



FACT SHEET: Defining and Measuring Jewish Engagement for Families with Young Children

What does “Jewish engagement” mean to Jewish families with young children and to Jewish early childhood professionals? Although Jewish engagement is not a new topic of interest for Jewish professionals and social scientists, coming up with a consensus definition of the term, and generating relevant measures of Jewish engagement for families with young children, has been relatively under-examined. Today’s American Jews marry later,¹ intermarry more,² and participate less in organized religion³ than American Jews of earlier generations. Because of these trends, Jewish families – and Jewish family engagement – are likely to be different now than a generation ago.

This fact sheet highlights several key findings from the CASJE Early Childhood Project, a study that explored the ways in which Jewish early care and education (ECE) is associated with greater and long-term involvement in Jewish life among families with young children. The first phase of the project included a literature review of 53 studies, a content analysis of 1,221 survey items used with Jewish populations, and interviews with 44 Jewish professionals and 10 Jewish parents of young children. For more information on research methods and the larger study, see the text box at the end of this document.

FINDINGS

1. Engagement for families with young children is multidimensional and encompasses at least seven factors: behaviors, attitudes/values, Jewish institutional attachment, home practice, connection/interaction with other Jewish families, making Jewish educational choices for children, and finding personal meaning in Jewish life. While the first three factors of Jewish engagement have been commonly measured among Jewish teens and adults for decades, the remaining four factors (**home practice, connection/interaction with other Jewish families, making Jewish educational choices for children, and finding personal meaning in Jewish life**) are beliefs and behaviors that are particularly salient to contemporary Jewish families with young children. Crucially, these latter four facets of Jewish engagement have received less attention in the literature and in survey use among Jewish populations,

¹ Lugo, L., Cooperman, A., Smith, G.A., O’Connell, E., & Sandra, S. (2013). A portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center survey of US Jews. *Pew Research Institute*, 10.

Hartman, H. & Hartman, M. (2009). *Gender and American Jews: Patterns in Work, Education, and Family in Contemporary Life*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press.

Parmer, D. (2015). What’s Love Got to Do with It? In *Love, Marriage, and Jewish Families: Paradoxes of a Social Revolution*, ed. by Fishman, S.B. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.

² Lugo et al., 2013.

³ Lugo et al., 2013.

especially families with young children. In particular, family activities inside the home are an understudied but potentially rich area of Jewish engagement of families with young children.

2. Jewish engagement can change over time, and there may be important “windows of opportunity” for increasing Jewish engagement for families with young children. Parents with young children reported changes in Jewish engagement from before to after having children. Specifically, the birth of the first child and a child’s entry into Jewish ECE are important times when families may become more engaged in Jewish life because the experience of having a young child can create a feeling of openness to new experiences for parents.

3. Many Jewish ECE programs emphasize “institutional attachment” over engaging families in Jewish life. The CASJE ECE Project’s content analysis of items used in past surveys of Jewish populations revealed that over 50 percent of the 1,221 survey items that were examined address Jewish engagement through the lens of an individual’s involvement with a particular Jewish organization. Jewish ECE programs are heavily invested in engaging families in their ECE program or, when applicable, the synagogue or Jewish Community Center in which it is housed (i.e., institutional attachment). This may be because the success of an ECE program may be evaluated by measures of institutional attachment or involvement (e.g., numbers of synagogue members, or numbers who attend an event) rather than changes in a family’s home practices or the quality of relationships between families. The emphasis on Jewish institutional attachment and supporting Jewish families’ connections within the institutional building rather than outside of it suggest ECE programs may have an opportunity to take a wider view of what Jewish engagement means for families with young Jewish children.

4. Compared to institutional membership, relationships are more likely to be a lasting characteristic of families’ Jewish engagement. Some Jewish professionals employ a relationship-based approach to engagement, in which creating and supporting relationships is of equal or greater importance to providing particular content. Staff (and clergy) can focus on developing relationships with children, parents, and grandparents to deepen families’ engagement in Jewish life. In practical terms this could mean that educators and clergy get to know families in one-on-one meetings, as well as during group programs that include ample time for families to get to know one another. It can also mean that families engaging with one another outside of institutions is as important as families engaging with institutions through membership or programming. This is not to say that content doesn't matter. However, it does mean that Jewish professionals are increasingly focusing on listening to families’ individual stories in order to discover which opportunities might best engage them in Jewish life.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Thinking differently about what counts as engagement in Jewish ECE: Engagement through Jewish organizations is changing. Jewish individuals, as well as families, today still take part in organizations’ programs but are less likely to make a long-term commitment to membership. Jewish organizations have historically been interested in “countable” aspects of engagement such as membership in synagogues and Jewish Community Centers, enrollment of children in education programs or social groups, and philanthropic contributions. These more “countable” forms of engagement might more appropriately be called “family involvement” in Jewish institutions, rather than engaging families in Jewish life more broadly. However, individuals or families often choose to participate in programs offered by organizations for several years without becoming members. Case studies conducted as part of the CASJE ECE research project found that, for the most part, Jewish ECE programs’ mission

statements did not mention a mission to engage families broadly in Jewish life.⁴ This points to an opportunity for the field of Jewish ECE to better articulate its mission to foster Jewish engagement of families with young children and ensure that their success is evaluated by metrics that take this larger objective into account.

