

# Exploring the Associations between Jewish Early Care and Education and Jewish Engagement: Research to Inform Practice

## Executive Summary

# Exploring Associations Between Jewish Early Care, Education and Engagement

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## Study Overview

This project examines whether Jewish early care and education (ECE) enhances Jewish engagement among families raising Jewish children, particularly among those who are initially less engaged. The research team examined the relationship between Jewish ECE and Jewish engagement among families with young children in a systematic and rigorous fashion, using multiple data collection approaches.

The project focused specifically on three areas of investigation:

- (1) Defining and measuring Jewish engagement among families with young, Jewish children;
- (2) Identifying and describing promising Jewish engagement practices both within Jewish ECE settings and outside of them; and
- (3) Exploring child care choices and levels of Jewish engagement among families with young, Jewish children over time.

Multiple data collection approaches were used to address these three focus areas. To define and measure Jewish engagement, **key informant interviews** were conducted with 44 Jewish professionals and 10 Jewish parents with young children from across the country to describe how they understand Jewish engagement, especially among families with young children. A **literature review** of 41 studies that met inclusion criteria for the review explored how Jewish engagement has been conceptualized in previous research and practice. We also conducted a **survey item content analysis** of 1,221 survey items (800 from the Berman Jewish Policy Archive's Jewish Survey Question Bank and 481 from surveys identified through the literature review) related to Jewish engagement. Finally, we conducted three rounds of **cognitive interviews** to develop and refine new survey items to capture Jewish engagement activities tailored to parents with young children on topics identified through the key informant interviews and literature review but not well-represented among extant surveys according to the survey item content analysis.

To examine the associations between Jewish ECE and Jewish engagement from the viewpoint of early childhood programs, we visited three Jewish ECE programs, one each in the three target communities (Chicago, IL; Seattle, WA; and Greater Washington, DC).<sup>1</sup> **Case study reports** were developed to summarize information from focus groups with program staff and parents in the selected Jewish ECE program and interviews with up to six Jewish ECE directors of other programs in each of the three target communities. For each community, we also examined the broader ECE and early engagement landscape, along with Federation and foundation support, and summarized this information in a **community scan**.

Finally, to explore parents' ECE choices and the nature of families' Jewish engagement (and whether families' types of Jewish engagement, or "profiles," change over time), an **online parent survey** of Jewish families with a child up to age 5 was implemented in the three target communities and made available more broadly through online

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<sup>1</sup> The target communities were chosen after considering various criteria, including: the diversity of Jewish families in the community; the research team's familiarity with the community; travel costs; the community's size; the availability of resources dedicated to supporting Jewish preschools; and the willingness of Jewish institutions to cooperate with the study. The Chicago area has a large and established Jewish community of close to 300,000 Jews with 38 Jewish preschools. The local Federation and a foundation provide considerable support for these preschools and devote resources to programming for parents with young children outside of preschools. The Washington, D.C. area has a Jewish population that is about the same size as Chicago and has 42 Jewish preschools. While the Federation does support local preschools and does sponsor programming for families with young children outside of preschools, it does not do so to the same extent as Chicago. Seattle's Jewish community is smaller and has fewer resources than Chicago or Washington, D.C., but is expanding rapidly and has a variety of programs available to meet the needs of the growing community. Seattle has approximately 63,000 Jews and 11 preschools. At the time of our data collection, there was no Federation or foundation support for Jewish preschools in Seattle.

sharing. With the support of local Jewish Federation staff, the research team was able to advertise the online survey to families participating in PJ Library activities in the three communities, as well as local Jewish ECE settings. A total of 1,223 parents participated in the online survey in the summer of 2018.<sup>2</sup>

## Summary of Findings

Findings from the various data collection efforts and subsequent analyses are summarized below, as they relate to the main research questions for the project. Reports based on individual data collection efforts associated with (1) defining and measuring Jewish engagement among families with young children, (2) lessons learned from Jewish ECE programs regarding supporting families with young children to deepen their Jewish engagement, and (3) parental decision-making around ECE and the association between Jewish ECE and Jewish engagement over time are available in several supplemental reports.

### Jewish engagement for families with young children is multidimensional

**Jewish engagement for families with young children 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 are beliefs and behaviors that are particularly salient to contemporary Jewish families with young children. In addition, these latter four facets of Jewish engagement have received less attention in the literature and in survey development/use among Jewish populations, especially families with young children.

- **Behaviors** are associated with religious and cultural practices among Jews. Behaviors associated with religious observances include Shabbat and holiday celebrations, synagogue attendance, keeping kosher, having a bar/bat mitzvah, and wearing Jewish apparel (e.g., kippah). Jews may also engage in Jewish behaviors that do not have a religious focus, such as attending Jewish cultural events, consuming Jewish media (e.g., news, music, movies), eating Jewish foods (e.g., latkes on Chanukah), and displaying Jewish identity publicly by wearing jewelry or clothes with Jewish symbols. These cultural behaviors are not ones that have been traditionally captured by extant survey items.
- **Attitudes/values** refer to beliefs and opinions about being Jewish. These attitudes and beliefs can encompass identifying as Jewish, feeling pride in being Jewish, feeling an emotional attachment to the Jewish people and/or the State of Israel, and/or believing that Jewish law and values provide moral guidance to one's life.
- **Jewish institutional attachment** refers to the ways that families relate to Jewish organizations. Traditional conceptualization of institutional attachment has been measured by *belonging to Jewish organizations*, and this is still a metric valued by Jewish professionals. However, today's families are more likely to attend programs offered by Jewish organizations but not seek long-term membership in these organizations. Thus, *taking part in Jewish family programming* is a metric of Jewish institutional attachment that is commonly measured among contemporary Jewish families with young children. However, families may attend programs sporadically when their children are young.
- **Home practice** refers to Jewish behaviors that occur within the family's home, often around *Shabbat or holiday celebrations*. However, it can also involve reading stories, singing songs, or engaging in other *media/cultural activities* inside the home. Some Jewish professionals feel that the home is an optimal

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<sup>2</sup> More detailed information about the methodology of all data collection efforts is available in Appendix A of the Final Report.

place for Shabbat and holiday observance, and others feel that home observance is a more practical option for families with children.

