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ABSTRACT

Several conditions indicate the urgent need for Jewish day care programs. The rising divorce rate among Jews, tremendous changes in the structure and function of the American family, the isolation of the nuclear family in the suburbs, and, importantly, Jewish parents' need for guidance concerning Jewish child-rearing practices, all present problems that can be alleviated through Jewish day care programs. Jewish parents need information about parenting skills and child development as well as an introduction to Jewish living experiences that they can practice at home. Personal observations show that Jewish parents may have inappropriate expectations for their children's achievement and are frequently unable to provide on-going, rich, Jewish observances in the home. Staff at nursery schools operated by the Board of Jewish Education have come to serve as surrogate family for enrolled children and their parents. By empathizing with parents, building parents' positive self image and confidence, and providing advice and a variety of Jewish participatory experiences, the center staff can provide young Jewish parents with guidance they have lost as traditional practices have become less prevalent. At nursery schools operated by the Board of Jewish Education, parents are involved at least 12 times each year in school activities related to family or parent-child events such as naming and birthday ceremonies. Additional ways to draw parents close to Jewish living need to be developed. (Author/RH)

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THE JEWISH NURSERY SCHOOL AS SURROGATE PARENT

by Marvell Ginsburg, Director
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"My four year old gets up several times during the night and wants to come in our bed. Should we let him?"

My husband says I'm not strict enough with our child. I think he's too strict. What should I do?"

Our two year old doesn't seem to be eating as much as he used to. Is something wrong?

"My three year old daughter cries in the morning and doesn't want to go to school. Should I bring her anyway or let her stay home?"

Our four year old won't tell us anything he does in school. Why?"

"My 3½ year old cried and cried when I told her she couldn't go to see Santa Claus. Then I gave in and took her. Is there any harm in that?"

"My husband is a convert. He doesn't want to take our children to his parents for Xmas because we are Jewish. I think we should go because I don't want to deprive them of their only grandchildren."

The foregoing questions and comments are typical of those asked of nursery teachers and directors by our parents over and over again during the school year. They stop teachers in the hall. They want to stop in the room and talk when bringing or picking up a child. They call on the phone or send notes pinned to their children's clothes.

What it amounts to is a serious plea for help and/or support with their general child rearing concerns--and specifically their concerns, conflicts and questions about Jewish child rearing.

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The great majority of young, Jewish families, served by our B.J.E. affiliated and/or operated nursery schools in the Chicago Metropolitan area, live in the suburbs away from their parents and other close relatives. Quite often they live in housing developments populated primarily with other young families similar to their own with similar problems and no better answers. They are today's typical nuclear (or in some cases, single parent families) trying their best to do a decent job of parenting. It is probably the same situation all over the country.

Prior to World War II, the extended family, with its multi-generational composition, was more the rule than the exception. It was this writer's own personal experience to grow up in just such a closely knit multi-generational family environment - with one set of grandparents living downstairs, another set six blocks away and a plethora of aunts, uncles and cousins within a three block radius. But then, the entire community seemed to be that way. Grandparents and other close relatives were immediately accessible by walking a short distance. There was no shortage of "advice givers." Grandmothers and aunts "knew exactly" what a young parent should do - when a child looked pale, wouldn't eat his carrots or wet his bed - and were not the least bit reluctant to say so. (Grandfathers and uncles were busy making a living, studying in the synagogue and leaving the children to the women).

Perhaps the young parents of that day had the problem of getting too much "help" with child rearing and may have resented it. But there was a certain comfort and security at the same time. There was another virtue. There were always many parenting models available to evaluate, emulate and integrate into one's own internal value system. In addition, one was parented not only by one's parents, grandparents and assorted aunts and cousins, but by everyone else's relatives as well. Thus, for better or for worse, one came to be a parent with somewhat of a sense of what parenting is all about. Then came the post World War II baby boom and move to the suburbs. Families dispersed.

Young couples got caught up in the American dream of the suburban home and found the nightmare of isolation as well. Gone was the security and comfort of having "elders" around for support. Dr. Spock took their place. While Dr. Spock and his colleagues are highly knowledgeable and were probably better "advice givers" because of their advice being based on scientific research in child development, still the loving commiseration and assurance of one's own family was sorely missed.

