As the Jewish community continues its sometimes effective, often comical quest to capture the attention of younger Jews, it would do well to consider the enormous possibilities for engagement among new parents and families with young children. Many new parents are at a stage in life in which they are receptive to larger connections to culture, spirituality and community. It is a perfect opportunity for Jewish enrichment, and a potential windfall for those seeking to engage larger numbers of Jews.

In addition to forging connections to community, the birth of a child can free new parents from much of the discomfort they might have with Jewish life — whether it be memories of the inanity of certain rituals, tension over the endemic dysfunction of Jewish institutional life, or hostility at organized Jewish leadership for espousing policies that are inconsistent with the views of most American Jews. In this way, the life stage of new parenthood presents an opportunity for the community to free itself, quite literally, from itself.

The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the unique dimensions of new parenthood, early childhood, and the Jewish education of both children and adults. The authors consider dynamic ways of understanding this particular cohort, and examine existing and potential programs that hold the promise of creating and sustaining connections between families and Jewish life.
Although Jewish life begins at birth, there is no guarantee that a baby will grow up to have a Jewish identity. Jewish identity must be transmitted to children by parents. The extent to which parents transmit Jewish identity depends on their own Jewish backgrounds. However, the Jewish community can have an influence on this transmission if it offers programs specifically for parents with young children.

Properly designed outreach programs for parents with young children can have a transformative effect. Parents are faced with a dramatic change in routine when they have a child, and this creates a desire for support and guidance and a receptivity to outreach efforts. When the organized Jewish community offers programming to new parents, they receive needed assistance and positive feelings toward the community are engendered. There is a greater likelihood that they will create a Jewish home and raise their children with a Jewish identity. Intermarried couples may be more likely to choose Judaism as their child’s religion.

How should outreach programs be designed to meet the unique needs of new parents at this stage of life? What features should programs include to attract unengaged and intermarried parents?

For the past three years, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University has been studying parents with young children and the programs that have been created for them around the country. After studying communities with successful programs, we have identified several strategies that appear to be effective at reaching parents with young children.

Successful Programs Are Sensitive to the Unengaged and the Intermarried

A sizable percentage of parents are either marginally engaged with the Jewish community or are not engaged at all. Intermarriage is commonplace. Communities with successful programs make them as accessible as possible to parents on the periphery and are sensitive to those who have had little exposure to Jewish tradition.

To maximize attendance, programs are offered in neutral, non-religious settings such as Jewish community centers, shop-
At this stage of their lives, parents are focused on their children. Learning must seamlessly weave Jewish texts and values into conversations that are relevant to being a new parent.

Successful Programs Help Parents to Make Jewish Friends

Because of the changes that new parents undergo and because many have relocated and have not yet made new friends, they are especially eager to seek out relationships with other parents who are at the same stage of life. Peers can provide emotional support as well as practical information. Peers can also help with the sometimes bewildering choices new parents need to make regarding childcare providers, baby gear, parenting classes, early childhood programs and community resources.

The fact that social relationships with peers are so important to new parents gives these relationships a pivotal role in fostering Jewish engagement. Parents who have not been connected to the community may not be interested initially in community institutions, but they are interested in connecting to other parents. Programs that help them meet Jewish peers can therefore potentially also help them to connect to the community.

Parents who have not been involved with the organized Jewish community might be more willing to attend events with Jewish sponsorship if peers invite and accompany them. In addition, parents may be more likely to make Jewish educational choices if they have Jewish friends who are making these choices. Preschools represent the first such choice parents make, and peers are a significant influence on whether parents choose a Jewish early childhood program.

Playgroups for new mothers organized and facilitated by the Jewish community are an especially effective way to create strong, lasting connections with Jewish peers. Mothers in these groups tend to stay connected with each other over the course of several years.

Successful Programs Highlight Current Knowledge about Parenting and Child Development

During their baby's early months, parents are focused almost exclusively on how to get through the day. They are preoccupied with diapering, dressing, eating and sleeping. As their babies continue to grow, new questions continually arise. There are many sources of information that parents can turn to for answers — friends, the baby's grandparents, lectures, books, parenting magazines and the Internet.

Jewish institutions that offer expert information about parenting and child development based on the latest scientific research attract parents to programs in large numbers. If programs of this type are not offered by the Jewish community, parents will turn to the many secular programs that are available and will not view the community as a resource. Thus, the opportunity to bring them into a Jewish setting, potentially leading to Jewish friendships and later enrollment in programs with Jewish content, is lost.

Successful Programs Provide Jewish Content That Matches Participants’ Degree of Receptivity

Many new parents possess little knowledge of Jewish tradition and are not prepared to pass it on to their children. Experience across communities has repeatedly shown that when programs over-emphasize Jewish themes, attendance is low compared to programs that focus on secular themes. Yet if programs are primarily secular in content, no Jewish knowledge is imparted and parents are not inspired to learn more.

For parents taking their first steps toward engagement, it is important for community institutions to calibrate Jewish content. Too much can scare some parents away. Too little doesn't inspire. Content at a level suitable for very young children doesn’t convey Judaism's richness.

At this stage of their lives, parents are focused on their children. Learning must seamlessly weave Jewish texts and values into conversations that are relevant to being a new parent.

Successful Programs Foster Caring Connections Between Parents and Jewish Community Professionals

While relationships with Jewish peers can create tentative connections to the community, most parents need further encouragement to explore Judaism, acquire more Jewish learning and/or join synagogues.

This is best accomplished when community professionals build personal relationships with parents. Repeatedly, parents in focus groups have told us that warm, caring interactions from local professionals made the difference between engagement and indifference.

Professionals in successful programs have told us that they spend many hours of their time meeting with parents, learning about their lives and teaching them about Judaism, both in intimate classes and one-on-one. The relationship draws parents in, and learning from someone they like and respect keeps them involved. If parents have personal connections to rabbis and Jewish educators, they are far more likely to consider participating in adult learning.

It is therefore important for communities to make sure they have professional outreach staff who have adequate time to establish and facilitate these relationships. In addition, outreach staff must be chosen carefully. It is the quality of the program staff more than the program content that draws parents in and keeps them coming.

In conclusion, our research indicates that communities do not need to wait and hope that families with young children will show up and participate in Jewish life. Well-conceived and well-designed programs that incorporate these strategies on a coordinated, community-wide basis have the potential to bring thousands of new families into Jewish organizations each year, setting parents and children on a Jewish trajectory for life.
Properly designed outreach programs for parents with young children can have a transformative effect. Parents are faced with a dramatic change in routine when they have a child, and this creates a desire for support and guidance and a receptivity to outreach efforts. When the organized Jewish community offers programming to new parents, they receive needed assistance and positive feelings toward the community are engendered. There is a greater likelihood that they will create a Jewish home and raise their children with a Jewish identity. Intermarried couples may be more likely to choose Judaism as their child’s religion. — MARK I. ROSEN