- **Connection/interaction** refers to finding and making Jewish friends and building community. Families with young children enjoy *socializing with Jewish friends*, either in their own homes, in others' homes, or at other venues both *inside and outside of Jewish institutions*. Families often report having more Jewish friends after becoming parents, and parents who send their children to a Jewish ECE program can connect with a community of other Jewish parents.
- **Jewish educational choices for children** is a unique aspect of Jewish engagement for families with young children. The choice to take part in Jewish family programming<sup>3</sup> is a form of Jewish educational choice for children, as is participation in Jewish ECE.
- **Finding meaning** in Jewish life refers to the ways that the ordinary occasions of family life (like bedtime rituals) get related to or imbued with Jewish ideas, words, and values. Learning to understand of Judaism's applicability within the real world of families' daily lives can help all types of Jewish families feel connected to Judaism's rich customs and traditions.

**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 their Jewish engagement from the period before they became parents 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 often creates for parents a feeling of openness to new experiences.

**Many Jewish professionals pursue a relationship-based approach to engagement with families with young children.** 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 encouraging families to spend time together outside of Jewish institutions is as important as families engaging with Jewish institutions through membership or programming. This is not to say that Jewish content is unimportant. 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.

## Promising practices to promote Jewish engagement include fostering relationships among families with young children

**Jewish ECE programs see their main role as educating children and their parents about Judaism's practices and values and encouraging children and families to “find meaning” in Jewish life.** Strong ECE programs integrate Jewish learning in everyday school activities seamlessly. For example, teachers will plan snacks around the holidays (e.g., dried fruit for Tu B'Shvat) and then teach about the holiday in an engaging way. The schools highlighted in the CASJE ECE Project also prioritize social emotional learning, which is well aligned with teaching Jewish concepts like *Tikkun Olam*. The Jewish ECE programs that were part of the CASJE ECE Project site visits all used a Reggio Emilia-inspired teaching approach and emphasized teaching universal values through a Jewish lens. These are values that all families, including non-Jewish ones, prioritize for their children.

**Jewish ECE programs also try to support Jewish families forming relationships/connections with one another and creating community.** Some of the activities around relationship-building and creating community happen *within the institutional building*. For these activities, Jewish ECE professionals need to get creative to address the

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<sup>3</sup> Jewish early engagement programming is a subset of Jewish family programming that is targeted to families with children ages birth to three.

barriers that young families face for participation. Parents with young children want to form relationships but are busy and often have inflexible schedules. Jewish ECE programs that hold events at convenient times (e.g., after work, Sunday mid-morning) and reduce burdens on the parents (e.g., provide dinner or brunch) can help engage these parents in programming and facilitate social interactions among young Jewish families. Several programs included a meal and/or child care in an attempt to make it easier and more attractive for parents to attend events. Successful Jewish ECE programs also ensure the events are not too long so that families do not need to disrupt their normal routine to attend. The other important piece is that these events include the entire family – parents, grandparents, the child, and siblings. One example of such an event is a monthly parent bagels and coffee, which is a time for parents to meet each other as well as for program staff to interact with parents. Forming connections among Jewish families is mostly addressed by Jewish ECE programs through activities *within the institutional building* rather than outside of it. Listservs allow parents to connect with each other outside of the Jewish ECE program, but this is often accomplished through the parents' own initiative. Another way to build relationships and share information involves the use of technology. One Jewish ECE program used a classroom app to facilitate information sharing and encourage relationship building between teachers and parents.

## **Jewish ECE programs emphasize families' involvement in school activities and activities of the host institution; they are somewhat ambivalent about promoting Jewish home practice and seldom promote Jewish engagement outside of the host institution**

As part of the site visits, the research team looked at the Jewish ECE programs' mission statements to see if they mentioned engaging families in Jewish life more broadly as a goal.

**For the most part, Jewish ECE programs' mission statements did not mention a mission to engage families broadly in Jewish life.** As one example, the mission statement for a JCC, which houses a Jewish preschool that was visited, has as its mission creating a warm, welcoming, Jewish learning community for people of all denominations.

**Jewish ECE programs are heavily invested in engaging families in their ECE program or, when applicable, the synagogue or JCC in which it is housed (i.e., *institutional attachment*).** This type of engagement might more appropriately be called "family involvement" in Jewish institutions, rather than engaging families in Jewish life more broadly.

**Jewish ECE programs are also invested in helping families form relationships/connections and "find meaning," but some are less focused on promoting other aspects of Jewish engagement, such as home practice.** 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. Directors at other Jewish ECE programs, however, recognize that home practice develops when children bring home what they learn in their ECE program and then ask parents to engage in the rituals they have just learned, such as singing Jewish songs, lighting Shabbat candles, or saying blessings over challah. Directors in this latter group are attentive to finding new avenues to enable children to bring Judaism home. They may send home a Shabbat box or give children song sheets to bring home. Jewish ECE directors note that parents become more involved in Jewish life, including home practice, through and in support of their children.

