to and support stay-at-home moms/dads?

Three studies investigated the way communities identify and engage families with newborn babies (Rosen, Lorin & Bar-Yam 2004; Rosen 2005; and Rosen 2006). These studies indicated that there was no community-wide vision for this population. Different agencies within the federation system were offering programs to new parents but failed to collaborate with each other and were in fact unaware of each other’s existence. Rosen recommended that communities become better organized, systematically find the babies and develop programs that meet new parents’ needs. He stated, “This cycle of Jewish life has been largely ignored. New Jewish parents were looking to connect with other new Jewish parents, obtain information on child development and strengthen their parenting skills. Only a few parents are being welcomed in any significant and meaningful way by their communities” (2006). According to Mayer et al. (2001) in the American Jewish Identity survey, this may be due to the fact that more Jews are identifying themselves as secular than with any particular religious stream of American Judaism and are consequently outside the immediate reach of the Jewish community.

### **IMPACT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD JEWISH EDUCATION ON JEWISH LIFE**

Numerous studies indicate that children’s success in life is based on a foundation of relationships, experiences, and skills developed during the first three years of life (Dealy 2006). One of these skills is identity formation, a sense of self. Early childhood Jewish education appears to impact not only the identity of the child, but also the Jewish identity of the parents. This section will discuss the research demonstrating that participation in an early childhood Jewish education program impacts parents’ ritual practices, impacts parents’ decisions about continuing with Jewish education and facilitates non-Jewish spousal investment in Jewish life.

### **IMPACT ON FAMILY RITUAL BEHAVIORS**

Several studies confirm that enrolling a child in a Jewish early childhood program has direct impact on the family as well as the child. Holtz noted that “young children influence family practice, early education programs become a ‘mini-community’ for families and early Jewish education acts as a feeder to the larger institution in which the program is housed” (1996). Beck demonstrated that while parents were not motivated to choose a school for its Jewish content and that the Jewish curriculum was often “ad-hoc and limited,” parents felt overwhelmingly positive about their child’s Jewish experience “Seventy percent of those interviewed were doing something different in terms of their Jewish observance or Jewish lifestyle as a result of their [children] attending a Jewish preschool” (2002, p. iv).

More recent research from three other community studies on early childhood Jewish education noted similar findings. The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education in Philadelphia stated,

The impact of Jewish early childhood education on attitudes and family practices is immediate and powerful. An awareness of the Jewish calendar is developed and rituals are being practiced in the home as parents become interested in what Judaism can offer in terms of meaningful tools for living. Long-term effects of Jewish early childhood programs are also indicated. Parents frequently decide to join a synagogue and to continue their children's Jewish education (2005).

Rosenblatt (2006) and Center for Policy Research (Denver 2006) reports both noted a positive impact and increased engagement in the families' Jewish activities, parents' willingness to consider additional Jewish educational options for their children and an increased inclination to learn more about Judaism. Over 80% of the families in the Denver study changed their behavior as a result of their Jewish early childhood experience.

### **IMPACT ON FUTURE JEWISH EDUCATION**

In addition to impacting Jewish family practice, participation in Jewish early childhood programs served as a catalyst for further Jewish education. Beck found that upon completing the Jewish early childhood programs, the overwhelming majority (76%) of the interviewed families continued their children's Jewish education the year after completing their early childhood experience. "Among the families who had not enrolled their child in a formal Jewish education program subsequent to completing preschool, 80% had specific plans to enroll their child in such a program within the next year or two" (2002, p. 13).

Wertheimer noted that children who attend a Jewish early childhood program were more likely to participate in many different forms of Jewish educational experiences than children who did not attend a Jewish early childhood program. Eighty-six percent of children who attended a Jewish early childhood program are currently enrolled in some form of Jewish education, and 60% of children who attended a Jewish early childhood program are actively involved in Jewish youth groups (2005, p. 15). It is important to note that the percentage of children continuing their Jewish education varies depending on the religious orientation of the early childhood program. Schaap, Goodman & Bidol-Padva (2006) noted that 84% of children in early childhood programs in day schools in Miami continue with their Jewish education compared to 64% and 56% respectively from Conservative and Reform congregation early childhood programs. Fifteen percent (15%) of children from JCC early childhood programs continue with their Jewish education.

These statistics strongly indicate that Jewish early childhood education makes a difference in both families' personal engagement with Jewish life and in their furthering their children's Jewish education. Early childhood Jewish education serves as a gateway for families to become involved in Jewish life (Kotler-Berkowitz 2005).

