

Inspiring Jewish Connections

Outreach to Parents With Infants and Toddlers

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Since its release in 2000, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine), the landmark report on the science of early childhood development, has guided the infant–family and early childhood field as we strive to fulfill its compelling charge *to blend the skepticism of a scientist, the passion of an advocate, the pragmatism of a policy maker, the creativity of a practitioner, and the devotion of a parent—and to use existing knowledge to ensure both a decent quality of life for all of our children and a promising future for the nation* (p. 415).

Minority communities, many of them faith-based, need to pay particular attention to this charge as a means of perpetuating identity, culture, and a communal sense of belonging. Researchers and practitioners, who inevitably serve members of faith-based communities in either secular or sectarian settings, enhance cultural competence when they understand the particular needs and aspirations of different populations.

As we continue our ongoing efforts to conceptualize, innovate, implement, and evaluate services for young children and their families, it is only appropriate that we expand our charge to include the interests and needs of faith-based communities. This article addresses the issue with regard to the American Jewish community. First, we explore the issues that arise when considering young families in the context of faith-based communities. Then we focus on a recent study of Jewish programs for young families that presents one faith-based community's approaches and challenges. We eagerly anticipate the conversations stimulated by the perspectives of other faith-based communities in the companion articles in this journal.

Authors' Note: We gratefully acknowledge thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this article from Lawrence Gianinno, Peggy Kaufman, Ben Phillips, and Ilene Vogelstein, and wish to thank Rachel Maimin for her assistance with various aspects of manuscript preparation.

Children in Faith-Based Communities

THE FINDINGS and recommendations conveyed in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000) capture important and unassailable propositions to propel program and policy improvements. Among the propositions are the importance of early life experience, the centrality of early relationships and family, the dramatic impacts of social and economic change, the challenges of cultural diversity, and the demonstrated capacity we hold to influence a wide variety of outcomes through early intervention. The report deserves accolades for its influence on the burgeoning field of infant mental health and for encouraging recent state government initiatives for young children and their families. However, this highly influential 500-page analysis includes none of the following in its index: religion, spirituality, faith, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist. "Religion" is mentioned twice in the context of "cultural competence" and "multiculturalism."

Among the conclusions and recommendations, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) stated that "despite widespread consensus about its importance, the underlying science of cultural competence remains to be developed" (p. 370) and we remain compromised in "the complex task of considering when to tailor . . . efforts to specific populations of children and

families and when to treat all families similarly" (p. 408).

Many of us would agree that faith-based attitudes and behaviors, religious affiliation and identity, spiritual experiences, and commitments to tradition influence our own perspectives. Even professionals who are not "believers" must take religion and spirituality into account, as many of the families we serve incorporate some element of faith into their lives. One Harris poll found that 90% of American adults believe in God (Taylor, 2003). A growing literature documents the salutary correlates and effects of religiosity, spirituality, and ritual observance for families and children (e.g., Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, in press; Roehlkepartain, 2003).

Abstract

Jewish agencies and organizations in communities across the country have developed a variety of innovative programs for parents with young children. Programs combine Jewish themes with content about parenting and child development, both to provide information and support and to inspire families to become more involved with Jewish religion and tradition. Although a number of excellent programs exist, a lack of systematic evaluation and a lack of communication within and between communities inhibit the dissemination of best practices, suggesting the need for a national coordinating body. Families benefit the most when Jewish organizations partner with local experts, combining religious/cultural knowledge with early childhood expertise. When faith-based communities learn from each other, cultural competence and program quality are both enhanced.



The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) noted that:

Efforts to understand the importance of cultural practices in the rearing of young children emphasize the extent to which culture is both reproduced and transformed within each child [and family]. That is to say, the socialization process that is embedded in the development of early relationships is influenced by the transmission of values and behaviors from one generation to the next, the “transformation” of those values and behaviors by the social context, and individual differences among caregivers. (pp. 247–248, emphasis added)

This concern about the transmission of values and behaviors from one generation to another is a central concern of the American Jewish community, often framed in terms of the survival and continuity of Jewish identity.