The emphasis on *Jewish institutional attachment* and supporting Jewish families' *connections within the institutional building* rather than outside of it, coupled with indirect attempts to encourage home practice collectively suggests that Jewish ECE programs and directors may have a narrower view of what Jewish engagement means for families with young Jewish children compared to the broader conceptualization that this project has identified and described. An alternative interpretation is that Jewish ECE programs and directors may hold a comprehensive understanding of what Jewish engagement means but feel it is not their place to have as their mission engaging families in Jewish life more broadly. Regardless, Jewish ECE programs are aware of the desire for *relationship-based engagement* among contemporary Jewish families with young children and therefore

aim to build one-on-one relationships with families as well as support connections among families enrolled in their programs.

## Practical factors such as cost, location, and hours of operation, as well as perceived quality, influence parental choice of ECE

**A review of the literature indicates that cost, location, and hours of operation all have an influence on parents' choice of early care and education.**<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a study of Jewish families in the greater Boston area found the most important factor in preschool selection was “teachers create a warm environment.”<sup>5</sup> In the Boston study, cost was the fourth most important factor, following “convenient drop off and pick-up times” and “educational approach.” This study also found that parents with more Jewish friends were more likely to choose Jewish ECE.

From the case studies conducted in the three communities as part of the CASJE ECE Project, we found that parents consider many factors when choosing an ECE program, only some of which are related to Jewish content or practice. In general, parents were more likely to choose programs based on their **perceived quality and convenience** rather than based on Jewish content.

From the CASJE ECE parent survey, we found that the largest proportion of parents reported that the **quality of care, reliability of the program, and the warmth of staff** were very important when choosing an ECE program. These findings from the CASJE ECE Project are consistent with previous research on parents' ECE choice.<sup>6</sup> However, findings from the parent survey also indicate that parents who choose Jewish ECE, compared to their peers who choose another type of ECE, are *less* likely to consider cost, location, hours of operation, and quality of the program (i.e., the most common reasons for choosing ECE in the general population) as very important reasons for choosing an ECE program and *more* likely to consider the warmth of the staff, meeting other families with Jewish children and providing a Jewish education for their child as important reasons for choosing ECE. **There are clear practice implications for these findings. Jewish ECE programs and other Jewish communal organizations need to address issues of cost, location, hours of operation, and quality of Jewish ECE programs in order to attract Jewish families that do not already have Jewish educational choices as a priority in choosing an early childhood program.**

## There are numerous barriers to enrolling children in Jewish ECE; some barriers can be addressed by ECE programs while others are more complex and difficult to overcome

Jewish ECE programs are, in part, meant to increase Jewish engagement among families. But Jewish ECE cannot be used as a catalyst for further Jewish engagement unless families with young Jewish children choose to send their children there. Jewish ECE directors from one community noted three factors that may dissuade parents from sending their child to a Jewish ECE program: shorter hours of care, a lack of services for children with special needs, and the inconvenience of being closed on Jewish holidays. Many Jewish ECE programs in the three communities had increased from part-day to full-day programs to accommodate parents' working schedules. An ECE director in one community highlighted that many Jewish organizations and Jewish ECE programs are not equipped to serve children with special physical or developmental needs and this is a major barrier to families' involvement in activities and programs offered by Jewish organizations.

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<sup>4</sup> Forry, N. D., Tout, K., Rothenberg, L., Sandstrom, H. & Vesely, C. (2013). *Child Care Decision-Making Literature Review*. OPRE Brief 2013-45. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>5</sup> Rosen, M. I. & Schwartz, H. (2015). *How Jews Choose: A Study of Early Childhood Decisions Among Jewish Parents in Greater Boston*. Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

<sup>6</sup> Forry et al., 2013; Rosen & Schwartz, 2015.

Demographic and parent background characteristics are associated with whether families choose Jewish ECE. Based on findings from the CASJE ECE parent survey, interfaith families and families that identify as secular or Reform were more likely to send their child to another type of ECE than to Jewish ECE. Families that identified as Orthodox or Conservative, those with at least one parent born in Israel, and those in which the respondent did not work outside of the home were more likely to send their children to Jewish ECE than to another type of ECE.

## **Families that choose Jewish ECE were more likely than families that choose another type of ECE to engage in activities associated with the multidimensional conceptualization of Jewish engagement**

The CASJE ECE parent survey included survey items that corresponded to our expanded, multidimensional definition of Jewish engagement among families with young children. In addition to the more traditional survey items that capture attitudes about being Jewish, Shabbat and holiday observances, and religious activities (e.g., attending synagogue services), we asked about current Jewish and Israel-themed cultural activities, child-centered Jewish materials in the home (e.g., children's books and board games), and about relational engagement with Jewish professionals, family, and friends.

In general, we found that families that were more Jewishly engaged before the birth of their child were more likely to send their children to Jewish ECE than other types of ECE, and once their children were enrolled in Jewish ECE these families were more Jewishly engaged than families with children in other types of ECE.

**Parents that chose Jewish ECE for their child were more likely than parents who chose other types of ECE for their child to report engaging in Jewish and Israel-themed cultural activities.** With regard to current Jewish and Israel-themed cultural activities, a majority of respondents ate Jewish food and used Jewish books, words (including Hebrew and Yiddish words), and media at least once a month. Slightly less than half of respondents listened to Jewish music and wore Jewish clothing at least once a month. All of these cultural activities were significantly more prevalent among Jewish ECE families than other ECE families, except the use of Jewish words.

