

MAKING THE CASE FOR CHANGE
WHY JEWISH ECE IS IMPORTANT: 8 REASONS
Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative

The Challenge and the Opportunity

Early childhood education represents a unique opportunity to engage both young children and their parents in a rich and meaningful Jewish communal life. At this stage of their lives, parents of young children are open to considering questions of identity and connection for themselves and their children. The raising of young children offers Jewish communities an unrivaled opportunity to engage young families and deepen their Jewish journeys.

The early years of a child's life have a substantial impact on brain development, social-emotional intelligence and personal identity. The foundations for future learning, personal relationships and communal belonging are laid down in those early childhood experiences. Thus, parents are seeking the best educational environments available for their children, and the Jewish community needs to be able to offer them excellence. Yet, less than a quarter of the Jewish children ages 0 – 5 are enrolled in a Jewish ECE school (Vogelstein, 2008) and therein lies both the challenge and the opportunity.

Why Jewish ECE is Important: 8 Reasons

1. Quality matters. Excellence makes a difference in parents' Jewish connections and in children's elementary school readiness socially and academically.

- “The most important predictor of families’ Jewish connectedness after enrolling their children [in a Jewish ECE school] was the quality rating that they assigned to different aspects of the programs’ operations.” (Ben-Avie, et al, 2009)
- “The general consensus among researchers is that high quality early childhood programming results in better school readiness both academically and socially.” (Public Policy Forum, Research Brief, Volume 97, Number 1, January 2009)
- The research on early childhood development and the care of young children points to three items related to quality: 1) quality of the relationship between the child and the child care professional impacts on all aspects of child development; 2) quality is predicted by the training and compensation of child care workers; and 3) the biggest quality issue is the inability to recruit and train qualified staff (found in Vogelstein, 2002)

2. Quality early childhood Jewish education will lead to an increase in the Jewish involvement and learning of families. Parents of young children are more involved in their child's educational experience than at any other time in their child's education. Early childhood

Jewish education is not just about the children. It is about building relationships with and educating parents.

- Research over the last two decades corroborates that Jewish ECE is a crucial period for instilling Jewish identity in children, engaging parents, and serving as a gateway for additional Jewish education and involvement in synagogue and community life (Vogelstein, 2008)
- “When parents have strong Jewish connections, their children are much more likely to receive Jewish education.” (NJPS - National Jewish Population Study - 2000-2001)
- Jewish ECE schools can be successful in increasing the engagement of families both in-married and inter-married in adult Jewish study and parenting sessions. (JECEI, 2008)
- “Adults and their children mutually reinforce each other’s Jewish engagement” (Wertheimer, 2006)

3. Parents of children in EC programs tend to form peer groups .

- A major predictor of Jewish engagement is the number of Jewish friends a person has. (NJPS 2000/2001)
- “Parents want and need friendships with other parents at the same stage of parenting. Jewish play groups and other social opportunities can lead to Jewish choices in such areas as education and children’s religious identity.” (Wertlieb and Rosen, 2008, p. 15)
- “Jewish parents who become involved with secular institutions will be much less likely to make Jewish friends. Since Jewish friends lead to Jewish choices, these parents will have little involvement with Jewish tradition during their child’s early formative years.” (Rosen, 2008, p. 6)

4. Jewish ECE schools can create lasting connections to unaffiliated families who consider the Jewish part of the program as secondary. In other words the community could use these programs as a key part of their outreach to the unaffiliated and keeping them connected beyond this initial experience.

- For many parents, the promotion of their children’s Jewish identity is not an important criterion when choosing a Jewish early childhood educational (JECE) program. However, if they perceive and experience the JECE programs as excellent and well-run, they will become more engaged in Jewish actions as a “side effect.” (Ben-Avie, et al, 2009)
- A 2006 study in San Francisco found that for interfaith families, their primary connection to the Jewish community was the Jewish ECE school (Vogelstein, 2008).

5. Staff of the Jewish early childhood schools who see themselves as Jewish educators can play a key role in assisting families consider further Jewish options upon the matriculation of the children.

- When asked to identify the top three purposes for schools out of a list of a dozen items, nearly a third of the educators in Jewish early childhood schools did NOT identify anything Jewish. (CAJE, 2006)
- 69% of educators in Jewish ECE schools are Jewish; 45% of the teachers’ highest level of Jewish education was afternoon school (Vogelstein, 2002)

6. High quality early childhood education leads to financial savings for the parents and the community. Early recognition and intervention by trained teachers can make a major

difference and prevent developmental, physical, cognitive and social disabilities and delays from turning into life-long disabilities. This saves significant money on the long-term, because the early identification of special needs leading to preventative treatment saves children from a long and often unsuccessful educational career in and out of costly special programs.

- “The earlier that problems are identified, the earlier they can be addressed...this results in a greater chance for a positive impact on the child” (Vogelstein, 2008)

7. Federation and community efforts to improve the quality of the early childhood programs will create a better partnership between the community at large and the individual institutions hosting the early childhood Jewish programs.

- “The current challenge in the field of Jewish education is to link the silos, to build cooperation across institutional lines and thereby enable learners to benefit from mutually reinforcing educational experiences” (Wertheimer, 2006, p. 2)
- “It is surprising how little communication exists across agencies providing similar types of programs and services [in Jewish ECE], both within a given community and across communities.” (Wertlieb and Rosen, 2008)
- “Social and communal contexts can have a major impact on whether Jewish education succeeds” (Wertheimer, et al, 2006)

8. Federal and State governments increasingly recognize the importance of early childhood education in leading to a more successful educational system. An increasing number of states are opening free public school programs for four and five-year old students. This may doubly hurting the Jewish system because both the children and the educators are now leaving our programs. The children are leaving because the public schools are providing the system for free while teachers in the public schools are earning significantly higher compensation (including benefits). It also may provide an opportunity for Jewish institutions to run government funded early childhood programs in their institution.

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