



Early Childhood & Family Engagement Department

Engaging Today's Families: Parent Research Findings

January 2013

Rationale and Objectives

On the heels of the 2011 Jewish Community Study of New York and its relevant findings, The Early Childhood and Family Engagement Department of The Jewish Education Project set out to understand what Jewish engagement looks like for first-time Jewish moms during this new life stage.

Families with young children today want their children to engage in high-quality social and educational activities. Parents want these experiences to be consistent with their values, lifestyle, and need for flexibility. Although there are a plethora of these activities outside the Jewish community, it can often be hard for families to find similar experiences with Jewish content. Recent research compiled by Mark Rosen in June 2010¹ shows that many families in New York City would like to participate in Jewish activities with their children but are unsatisfied with the current choices in their local Jewish institutions or communities. If today's Jewish community and institutions aren't delivering inventive, relevant social and educational experiences, then many families will not participate.

The Rosen study also shows that "social networks play an important role in parental decision making. Parents' choices are often influenced by friends - they seek recommendations from peers and go where their friends go." The new UJA-Federation 2011 Jewish Community Study of New York finds "a very close and powerful association of Jewish social connection with level of Jewish engagement."

Based on these findings, we decided to explore the connections new moms make with other moms, and the role Judaism plays (or could play) in the social connections and choices they make during this life stage. Furthermore, we attempted to uncover the needs and wants of these mothers, the behavioral differences within groups of parents and motivations for certain social experiences and connections. Furthermore, we aimed to garner feedback regarding and measure the appeal of new activities.

In order to align and compare our findings with other recent research in this area, we limited our geographic region to Manhattan and Brownstone Brooklyn (Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, DUMBO, Prospect Heights, Park Slope, Windsor Terrace, Kensington, Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, and Williamsburg).

Methodology

To achieve these objectives, we conducted four qualitative focus groups with moms of children ages 0-2. Research was conducted in New York, New York on August 7th and August 8th, 2012.

All participants had to fit the following criteria:

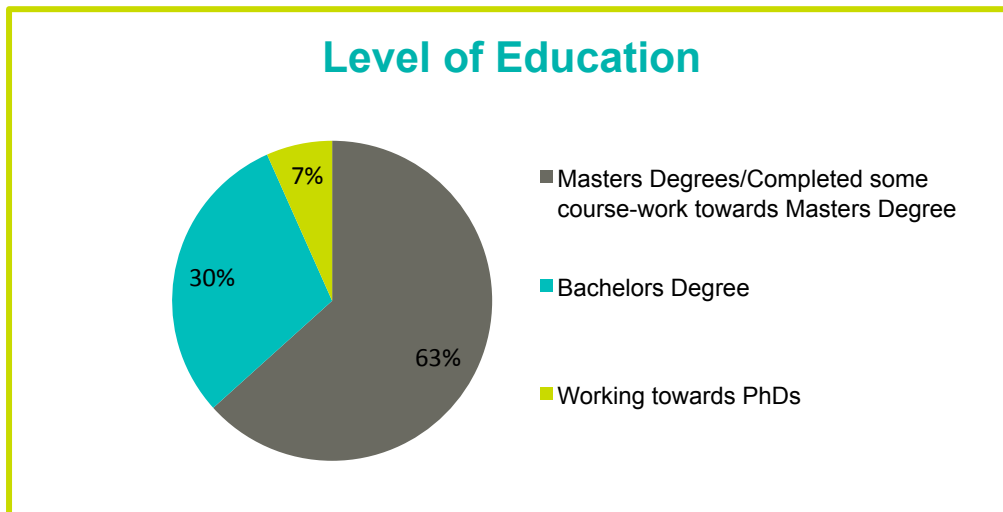
- Identify as Jewish (non-Orthodox);
- Primary caretaker of their child and/or very involved in their children's activities;
- Planning to raise their child as an identified Jew;
- Oldest child is between the ages of 0-24 months (1st child is this age?)
- Currently attend or plan to attend enrichment classes, and/or formal and informal playgroups
- Live in selected geographic area.