This article describes outreach programs for young families with Jewish sponsorship that have been generated in large part by concerns over Jewish continuity. In providing a description of how the Jewish community addresses the transmission of values and behaviors, we seek to provide a window on community problem solving in general, and to articulate steps toward widening and strengthening cultural competence for those who serve young children and their families.

Jewish Families With Young Children

THROUGHOUT THEIR very long history, the Jewish people have almost always been a minority in the countries they have inhabited. Jews make up approximately

two tenths of 1% of the world’s population. In the United States, with about 40% the world’s estimated total Jewish population of 13.1 million (DellaPergola, 2006), Jews represent approximately 2% of the total population. However, the precise percentage is a source of some controversy among scholars, as minority populations are difficult to count, and there are differing definitions of who is Jewish (Saxe, Tighe, Phillips, & Kadushin, 2007).

Although often perceived as a monolithic group, American Jews, like other religious and ethnic groups, differentiate among themselves along a variety of dimensions. These include distinctions by religious denomination or lack thereof (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or secular), locus of European or Eastern origin (Ashkenazim or Sephardim), level of assimilation, and extent of affiliation with Jewish institutions. Such institutions as synagogues, Jewish community centers, and Jewish federations, which are centralized organizations in local Jewish communities that engage in fundraising and make allocations to domestic and overseas organizations, are collectively referred to as the “organized Jewish community.” This pluralism within Judaism not only makes it difficult to make general statements about the Jewish people, it also illustrates in a larger context that minorities cannot be viewed as a single homogeneous group and require nuanced understanding.

Demographers project a decline in the Jewish population, primarily as a consequence of low birthrates among Jews, intermarriage, and assimilation (DellaPergola, Rebhun, & Tolts, 2000). These projections suggest that there will be fewer children

raised as Jews in the future. In addition, Jews of childbearing age in their 20s and 30s are increasingly choosing not to affiliate with Jewish institutions (Ukeles, Miller, & Beck, 2006).

To counteract these trends, the organized Jewish community has, for more than a decade, been highly focused on the expansion of educational and cultural programs for children and youths under the assumption that interventions can influence the Jewish identity of the next generation. Yet most of this effort, and the vast majority of philanthropic dollars, have been directed toward the next generation rather than their parents. In light of the irreplaceable role that parents play in the lives of their children, this one-sided emphasis is both curious and puzzling.

As well documented by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000), families, “parents and other regular caregivers in children’s lives are the ‘active ingredients’ of environmental influence” (p. 389) on children’s development. The role that parents play in the home is unlikely to be duplicated by any outside Jewish institution, educator, or program. Parents have far more contact with their children than do Jewish educators. In addition, parents select which settings and values outside the home will be part of their young child’s experience. If what is learned outside the home is not modeled and reinforced in the home, it is less likely to be sustained. Secular and cultural influences that erode Jewish identity can be counteracted in the home. For better or worse, parents unquestionably are a major influence on children’s Jewish identities and the Jewish future.

The influence of parents on children is not merely one way. In the course of bearing and raising a child, parents can potentially undergo a spiritual transformation of their own. There are mutual influences between parent and child learning and development, thus making family-focused and relational education and intervention opportune (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003; Friedland & Berkson, 2003).

Despite the organized Jewish community’s focus on youths rather than parents at the national level, at the local level many Jewish institutions have developed significant programs and services for parents, as described next. Increasingly, leaders are calling for intensification, integration, and quality enhancements as crucial opportunities for strengthening Jewish identity and continuity (Fox et al., 2003; Rosen, 2006; Vogelstein & Jacobs, 2003).

Available demographic data on American Jews illuminate features of the community.

Although small in number, social scientists consistently find that American Jews exceed almost all other ethnic/racial and religious groups in socioeconomic status, education, occupational prestige, and household income (Kosmin & Keysar, 2006; Smith, 2005). Jews are more likely to be members of the middle or upper class who hold professional, high-paying positions.