**Parents who chose Jewish ECE for their child report engaging in more child-centered Jewish home practices than parents who chose other types of ECE.** Parents reported that they frequently engaged in child-centered Jewish home practice, which was measured by reports of using Jewish-themed learning materials in the home. Nearly all parents reported using Jewish children's books at least once or twice a month, which was not a surprise since many of the parents who responded to the survey were recruited from PJ Library<sup>7</sup> listservs, an organization that sends Jewish-themed children's books to members each month. Significantly more families with children enrolled in Jewish ECE compared to families with children enrolled in other types of ECE reported using Jewish learning materials such as Jewish toys, puzzles, and games on a monthly basis. Few respondents, regardless of type of ECE their child attended, reported using Jewish card games at least once or twice a month.

**Parents who chose Jewish ECE report stronger relational engagement than parents who chose other types of ECE.** Families in the sample overall had strong relational engagement, as measured by doing Jewish things with their Jewish friends, having a Jewish professional with whom they could speak, and having support for their family's Jewish life from their extended family.

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<sup>7</sup> PJ Library is a program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation which sends Jewish books and CDs monthly to families with children age six months through age 8.

## Based on a subset of items, four distinct profiles of Jewish engagement were identified among a sample of families with young, Jewish children surveyed across three communities

Survey respondents were asked to respond to a subset of Jewish engagement items with reference to two points in time: 1) during the year before their first child was born (retrospective report) and 2) at the time of the survey (concurrent report). This subset of items is associated with more traditional measures of Jewish engagement. Specifically, respondents were asked about the following beliefs and activities retrospectively (pre-birth) and currently (at the time of the survey):

- how many of the respondents' friends are Jewish;
- how often they participate in Jewish activities;
- how important being Jewish is to them;
- whether they are a member of a synagogue;
- how often they attend services;
- whether they celebrate the High Holidays;
- whether they celebrate Hanukkah;
- whether they celebrate Passover;
- and, where they celebrate each of these holidays.

Responses to this subset of survey questions were used to develop “profiles” of engagement that could be compared over these two timepoints using a statistical technique called latent transition analysis (LTA).<sup>8</sup> Findings suggested that families can be categorized into one of **four distinct profiles**:

- A profile we labeled “**Baseline**” engagement, representing families that are not *highly* engaged in any domain of engagement examined. It is important to note that the “Baseline” profile does not represent families that are not Jewishly engaged. Rather, it represents families that do not have high levels of engagement within the domains of Jewish engagement we examined in this analysis. For example, when asked about holiday celebrations, families associated with the “Baseline” profile tended to report celebrating one or two Jewish holidays per year rather than all three.<sup>9</sup> These families may also do Jewish things, but not at least monthly.
- A profile we labeled “**Holiday-based**” engagement, representing families that celebrate Jewish holidays, often with family or friends, but are not *highly* engaged in other domains.

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<sup>8</sup> Latent transition analysis (LTA) is used to test patterns of responses across several variables and then group respondents into distinct “profiles” based on their patterns of response. In this study, patterns in family Jewish engagement were analyzed, and families were grouped based on their Jewish engagement profiles at both timepoints. LTA further permits researchers to determine if profile membership shifts over time, for example changing from one profile type at Time 1 to another profile type at Time 2, or whether profile membership stays stable over time. Because we were interested to see if shifted their Jewish engagement profiles over time based on whether they sent their children to Jewish ECE or another type of ECE, we conducted the LTA on a sample that was matched on background characteristics (through a technique called propensity score matching) to try to equalize the subgroups of families who enrolled their child in Jewish and “other” ECE and thus isolate the effect of Jewish ECE on profile membership.

<sup>9</sup> Because at least 85 percent of respondents said they celebrated each holiday, we combined holiday celebrations into one variable indicating respondents participated in all three holidays. An indicator of whether they celebrated all three holidays provides more variability in this construct of engagement.

- A profile we labeled “**Connected,**” representing families that are *highly* engaged in the following domains: Judaism is very important, they are frequently (at least monthly) doing Jewish things, they celebrate Jewish holidays, and celebrate the holidays with family and friends. Families represented by this profile are not *highly* engaged in synagogue membership or attending religious services, and do not endorse the statement that most or all of their friends are Jewish.
- A profile we labeled “**Connected and Affiliated,**” representing families that are *highly* engaged across the domains of Jewish engagement characterized by the “Connected” profile as well as *highly* engaged for the remaining engagement indicators examined in this analysis, namely synagogue membership, attending religious services, and endorsing the statement that most or all of their friends are Jewish.

## Demographic and parent background characteristics distinguished the four Jewish engagement profiles

There were several characteristics that distinguished Jewish families’ membership in the four engagement profiles:

- Parents represented by the “Connected and Affiliated” profile are significantly **younger** than parents represented by other engagement profiles. While the age difference of two years, on average, between profile groups (32 years versus 34 years) was found to be statistically significant, this difference is not practically important.
- Parents represented by the “Connected” profile pre-birth are more likely than those represented by the “Baseline” and “Connected and Affiliated” profiles to have **grown up in the same community where they currently live**. Parents represented by the “Holiday-based” profile pre-birth are also more likely than those represented by the “Baseline” profile to have grown up in the same community where they currently live.
- Mothers represented by the “Connected” and “Connected and Affiliated” profiles are more likely to have **attended Jewish day school** than mothers represented by “Baseline” or “Holiday-based” profiles.
- Fathers represented by the “Baseline” profile pre-birth are less likely than fathers represented by “Connected” or “Connected and Affiliated” profiles to have **attended Jewish day school**. Fathers represented by the “Connected and Affiliated” profile currently are more likely than fathers represented by all other profiles to have attended Jewish day school.
  - Consistent with some preliminary analyses,<sup>10</sup> Jewish day school appears to be an important factor not only in a family’s choice of ECE, but their overall Jewish engagement.
- Families represented by the “Connected and Affiliated” profile (pre-birth) are more likely to identify as **Orthodox** compared to other groups. One-quarter of families represented by the “Connected and Affiliated” profile identify as **Reform**, although this is a smaller proportion than in other profile groups. Families represented by the “Holiday-based” profile are most likely to identify as Reform and families represented by the “Baseline” profile are most likely to identify as Secular, compared to other groups.
- Parents represented by the “Baseline” and “Holiday-based” profiles pre-birth are more likely to have an **interfaith marriage** than parents represented by the “Connected” or “Connected and Affiliated” profiles. Parents currently represented by the “Connected” profile are also more likely to have an interfaith