¹ Rosen, M.I., Allen, M.L., Lowenstein, A., Steinberg, S., Kartseva, T., Meiseles, A., Kibrit, J., *Jewish Early Engagement in New York: A Feasibility Study Prepared for the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal of UJA-Federation of New York*. 2010.

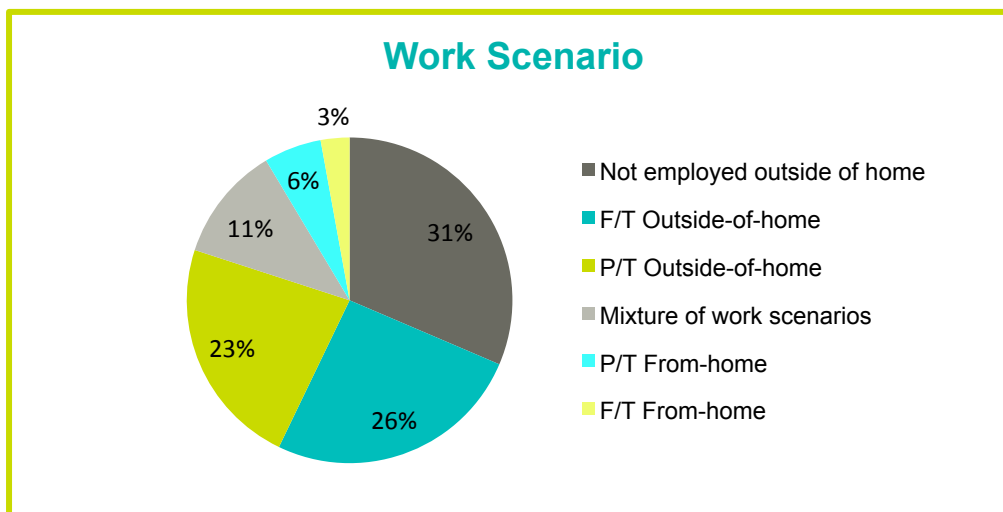
Participants' ages ranged from early 30s to early 40s. The four focus groups were segmented as follows:

Community	Parents with kids ages 0-1	Parents with kids ages 1-2	Totals
Lower Manhattan (Below 14 th St.) & Brownstone Brooklyn	N=7	N=11	N=18
Manhattan (above 14 th St.)	N=5	N=12	N=17
TOTALS	N=12	N=23	N=35

The breakdown of the levels of education of the participants is as follows:



The breakdown of the participants' work scenarios is as follows:



Findings

Transitional Life Stage

- As a generation of women who have a strong sense of autonomy, these women see themselves as self-directed, successful individuals with strong interests and passions separate from being a mom.
- This autonomous approach to life influences their parenting style and they are more proactive in their parenting than other generations were, leaving less to chance.

Moms are **autonomous**,
successful people
with **strong interests and**
passions

"I was just told that I might have to travel for my job, and I was speechless at the thought of leaving my child. I used to be the woman that loved to get on a plane, and I would travel and meet my husband on a business trip, and go to conferences. I used to love connecting with people in my industry. That was one of my hobbies- traveling and going places for my career. I miss being an overachiever- that was a hobby of mine - to try to accomplish a lot and succeeding a lot often, if not always, and now it's never."

-Meredith, UWS mom of 23-month old daughter

- These moms want their children to self-actualize rather than projecting certain values on their children. They want to do everything "right," to give their kids every tool and opportunity, and create a world that shows their kids that anything is achievable - the sky is the limit.
- **This life stage is an identity transformation process for new moms.** They are transitioning from social and active lifestyles where they were solely responsible for their own actions to becoming responsible for another person's life.
- New mothers are struggling to determine the right balance between "my existence" and "my child's existence" as they shift from complete autonomy over their lives to being "ruled" by their child's needs.
- Becoming a mom is an exciting life change that also leaves them feeling vulnerable and in need of support.

