

Engaging the Whole Family in Learning

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Questions to consider when determining congregational readiness for family learning:

- What is your synagogue's vision?
- How does the religious school relate to the congregation's vision?
- Does a family learning model fit within the synagogue's vision?
- What is meaningful to families in the community?
- What's not working in your current model?
- What do you know that families (kids, adults, etc) want? From their synagogue? The Jewish community? In their own family life and practice?
- What changes are our community willing to make? Budget? Teachers? Change in structure?
- How big are these "gaps" - and can we create solutions/work-arounds for them?

Lessons from the Field – Active Learning Network for Family Learning Models

The Union for Reform Judaism has developed an active learning network on family learning models for congregations who run curricularized, regular family models. We have connected 17 congregations across the country to learn, support, problem-solve and collaborate together. Here are some models of the family learning from synagogues around the United States.

Main Line Reform Temple (Wynnewood, PA) – Rabbi Kevin Kleinman (kkleinman@mlrt.org)

- L'chayim (350 families in the school, 45 in the program)
 - Created with Jewish Learning Venture in order to create an opt-in program for parents, and potentially lead to a program they could adopt for the entire school
 - Program started for 3rd and 4th grade families as a series of field trips with 1 hour of Hebrew a week, in addition to a monthly Friday for Family Shabbat, which included a learning piece.
 - L'chayim expanded to include 5th graders in year two. Families also started to come on 3 Sundays a month, and they added Shabbat dinner in pre-service program. Family Shabbat was wildly successful.
- Moving forward: They hope to increase attendance of non-L'chayim families at Family Shabbat, increase a sense of community between those in L'chayim, and those not in the program, and move to a model where the entire 3rd through 5th grade program is L'chayim.

Shaaray Tefila (New York, NY) – Meredith Lubin (mlubin@tstnyc.org)

- Born out of feeling that “I didn’t like going to religious school – how can we make it different?” and at the same time, parents know they haven’t been to religious school since they were 15/16 and want to be there with their kids
- MASA:
 - For families with children in K-5th grade, the program is about an hour of family learning followed by about an hour of leveled learning (kid friendly in one location, adult in another); then everyone joins together with t’filah (prayer service) at the end of the session
 - The program is 7-8 years old, and has undergone a lot of change. At one point they moved up to having two tracks, where people could choose different learning topics. This proved to be very chaotic. Now they are moving back to one track, and using a new curriculum.
 - In the coming year, they are considering what structural changes they can make to the group so that the program still feels intimate and appropriate for kids of all ages.
 - Built in assumption that parents are active participants, can be facilitators too
 - 6-7 MASA program is different
 - Deals with the curriculum that 6th and 7th graders use in religious school– uses more classrooms learning, less family learning
 - For all students in the MASA program, their Hebrew is weekly 30 minute 1:1 sessions that are scheduled at the synagogue Sundays through Thursdays.

Temple Judea of Manhasset (Manhasset, NY) – Lauren Resnikoff (Laurenresnikoff@gmail.com)

- Program was born out of an adapted ReImagine program – she invited her committee to reach out to five pre-assigned congregations, and ask them a prepared list of questions. When the committee reported back, they discussed the various programs, talked about likes and dislikes, concerns about what their synagogue was capable of, and how to adapt the “best of” their findings to their specific setting.
- Journeys is the only learning model at the synagogue. It meets for 1 hour and 45 minutes every week, plus 30 minute tutoring sessions (2:1)
- Journeys started with a series of events and field trips for families. The same people would attend each time. In order to increase their parent participation this year, they developed mitzvah strands
 - First two years it was a series of events and field trips – this was attended by the same people each time
 - Third year (immediately ended) – started mitzvah strands, with mixed success. This coming year the strands will be more organized and planned ahead of time.
 - Families come for the strand programming and holiday events
- The congregation and school are very small – there are about 25 families in the school. Journeys builds community within the congregation.

Westchester Reform Temple (Scarsdale, NY) – Rabbi David Levy (rabbi.levy@wrtemple.org)

- “At our core, we try to do family engagement at every level.”
- Sharing Shabbat
 - This model is in its 20th year, and was developed from the work of the Experiment in Congregational Education.
 - Structure: 1 hour Saturday morning service, 30 minute oneg, 1 hour parallel adult/kid learning (K-6); Mid-week learning for Hebrew
 - Time with clergy is an important piece for the adults – their learning is with different clergy each session.
 - The culture of this program is like a chavurah – it’s 20% of the school (40 families).
 - They did wonder 15 years in if Sharing Shabbat had run its course – the program continues to change, and parent involvement has evolved over the years
- Alef and Bet – 5th-6th grade family program
 - Structure: 2 hours on Sundays with a 30 minute service in middle, allows for parents to be there
 - Parents are invited in to be part of the program five times a year – staff works hard to make these parent programs meaningful. Again – interaction with clergy is important on parent days.
 - A few 5th and 6th graders still in a drop off model, but the vast majority do the family engagement on the weekend, and small group Hebrew during the week
- Parent involvement continues in the b’nai mitzvah year and beyond in various iterations – parents have learning workshops with the students, parents travel with the students, and more.