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<sup>10</sup> We conducted propensity score matching (PSM) to ensure that our samples of Jewish ECE and “other” ECE enrolled families initially matched on a set of background characteristics, including parents’ own enrollment in Jewish education as children.

marriage than parents represented by the “Connected and Affiliated” profile, but less likely than parents represented by the “Baseline” and “Holiday-based” profiles.

- These demographic findings are consistent with our expectations given the extant literature about the characteristics of Jewish families that are more engaged on traditional measures of engagement.<sup>11</sup>

## Parents represented by the “Connected” and “Connected and Affiliated” Jewish engagement profiles (pre-birth) were more likely to send their children to Jewish ECE than parents represented by the “Baseline” or “Holiday-Based” engagement profiles

From the parent survey findings, we see that families’ engagement profiles before the birth of their first child and at the time of the survey are associated with whether they decide to enroll their child in Jewish ECE versus other types of ECE. Parents represented by the “Connected” and “Connected and Affiliated” engagement profiles before the birth of their first child were statistically more likely to send their children to Jewish ECE than parents represented by the “Baseline” or “Holiday-Based” profiles. Families with a child in Jewish ECE were also more likely to be currently characterized by the “Connected” and “Connected and Affiliated” engagement profiles than the other engagement profiles.

## Data from the qualitative case study as well as the quantitative parent survey suggest that Jewish ECE can increase Jewish engagement among some families – at least over the course of their participation in the Jewish ECE program

**Qualitative data from case studies suggest that most families that choose Jewish ECE do increase their Jewish practice, such as celebrating Shabbat and holidays and participating in Jewish ECE events, often with friends whom they met at the Jewish ECE program. However, involvement in Jewish activities and programs sponsored by Jewish institutions is not always sustained over time even if Jewish friendships endure.** Information from the case studies in the three communities that were part of this CASJE ECE Project addressed the effects of Jewish ECE on Jewish engagement of participating families. Virtually all Jewish ECE directors within one community spoke about changes in families’ Jewish engagement that resulted from program attendance. Directors reported that parents who were not at all or less engaged in Jewish life at program entry increased their level of engagement while their children attended the Jewish ECE program. Specifically, directors at five of six Jewish ECE programs in this community reported that families celebrated Shabbat more frequently and in a more comprehensive way than they did prior to enrollment. Examples of increased Shabbat practice among ECE families included attending Tot Shabbat programs, lighting candles, saying Shabbat blessings, and saying *Havdalah* at home. Additional, less frequently discussed indicators of increased home practice included building a *sukkah* and saying the *shema* prayer before going to bed. Other aspects of increased Jewish engagement as a result of Jewish ECE attendance included changes in Jewish institutional attachment (e.g., becoming synagogue members and attending Jewish day camp) and connection/interaction (e.g., developing new Jewish friendships).

**Respondents to the CASJE ECE parent survey who chose Jewish ECE indicated they felt more engaged as a result of enrolling their child in Jewish ECE.** The CASJE ECE parent survey asked parents who had chosen Jewish ECE how strongly they agreed or disagreed when asked whether enrolling their child in a Jewish ECE changed their engagement in Jewish life in various ways. The most commonly reported increases in Jewish engagement for respondents with a child in Jewish ECE were in feeling more a part of the Jewish community (both generally and

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<sup>11</sup> See Cohen (2005) as an example.

locally) and having made friends who are Jewish. Comparable questions were not asked of parents whose children attended another type of ECE.

**The “sweet spot” for making families feel connected Jewishly as a result of being in Jewish ECE may be between 6-12 months.** The self-report questions about change in Jewish engagement as a result of enrollment in Jewish ECE (asked only of parents who had chosen Jewish ECE for their children) revealed the number of hours per week children attend ECE was not significantly related to any measure of Jewish engagement for children in Jewish ECE. However, the number of months that child attended Jewish ECE was significantly related to several aspects of Jewish engagement. Specifically, families with children in Jewish ECE for six months to one year felt greater pride in being Jewish and were more likely to join a Jewish organization than families who had children in Jewish ECE for less than six months or for over one year. Also, families with children in Jewish ECE for longer than 6 months were significantly more likely to start a Jewish tradition at home as a result of Jewish ECE. However, families with children in Jewish ECE for at least two years felt less pride in being Jewish as a result of Jewish ECE than families whose children were in Jewish ECE for less than two years. Finding that families with children enrolled in Jewish ECE between 6 and 12 months have more positive attitudes and join Jewish organizations more often than families with children enrolled in Jewish ECE for over one year could be an artifact of a common practice of offering free or reduced synagogue membership to new ECE families of synagogue-affiliated programs. Perhaps once parents become involved with a synagogue community, the ECE program may no longer be the primary focus for engagement. This hypothesis merits further investigation.

