Executive Summary

Jewish Engagement from Birth:
A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents

Full report may be downloaded at: www.cmjs.org/parents

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This report describes the findings of a national study of outreach programs for Jewish and intermarried parents with young children. This report describes the results of an in-depth study based on visits to ten Jewish communities around the country that have developed successful outreach programs for first-time parents and parents with young children. The report focuses on how these communities find parents who are not connected to the community, and describes the programs they offer to help these parents make connections. Over one hundred professionals in Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Denver, Milwaukee, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, St. Louis, and Washington, DC were interviewed to obtain detailed information about each community’s programs, the parents who participated, the program staff and volunteers, and the community infrastructure that supported these efforts. Focus groups were also conducted with parents and volunteers.

New parents are looking for support and connections; unengaged parents are receptive to overtures from the community

Professionals felt strongly that the organized Jewish community needs to pay much greater attention to first-time parents and parents with young children. While youth programming has expanded considerably over the past decade, programming for the parents who raise these children and make their educational choices has received surprisingly little support.

When young adults give birth to their first baby or adopt, their lives change dramatically. There are profound shifts in the realms of personal identity, relationships, and work. Many of these parents have moved thousands of miles from where they were raised and are looking for support, guidance, information, and friends. This set of circumstances offers the Jewish community a unique
window of opportunity to engage these parents by offering targeted programming, while helping them to become better parents. Unengaged parents who would not otherwise attend programs with Jewish sponsorship are receptive to programs when these programs address their needs as parents.

Peer relationships have a strong influence on engagement

The site visits indicated that engagement with the organized Jewish community is strongly influenced by parents’ peer relationships. The main reason that parents attend programs is to meet other parents. Peers can influence Jewish choices by encouraging attendance at events with Jewish sponsorship, by serving as role models, and by recommending Jewish institutions. Peers can also influence choices that intermarried couples make regarding the religion in which their children will be raised. Jewish playgroups appear to be one of the best ways to foster peer relationships.

Programs are offered by many different agencies and organizations; efforts are uncoordinated both within and across communities

Programs for new parents are offered by a variety of agencies, organizations, and foundations. Federations, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Family Services, synagogues and synagogue-based early childhood programs, central agencies for Jewish education, Chabad, local foundations, and individuals in private homes all offer or have developed programs. Programs are rarely coordinated among agencies within communities and there is little communication and sharing of information across communities.

In several communities, well-designed programs have been very successful at welcoming unengaged parents and helping them to make connections, but most such programs are underdeveloped

Communities reach out to first-time parents through welcome programs, commonly called Shalom Baby programs. These programs, which involve delivery of a gift basket to a family when they have had a baby or adopt, introduce parents to the community at a time when parents are very receptive to overtures. Several communities appear to be successful at finding unengaged parents, and when parents are contacted by program staff, more than 95 percent respond positively. In communities with especially well-developed gift basket programs, about 75 percent of the parents who receive baskets participate in a variety of follow-up programs.

Over 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 federations who have many other responsibilities and do not have time to find the unengaged or follow up with parents who have received a basket.

Successful programs, mainly those sponsored by JCCs, have the following features: passionate staff with strong interpersonal skills; directors who devote a majority of their time to running the program; community leaders who support the program; an extensive network of Jewish professionals, parents, and medical professionals who help find first-time parents; committed peer volunteers who deliver the baskets and advise the program; strong follow-up programs, including Jewish playgroups for mothers; and a policy of no solicitations.

Communities offer a number of different programs that correspond to children’s stages of development and parents’ interests

Some communities offer programs for expectant parents that include material on childbirth and Jewish tradition. Many communities offer programs for parents with infants and toddlers that have a variety of titles and topics, although the quality of the individuals who teach these programs has more of an impact on enrollment than program content. Some JCCs and synagogues have parenting centers where parents can choose from among many different program options. Jewish Family Services offers programs in some communities to provide parents with support and guidance.

A number of family and adult education programs have been developed. National family education programs include Al Galgalim: Training Wheels, a family education program offered by Hadassah, and the PJ Library, developed by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, which sends Jewish books and CDs to children each month beginning at six months of age.

Adult education programs for parents with young children include Ikkarim, a joint collaboration of Combined Jewish Philanthropies and Hebrew College in Boston, and the Parent Education Program, developed by the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School with support from the AVI CHAI Foundation.

Programs specifically for intermarried parents with young children include The Mother’s Circle, developed by the Jewish Outreach Institute, which teaches non-Jewish mothers how to raise Jewish children, and Pebbles, a Reform Movement program in Denver, which encourages intermarried families to raise their children as Jews.