Craving Connections

- Newer moms are craving connections at this life stage because they feel vulnerable in this new role. They seek help and support as they navigate new terrain where they can no longer identify as "an expert."
- More seasoned moms, or those whose children are no longer newborns, experience loneliness and crave connections with others both for themselves and for their children.
- Moms are **craving a common connection with other mothers and are searching for validation.** They look for validation and peer support from others who are experiencing the same transition from confident and successful to vulnerable and unsure.

"Nobody is more insecure than a new mom...you are at your worst. You walk around and see [moms] on the street and you ask yourself, 'oh my god, should I be doing this or not doing that?' so I think it's also your willingness to open up with another person and let your guard down."

- Jill, Gramercy mom of 2 ½ year old daughter and 6 month old son

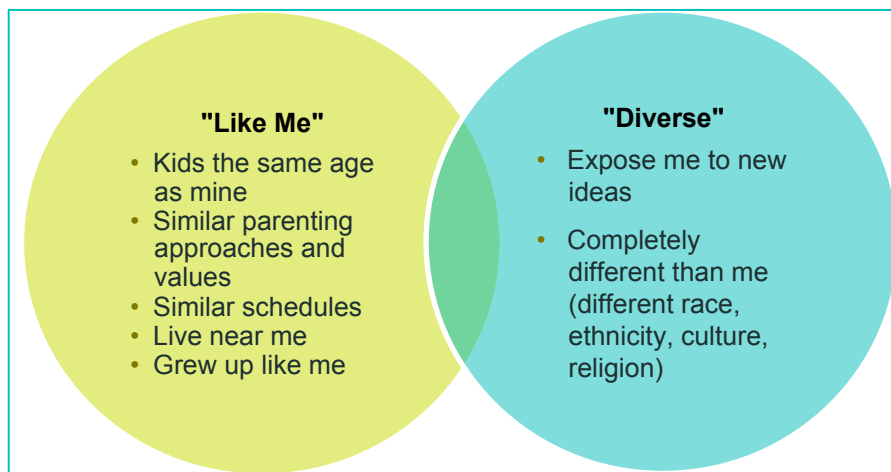
"I went to a breastfeeding support group and I think a big part of that was just wanting to be around other people and to see people who are doing worse than you or better than you."

- Sam, Park Slope mom to 11 month old son

- **The process of making connections at this life stage can be compared to the experience and process of dating.**

Moms are looking for other moms with logistical similarities (kids the same age, geographic proximity). However, chemistry remains at the core of what moms hope to discover in new friendships.

- **Connecting early on fosters stronger relationships.** Successful and strong friendships developed among moms who met at a very early stage of "mommy hood" (i.e., at parenting classes when children were between 3 weeks and 2 months).
- If moms didn't create a group of new "mom" friends at the early stages (during pregnancy, infancy, etc.) they felt more isolated and disconnected later on when they tried to make connections or join already existing groups of friends.
- When seeking out connections, **moms are looking for people who are both "like them" and "diverse."** These two classifications are not always conflicting concepts...



"I want to connect my daughter to a Jewish community of kids her age because I want her to feel like she's part of a community and because I worry about my husband's and my ability to independently create that community for her at home. We're not religious but I want her to know that if we sit down on a Friday night for dinner that it's the Sabbath. I don't want to teach her what everything means but I want her to feel part of a community."

- Shira, UES mom to 21 month old daughter

"I'm still good friends with the moms from my mom group. I was looking for some diversity in my mom friends. Some of the people I was meeting at first were all Jewish like me, so when I joined this [mom's] group, none of them were Jewish and they were from all different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and it's awesome. It's just very different; everyone's raising their child differently. It was nice for me that they were a diverse group."