**Analyses of Jewish engagement “profiles” from the CASJE ECE parent survey indicate that Jewish ECE can increase Jewish engagement among families that are already “connected” to Jewish life.** Most families characterized by a Jewish engagement profile “stay” in that profile from the time before the birth of their first child to the time of the survey. This speaks to how difficult it may be to change how families are Jewishly engaged. However, latent transition analyses<sup>12</sup> of the parent survey data revealed that **families with children enrolled in Jewish ECE are more likely than families with children enrolled in other ECE to transition from being represented by a “Connected” profile (pre-birth of first child) to being represented by a “Connected and Affiliated” profile (currently).** This suggests an effect of Jewish ECE over other ECE in changing how families are Jewishly engaged, although the unique contributions of Jewish ECE are still unknown (see below). In addition, the fact that families characterized by initially lower levels of Jewish engagement (represented by the “Baseline” and “Holiday-based” profiles) are not likely to change profile membership when enrolled in Jewish ECE suggests that **Jewish ECE influences Jewish engagement if baseline levels of engagement are already at a certain threshold of “connectedness.”**

It should be kept in mind that these profile analyses of the parent survey data are based on a small set of indicators of engagement and do not represent the full spectrum of Jewish engagement constructs identified in earlier stages of this study; different findings might be revealed if a larger set of engagement indicators were included in these profile analyses.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more detailed information about latent transition analysis methodology and results, see Karberg, E., Huz, I., Ciaravino, S., Paschall, K., Welti, K., Pina, G., . . . Cantrell, E. (2018.) *A Focus on Jewish Families: Results from the CASJE ECE Online Parent Survey*. Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education.

<sup>13</sup> See Implications for Future Research later in this executive summary.

## Besides Jewish ECE, other levers of greater Jewish engagement among families with young children include the birth of a first child, participation in Jewish infant/toddler programming, and the parents' own childhood experiences with Jewish education

Findings from both the Key Informant Interviews and the parent survey indicate that the birth of a first child is a pivotal event prompting greater engagement in Jewish life. However, findings from the parent survey suggest that the birth of a first child increases parents' engagement *in domains in which they are already engaged* but does not necessarily lead parents to be more engaged in new domains. Thus, the birth of a first child is a lever of change in *degree* but not *type* of Jewish engagement among families.

The parent survey data reveals that mothers and fathers who send their children to Jewish ECE are more likely to have attended Jewish day school and are more likely to have participated in Jewish programming when their children are infants and toddlers. This analysis points to other levers that may explain the change in Jewish engagement we see among families with young children enrolled in Jewish ECE.

## Implications for ECE Educators, Directors, and Administrators

Based on the findings of the CASJE ECE Project, we offer the following suggestions to ECE educators, directors, and administrators.<sup>14</sup>

- **Consider ways to meet parents' needs and accommodate parents' busy schedules and competing demands.**
  - Parents are looking for high-quality care that is affordable and conveniently located. Jewish ECE programs and other Jewish communal organizations need to address issues of cost, location, hours of operation, and quality of Jewish ECE programs in order to attract Jewish families that do not already have Jewish educational choices as a priority in choosing an early childhood program.
  - Consider lengthening your program to a full day, with extended day options (before- and after-care) for working parents.
  - Try offering Jewish programming and celebrations after work, or at drop-off or pick-up time.
  - Consider including food and child care, or separate activities for the children, in order to maximize parental attendance at ECE events and opportunities for parents to connect with each other and form friendships.
  - Consider the use of a classroom app to facilitate information sharing and encourage relationship building between teachers and parents.
  - Consider offering "holiday programming" for children enrolled in the Jewish ECE on days that school is otherwise closed for Jewish holidays. Parents would sign up and pay for this additional programming; it would follow synagogue rules for holiday observance (e.g., no electronics, Passover food served, etc.) depending on the host synagogue's practice and requirements.

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<sup>14</sup> Evidence from the case study data that supports these recommendations is summarized in Rushovich, B., Schwartz, H., Huz, I., Rosen, M., Halle, T., Bier, M., ... Bamdad, T. (2019). *Promising practices for engaging Jewish families through Jewish early care and education programs: Lessons Learned*. Washington, DC: Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education.

- **Structure your program so that it offers opportunities for informal gatherings of parents in addition to the more formal ECE events to encourage friendships among families.**
  - For example, encouraging parents to walk their children into school and having coffee in the lobby at drop-off and pick-up times can create both time and space for informal gatherings among parents to happen; these opportunities invite family friendships to be established and flourish.
  - Family friendships can last for many years, and foster continued, joint, Jewish engagement.
- **Provide opportunities for parents and grandparents to join in Jewish celebrations and learning. Provide content in a format and length that meets parents' varying levels of current Jewish knowledge.**
  - Offer a wide range of Jewish options, from in-class to home-based experiences, so parents and grandparents can choose from, and be exposed to, many types of learning.
  - Invite parents into the classroom regularly so they can observe their children in joyful Jewish observance and play.
  - Consider developing a series of podcasts for parents and grandparents to expand their knowledge about Jewish practices, customs, and values.
- **Identify funding sources to support the participation of all staff in professional development activities to learn about child development and developmentally appropriate practices for working with young children, as well as adult learning theory for interacting with parents and encouraging parents' own learning.**

## Implications for Funders, Institutional Policymakers, and Communities

Parents consider the quality of the ECE program when choosing where to enroll their children, so it is important that Jewish ECE programs attract and retain well-qualified, well-trained staff and consider participating in community-wide, well-recognized quality initiatives. Parents also choose their ECE program based on how well it meets their family's needs, including a child's special needs. Specific recommendations and their rationales are outlined below.

