

Key Takeaways and Questions

It is not an easy time to raise children. The threats that keep people awake at night are both global and quite personal: environmental catastrophe, perpetual war, and pandemics; rising costs of living, a shrinking social safety net, and social isolation. Parents now seem to have less support and bear heavier expectations than their own parents did, and increasingly they are physically distanced from the communities in which they were raised. As each generation does, they enter a new world armed with aspirations shaped partially in the old one and partially in the new, and they grapple with the tensions this produces. Many of those who grew up in thriving Jewish communities want some of the same experiences for their children, but only some of them have landed in places where this is possible. Living in an age of identity conflict and celebration, parents want their children to be knowledgeable and proud of being Jewish, but to also know and understand and accept others, even as they confront antisemitic ideas in both metropolitan centers and further flung places. Parents probably have access to more direct resources for building Jewish life for children than at any time in history through the internet, but they have less time and support to curate them than ever before. These are just a few of the central tensions that emerged in the accounts of the parents whose experiences are represented in this study.

Most parents in this study aspire to raise children who are kind, respectful, and overall good people (we might say *mensch*s). Finding resonance in Jewish concepts like *tikkun olam* and *tzedakah*, they want their children to treat others well, respect diversity, and work for the betterment of the world. They aspire for their children to feel comfortable in their own skins, proud of the Jewish and other components of their identities. Furthermore, they

seek communities that will accept and embrace them for who they are.

This desire for Jewish community is challenged in multiple ways, many of them structural; the broader social, economic, and political conditions are largely beyond individual control. Geographic mobility fueled by the search for economic opportunity interrupts the development of locally based social networks. The rising costs of basic goods and services constrain parents' abilities to choose where they want to live and educate their children. Synagogue membership, Jewish preschool tuition, and community center fees are prohibitive for many. On top of these logistical barriers, families are often deterred from Jewish institutions by their lack of inclusion. Put more simply, families who don't fit stereotypical notions of what Jewish families are "supposed to look like"—for example, those that include People of Color, LGBTQ+, or single parents—continue to face discrimination, subtle or overt, in many Jewish spaces. Political polarization within the Jewish and general populations can present an additional barrier to community engagement.

It is clear, however, that the families we spoke to are not "fleeing from institutions," a common trope invoked to explain declining Jewish communal participation. They are simply struggling to find communities where they fit and that work for them: communities that are logistically accessible for ever-constrained budgets and schedules; communities that "walk the walk" when it comes to including diverse families and where they know they will be welcomed and affirmed for their whole selves; and communities that speak to their values. This is a tall order for institutions that must in turn make informed, intentional decisions about their policies and practices of inclusion.

The diversity of American parents raising children as Jews is striking. This diversity appears in multiple, intersecting domains: ethnicity (a category that includes language, physical appearance, culture, and often religion); different kinds of Jewishness; gender identities and ideologies; sexualities; socioeconomic status; and more. While broad demographic surveys have indicated as much, our interviewees flesh out the statistics, illustrating the multiple ways contemporary families experience Jewish religion, identity, and community.

These circumstances are challenging for organizations. Those that are embraced most warmly do not seem to attempt to cater to each family's specific contours—likely an impossible task—but recognize, validate, and support perhaps the only single shared feature of these families: their appetite to foster Jewish family life in community. One of our participants made this point beautifully:

Understanding more families that are multicultural, not necessarily multifaith, interfaith, but just families where you have two people coming from different approaches to things based on how they grew up and how they might react to certain things. And that doesn't necessarily make it a bad approach, it's just different. And also, along the same lines, not making assumptions about who someone may be just based on what they may look like. If someone tells you that they're a multicultural or multifaith family, don't make your own assumptions about what that multi-ness may be.

PoC LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

Jewish families today may look and live quite different from those in the past, but much of what Jewish parents want for their families is not new. This study makes explicit the challenges and the opportunities at the intersection of these two phenomena, and the tensions with which parents live as they try to fit these pieces together. Their effort as parents is a work in progress, with no end.

Recommendations

A small team of scholars and practitioners served as advisors to this study from its design until its conclusion. Following their review of the findings, they offered the following recommendations to funders and practitioners interested in engaging Jewish families with young children. Special thanks to Tani Prell, Jonathan Shmidt Chapman, and Meir Muller for these suggestions.