Bringing Jewish ECE Home. The survey content analysis conducted for the CASJE ECE Project yielded very few items addressing Jewish engagement in a home context; however, the literature review and interviews with key informants revealed that encouraging more home-based Jewish practice is a key facet of Jewish engagement for families with young children. Many directors at Jewish ECE programs recognize that home practice develops when children bring home what they learn in their ECE programs. Simultaneously some Jewish ECE directors indicated that they don't want to "push" Jewish home practices too much and too fast for fear of alienating families. The survey content analysis revealed that Jewish home practice in Jewish ECE has often been narrowly defined with a focus on Shabbat and holidays. Because of the lack of survey items that address home practice, the CASJE ECE study developed a set of new items related to Jewish engagement within the home for phase three of this study. Thinking more broadly about what constitutes Jewish home practice to include cultural activities, child-centered Jewish materials in the home, and everyday practices like bedtime rituals may point to more opportunities for Jewish ECE to foster Jewish engagement for families with young children.

Implications for Future Applied Research on Jewish Engagement among Families with Young Children

Distinguishing between indicators and facilitators of engagement. A challenge to researchers studying Jewish engagement is the fact that Jewish professionals do not clearly distinguish between *indicators* of engagement and *facilitators* of engagement. For instance, "having Jewish friends" may be considered an indicator of engagement; Family A, with many Jewish friends, is more engaged than Family B, with few Jewish friends. However, "having Jewish friends" may also be considered a facilitator of engagement; Family A's friends may invite them to a *Chanukah* party at their home or suggest that they join them at a *Tot Shabbat* gathering at their children's Jewish ECE. This duality creates complexity for the researcher interested in studying Jewish engagement, because the same condition (having Jewish friends) is both outcome and input. Matching families on baseline characteristics prior to the start of Jewish ECE can help isolate the effects of Jewish ECE on Jewish engagement indicators.

More precise measurement of Jewish engagement among families with young children is needed. In our analysis of survey items used in studies of Jewish populations, we found that between two and three

⁴ More findings from these case studies can be found in a companion CASJE brief entitled *Promising Practices for Engaging Jewish Families through Jewish Early Care and Education Programs: Lessons Learned* (Rushovich et al., 2019) and in the executive summary and full report entitled *Exploring the Associations between Jewish Early Care and Education and Jewish Engagement: Research to Inform Practice* (Halle et al., 2019).

distinct topic codes could be applied to each survey item, suggesting that existing survey items could be construed as measuring multiple aspects of Jewish engagement rather than distinct aspects. Future survey item development should involve cognitive testing to ensure that respondents understand the

intended meaning of the survey items. Although engagement is multifaceted, the measures we use to operationalize different aspects of engagement should be precise and unambiguous.

The CASJE Early Childhood Education (ECE) Project

In November 2016, the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE) launched a major research initiative, funded by Crown Family Philanthropies, to explore the ways in which Jewish ECE may serve as a gateway for greater and long-term involvement in Jewish life.

The mixed-methods, multi-year study addressed three questions:

1. What does “Jewish engagement” mean to Jewish families with young children and to Jewish early childhood professionals?
2. How do Jewish ECE and early engagement programs engage parents with young children, and what are the barriers to parental or family engagement?
3. How does Jewish engagement change over time for Jewish families with young children, and do these patterns differ for families who do and do not enroll their children in Jewish ECE?

Each of these three research questions corresponds to a primary research phase of the project:

1. Conducting a literature review, survey content analysis, and key informant interviews to develop a more precise definition of “Jewish engagement” with a specific focus on a wide range of Jewish families with young children;
2. Conducting case studies of Jewish ECE and early engagement programs in three target communities to identify best practices utilized by Jewish ECE for engaging parents with young children, as well as barriers to engagement; and
3. Conducting a survey of Jewish families with young children to examine changes in engagement over time.

Three metropolitan areas were targeted to address the latter two research questions of the study: Chicago, IL; Seattle, WA; and Greater Washington, DC. These represent communities with diverse Jewish populations, and range from large and well-established, to highly transient, to small but rapidly growing.

This project was led by Dr. Tamara Halle and Dr. Elizabeth Karberg at Child Trends, together with Dr. Mark Rosen of Brandeis University. The initiative aimed to contribute rigorous research findings on Jewish ECE to the field to inform future research and practice.