- **Work toward providing a competitive salary for the ECE workforce that will encourage highly qualified staff to stay in the field.** ECE workforce compensation (both wages and benefits) is a long-standing, major concern not only within the Jewish community but for the larger ECE field.<sup>15</sup> Recent proposals for national compensation reform suggest that achieving wage parity with K-3 educators should be part of the solution.<sup>16</sup> Anecdotal reports suggest that early care and education programs affiliated with synagogues and JCCs can sometimes be viewed primarily as revenue generators for their respective institutions by some senior administrators and boards;<sup>17</sup> educating these individuals about the importance and difficulty of attracting qualified ECE professionals might help them to better understand the need for competitive salaries.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, <https://csce.berkeley.edu/from-unlivable-wages-to-just-pay-for-early-educators/> and [https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/initiatives/p2p\\_decision\\_cycles\\_78.draft\\_for\\_field\\_review.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/initiatives/p2p_decision_cycles_78.draft_for_field_review.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> McLean, C., Whitebook, M., & Roh, E. (2019). *From Unlivable Wages to Just Pay for Early Educators*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>17</sup> Rosen, M. (2020). Personal communication.

- **Offer funding for continuing education opportunities, including in leadership training, Jewish pedagogy, and developmentally appropriate practice.**<sup>18</sup>
  - Because many staff at Jewish ECE programs are not Jewish, it is important that programs offer professional development opportunities to learn about Jewish practices and customs, as well as what Judaism values, so that they can create Jewish learning opportunities for the children in their classrooms.
  - However, focusing all professional development opportunities on Jewish pedagogy is insufficient. It is also important to provide early childhood educators with a strong foundation in child development and developmentally appropriate practice. Any professional development offered ECE staff should be based on sound developmental theory and practice. The Rose Community Foundation in Denver, CO recently developed guidelines for exemplary educational practice for ECE programs operating in synagogues and JCCs that would be useful for any Jewish institutional decision maker or ECE administrator to review.<sup>19</sup> These guidelines focus on developmentally appropriate curriculum, child development and content learning, teacher-child relationships and center-home relationships in addition to infusing Jewish values and customs into daily activities (what is called “seamless Judaism” in these guidelines). Finally, professional development opportunities should also be aligned with and supportive of achieving ECE workforce competencies and skills as outlined in current national initiatives such as Power to the Profession (P2P).<sup>20</sup>
- **Consider participation in local or statewide quality improvement initiatives.**
  - The ECE case studies in the current project revealed a trend among Jewish ECE programs to forego affiliation with national ECE organizations and accreditation bodies such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which is a professional membership organization that works to promote high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age 8. This pattern contrasts with the practices of most Jewish day schools which typically affiliate with the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). The NAIS requires affiliated schools to be accredited by an approved accrediting organization and to adhere to the NAIS Principles of Good Practice.<sup>21</sup>
  - State and local quality improvement opportunities for early care and education professionals are plentiful; they include pre-service and in-service training offered through local two-year colleges and four-year universities and professional development through state PD systems administered by local child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs).
  - Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) have been implemented in 44 states and communities nationwide as of 2017.<sup>22</sup> Most QRIS are voluntary. Each QRIS provides technical assistance to individual participating programs to improve their quality along a set of quality

<sup>18</sup> The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is in the process of revising its position statement on developmentally appropriate practice. See the latest proposed version here:

[https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/get-involved/leadership/initial\\_public\\_draft\\_dap\\_2019.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/get-involved/leadership/initial_public_draft_dap_2019.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Rose Community Foundation (2017). *Standards of Excellence: Guidelines for Exemplary Educational Practice for Jewish Community Centers and Synagogues with Early Care and Education Centers*. Denver, CO. Available at [https://rcfdenver.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/RCF\\_SOE\\_final\\_hyperlinkv2\\_singlepage.pdf](https://rcfdenver.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/RCF_SOE_final_hyperlinkv2_singlepage.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/initiatives/profession>.

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.nais.org/membership/school-membership/>.

<sup>22</sup> The Build Initiative & Child Trends. (2017). *A Catalog and Comparison of Quality Initiatives* [Data System]. Retrieved from <http://qualitycompendium.org/> on December 25, 2019.

indicators which are established by the state or community (there are often different sets of quality indicators for center-based and home-based programs); some quality indicators focus on administrative features of a program and some on the physical or interactive features of a program. The “rating” part of a QRIS is oriented toward consumer education. Advertising the quality rating of an ECE program can help families evaluate the quality of the program against others in the same geographic area or across the state, similar to how a star rating system has helped consumers compare hotels. Participating in a QRIS has the dual benefit of supporting quality improvement within an ECE program and helping to advertise the program’s quality to potential new families.

- If programs choose to forego participation in local or statewide quality initiatives, future measurement development should translate the standards of excellence for Jewish ECE developed by the Rose Community Foundation into observational and survey measures that accurately capture the indicators of quality that are important to Jewish ECE programs (and consumers) for ongoing monitoring and reporting purposes.<sup>23</sup>
- **Consider how to expand support for children with special needs within Jewish ECE.** For example, consider hiring staff dedicated to working with children with special needs, or contract with community-based specialists.
  - Jewish ECE directors in one community noted that a lack of services for children with special needs can dissuade parents from sending their child to a Jewish ECE program. Creating an inclusive community within Jewish ECE involves more than being welcoming of families with different levels of Jewish knowledge and observance; it means being accepting of and providing appropriate supports for children with different learning and developmental needs.
  - While some programs work creatively to accommodate students as they would like Jewish education to be accessible to all, Jewish ECE directors recognize that their program may not be the best fit, developmentally, for all children. Some programs refer families to appropriate local services and have a few students who attend the program for a half day and attend a different program with more specialized services for the other half of the day. Some programs contract with outside specialists to work with children on site rather than employing in-house specialists.