Aspirations

Community

1. *Practitioners:* Help new families feel welcomed by reliably hosting “**new family**” events and “**new family**” spaces that are part of larger community events. This signals to your families that you are there for them if and when they are ready. The same offering can also be true for other affinity groups (interfaith families, LGBTQ+ families, single parents, etc.). Note: If a space is offered for an affinity group, then support the people involved to take the lead in creating spaces that are most meaningful for them. ([Resources](#) exist for supporting affinity spaces in Jewish institutions.)
2. *Funders:* Many Jewish institutions might not have a large enough mass of any one marginalized identity group in their current community. However, that number may increase significantly if all the Jewish communities in a region come together. Support families from diverse backgrounds by helping fund **regional convening spaces** and experiences for families from diverse backgrounds, across Jewish institutions.

3. *Funders:* Consider funding more opportunities for families to meet new families outside of institutional Jewish life through organized **regional weekend trips**. Honeymoon Israel successfully shows how the bonding that takes place during a shared trip can foster long-lasting and meaningful relationships and community. This offering can be especially helpful in supporting Jewish families who live in areas with sparse Jewish populations and provide a chance for families to make meaningful connections that can then be sustained in virtual spaces.

Identity

Support parents in their own education on how to “do Jewish” at home.

1. *Practitioners:* Consider replicating Jew by Choice (conversion) classes to something more similar to a “**Jewish Parenting 101**” class. This can serve as an “adult refresher” for people who might not have been to a synagogue since their B’Mitzvah or a low-barrier introduction for parents learning about Judaism for the first time. If classes are taught with a baseline assumption of no prior Jewish knowledge, anyone can then find the class to be accessible and judgment-free.
2. *Funders:* Develop a “go-to” online platform where parents can access all the **step-by-step “How To’s”** for Jewish life and ritual. Everything from Shabbat, to hosting a Passover Seder, to answering “big questions” in Jewish life.

Obstacles

Geography

1. *Practitioners and Funders:* Consider **intergenerational programs** that pair Jewish elders with young families to help support parents who do not have family or institutional support readily available.

The burden of transmitting Jewish knowledge and identity is especially felt by those who do not have family nearby or institutions to support them. **Jewish elders** can serve as role models and transmitters of Jewish wisdom, welcome, and support for young families. Young families can then be a source of vibrancy and joy for Jewish elders. The Jewish elders could support young families in navigating Jewish ritual and supporting Jewish identity at home, and they could also impart generational knowledge and wisdom to the young people.

Funders: In this intergenerational model, Jewish elders can receive training around how to be a positive support to young families in ways that feel inclusive, helpful, and meaningful. Consider funding intergenerational resources that Jewish elders and young families can use together.

2. *Practitioners and Funders:* Create “**Pop-Up Jewish Spaces**,” temporary, flexible Jewish spaces designed to bring community experiences to underserved areas. These could include Shabbat dinners, holiday celebrations, or parenting workshops held in non-traditional venues like libraries, community centers, or outdoor spaces. Pop-up spaces would provide opportunities for families to connect, celebrate, and engage in Jewish life without the need for permanent infrastructure.

Partner with local organizations or Federations to host quarterly pop-up Shabbat dinners or tot Shabbat programs, emphasizing inclusivity and cultural diversity.

3. *Funders:* Invest in **Digital and Hybrid Engagement Tools**, high-quality, accessible online resources and hybrid programming to support families with limited access to Jewish infrastructure. Create interactive digital holiday guides, virtual workshops, and online mentorship programs connecting families with educators or peer networks. Expanding digital offerings, in this way, ensures that families can access Jewish education and resources wherever they are.
4. *Funders:* Invest in **creative virtual resources** to support Jewish families who live away from Jewish infrastructure. Jewish umbrella organizations can create virtual resources that help overcome barriers for families looking to deepen their children’s connection to Jewish identity. These interventions could include:
 - ➔ Products and resources that help parents create meaningful and accessible Jewish engagement within the home on their own
 - ➔ Online network-building by region, so that families can find other families near them seeking Jewish community for meetups and informal gatherings.
 - ➔ Virtual affinity groups or learning circles for parents in different regions to learn from and with each other about carving their own path in creating Jewish engagement within their family/community.

Cost

Many small steps can help lower financial obstacles to family participation.

1. *Practitioners:* When planning, consider that many families budget their entire yearly spending well in advance. The luxury of disposable income is no longer something we can assume our families have to spend. Help people not feel the burden of trying to accommodate last-minute expenses by allowing them enough time to **budget ahead** for your

more high-priced Jewish offerings. The ability to plan ahead can be one factor that helps mitigate feelings that Jewish communal life is financially out of reach for families.

