

Guide to Engaging “Connector” Families

Express Innovation works on the assumption that social networks exist among your congregation’s families. Tapping these networks can release the energy and passions of parents who want, as you do, a meaningful Jewish learning experience for their children. Identifying and accessing these informal connections now will enable you to facilitate the flow of information, and ideas needed to engage families with the new learning model that has been chosen for your community.

This is a new way of thinking for most congregations and draws heavily on social network theory and community organizing. In the past you may have introduced a great new program, hoping it would attract the interest and participation you wanted. In **Express Innovation** you will begin the implementation of your model by analyzing and tapping into the relational ties and deep hopes that exist among your families as a way to accelerate the changes you envision. Starting at this place will root your innovations in the lives of your members and will yield deep systemic change within your congregation.

Identify your “connectors”

Once you have decided who your target population – the grade(s) and families who to whom you will first introduce your model - you need to ascertain the social connectors within that group. Social network theorists call this identifying the “network geography” since it means examining the social “lay of the land.” You can do this either by working from a list of the students and their families, or if by creating a diagram and grouping them according to how they associate.

Think about how the families within your target population are socially connected: There may be some who are related, live in the same neighborhoods or carpool together. As you will realize, not all connections are mutual or even exclusive. Likewise, in some families the mothers may be connected even if the fathers and/or children are not. Within this web of associations you will discover some families connected to a mix of others while other families may be more peripheral or even disconnected. *Note: Keep a record of these various connections for future reference when you are looking to expand the scope of your model.*

As you look over your list or diagram, identify 6-10 parents you think are broadly well-connected, to each other and to others. These are your connectors. Their personal stories and lives will help shape your model while their social connections will trigger interest and involvement in what you create.

Designing Connecting Conversations

Goals of Connecting Conversations

- Build relationships through sharing personal stories and discovering commonalities and differences
- Invest families in your model by drawing connections for them between their hopes and dreams and the potential of your model
- Prepare families to engage others
- Collect data about families' hopes and dreams that will help shape your model

Inviting participants

- Invite participants by phone and then follow up with an e-mail to confirm. Be sure to give plenty of lead-time.
- Make the invitation personal. Be specific about why you are inviting each person. Don't be afraid to flatter.
- Invite them for a 2-hour conversation.
- Assume invitees don't know much about **Express Innovation** – and that, at this point, that's OK. The focus of the Conversation will be on their hopes and aspirations for their children.
- Indicate that they're being invited because the new kinds of learning opportunities will first target their children's grade(s)/subject/stage in life.
- Convey that this Conversation isn't about fundraising or chairing a committee. Instead, you need their input in order to create something important for their children and exciting for your congregation.

The appropriate setting

- Plan your Conversation at a time and location that will comfortably accommodate everyone and, if possible, is related to your model. For example, if you are adopting a Shabbat-based model you may want to meet during Shabbat, perhaps for dinner or lunch. Meeting at the synagogue is certainly an option, but don't be afraid to think out of the box. Doing so can signal that you are embarking on a wholly new learning experience – certainly a message you want to convey. Just be sure it's a place that affords some privacy where people will be comfortable speaking freely.
- Create text handouts for each person.

Tips for scripting your Conversation (also see Sample Script)

1. Preparation:

- **Script the Conversation** so you include everything important, carefully word your questions and anticipate the flow of the discussion from beginning to end.
- **Be realistic about your timing** and don't try to fit too much into a limited time.

- **Share the responsibilities** by having a note taker to record the conversation and watch for body language and signs of agreement and disagreement.
- **Manage expectations.** Be clear with participants about what will and will not come from this conversation. This should not devolve into a critique of the synagogue, its staff or its programs.

2. Building Relationships to one another and to Judaism

- **Let the participants do most of the talking.** Be sure they have a chance to share their personal stories as well as their hopes and dreams for their children's Jewish lives.
- **Include a bit of Jewish learning** so that participants experience Jewish learning in a new setting and context.
- **Ask open-ended questions** and invite follow-up and intergroup discussion. Probe for answers and tolerate "pregnant pauses" while people think.
- **Facilitate relationship-building** by practicing active listening (e.g. "Could you explain a little more what you mean by that?"), drawing out participants' personal stories, pointing out which ideas and comments complement or differ from each other, including yourself in the conversation by the use of "we."
- **Put concerns that are off topic in a "parking lot"** where they can be revisited later. Let the participants know you'll call them next week to follow-up.
- **Be prepared to ask participants to help** make your new learning successful by reaching out to others, being your eyes and ears in the congregation and by offering their gifts and talents to this effort.
- **Promise participants** that their input will help shape the interior design of your model and that you will follow-up with them shortly.

3. Capturing data

- Capture actual wording whenever possible – it can be useful in future communications
- Review notes with facilitator afterwards
- Hear the words and the feelings behind the words – make note of both

At the Conversation

- Include refreshments and/or food
- Provide name tags
- Be welcoming, non-judgmental and non-defensive
- When talking about your new model, convey excitement
- Stick to script and time frame
- Thank participants for their time and for sharing themselves

After the Conversation

Debrief

- Check-in with the note taker immediately afterwards to review Conversation
- Reflect on the Conversation – let it sit for a few days
- Share Conversation with team
- Decide what you heard that you want to incorporate immediately into your model
- Identify how to keep each participant engaged based on comments, talents and interests

Follow-up

- Thank each participant individually
- Follow-up with participants who had specific ideas or offered help
- Keep connector families apprised of how the model is shaping up, highlighting how you've incorporated their input. You might want to create a special e-blast update sent just to them as the “co-creators” of your model.
- Continue to cultivate relationships with these valuable connector families by seeking them out for on-going conversations, e.g. getting together for coffee or lunch, asking the rabbi or cantor to reach out to them in appreciation and to hear more about the Conversation, etc.