- Meredith, Tribeca mom to 23 month old daughter

- Many moms unintentionally gravitated toward other Jewish moms. While most moms were unable to articulate this trend, it was apparent from how they described their friends and the activities they do together.
- Moms tend to seek out friends who have “the same level” of commitment to Judaism. Some moms are intimidated by others who are “more Jewish” than they and do not want to feel judged.
- Interestingly, most moms are more tolerant of diversity outside of Judaism, than they are within Judaism.

“When I was pregnant my friend took me to this mom’s group on the UWS... it was pretty intense... I guess the women were all pretty Jewish...like orthodox, and I felt so uncomfortable, and I would never do it again. I didn’t like the feeling of being around all of the same people...even if there were people who were in the same level of religion as me, I still wouldn’t have liked it...I felt like it was like a cult.”

– Jodi, West Village mom to 20 month old son

Cultural Judaism vs. Religious Judaism

- **For most of the moms, Judaism is more “cultural” than “religious.”** They identified more closely with the cultural aspects of Judaism (food, holidays, and people) than they did with the religious aspects (Hebrew, prayer, rituals, etc.). Sometimes, and more often than not, they **only** identified with the cultural aspects. For the majority of moms, their main Jewish engagement revolved around:



- Their motivation for participating in these aspects of Judaism at this life stage is because they want to keep Judaism **“fun.”** Celebrating Judaism through food usually only happens around the Holidays (a few times a year – mainly on the High holidays, Passover, sometimes Chanukah).
- There was some engagement around **lifecycle events** (bris, baby naming), **tradition** (family customs passed down), **heritage** (knowing our people’s past and history) and **connection to older generations** (naming after grandparents/parents).

“We had a bris, and it was horribly traumatic, and I regretted doing it. Our beautiful son came in the world perfect and we subjected him to this horrible barbaric thing just because it’s our tradition...We want to celebrate the happy holidays and my father was a holocaust survivor, and I’m torn between wanting to celebrate the happiness of the sense of identity and not wanting to freak him out about the world and what it means to be Jewish. Jewish history is so oppressive and full of suffering, so I struggle with that”.

– Orna, Prospect Heights mom to 9 month old son

- The more knowledgeable the mother was about Judaism, the more likely she was to be engaged (in Jewish ritual and practice). This is likely because moms who do not fully understand certain Jewish concepts lack the same motivation to expose their children to Judaism as do the more knowledgeable moms.

- Most moms were unaware of the Jewish resources and opportunities that exist for them at this life stage. Some moms attended Tot Shabbat, JCC classes, KesheTot², and other Israeli groups. However, very few moms were aware of resources like PJ library and Kveller.
- **There were many moms who felt strongly that synagogues did not give them meaningful, positive experiences as a child. They therefore have little desire to join and/or make synagogues a part of their lives.** The moms who had a positive experience in synagogue attribute it to family rather than “religion.”
- Some of the moms saw the benefits of synagogue life, and therefore plan to or already make synagogue a part of their family’s life. The benefits were mainly functional and were related to lifecycle events (bar/bat-mitzvah, death, etc.).
- Very few of the moms saw emotional benefits of synagogue and relied on it solely for a sense of community.

“I remember having to go inside the synagogue once to get my grandfather and I felt so uncomfortable. I was 8, and I had never been in a synagogue before, and I had the feeling that I didn’t belong there, and I was an outsider, and I’ve had that feeling a number of times over my life and so one of the things that’s important to me for my kids is to give them at least the tools of Judaism... culturally. I want them to have more tools than I had. I want them to understand the holidays, what you do, what they mean, what the foods are, I want them to even have some Hebrew, and it’s not about being religious...it’s a matter of being able to enter that world (of Judaism) much more than I could.”

- Ariana, Park Slope mom to 15 month old son

“I’ll probably join a synagogue because I want my daughter to go to religious school and have a bat-mitzvah but if it weren’t for that, I wouldn’t join.”

- Dayna, Brooklyn mom of 18 month old daughter

“I could not give birth to a child and not belong to a synagogue. This is a new stage of adulthood so with that you should belong to a synagogue. It’s what my parents instilled in me.”