Jews tend to marry later than other Americans and consequently have children later (Smith, 2005). It is estimated that more than half of Jewish women age 34 and under have not yet given birth to a child (Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2003). Consequently, a sizable percentage of first-time Jewish mothers are in their 30s and have been in the labor force for 10–15 years. When they have their first baby and either take a leave of absence or stop working altogether, there is often an identity crisis. Regardless of whether they eventually re-enter the labor force, their high educational levels tend to make them sophisticated consumers of child care services.

Thus, while Jewish institutions are increasingly recognizing the value of providing outreach programs for Jewish parents that enhance identity, promote continuity, and encourage membership in Jewish institutions, Jewish parents themselves are more concerned about quality early care and education, often obtaining these services from secular providers. Programs developed by the community reflect both of these forces, and discussions about the future direction of these programs incorporate these inherent tensions.

Engaging Families With Young Children

TO ASSESS THE STATE of the field, Rosen (2006) visited a variety of well-regarded programs with Jewish sponsorship targeted at new parents and families with young children. Interviews and focus groups with close to 200 professionals, parents, volunteers, and community leaders in Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Denver, Milwaukee, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, St. Louis, and Washington, DC, yielded a useful catalog of current services, an initial pool of good practices, and insight and guidance for building upon what are considered successful programs. This opportunity to learn from successes in the field is invaluable; formal evaluation, however, remains a challenge.

Programs for Jewish parents are offered by a variety of Jewish agencies, organizations, and foundations. Jewish community centers, Jewish social service agencies, synagogues, early childhood centers, Jewish educational organizations, local foundations, Jewish fed-

erations, and even entrepreneurs have developed various types of programs. However, these programs are rarely coordinated among agencies within communities, and there is little communication and sharing of information across communities.

We describe a number of programs below. (The full report with additional details on methodology and findings is available at <http://cmjs.org/parents>.)

Five basic categories of programs operate currently in the Jewish community:

- Prenatal education programs for expectant parents
- Programs to welcome, engage, or support new parents who have just added a new child by birth or adoption
- Infant care centers
- Short-term infant-toddler programs for parents and children, both within and outside of formally established parenting centers
- Long-term educational programs, including family education, adult education, and literacy programs for parents with young children

Jewish Prenatal Education Programs

Prenatal education programs for expectant parents that combine information about childbirth with information about Jewish traditions are found throughout the country (see sidebar describing the Jewish Baby University in Denver). Such programs are generally cotaught by a certified childbirth educator such as a Lamaze instructor in combination with a Jewish educator. The establishment of new programs of this type is often a challenge in some communities, as in areas of low Jewish population density, it is not easy to

generate a critical mass of expectant Jewish couples in the same trimester of pregnancy.

Jewish Welcome Programs

Communities reach out to first-time parents through welcome programs, commonly called “Shalom Baby programs.” These programs, which usually involve delivery of a gift basket to a family when the parents have had a baby or adopt, introduce parents to the community at a time when parents are very receptive to overtures (see sidebar describing the San Diego Shalom Baby Program).

Several communities appear to be successful at finding unaffiliated parents, and when parents are contacted by program staff, more than 95% respond positively to initial phone calls, even if they have not been involved with the Jewish community previously. Nationally, more than 30 communities have implemented gift basket programs, but only a few have fully realized the potential of these programs to engage parents. Most programs are run by part-time staff in Jewish agencies who have many other responsibilities and do not have adequate time to find new parents or follow up with those who have received a basket.

THE SAN DIEGO SHALOM BABY PROGRAM

The Shalom Baby program at the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center in La Jolla, California, which began in the fall of 2001, celebrates the arrival of Jewish newborns and welcomes them to the San Diego Jewish community through gift baskets, play groups, social events, holiday celebrations, and resource guides. Relying upon referrals, the program contacts expectant parents several months prior to their due date with a welcoming phone call, and sends a prayer card that contains biblical Psalm 121, which according to Jewish tradition arouses God’s mercy for an easy birth when brought into the delivery room. Shortly after a baby is born, a trained peer volunteer visits the new parents and gives them a beautifully arranged gift basket with both religious and practical items for newborns and families, as well as information about San Diego’s Jewish institutions. New mothers are then invited to join play groups with other Jewish mothers, which help in the transition to parenthood and provide emotional support. The play groups have proven to be the most popular element of the program. To date, San Diego’s Shalom Baby program has delivered more than 1,500 baskets, and facilitated the creation of more than 35 play groups.