Organizations offering programs face a number of challenges

- Communities need to create an effective “infrastructure” for finding Jewish parents or programs do not reach the unengaged.
• While publicity through obstetricians and pediatricians is the best way to reach the unengaged, communities do not always approach physicians and physicians are not always willing to distribute publicity to patients.
• Some community professionals are uncooperative and do not provide the assistance that welcome programs need to find the unengaged.
• Parents who live in outlying suburbs with few Jewish institutions are reluctant to drive long distances, so programs must be brought to them.
• Since unengaged parents are sensitive to program venues, neutral venues such as JCCs tend to be preferred over synagogues.
• Professionals find it difficult to establish an appropriate level of Jewish content in programs. When programs have little Jewish content, they are indistinguishable from secular counterparts. When parents think there is too much Judaism, those who are not yet interested in learning about it are unlikely to show up. If Jewish content is taught at a level suitable for young children, parents do not receive exposure to Judaism’s richness.
• Professionals do not feel that separating intermarried parents from in-married parents is in the best interests of either the parents or the community.
• Parents prefer a single, trusted point of contact and do not want to be on multiple lists. Since parent lists are frequently owned by one organization, other organizations find it difficult to publicize their programs.
• Once unengaged parents have begun attending programs, it is necessary for community professionals to provide them with a considerable amount of personal attention to help them move along on their Jewish journey.
• Unengaged parents are less likely to choose Jewish preschools for their children, since their preschool choices are based primarily on quality, location, and hours rather than Jewish sponsorship. Involvement in Jewish programs prior to enrollment in preschool can enhance the importance of Jewish sponsorship, potentially leading to more Jewish preschool choices.

Professionals need to be carefully selected; volunteers are critical
Professionals who do outreach to parents need to have early childhood expertise and must be sensitive to the needs of parents. Programs are most successful when there is strong volunteer involvement.

Program developers need to ask the right questions
• Have program leaders been carefully selected based on their interpersonal skills and expertise?
• Has the program been designed so that it is accessible and appealing to unengaged parents?
• Is the program’s Jewish content appropriate for the audience?
• Is the program sufficiently informed by current knowledge on parenting and child development?
• Does the program strengthen bonds between parents and their children?
• Does the program offer opportunities for parents to form friendships with other Jewish parents?
• Does the program offer opportunities for parents to form relationships with Jewish professionals?
• Does the program inspire parents to learn more about Judaism, create a Jewish home, make Jewish educational choices, and become involved with Jewish institutions?

Jewish institutions that offer programs for parents with young children have both strengths and weaknesses; collaborations among agencies and organizations generate the best programs

• Jewish Community Centers offer many programs for parents, have early childhood expertise, and have facilities that lend themselves to these types of programs. They also engage in extensive marketing and draw parents that would probably not come to a program at a synagogue. However, Jewish content is sometimes lacking in JCC programs.
• Synagogues create community and offer rich Jewish learning opportunities, but programming for parents with young children is rarely a priority for rabbis or synagogue leadership.
• Professionals who teach in early childhood programs connect with parents every day, but since early childhood programs and professionals are oriented toward the needs of children rather than parents, parent education remains underdeveloped at most preschools.
• Jewish Family and Children’s Services has considerable expertise in parenting and child development, but programs are usually secular.
• Federations can fund existing programs, initiate new programs, partner with community agencies, and bring professionals together from different agencies. When they are responsible for program delivery, however, the programs do not receive sufficient attention since staff members usually have many other responsibilities.
• Jewish chaplains have connections to hospitals where babies are born but are sometimes reluctant to promote specific programs.
Central agencies for Jewish education can provide models of excellence, and have expertise in family education, but tend to be oriented toward programs within educational institutions rather than outside of them. Chabad has experience with outreach, many centers in outlying communities where young families live, and early childhood expertise. In addition, Chabad centers are run by couples with young children who relate well to parents. However, Chabad’s religious orientation does not have universal appeal.

Successful outreach to parents requires a coordinated effort by the entire community

Communities that are successful at engaging first-time parents have passionate champions who are a driving force; engage in extensive efforts to find parents; offer many opportunities for parents to get together; offer many different programming options to parents; offer Jewish programs based on best practices; have connections to secular parenting organizations; place an emphasis on relationship-building with parents; communicate regularly with parents via email, phone, and newsletters; draw upon the expertise of local early childhood professionals; cultivate volunteers and peer leaders; have strong JCCs that are centrally involved; have professionals who work together across agencies and organizations towards a community-wide vision; and have leaders who recognize the importance of reaching parents with young children.

Funding is needed to realize the potential of these programs

The next step is to identify a community for a pilot project that would involve developing a community-wide effort based on these success factors.

Funding needs include: the expansion of Shalom Baby programs and other successful programs for parents with young children; helping synagogues to become more parent-friendly; helping preschools to better serve the needs of parents; and the development of training programs to create peer leaders.

A national coordinating body is needed to disseminate best practices, assist communities in developing programs, support professionals, advocate, and seek funding. Additional research on these programs is also needed.

Well-designed and well-coordinated programming for parents with young children has the potential to change the Jewish future

The conclusion of this report is that an investment in programming for first-time parents has the potential to change the Jewish future by engaging many families who might otherwise be lost to the organized Jewish community.