### **IMPACT ON INTERFAITH AND NON-JEWISH FAMILIES**

An early childhood Jewish education experience also positively impacts non-Jewish spouses. A journalist for the *Baltimore Jewish Times* interviewed three non-Jewish mothers who were raising their children Jewish. They said the Jewish early childhood program welcomed them into the Jewish world and led to their thinking about becoming Jewish (Friedman 2006). One mother indicated that "This was the first place where I felt accepted as a non-Jew. I had to be accepted as a non-Jew before I could consider becoming a Jew." None of the three women intended to convert to Judaism, but learning with their children changed their minds. "You've got a preschooler that's demanding that you do something with the Shabbat basket, so you better do something!"

Interfaith families in San Francisco indicated that the early childhood program was their primary connection to the Jewish community (2006). The Denver study reported a positive impact on non-Jewish families (no Jewish adults in the household) who chose a Jewish early childhood program for their children. Sixty percent of the non-Jewish families said that their child's experience at a Jewish early childhood program has made them feel more positive about Judaism and the Jewish people (2006).

The evidence seems irrefutable. Early childhood Jewish education strengthens the Jewish identity and the Jewish ritual behaviors of parents and impacts parents' future Jewish education decisions. A Jewish early childhood experience serves as families' primary connection to the Jewish community for the majority of the parents and an important connection for many parents. Furthermore, an early childhood Jewish education experience has a positive impact on interfaith families. These studies suggest communities, federations and philanthropists should ensure that all Jewish children have the opportunity to attend an early childhood Jewish education program.

### **CREATING EXCELLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD JEWISH EDUCATION**

The importance of providing quality experiences for young children is now influencing pedagogic approaches and criteria for excellence in early childhood education in the secular world. Current accreditation programs have developed new core competencies and standards for excellence and many states are developing their own accreditation programs (Barnett 2005, NAEYC 2006). Research documenting the positive and powerful impact of an early Jewish education experience has had similar effect in the Jewish community. There have been several attempts to quantify excellence in Jewish early childhood programs. The *Best Practices Project in Early Childhood Jewish Education* (Holtz 1996) was one of the first to identify categories of best practice in Jewish early childhood programs. Four communities—Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and Washington, DC—each developed Jewish accreditation programs that augment the National Associate for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation standards. In 2004 the CAJE Early Childhood Department commissioned the Center for Applied Child Development at the Eliot Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University to develop a “Preliminary List of Quality Indicators” for early childhood Jewish education. The Tufts investigators began their work by interviewing Jewish early childhood teachers, many of whom felt that the primary criteria for excellence was cultivating Jewish identity in children and creating an emotionally based Jewish foundation that would either sustain ongoing Jewish education or coax their young students to return to Jewish life if they later chose to leave it. At this time there are no commonly accepted standards of excellence for early childhood Jewish education and no research on the pedagogic, curricular and/or organizational practices that would facilitate the replication of excellence when it occurs. There are, however, numerous independent and collaborative conversations around this topic.

The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) was established in 2005 specifically to focus on “creating a vision of excellence, embodied in the creation of vanguard centers using the best practices of early childhood, adult and family education, the most recent studies in brain development and social/emotional learning, and the accumulated lessons of organizational change efforts throughout the educational world.” JECEI hopes “to create a vision of early childhood education framed by and embedded within foundational Jewish values that are meaningful and compelling to contemporary Jewish families seeking supportive communities for their families and the highest quality education for their children” ([www.jecei.org](http://www.jecei.org)).

Project Kavod, the Alliance for Jewish Early Education, the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Union for Reform Judaism and the Jewish Community Center Association of North America are all addressing the issue of program standards and indicators of excellence for early childhood Jewish education programs.

### **PROFESSIONALS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD JEWISH EDUCATION**

One of the primary factors for achieving excellence in early childhood programs is professionals. “Teacher quality is the single most important feature of the schools that drives student achievement” (Haskins and Loeb 2007). Two variables that have been identified as critical for staff quality are education and wages (Burchinal et al. 1996; Goelman et al. 2006; Whitebook 2003). All states require kindergarten teachers to have a minimum of a bachelor's degree, but few states require bachelor's degrees for early childhood teachers (Bell et. al. 2002). This is beginning to change. States are increasing their standards for early educators in light of research on the importance of interpersonal relationships and environments for young children (American Federation of Teachers 2002; Barnett et

al. 2005) and the opening of state-financed pre-K programs. By 2010, BA degrees and early childhood training will be required of all National Association for the Education of Young Children accredited schools (NAEYC 2006).

