

Jewish Education Begins With Early Childhood

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by Pat Bidol Padva



Among all forms of Jewish education, early childhood education may provide the best opportunity for strengthening the viability of North American Jewry. Families of young Jewish children are in transition,

looking for connection and open to new life paths. However, too often they either miss the opportunity to participate in Jewish early childhood programs; or, even when they do enroll, the schools fail to engage them in a significant way Jewishly. How can we address that challenge - and realize this promise?

Six years ago, a group of leading Jewish philanthropists formed JECEI, the Jewish Early Childhood Initiative, with that mission in mind. Working in seven different metropolitan areas across the country, JECEI offers a whole school change approach that is transforming existing early childhood schools into centers of excellence that attract families and engage them even after their children transition to Kindergarten.

What makes it work?

First, we understand that educational excellence is the deciding variable for parents in determining where to send their children to school. So we focus on developing programs that are pedagogically sound and making ample room for teachers to learn. Our approach draws its power from a unique blend of two methodologies: 1) the world-renowned Reggio Emilia early childhood education model, which emphasizes the natural development of children through exploration and self-discovery; and 2) a reliance on significant Jewish ideas and values.

Second, we have learned how to reach parents and communities where they are. We work with Jewish schools to create an educational and social environment that is welcoming to all variety of

families with young Jewish children. While all JECEI classrooms share fundamental tenets and inspiration, key to JECEI's sustainability is the flexibility of our five Jewish Life and Learning (JLL) "options," which can be customized to reflect the culture and personality of each school community.

The options integrate dialogue, prayer, study, music, and social action as follows:

Learning Circles: group adult Jewish learning sessions that include teachers and parents that strengthen parent-teacher bonds and enhance teachers' learning, in turn, keeping the educational caliber high.

Project Work: projects such as building a *sukkah* that can become a Jewish learning moment, one that brings families together, sparking further engagement.

Experiential Learning for Families: interactive child-friendly family experiences that connect to Jewish values and ideas; includes opportunities for parents to deepen their own Jewish knowledge.

Celebrating Jewish Life - Rituals and Observances around the Calendar and Life Cycles:

Families come together for celebration, to model Jewish practice and community-building and to receive learning materials that help extend Jewish engagement into the home.

Adult and Parent Courses and Speakers in Host Institution and Community: The goal is to help assure that: 1) school professionals and parents are involved in connecting parents to these opportunities; 2) the schools are part of planning and/or sponsoring the programs; and 3) the programs are high quality.

Through study and discussion together, teachers and parents select and design JLL options. They develop a shared understanding of Jewish living and learning that integrates organically into their school and home lives. In fact, it is this process - or underlying operating system - that was cited as a key driver of JECEI's success in a recently released study conducted by the Yale Child Study Center published online for a recent edition of the *Early Childhood Education Journal*. The study found that "...the strong relationships that formed between families and educators resulted in change not only in the early childhood program, but also in the community."

These relationships are enhanced by the digital connections JECEI provides to link parents to one another and to their school as partners in learning. Additionally, JECEI's team of expert advisors works with the schools for four years. We establish at least three JECEI schools in each community, nurture inter-school collaboration, and draw on the support of local professionals and lay leaders.

The evidence is growing that we are having a measurable impact on long-term family engagement. Another study by Yale University researchers analyzed data from parents in JECEI and non-JECEI schools and found that, across the board, JECEI parents:

- increased their celebration of Shabbat;
- increased their celebration of Jewish holidays;
- increased their contributions to Jewish organizations;
- expressed greater interest in sending their children to Jewish educational programs in the future, including: Jewish camps, Israel experiences, and day schools.

But the best measure of our success is the rapidly rising demand for our services. What started as a small pilot program has in short order become a full-fledged national effort, with partners in every

region of the country and a growing list of communities expressing interest in joining our ranks. We now have more than 2,300 families engaged in 20 schools in seven metropolitan areas around the country. We expect that the roster of schools will grow even longer as our accreditation program takes hold. A rigorous examination process, and the seal of excellence that it culminates in, will provide a powerful incentive for Jewish early childhood schools to embrace the JECEI brand.

There is reason to be excited about the potential for growth and the unique opportunities this will create to strengthen Jewish connections. By providing a high-quality educational experience for families with young Jewish children, we can attract these families at exactly the time in their lives when they are shaping their identities and are most open to creating new pathways. Our success is in no small part reliant on the JLL options designed to be relevant to today's families. By leveraging excellent secular and Jewish education for children with intelligent, carefully designed outreach to parents, JECEI inspires families to integrate Jewish ideals into their daily lives, and is a gateway to lifelong Jewish engagement.

Pat Bidol Padva is the Executive Director of [JECEI](#).

Selected Comments:

-Anyone who has had the transformative experience of being educated and shaped by your children can appreciate the value of a JECEI-inspired early childhood experience on the whole family. Our kids grew up pre-JECEI, but the education they had beginning at age 2, shaped by Charlotte Muchnick at Adas Israel in Washington DC, still creates wonderful ripples in our lives.

How do parents, coming through the JECEI-directed experience, develop in an intellectually challenging and satisfying way that parallel's the child's opportunity for self-discovery and exploration? The new Foundations of Jewish Family Living curriculum from the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School addresses that need through a 20-week course of study for parents. With a focus on the core values in Judaism explored through master stories and other texts, parents have the opportunity to engage in dynamic learning at an adult level, and bring the conversation home. Since many JECEI communities and schools are in communities that also have a FMAMS, there is room for a good shidduch here. "The more Torah, the more life."

-This sounds like a remarkable program and one that more communities should be striving to embrace. As the publisher of the New Vilna Review, an online journal dedicated to exploring questions of modern Jewish Identity, I often find myself in conversation with Jews of all ages, backgrounds, etc. and invariably, one of the areas of discussion that comes up is Jewish education. Too often it seems as though people can be divided, broadly, into two groups, when it comes to the kind of Jewish educational experience they had when growing up (outside of Orthodox communities): Those who went to Jewish Day School and grew up in relatively observant homes, and those who went to "secular" schools which were supplemented by weekly "Hebrew School" and "Sunday School" at a local synagogue. Often the latter group (in which I would note that I place myself) has had a rather abysmal Jewish educational experience, which is unfortunate. There

are two elements of this program, as it is described here, which jump out at me. The first is that it talks about approaching “Jewish” education, from the perspective of creating a quality educational experience, which is noteworthy and laudable in its own right. The second element of the program that I think will help make for a successful experience is the integration of the teachers and the parents into this project of helping to sow the seeds of Jewish identity.

-I had the privilege of working with a group of early childhood educators in Philadelphia on an Israel infusion professional development initiative including an early childhood educator Israel trip.

In Early Childhood education we have a rare window of opportunity when parents are willing and active partners with the teachers and institutions in the education of their children. This means we can have a positive impact not only on the students, but also on the parents and families as we lay the foundation of love, connection and commitment to Israel as part of a strong Jewish identity.

Unfortunately, many of our Early Childhood directors and educators have neither the necessary knowledge nor experience of Israel to change the preschool culture regarding Israel. In addition, they often do not have the skills and tools required to initiate changes even if they have acquired the necessary knowledge base. Changing this reality requires a serious professional development effort involving both directors and teachers. And finally, too many of our Early Childhood professionals have never been to Israel.

This project addressed these needs by providing teachers and directors some 21 hours of professional development with a 10-Day Institute for Early Childhood Israel Education in Israel as a central experience.