JEWISH BABY UNIVERSITY IN DENVER

Jewish Baby University is a 7-week course in Denver that has been offered since 1995 for parents who are expecting for the first time. It is cosponsored by the Robert E. Loup Jewish Community Center and Rose Medical Center, which markets itself as Denver’s “baby hospital.” The course includes 12 hours of childbirth education taught by a certified childbirth educator, as well as 6 hours of Judaic instruction taught by a rabbi. Judaic content explores such topics as Jewish parenting, naming ceremonies, ritual circumcision, and creating a Jewish home. During the final session, mothers and fathers have a chance to explore, separately, the emotional impact of becoming a parent.



PHOTO: JUDY NEWZER

Several Jewish social service agencies offer sophisticated programs for new parents in which support for the new mother is the primary aim, rather than efforts to engage the family Jewishly (see sidebar describing the Center for Early Relationship Support at Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Boston). Although these programs are situated within Jewish agencies, all offerings are completely nondenominational and are available to the entire community, not just Jewish parents.

Jewish Infant Care

Currently, full-day Jewish infant day care is available only in a limited number of communities. Invariably, where such programs do exist, demand is high and there are waiting lists. Such programs have a dual focus, providing high-quality care and immersion in a Jewish environment (see sidebar describing

Infant Care at the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago). At present, there are few training programs despite the need for qualified staff.

Jewish Infant-Toddler Programs

Many Jewish organizations offer short-term infant-toddler programs where parents and children participate together. The idea at this stage is to focus on parenting issues and the baby rather than Judaism. However, program sponsorship is Jewish, and there are many opportunities for parents to meet other Jewish parents. The hope is that social networking with other Jewish parents will generate Jewish involvement.

Such programs are often very similar to those offered in the general community—the similarities are deliberate so that the sponsoring organization attracts parents who would otherwise be drawn to competing secular offerings. Programs that do have Jewish

content are often based on Jewish holidays or Sabbath observance; Sabbath programs known as “Tot Shabbat” programs are perhaps the most frequently offered. Parents come to these programs to get out of the house, have fun, meet other Jewish mothers, and learn something useful. Programs are light and have cute titles.

Jewish parenting centers serve as an umbrella for an array of infant-toddler programs. There are approximately 40 Jewish parenting centers in the United States, located in Jewish community centers and a handful of synagogues (see sidebar describing The Seattle Jewish Community Center Parenting Center).

Jewish Educational Programs for Parents

The Jewish community has developed several long-term family and adult education programs that specifically target parents with young children. Family programs involve the participation of both toddlers and parents, incorporating arts and crafts activities and Jewish content suitable for young children. Adult education programs are designed for parents wishing to deepen their knowledge of Judaism. These programs use Jewish texts to explore in a sophisticated fashion what Jewish tradition teaches about parenting and the transmission of Jewish identity. Several Jewish literacy programs and book clubs have also been developed (see sidebar describing the PJ Library).

INFANT CARE AT THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS OF CHICAGO

The Jewish Community Centers of Chicago provide full-day infant care for children of all backgrounds at four of their locations, each of which has a specially designed infant care center. Staff members are trained not only in the latest developments in child care, but also in how to create a Jewish environment. Infants are surrounded by Jewish-themed toys, Jewish music, Sabbath celebrations, and the incorporation of Hebrew into everyday language. Building relationships with families is a major priority of the infant care program; parents and caregivers remain in constant communication, and parents are also involved in celebrating Jewish events with their children. Parenting support is offered in two areas: daily care and Jewish education. The latter is provided through the Pritzker Center for Jewish Education, which offers classes in how to raise a Jewish child.