Jewish early childhood education should be no different. Early childhood educators hold the key to quality in Jewish early childhood programs. "There is no place in Jewish education where personnel matters more than in early childhood Jewish education. The teachers' influence on young children is comparable to virtually no other area in Jewish education" (Holtz 1996). Unfortunately, most early childhood Jewish educators have limited Jewish knowledge (Gamoran et al. 1998), inadequate training in early childhood education (Goodman 2006) and are poorly compensated (Vogelstein & Kaplan 2002; Goodman 2006). (See Goodman & Schaap chapter on Jewish Education Personnel for an extensive discussion on early childhood Jewish educators.) The lack of training in child development is exacerbated by the lack of Judaic knowledge. Research studies on religious education suggest the lack of authenticity alienates children from their religion. Haskins and Loeb (2007) noted that older students do better when their teachers are of their own race. These research findings raise questions about the large number of non-Jewish teachers and Jewish educators with limited Jewish knowledge employed in Jewish early childhood programs (Krug & Schade 2004).

In an effort to address the lack of secular and Judaic training of early childhood professionals, two national organizations collaborated to create standards. The National Board of License for Teachers and Principals of Jewish Schools in North America and The Alliance for Jewish Early Education (a network of national organizations that provide services and/or advocacy for early childhood Jewish education) recently adopted professional standards for all educators working in Jewish early childhood programs. There are five levels. Level One requires 120 hours of training in child development and early childhood education integrated with Jewish values and concepts. Level Five requires a master's degree in Early Childhood Jewish Education.

But these standards are vacuous if central agencies of Jewish education and federations do not endorse these standards; if there are no incentives or requirements to fulfill and/or enforce them; if there are no programs for the approximately 16,000 early childhood educators to obtain certificates/degrees; and if there are no subsidies to enable the educators to participate in the certificate and degree programs. Currently only one Jewish institution of higher learning offers a master's degree in early childhood Jewish education, and it is in conjunction with a secular university. One Jewish institution of higher learning offers a bachelor's degree, and three Jewish institutions of higher learning offer certificates or courses in early childhood Jewish education. Two of these institutions offer courses online. In the summer of 2007 seven Jewish institutions of higher learning will meet to discuss the challenges facing educating the early childhood Jewish education workforce.

While fewer than one hundred early childhood educators are currently seeking degrees or certificates at Jewish institutions of higher learning, most early childhood educators participate in professional development programs, including workshops and conferences offered by central agencies for Jewish education, the Early Childhood Conference sponsored by the Coalition for the Advancement in Jewish Education (CAJE), The Union for Reform Judaism Annual Early Childhood Conference and secular conferences such as NAEYC. Research has clearly demonstrated that in order for professional development to actually improve teacher quality it must 1) be a multi-day program; 2) focus on subject matter instruction; and 3) have goals that are aligned with the goals and curriculum of the school (Haskins and Loeb 2007). Mentoring is also an effective technique for improving teacher quality. The Union for Reform Judaism, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Jewish Community Center Association of North America each employ an early childhood consultant to serve their constituent schools.

## **SALARY AND COMPENSATION—CRISIS IN RECRUITING NEW PROFESSIONALS**

Sufficient training programs that coincide with the new standards would still not solve the most pressing professional challenge—the recruitment of new professionals. The average age of early childhood educators in Jewish programs is 46. The majority of directors are in their 50s (Vogelstein & Kaplan 2002; Schaap 2004; Goodman, Bidol-Padva & Schaap 2006). The need to attract new edu-

cators to the field is critical. But, it is highly unlikely to attract and retain the best and the brightest with the current compensation packages. Early care and education has not been acknowledged as a part of the larger educational system in the United States. As such, early childhood teachers and caregivers are among the lowest-paying of all occupations (Barnett 2003). “Only 18 occupations out of 770 surveyed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) reported having lower mean wages than child care workers. Those who earned higher wages included service station attendants, bicycle repairers and locker room attendants” (Center for Childcare Workforce 2004). Rationales for maintaining low wages include the assumption that women are not the primary breadwinners of families and that this profession does not require great skill or education. Current research contradicts those assumptions. We unequivocally know that quality early education is dependent on skilled and knowledgeable educators (Bruner 2004) and that there is an increase in single women heading households (National Academy of Sciences 2003). Furthermore, salary is now the main source of income for 28% of early childhood teachers in Jewish early childhood programs and an important source of income for 91% of the teachers in Miami-Dade and Broward County, Florida (Goodman, Schaap & Bidol-Padva 2006).