## Implications for Future Research

This study represents the first rigorous investigation of Jewish engagement among families with young children, and the role of Jewish ECE in changing the nature of Jewish engagement among families with young children. A major contribution of the CASJE ECE Project is the development of a parent survey that gathers information about an expanded conceptualization of Jewish engagement among families with young children. While this study fills several gaps from previous investigations of Jewish engagement among families with young children, several gaps remain.

An initial hypothesis that was tested in the CASJE ECE Project by the parent survey was whether families that have initially low levels of Jewish engagement might move to profiles of higher engagement by virtue of their child’s enrollment in Jewish ECE. This hypothesis was not confirmed by the data. Families with a “Baseline” or “Holiday-based” profile of Jewish engagement did not change profile membership based on Jewish ECE enrollment versus enrollment in another type of ECE. **Future research, policy, and practice should explore the ways Jewish ECE can**

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<sup>23</sup> Since the completion of the CASJE ECE Study in December 2018, there have been further advancements in developing assessment tools for Jewish ECE in Pittsburgh, PA, and a commitment by JCCA/URJ to drive work in this area forward.

**better attract families that are not already representing a “Connected” or “Connected and Affiliated” Jewish engagement profile.**

The Jewish engagement profile analyses presented in this report rely on a relatively small set of engagement indicators that were captured at two timepoints: prior to the birth of a first child (retrospectively) and at the time of survey response (currently). This small set of indicators included many of the “traditional” survey items that have represented Jewish engagement in past research, such as reports of Shabbat and holiday observances, as well as some new items, such as reporting on celebrations with family and friends. **Additional analyses on the broader set of Jewish engagement items developed for the CASJE ECE parent survey, such as current Jewish and Israel-themed cultural activities, child-centered Jewish materials in the home, and relational engagement with Jewish professionals, family and friends should be pursued in further research with this rich dataset.**

Parents’ Jewish day school attendance and children’s participation in Jewish programming for infants and toddlers (i.e., early engagement programs) were two predictors of ECE enrollment that could not be completely controlled in the propensity-matched sample used in the current set of analyses of the parent survey data. Thus, when differences were found between parents who sent their child to Jewish ECE and those who sent their child to other types of ECE, the effect of early engagement programs and parents’ own Jewish educational experiences could not be fully ruled out as influencing the outcomes of interest. **More research is needed to determine the unique effect of Jewish ECE on Jewish engagement.**

There were additional challenges for this research project, including the challenge of finding and recruiting families that are not affiliated with Jewish institutions, including Jewish ECE. The best source of these families are PJ Library email lists, which are understandably guarded from survey over-use. However, it should be noted that even unaffiliated families that are on the PJ Library lists are receiving some form of Jewish “intervention” and are not entirely disassociated from Jewish life. Still, PJ Library email lists are the best source of young, Jewish families with likely initially low levels of “traditional” indicators of Jewish engagement. **Any future research focused on young, Jewish families with initially lower levels of Jewish engagement will be most successful in partnership and collaboration with Jewish Federations and their PJ Library staff and participants.**

Ideally, one would want to **survey families right before their children start ECE and follow them over time.** A future research project may therefore wish to recruit a large sample of Jewish families prior to this important educational decision and follow them across multiple time points to determine similarities and differences in their trajectories of Jewish engagement over time and in relation to their choice of Jewish ECE versus other types of ECE. This type of study will be difficult to execute, as longitudinal research is expensive due, in part, to how difficult it is to recruit the target families and maintain a large enough sample for meaningful analysis over time. Such research may require “refreshing” of survey samples and recruitment in multiple communities across the country.

Although the current study explored the factor of “dosage” of Jewish ECE and did not find a statistical effect of number of hours of care per week on indicators of Jewish engagement, **further research on the role of full-day versus half-day Jewish ECE programs would be useful.** For example, further analyses could examine characteristics of parents who enroll their children in full-day versus half-day Jewish ECE programs.

Along with dosage, another critical factor to examine in future research is the quality of care children receive in Jewish ECE. **Future studies of the role of Jewish ECE on family outcomes should include quality of ECE in the analytic model.**

Finally, **the role of Jewish programming for families with infants and toddlers on ECE choice deserves more research focus.** Participation in Jewish programming for families with infants and toddlers was considered explicitly by Jewish ECE directors and other Jewish professionals as a possible “feeder” to Jewish ECE for families with young children. Similar to the research into Jewish ECE, there have been few rigorously designed research

studies of the role of Jewish infant/toddler programming as a unique lever to Jewish engagement, particularly as an onramp to Jewish ECE and future Jewish engagement.

## Future Directions

The CASJE ECE Project represents the first rigorous investigation of Jewish engagement among families with young children, and the role of Jewish ECE in changing the nature of Jewish engagement among families with young children. While the findings presented in this report are promising and provide many suggestions for practitioners, policymakers, funders, and researchers, this report provides just the beginnings of what we can learn about Jewish ECE's role in supporting Jewish engagement among young families. We hope that the findings from the CASJE ECE Project inform future efforts to strengthen the quality and reach of Jewish ECE within communities across the country, starting with a focus on recruitment, training, and retention of high-quality ECE staff. We further hope that practitioners, funders, and researchers interested in the role of Jewish ECE in deepening families' engagement in Jewish life will make use of the rich data that was produced by this project, both to mine it for further insights and practical applications, and to plan for and implement additional applied research efforts.

### About 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 initiative aimed to contribute rigorous research findings on Jewish ECE to the field to inform future research and practice.

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 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 site visits 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 Jewish 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.