THE CENTER FOR EARLY RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT AT JEWISH FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICE OF GREATER BOSTON

The Center for Early Relationship Support at Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Boston provides direct services, training, supervision, and consultation that focus on the earliest parent-infant relationship. There are a multitude of programs, which include the following: Visiting Moms, a program for pregnant women and new mothers who are struggling with the adjustment to an expanding family; Early Connections, which provides specialized therapeutic home visits and treatment for mothers experiencing postpartum depression or other postpartum adjustment disorders; Healthy Families, which offers free home visits and group support for young parents who are under 21 years old; Fragile Beginnings for parents of premature infants; and the Infant-Parent Training Institute for experienced professionals who wish to broaden their knowledge and develop skills specific to a clinical orientation in working with infants and families. Support groups, feeding support, and sleep consultations are also offered.

THE SEATTLE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER PARENTING CENTER

The Parenting Center at the Stroum Jewish Community Center in Seattle provides a warm and nurturing environment for expectant parents and families with young children. The Parenting Center offers programs, classes, and support services designed to strengthen emotional bonds and promote optimal child development. Parents have the opportunity to join support groups, consult with experts, enroll in a variety of parenting programs, participate in a Tot Shabbat service, attend an annual baby fair, or just drop in. Periodically, the Parenting Center offers talks by scientists, physicians, and authors with national reputations, a number of whom are members of its advisory board.

Challenges and Future Directions

IT IS apparent from the preceding typology that the organized Jewish community has created vibrant, innovative programming for Jewish parents with young children. Further advancement of the Jewish outreach agenda for children from birth to 3 years old requires that the community address the following challenges:

1. *Jewish communities need to do a better job of finding Jewish babies.* Many Jewish and intermarried parents are not aware that Jewish programs exist in their community. A sizable percentage of Jewish babies are born to families that have little or no connection to their tradition. Finding these babies through social networks and referrals, and informing parents about programs, is perhaps the biggest challenge that the Jewish community faces.
2. *Program content needs to be “calibrated” appropriately.* As most Jewish parents are looking for information about parenting rather than information about Judaism, finding the right balance between Jewish content and parenting information is another ongoing challenge. Too much



PHOTO: ALMA HADASH GEIGER

3. *Parents need to receive more personal attention from Jewish professionals.* Parents become better parents through experience and learning, while they grow as Jews primarily through personal relationships with clergy and lay leaders such as rabbis, social workers, and Jewish educators. Programs that foster such relationships further the community’s agenda.
4. *The importance of social networks needs to be recognized.* 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. Peers can influence Jewish choices by encouraging attendance at events with Jewish sponsorship, by serving as Jewish role models, and by recommending Jewish educational institutions.
5. *Agencies need to coordinate their efforts and share information within and across communities.* It is surprising how little communication exists across agencies providing similar types of programs and services, both within a given community and across communities. A national Jewish ZERO TO THREE-type organization is needed to disseminate best practices; assist communities in developing, evaluating, and funding programs; support professionals; and advocate.
6. *Jewish organizations need to partner with the experts.* However well meaning, Jewish infant and toddler programs sometimes lack cutting-edge information as they tend to be led by experts in Judaism rather than by experts in early childhood or infant mental health. The ideal scenario is for Jewish organizations to partner with local secular programs. This would improve program content, attract more Jewish parents in search of quality offerings, and extend program reach to Jewish parents in secular networks who may not be aware of programs offered by Jewish organizations.

THE PJ LIBRARY

The PJ Library, a national program offered by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation based in West Springfield, Massachusetts, sends free children’s books and CDs with Jewish content to families that self-identify as Jewish. The program starts when children are 6 months of age, and currently runs through age 6. The concept originated with country singer Dolly Parton, who developed the Imagination Library as a way to enhance literacy among disadvantaged children. Books and CDs are selected by a team of Jewish educators, incorporating themes of Jewish holidays, folk tales, and family life. Parents receive guides to help them use the books and CDs, and also receive a popular book on Jewish parenting, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* (Mogel, 2001).

The richness of Jewish programming leaves us with great optimism regarding next steps in the field: one set of steps particularly incumbent upon the Jewish community, and another related set of steps for the cadres of skeptical scientists, passionate advocates, pragmatic policy makers, creative practitioners, and devoted parents—Jewish or not. Additional research on these programs is needed to demonstrate effectiveness

and efficacy, as well as substantiate best practices.