This is an example of what we all know has been happening to the family in America. There have been tremendous changes in the composition structure and function of the family. These changes have occurred with such great rapidity, that even federal agencies cannot agree on one all encompassing definition. In report number 57 of the Education Commission of the States, December, 1975, titled "The Role of the Family in Child Development," we find that "The U.S. Bureau of Census defines the family as two or more persons related by blood, marriage or adoption who reside together. The Family Assistance Plan includes in its definition all relatives living in the home with children".

Since report 57 deals with child rearing aspects of the family, the term "family is used to refer to any adult arrangement that has as one of its functions the nurturing of an infant or young child. By the same token the term "parent" refers to any adult who has assumed responsibility for the physical, psychological, emotional and educational nurture, as well as proper protection, of a child."

If some of these definitions have a strange ring to them it's because of the idea of a married couple, raising their biological offspring with or without other relatives by blood or marriage in the home is our deeply imbedded notion of family. This still seems to be the case for the general population. It is especially deeply imbedded in our Jewish

psyches - for in our tradition the family is the foundation of Judaism.

There is a Yiddish expression which says "Vie se Christelt Zich, Azo Yiddelt Zich" - The way of the non-Jew becomes the way of the Jew.

While our Jewish nursery schools are basically middle class and serving intact families, we are seeing increasing numbers of children from divorced homes. While the divorce rate among Jews has not reached the same proportions as in the general population, it is climbing all too quickly.

The national Jewish Population Study (1971) found that among 25-29 year olds, approximately 15% of heads of households were separated or divorced. A few years later the Jewish welfare Board's National Conference on Single Parent Families (1974) estimated 20-40% of the national membership in Jewish Community Centers were single parents.

According to Kenneth Keniston, Professor of Human Development at Massachusetts Institute for Technology, in the U.S. at present, about one of six children is living with one parent (usually the mother) while one of every three children will spend some time between birth and age 18 in a single-parent family.

There is a more urgent need for Jewish day care. In addition to divorced families, our young Jewish mothers are emulating the general trend for women with young children to enter the work force. Whether this trend has an adverse effect on the development of the child, the family and Jewish identity is yet to be seen. While it is not the subject of this paper, it is of deep concern to the writer and should be to all of us. We all know that the foundation of the personality is laid in the first few years of life. The increasing instability of Jewish homes is now added to the list of problems with which we are

already trying to cope in terms of educating "Jewishly". Many of the youngsters in our early childhood centers are third and fourth American born generations, whose parents (and grandparents if they are available) are unable to provide on-going, rich, Jewish observance in the home. There is confusion on the part of some parents, who although are both Jewish, nonetheless see it as being "American" to have a Christmas tree and Chanukiah in their homes. This is in addition to mixed marriages where this is the common practice. We also have the problem of explaining to a child from a Jewish home which only observes Jewish practices why his cousin, who is Jewish, celebrates Christmas in addition to or in place of Jewish practices.

Another former and primary function of the parent, to be the child's first "teacher", is now being given over to a multitude of care takers whether mom works or not.

Example: Possibly because of a heightened sense of isolation from family and the former camaradery of the work place, or college, "stay at home" mothers are seeking out programs for their children which start with infants as young as six months of age. Here they also find a needed friendship group for themselves as well as the so called "good" early education experiences. With all good intentions, many of these programs do not understand the needs of these infants and young children below age three and thus give mothers the wrong messages about what are appropriate experiences at these stages.

This writer has observed children in such a program. Young children, according to Jean Piaget, should be freely exploring space, environments, and manipulating objects. These children were being manipulated themselves as objects and overly directed by the teachers and parents in highly structured programs.

These 12-18 month olds were asked to do projects suitable for 4 and 5 year olds to sit down at a table and glue buttons on a piece of cardboard.

Thus instead of promoting sound development and fostering positive parent-child relationships, and providing appropriate expectations for parents, such unsound programs work against their stated goals. This has a direct adverse effect on our work in our Jewish early childhood centers.

This writer observed the "roll call" lists on the wall at the parent-infant - toddler center visited. At least 6-7 of the nine participants in each group were Jewish. Many of these parents subsequently enroll their children in our centers, beginning with our Parent-Toddler program for two year olds with a parent participating once a week for 1 1/2 hours. These "experienced" parents then expect programming which is far too complex. Their expectations of their children's achievements and developmental states are inappropriate. This makes for "pushing" and frustration. Unhappy children and parents cannot totally benefit from our program, specifically the Jewish components. It has long been the writer's basic premise that if we are to foster positive Jewish identification in children in our schools, we not only have to provide a SOUND program of Early Childhood Jewish education for the children but we have to work toward two basic goals with parents:

1. Help them with their general parenting concerns and skills and understanding appropriate developmental needs and stages.
2. Provide a rich, intensive set of Jewish living experiences for them as families in the school in order to provide sufficient beginning Jewish skills for the parents to translate into home practice.