An additional challenge to recruitment is the increasing demand for early childhood teachers in the public schools. As states mandate universal pre-K programs to boost kindergarten readiness, more early childhood teachers will be required. As public schools expand their programs and hire more trained early childhood teachers, the compensation levels will, of necessity, increase significantly. But will the Jewish early childhood programs be able to keep up? As a comparison, the national median salary for a preschool teacher in 2004 was \$20,980 and the national median for a kindergarten teacher ranged from \$41,400–\$45,370 plus benefits, with the top 10% earning between \$66,240 and \$71,370 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006). The national median salary for an early childhood educator in a Jewish program in 2004 was \$15,000, compared to \$41,250 for day school educators working the same number of hours (Schaap 2004). Poor compensation and lack of incentives for additional educational training will severely threaten the quality of early childhood Jewish education in the coming decade.

## NEW INITIATIVES

In her 1992 chapter in *What We Know about Jewish Education*, Feldman discussed the major issues facing early childhood Jewish education and suggested a four-part strategy for addressing those issues.

1. Conceptualize Jewish early childhood programs as Jewish family resource centers.
2. Relieve families of the financial pressure of an early childhood Jewish education by sharing the fiscal responsibility with a third party (e.g., federations, synagogues and/or JCCs).
3. Create mechanisms for training early childhood professionals.
4. Develop a curriculum that reflects a vibrant Judaism appropriate for young children.

Unfortunately, in the fifteen years since its publication, only a few of these strategies have been addressed. As we look to the future, each of these policy recommendations remain high on the agenda if quality early childhood Jewish education is to be achieved. Several new initiatives have emerged to respond to challenges facing the field.

- An Ethical Start® is an innovative multimedia curriculum for early childhood educators and parents in Jewish Community Centers. The program is designed to teach Jewish values from *Pirkei Avot*. There are over twenty early childhood programs in Jewish community centers currently participating in An Ethical Start.
- Early Childhood Department at the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education serves as the leading national advocate and the primary venue for research on early childhood Jewish education; it provides professional services for any early childhood educator and promotes excellent and authentic Jewish educational experiences for children and their families. [www.caje.org/earlychildhood](http://www.caje.org/earlychildhood).



- JECEI offers the field of Jewish early childhood education a vision of excellence embodied in the creation of vanguard centers using the best practices of early childhood, adult and family education, the most recent studies in brain development and social/emotional learning and the accumulated lessons of organizational change efforts throughout the educational world. JECEI's work signifies an important departure from the commonplace standards in the field toward a unique and vibrant vision of early childhood education. JECEI is framed by and embedded within foundational Jewish values that are meaningful and compelling to contemporary Jewish families seeking supportive communities for their families and the highest quality education for their children. JECEI is currently working in sixteen schools. (Retrieved from <http://www.jecei.org/vision.html> October, 2006.)
- The Jewish Community Centers of North America offers early childhood consultation services for early childhood programs associated with the JCCA.
- *Ma'alah* is a program model designed to promote excellence in teaching Hebrew by Immersion to three- and four-year-olds. It is now in twenty-six schools. *Ma'alah* was an initiative of The Jewish Theological Seminary's Melton Research Center for Jewish Education. The goal of the project is to build a strong Jewish identity and connection to Israel by acquiring Hebrew as a second language when children are most receptive to learning a new language. Research suggests second languages are more easily learned when children are under six years of age. (Retrieved from <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/kids/maalah.shtml> October, 2006.)
- The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School Parent Education Program (PEP) is an adaptation of the Adult Mini-School program specifically for parents whose children are in Jewish early childhood programs. PEP is designed to match the Jewish learning interests of the parents of young children. Texts and discussions are designed to show the learners how the concepts they learn in class are relevant and applicable to their lives as Jewish parents. One of the main objectives of PEP is to encourage the learners to take the conversation home. (Retrieved from <http://www.fmams.org.il/pep/pep.html> October, 2006.)
- PJ Library is a program that sends participating children a high-quality Jewish children's book or CD every month through age five. Each book and CD comes with helpful resources. The goals of the program are to create stronger Jewish homes by fostering children's curiosity about their Jewish heritage and to help families explore their Jewish identity. The program is currently serving nearly 1,500 families in 12 communities. The PJ Library is sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. (Retrieved from <http://www.pjlibrary.org> <<http://www.pjlibrary.org/>> October, 2006.)
- Project ENGAJE is a two-year professional development program for 250 early childhood educators in eleven New York early childhood programs to enhance their Judaic knowledge through informal lectures, text learning, group discussions and a 10-day trip to Israel. The program was sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York in partnership with the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York and the Suffolk Association of Jewish Educational Services. (Retrieved October, 2006 from <http://www.ujafedny.org/site/c.ggLUI0OzGpF/b.1886315/apps/s/content.asp?ct=2685933>.)
- Project Kavod is a three-year pilot project conducted in partnership with the Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education in Miami to improve the quality of Jewish education by addressing the recruitment and retention of Jewish education personnel and the culture of employment in which they work. (<http://www.caje.org/interact/ProjectKavod-index.html>.)
- The Union for Reform Judaism Department of Lifelong Jewish Learning provides a variety of services for the Jewish early childhood education community including development opportunities, publications and consultation services to existing and new programs. (<http://urj.org/educate/childhood/>.)
- The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism Department of Education offers early childhood consultation services that provide active support for early childhood programs in USCJ congregations and Solomon Schechter day schools. (<http://uscj.org/About6767.html>.)