- Wendy UWS mom of 3½ month old daughter

“Community is important because I think there’s a sense of honoring tradition. My dad passed away while I was pregnant and so there’s something nice about honoring something [joining a synagogue] that meant a lot to him.”

-Myra, Windsor Terrace mom to 24 month old daughter

- **Israeli and American Jewish moms had distinctly different mindsets as related to forging cultural connections.** Both seek culturally Jewish experiences, but they look differ in that:
 - Most Israeli moms craved connections and experiences that would foster a similar cultural experience to their own (Hebrew language, songs, music, Israeli food, the “non-American” culture).
 - American moms seek connections and experiences that would foster more of an American Jewish cultural experience (Jewish friends, celebrating certain holidays, Jewish food).

² Israeli enrichment program sponsored by *Israelis in Brooklyn* and associated with Congregation Beth-Elohim in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

- The nuanced differences make it hard for one type of experience to appeal to both Israeli moms and American Jewish moms.



Israeli moms craved cultural experience similar to their own (Hebrew language, songs, music, Israeli food, the “non-American” culture)

- **Hebrew is necessary.**
- Feel more **confident in passing on Jewish values**, lessons, etc. to their children through their home life.
- Were raised among people “like them” (Jewish) so they **feel excitement about diversity**.



American moms seek American Jewish cultural experiences (Jewish friends, celebrating certain holidays, Jewish food)

- **Hebrew is a barrier** and is seen as “too Jewish,” unfamiliar.
- Do not have all the building blocks of creating a Jewish home, so need to look outside to do so.
- **Were raised in a more diverse setting**, and subconsciously tend to gravitate to others “like them.”

Creating Community

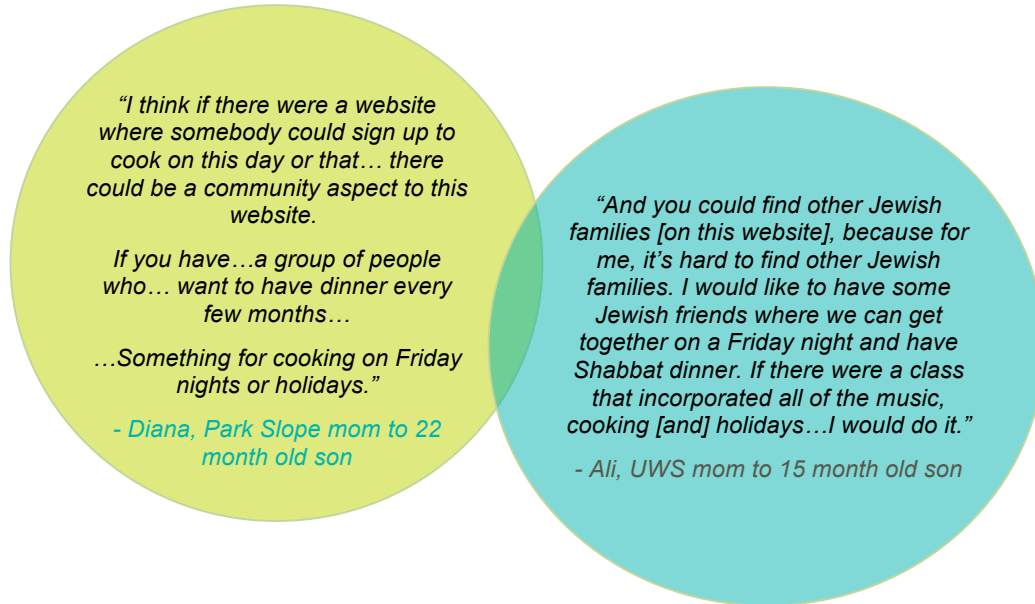
- Moms are getting a sense of community and support from many different sources. They receive communal benefits from their own work environments, their “old” friends, their family, and their new mom friends.
- **Moms want a feeling of belonging and a stronger community but it must be organic – and they do not know where or how to get it (and have limited time to find it).** While they are willing to invest effort into creating community, they do not want it to feel too contrived, limited, or closed. This is especially important when it comes to a Jewish community.
- Enrichment classes provide some sense of belonging/connectedness for moms. This is because it gives them something to do out of their homes, fosters connections for both moms and kids, gives them a sense of belonging, and an opportunity for their children to learn and grow.
- Classes that moms like best meet the following criteria:
 - Make their children happy;
 - Are within a 10 block radius of their home;
 - Are affordable (Moms do not consider the \$30-40 price per class to be affordable, but have accepted this price as the “standard.” If a class is less than \$40, it is a huge bargain.³);
 - Have an engaging instructor who provides outside knowledge that the parents do not have.

