

New parents wonder: why select a Jewish preschool?

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Jewish education begins young. As parents begin to navigate the first of many decisions regarding the education of their children, there are many things to consider when evaluating a preschool. Stanford University education professor and early childhood education expert Deborah Stipek notes that at first glance, a well-run preschool can look a lot like children simply playing, but research shows that effective preschool programs share common elements that can be identified even in brief visits.

These elements include the caliber of teachers, the classroom environment, the school's physical space, how the school tracks development, and the quality of the individual student-teacher interactions. It is helpful to understand the educational philosophy of the school to see if it fits with your own thinking. Some important considerations in selecting a preschool are to evaluate how self-expression and development are encouraged, how conflict is handled and what the meaning and purpose is behind the daily activities offered.

But one additional important question to ask oneself during the process of selecting a school is why select a Jewish preschool? We all want our children to grow up to be kind and caring people (in other words, we hope he or she will be a mensch!). Jewish preschools are known for fostering values even among the youngest set. For example, a social studies curriculum is robust with opportunities to teach young students about how to share, take turns, negotiate, and be kind and caring toward one another. Given that Jewish preschools' curricula are grounded in many of the lessons of Torah, this kind of empathetic teaching is naturally integrated into the daily schedule of our schools.

The foundation for Jewish learning begins at a very early age. Celebrating the Jewish holidays, gaining an understanding of the content inherent in each festival, as well as learning about the Jewish culture, while fostering an appreciation for people of all faiths occurs in our schools. Not only do we place a high value on our secular curriculum, but on our Judaic studies as well. A Jewish preschool builds a uniquely strong foundation of Jewish identity that stays with the

children throughout their lifetime. We begin to instill Jewish identity in our students at a very early age through the use of Hebrew, the celebration of every Jewish holiday, the weekly celebration of Shabbat, the introduction to Torah stories that are developmentally appropriate and much more.

Regardless of which stream of Judaism they follow, Jewish preschools foster important Jewish values and offer a strong Judaic curriculum. Indeed, the impact of the lessons can extend far beyond the preschool. Tamar Frieze, the mother of three children who have attended the Frances Jacobson Early Childhood Center at Temple Israel in Boston noted, “Selecting a Jewish preschool was a great re-education for us on Jewish traditions, holidays, culture and values. As our children learned, we learned along with them, and we learned the meaning of it all!”

The Jewish preschool is a wonderful (and fast!) way to find community. Everyone who has gone through a Jewish preschool will likely tell you that one of the most important takeaways from the experience was the deep friendships made amongst the parents and children, in equal measure. Preschool is such a unique time in a family’s life, and similar to your college years, the bonds created in this environment truly last a lifetime.

We were drawn to a learning environment informed by Jewish values such as *tzedakah* and *Tikkun Olam* (charity and repairing the world), *chesed* (kindness), and *kavod* (honor, respect, dignity). None of these words by the way which I would have known on my own without Jewish preschool!

We are not perhaps the most ‘religious’ family, but my husband and I, thanks in large part to choosing our Jewish preschool, have been able to easily construct a rich and meaningful Jewish life for our family. We are grateful for our experience and know that there will never be another time like this to make a choice that will have such a lasting impression.

Helen Cohen is the director of the Frances Jacobson Early Childhood Center at Temple Israel of Boston which hosted a recent Jewish preschool fair for area schools.