## **FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

It is clear an early childhood Jewish education experience has a powerful impact on the children and the families who participate in these programs. But the research is incomplete. Were the parents who chose early childhood Jewish education predisposed to identifying with and participating in Jewish education and therefore more likely to respond positively? Why don't more parents choose early childhood Jewish education programs? What is the impact of an early childhood Jewish education on the children and families who do not continue their Jewish education? Why don't more families continue with Jewish education when the early childhood experience is so positive? How do we capture the curricular and pedagogic practices that result in positive outcomes? In order for early childhood Jewish education to compete with other public and private early childhood programs it must meet, and preferably exceed, the current standards for early childhood education.

To achieve the ultimate objectives of instilling a strong Jewish identity in children, strengthening the Jewish identity of families, and serving as a key gateway to life long Jewish living and learning, the Jewish community needs to focus on engaging the families, strengthening the professionals, building excellent programs and creating local and national infrastructures.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES**

Communities need to

- Develop an effective infrastructure for finding and engaging new families.
- Develop programs to attract and retain parents with children from birth through age three.
- Provide incentives to families to choose Jewish early childhood programs over public and other private early childhood programs.
- Provide support to early childhood programs that are a part of a congregational school.
- Provide support to home-based family child care programs.
- Invite parents to participate as equal partners in creating and implementing the new vision.

Policy implications for professionals in early childhood Jewish education:

- Provide equitable compensation for early childhood Jewish educators.
- Create and support Jewish early childhood certification and degree programs.
- Provide stipends and salary incentives for early childhood educators to participate in certification and degree programs.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD JEWISH EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

- Build stronger relationships and infrastructures with host institution professionals, clergy and lay leadership.
- Conceptualize Jewish early childhood programs as Jewish family resource centers.
- Increase family engagement, family involvement and family education in the early childhood programs.
- Ensure every early childhood program has a clear vision.
- Assist families with post-early childhood Jewish education and adult Jewish education decisions.
- Make visible the positive impact of an early childhood Jewish education.
- Apply the latest research to create the highest quality Jewish early education practices.
- Develop standards or quality indicators specifically for early childhood Jewish education programs based on Jewish values and concepts.
- Assist schools in identifying outcomes and meeting performance evaluations.
- Increase the number of Hebrew immersion programs.
- Continue to research, document and evaluate the impact of the programs.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

- Develop effective community infrastructures for addressing the challenges facing early childhood Jewish education.
- Centralize all early childhood Jewish education efforts within each community in order to minimize the "silo" effect.
- Make families with young children a communal and national priority.
- Strengthen the relationship between early childhood programs, day schools, religious schools, and congregations.
- Build communal institutional networks and collaborations.
- Support existing national institutional networks and collaborations.
- Provide support to early childhood programs that are a part of a congregational school
- Provide support to Jewish home-based family day care programs.
- Strengthen the relationship between early childhood programs and other communal Jewish institutions.

## CONCLUSION

Among all forms of Jewish education, early childhood Jewish education holds one of the greatest potentials for the future viability of the North American Jewish community. It instills a Jewish identity in children, one that is permanently imprinted in their brains and that will remain with them throughout their lives. It strengthens the Jewish identity and practice of families, provides a significant venue for adults to connect with other Jewish adults and serves as a pivotal gateway into further involvement and commitment to Jewish life and the Jewish community. This opportunity is threatened by both present and future challenges. Poor compensation and insufficient child development and Jewish knowledge threaten the quality of the early childhood educator, the quality of the programs and the ability to inspire and engage families. Early childhood Jewish education is limited to a five-year window—from birth until the child enters kindergarten. All of the research indicates that these are critical years in the development of the child and engagement of the family. As with the critical periods of brain development, if this opportunity is missed, it may be lost forever.

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