2. *Practitioners:* If you are able, make access to financial support easily available and low barrier. Completion of a form can feel more accessible than requiring someone to email an individual for support, for example.
3. *Practitioners:* When planning your programming calendar, identify your highest-cost experiences (High Holiday tickets, family retreat weekends, etc.). Brainstorm how you can make more **low-barrier alternatives** for families—in terms of time, commitment, and money. This also becomes an opportunity for inclusion, since many families with neurodivergent children are unable to participate in longer programs but would be able to attend a campfire Havdalah the week before a family retreat, for example.
4. *Funders:* The cost of childcare can be a major stressor on families. Consider funding a **“community babysitter” program** that trains and prepares Jewish teens and young adults (madrichim, camp counselors, Hillel students, etc.) to be childcare options for families in the area. This program can be made available during any Jewish programs at institutions and also an ongoing option for parents.

Funders can offset the cost of childcare by supplementing a portion of the amount paid to the sitter and funding the training.

The “training” can include ways for the sitters to instill Jewish experiences with the young people in their care (e.g., baking challah together, making Jewish crafts, reading PJ Library books).

With a readily accessible childcare option, parents are then freed up to be able to share in

adult Jewish experiences together like attending Shabbat services or planning a date night where they discuss their Jewish parenting.

Lack of Welcome

1. *Practitioners:* Demonstrate welcome through representation. Consider having **greeters or “socializers”** at your events who represent a range of diverse backgrounds and who will mingle with families with intention. People from diverse backgrounds seeing themselves represented can help people feel safer and more welcomed. This representation can offer a sense of relief and an idea that, “If they are here and happy, maybe I will be too.”

Note: If people from diverse backgrounds are asked to do additional tasks, provide additional insight, or do anything beyond what other attendees may be asked to do, plan to compensate them for their time. Compensation could be in the form of payment, free admission to an event, or something similar, since you are asking them to provide their labor, time, and/or emotional energy.

2. *Practitioners:* Show inclusivity by **defining terms** in writing and during in-person events. This is a great signal for people that they will be able to attend your events and fully access the content, regardless of their prior levels of Jewish knowledge.
3. *Practitioners:* Offer **childcare** during programs that are geared toward parents. This way, parents do not need to consider the cost of childcare when deciding whether or not to attend a Jewish event. Childcare during events also allows parents to be fully present when in community with other parents. The ability to foster connection among other parents will allow for community and connection to then later occur among children.

4. *Practitioners:* Consider ways that your organization can shift culture to become a more inclusive and welcoming community. Even when synagogues and organizations attempt to welcome Jewish families with intersectional identities, challenges can exist in the interpersonal interactions within the community. Organizations can explore ways to shift the culture within the community to create an environment more genuinely ready to be accessible and welcoming.

Adult learning initiatives that support community members to deepen their understanding of intersectional identities within the Jewish community and within Jewish families

Strengthening **partnerships with institutions/communities outside of the Jewish community**

Building **affinity-based meetup opportunities** within the organization for families not currently represented to meet and connect with each other

Making it Work

1. *Funders:* Launch a “**Jewish Home Innovation Fund.**” These would be microgrants for small groups of families to develop creative, home-based Jewish practices that align with their unique cultural backgrounds and identities. These grants would empower families to create meaningful Jewish experiences, especially when institutional access is limited. They could support projects like creating interfaith holiday experiences or organizing small-group, home-based celebrations around a Jewish theme (challah baking, adding a mezuzah to each home, etc.).

2. *Practitioners:* Expand dialogues through “**Resetting the Table**” or “**Perspective Honoring,**” structured initiatives that foster open and respectful conversations around complex and sometimes polarizing topics, emphasizing the process of dialogue rather than specific subjects. Dialogue programs create safe spaces for nuanced discussions, making Jewish organizations more inclusive and appealing. Offering facilitated sessions can increase community, building an appreciation of diverse viewpoints.

3. *Funders:* Explore innovative family programs that **emulate best practices** for inclusive, accessible, engaging formats from other sectors. Jewish institutions can learn from other sectors that engage families (e.g., arts-based family workshops, music classes, baby gym classes, “baby raves,” family yoga) to experiment with new formats/models for Jewish family programming for very young children within Jewish institutions. Changes can include:

- ➔ Pricing models
- ➔ Marketing strategies
- ➔ Community-building practices
- ➔ Program design