A generation or two ago, the kibbutzim in Israel began experimenting with a radical departure in child rearing. Children did not live at home with parents. They were raised in groups, in a children's house by a "metapelet" who was supposed to be a combination of parent, teacher and child guidance expert (some of whom had six week crash courses). Her word was law to the parents. They obeyed her every command regarding their relationships to their children. These young pioneer parents had deliberately cut themselves off from their parents and former culture (primarily in Eastern Europe.) Thus they were totally dependent on their "child-expert in residence", the metapelet, to help them with the normal concerns of all young parents.

Most kibbutzim today are returning to more traditional parent-children living together arrangements.

While most young Jewish parents in the U.S. have not left country, culture and family, it seems to some of those in the suburbs as though they have. If their parents live in the city an hour away by car, or have no car, or live in another state the young parents feel almost as cut off as those young kibbutzniks.

The young kibbutz parents had the advantage of a cohesive support system where the kibbutz community, the educational system and parents all had the same goals.

Our young, American Jewish families feel pulled in many directions by conflicting goals emanating from a multifaceted society in a constant state of flux, lack of support for Jewish educational goals, or unclear educational goals, undermining of sound family life, T.V. as a shaper of values, and confusion about whether to focus on self fulfillment for mom, career wise, or to focus on what children need to thrive.

For all of the foregoing reasons and more, we find that our early childhood centers have come to serve as surrogate family for both the children enrolled and their families. According to Report No. 57 quoted earlier, our teachers certainly fulfill the functions of "parent". They are trained and responsible for the physical, psychological, emotional and (Jewish) educational nurture and protection of the children. John Dewey, Maria Montessori and other educational philosophers spoke of a good school being patterned after a good home. Perhaps even more important, our teachers serve as models of committed, enthusiastic, Jewishly literate adults.

With children now spending the years from approximately age 3-20 in school, and watching T.V. 15,000 hours per year as against 11,000 hours in school, this notion of school as surrogate family is more important than ever.

How does the Jewish nursery serve as surrogate family for today's young parents?

Because young parents do not live in a cohesive, value oriented society as the kibbutz parents did, the one source of support where they can feel cultural affinity and comfort, is the Jewish school. Here, they can pour out their hearts to a teacher they know will really empathize and understand.

Just as in a good family, our teachers consciously try to foster positive self image in these young parents. They try to build up their confidence in their parenting ability. They become a resource for advice through regular newsletters and conferences and by having good children's books on developmental issues available. In the last ten years there have been a great many excellent children's books on psychologically relevant themes published. The schools also distribute articles on pertinent child rearing issues. But most important of all, the schools expend great energy in developing a variety of intensive Jewish

participatory experiences for the families.

Since 1972, when the Board of Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago opened our first model early childhood center, we have had intensive parent involvement as a priority goal.

For years Jewish educators at all levels of Jewish education have lamented the negative effect of the lack of home support for the school's Jewish teachings. We now have some research in the general and Jewish fields to substantiate those "feelings" of the educators.

In an article in Jewish Education Spring, 1980, by Knoff and Smith, "Student Attitudes Toward Religious Education," the authors quote a number of studies that "clearly document that the school cannot be a primary instrument for influence of students' fundamental attitudes or behaviors. It is parent actions that have been shown to significantly affect their offspring's religious values and self-esteem." The article also quotes Ribner (1978) who "found that there was a significant relationship between parental Jewish observance and Jewish activity and his child's subsequent Jewish lifestyle as an adult." The authors go on to state that "it seems clear that without some sort of parental involvement, it is less likely that a child will become interested or committed Jews." Ribner's data also show that, "when their parental effects are partialled out, the more intensive adults' prior Jewish educational backgrounds, the more committed they are to Jewish affairs."

Harold Himmelfarb examined the education of Jewishly - culturally deprived children. In his resulting study, "Education for Naught," he makes it clear that "schools fail when parents do not enroll their children in Jewish schools at an early enough age; when they do not enroll them in schools which provide intensive and extensive Jewish

education and when the parents do not personally and clearly demonstrate that Jewish education is a high priority. Studies show rather conclusively that schools can only intensify already existing values and attitudes, but they are not very effective in changing them.