We really can't even afford a class... but I feel like I am doing an injustice so I try to get him [my son] into at least one class. Some of these things are \$40 dollars a class for 45 minutes.”

-Lisa, Brooklyn mom of 15 month old son

³ Many moms noted that they did not see a difference in the quality of classes despite the difference in price (free, cheap, or expensive). However, it is the “norm” for moms to sign their child up for one expensive class per semester.

- **There is strong interest among moms for a “new and innovative” type of Jewish class.** Moms feel like the current Jewish classes that exist “do the job” but are not innovative and different enough to compete for their limited time and money.
- Similar to moms’ engagement with Judaism, their interest in a new Jewish opportunity mainly revolves around **connection, community, and cooking.**



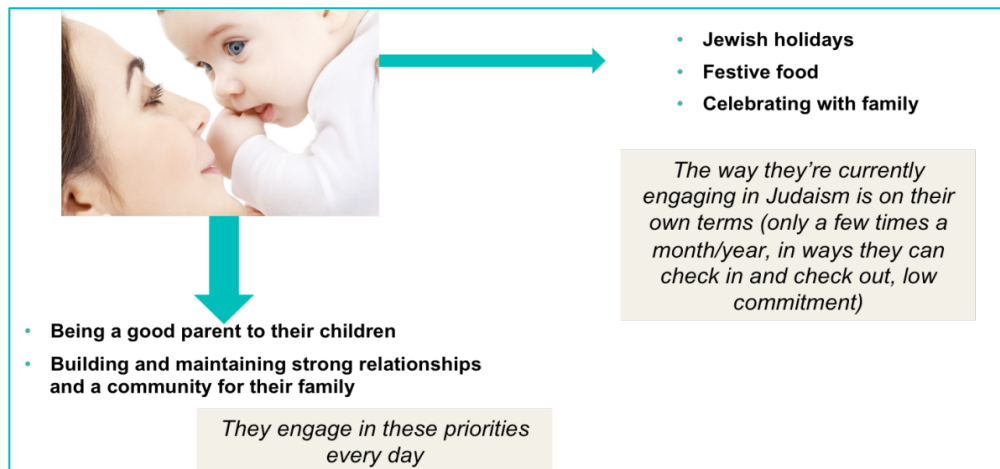
- A Jewish community seems appealing and intriguing to moms, but they want the option of **“checking in”** and **“checking out”** at their convenience.
 - They’re not easily able to envision it.
 - It has to serve their needs, not be too demanding on their time, and must be convenient.
 - The boundaries and intentions have to be clear: What do I have to contribute? What will I get in return? Will I be pushed in directions with which I am not comfortable?

“Growing up in a Jewish community, everyone is kind of there for each other....I have never seen [that] in any other community... For example, I have friends that live in Englewood, NJ. When they had their babies, they had a calendar of who is going to cook for [the mom] who just gave birth and all their meals are taken care of for a while. In the city I asked my friends, where is my dinner?”