Well-designed and well-coordinated programs for parents with young children have the potential to change the Jewish future by engaging many families who might otherwise be lost to the organized Jewish community. To accomplish this, national Jewish organizations and philanthropic giving need to be reoriented so they direct resources to parents as well as youths. In addition community agencies need to transcend their individual missions and work together at a community-wide level to find and attract Jewish parents.

Beyond the Jewish community, the infant-toddler community can better advance its mission with greater attention to the ways that faith-based communities address the needs of their young families. Our aspiration

to cultural competence, as well as our obligation to establish an evidence base for all of our programming, could be supported with the participation and inclusion of diverse faith-based initiatives as learning opportunities and as sources of good practices (e.g., Dowling & Dowling, 2003; Friedland & Berkson, 2003; Hadi & Al-Fayez, 2003; Roehlkepartain, 2003). When faith-based communities learn from each other, they inform secular services, enhance the transmission of cultural values, develop assets, and sustain community. As a rabbinic proverb teaches: "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone." ❧

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Learn More

JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Jewish Early Education

Contact: *Ilene Vogelstein, ivogelstein@gmail.com*

The Alliance for Jewish Early Education is an umbrella group with more than 25 members, each of whom represents a national, international, or community-based Jewish organization that serves either early childhood professionals or young children and their families. The alliance actively coordinates efforts to advocate, network, and share knowledge regarding early childhood Jewish education in the interest of enhancing the field.

Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, Early Childhood Department

www.caje.org/earlychildhood

The mission of the Early Childhood Department at the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education is to ensure that early childhood Jewish programs utilize innovative and developmentally appropriate pedagogic practices, as well as provide

excellent and authentic Jewish educational experiences from knowledgeable Jewish teachers.

Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative

www.jecei.org

The mission of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) is to develop a unique model and brand of Jewish early childhood education that offers excellence in education for both children and parents, and to ignite families on a lifelong journey of Jewish living and learning. To accomplish this mission, JECEI works as a multi-tiered organization immersed in teaching, research, fieldwork, dissemination, support, and community building.

JEWISH ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR PARENTS OF INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND PRESCHOOLERS

Ikkarim: Jewish Values and the Journey of Jewish Parenting

Contact: *Deborah Kram, adultlearning@cjp.org*

Ikkarim, which in Hebrew means roots or principles, is a text-based adult learning program

for parents of children birth through age 5 years taught at Boston synagogues. The program has a number of goals: to inspire Jewish choices, to engage parents in serious study of Jewish texts, to create a community of learners, and to discuss and direct strategies for parenting that reflect Jewish values.

The Mother's Circle

www.themotherscircle.org

The Mother's Circle offers programs and resources for non-Jewish women with Jewish partners who are raising Jewish children. The central component of the program is an 8-9 month adult education program that meets twice a month. Additional components include a national electronic mailing list and various one-time events. The program is not focused on encouraging non-Jewish mothers to convert, but rather respects these women's choice to retain their own religious identity.

Learn More About the Programs Mentioned in the Article

Jewish Baby University in Denver

For further information, contact Rabbi Jeffrey Kaye, Director of the Chaplaincy Department at Rose Medical Center, at 303.320.2159 or *jeffrey.kaye@healthonecares.com*.

The San Diego Shalom Baby Program

For additional information, contact Judy Nemzer at 858.457.3030, ext. 1352 or *shalombaby@lfcc.com*.

The Center for Early Relationship Support at Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Boston

For additional information, contact Peggy Kaufman at 781.647.5327 or email *pkaufman@jfcbboston.org*

Infant Care at the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago

For further information, contact Fern Batchko, assistant director of Early Childhood Services at the Chicago Jewish Community Centers, at 847.763.3507 or *fbatchko@gojcc.org*.

The Seattle Jewish Community Center Parenting Center

For additional information, contact Dana Weiner at 206.232.7115, ext. 237 or *danaw@sjcc.org*.

The PJ Library

For additional information, visit *www.pjlibrary.org*.

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