Thus, without encouragement and reinforcement from the home, it is extremely unlikely that Jewish schools will have any lasting impact on their students. If the home provides the necessary encouragement and reinforcement, Jewish schooling can increase the level of Jewish commitment achieved in the home. These two institutions need each other and the efforts of one without the other are likely to produce only slight results."

We welcome the publication of the foregoing studies quoted, because we have always maintained what these studies have verified. We also realized that most of the parents who come to our Jewish early childhood programs seek them out as points of entry or re-entry into Jewish life.

We have, therefore, expended and continue to invest a great deal of energy into finding ways to intensively involve parents and children in Jewish experiences. Some of them are probably what many of you do - Friday Shabbat guests, family dinners, etc.

For a long list of such activities you may want to refer to the writer's recent article on the "Parent in Early Childhood Education"

I do want to share with you two special things we are doing which were conceived by the director of two of our model BJE centers, Janice Cohn.

The first is a Hebrew naming ceremony for the four year olds. They are told that because they were babies when they received their Hebrew names, we will have a special ceremony in school so they can remember it.

Children from the group are selected to assume roles of rabbi, nazzan, and parents of the child to be named. The class rearranges the room into a synagogue using the ark they have made, and a tiled alter cloth with Jewish symbols. The child's family is invited to attend.

One of our teachers, Rachel Horn, who is a professional artist, created a Hebrew naming certificate for this ceremony as well as a shehechyanu certificate for our 3 year old class birthday ceremony.

The Hebrew name certificate concludes with the traditional blessing, "May you grow up to study Torah, be married under a Hupah and do good deeds for the Jewish people and the whole world;" All the while, the parents and grandparents are smiling through their tears and saying "from your mouth to God's ear!"

We hold this ceremony for four children at a time in each 4 year old class.

Having seen how effective this ceremony was, we wanted to do something special for the three year olds. Janice thought of enriching the birthday celebration by the inclusion of parents reciting Shehechyanu prior to lighting birthday candles and singing Happy Birthday. We send home the blessing so parents can practice. If they don't read Hebrew and can't pronounce the accompanying transliteration the teacher goes over it with the parents on the phone.

The teacher explains to the class that parents love their children very much. They are so happy to have the child in the family and see it continue to grow up, that we Jewish people say a special Hebrew braha to show how happy we are to be alive and with this child on his/her birthday.

A parent decorates the certificate in class. The teacher holds it up to show the children how beautiful Lisa's mommy made the certificate.

This gets the parent invested in doing something of a Jewish nature. We suggest that it be framed. It is more likely then to be framed and kept for a reminder forever that significant life events are even more significant when the Jewish component is added.

Another element we emphasize is to strongly encourage the family to contribute a gift to the class in child's honor - a record, book, puzzle, etc. We explain this as laying the foundation for tzedakah.

In addition to participating in these ceremonies, our parents are involved in at least a minimum of ten other times they participate in some family or parent-child event. Thus we have parents coming to school at least once a month to be bathed in the love and beauty of Jewish life.

We all need to turn our creative energies towards developing even more ways to draw our parents close to Jewish living. We also need to think through carefully the additional challenge of equipping the children and their parents to cope with changes that are quickly occurring in the various denominations in Jewish life today and in the future.

The impact of the women's movement is being strongly felt. There are now 100 young women who have either been ordained as rabbis and cantors or are in school studying towards that goal.

Many conservative synagogues give women aliyot. There is even a feminist group in the orthodox community called Ezras Nashim.

We have a fascinating situation in our own family. Our son is a third year conservative rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Our daughter-in-law is a second year reform rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College. She has accepted the traditional mitzvah of mikveh for women but in addition puts on t'philin when she doves every morning. They are working out a mutuality of sharing for

other mitzvot such as kiddush. This seems to be the trend in their generation.

We need to think about this as we educate our families towards "yiddishkeit."

But however we do it, do it we must. We can no longer pay lip service to educating parents. It is an imperative. We are now witnessing through assimilation, intermarriage, and broken families the slow erosion of our people. For as the prophet Malachi tells us,

"Remember ye the law of Moses My servant,
Which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel.
Even statutes and ordinances.
Behold, I will send you
Elijah the prophet
Before the coming
Of the great and terrible day of the Lord.
And he shall turn the hearts of the
Fathers to the children,
And the hearts of the children to their fathers;
Lest I come and smite the land with utter destruction.

Thank you