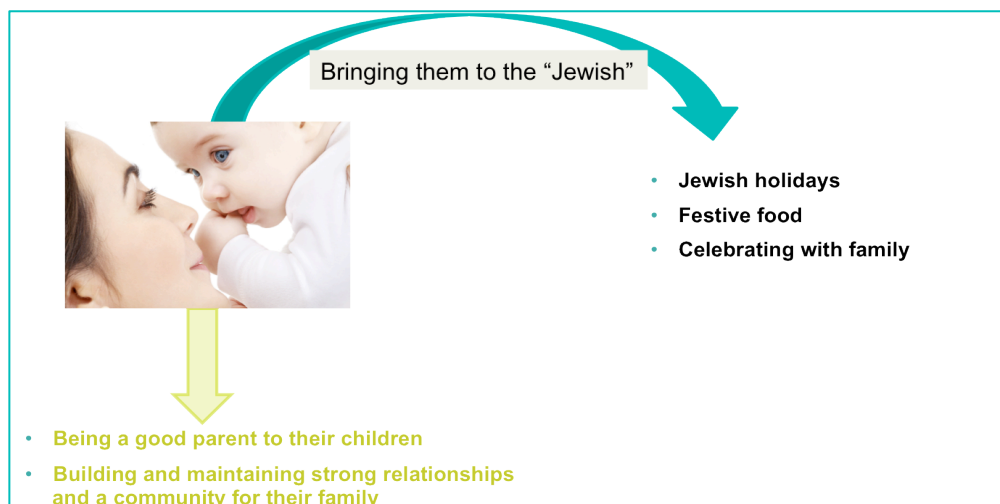
-Ali. UWS mom to 14 month old son

Key Considerations and Implications

- In sum, most moms in our study have certain priorities that guide their lives and are deeply ingrained into who they are at this life stage:
 - Being a good parent to their children**
 - Building and maintaining strong relationships and a community for their family**
- In the grand scheme of their priorities, their Jewish engagement (while still important) is less ingrained in who they are at this life stage:

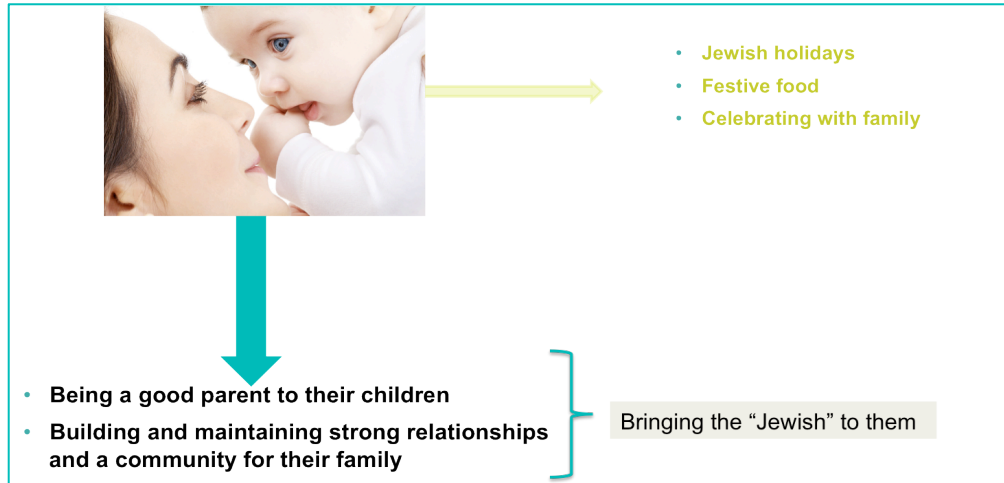


- The prevalent and most available Jewish engagement models try to engage moms by bringing them somewhere “Jewish,” and make the “Jewish” more relevant and a higher priority:

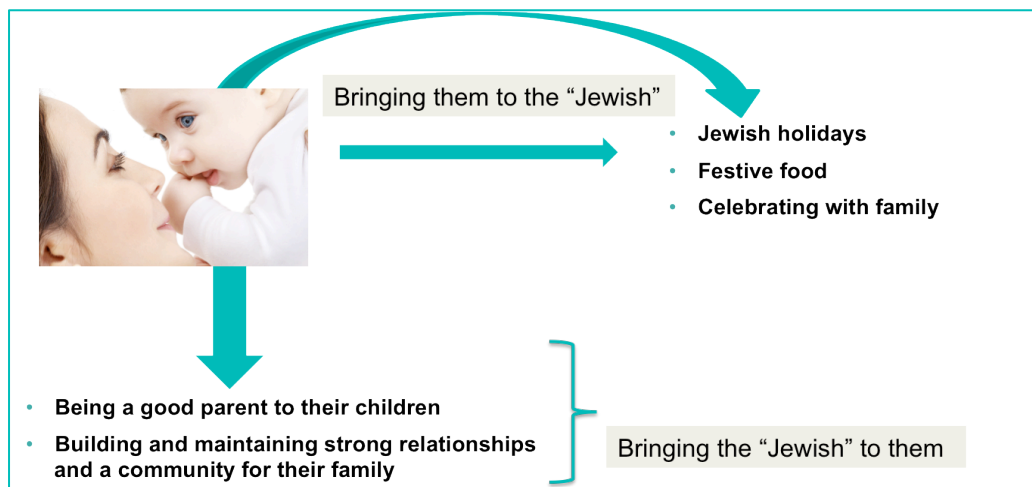


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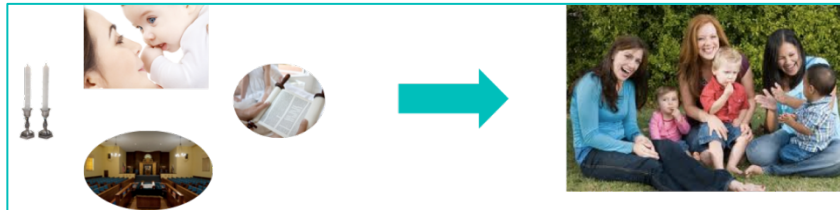
- And some Jewish engagement models are trying to reach moms by connecting “Jewish” to what matters most to them:



- For both of these strategies, we must be mindful of the **zone of proximal development**. Right now, moms are so focused on what is most important to them that they might not have the capacity to change or absorb **much** in terms of **new** Jewish ideas and practices. While bringing them to the Jewish and the Jewish to them may be effective, it will probably not create a major shift in Jewish engagement.



- Shifting to a **new outcome** at this life stage:
 - If we **shift our desired outcomes away from only Jewish rituals and affiliation as evidence of Jewish engagement, and more towards relationships among Jewish parents**, we can help create and support a vibrant Jewish network made up of meaningful and purposeful relationships.
 - Then, when the zone of proximal development evolves and expands for these moms, we can hope that they'll have more capacity to absorb and change behavior as they develop into new stages of parenthood.



- Combining the theory that relationships can change behavior with the in-depth understanding of moms at this life stage, we suggest a new way to engage moms in Judaism. Previous research **has suggested the importance of relationships, but hasn't advocated such a bold shift.**

How can organizations and individuals engage moms at this life stage?



Investing in future relationships

Let us commit the time and effort to **building relationships between and among families** as an investment in the future, a time when they could be more able and willing to engage in new types of learning and living. These new types of learning and living may lead to engagement with us and our organizations or may be totally new models of community and engagement among families outside of our current organizations and institutions.

How can this change our work?



Relationship Weaver

When serving this population at this life stage, perhaps **we should instead think about our role as relationship weavers** – focusing primarily on building and strengthening Jewish community through relationships rather than content delivery.

*What will the new Jewish landscape look like if we shift our desired outcomes away from only Jewish **rituals and affiliation as evidence of Jewish engagement** towards **relationships** as the basis of long-term engagement?*

Research conducted in August 2012 by Jamie Betesh, Associate Director of Strategic Research & Insights at The Jewish Education Project. For questions regarding the research, please contact Jamie Betesh at jbetesh@jewishedproject.org.

Report compiled in January 2012 by the Department of Early Childhood and Family Engagement at The Jewish Education Project in New York City:

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