



Family Learning, Temple Israel of Great Neck

GREAT NECK, NY

WHO ARE THE LEARNERS? THE TEACHERS?

- Children in K-7 grades and their families
- Teachers vary depending on the family education offering in which they are participating.
- For Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah, teachers are members of the congregation – knowledgeable, Conservative Jews who are great with kids. Associate Rabbi works with oldest group. Regular Jr. Congregation leader does services and works with grades 3-4.

WHEN DOES THE MODEL TAKE PLACE?

- Throughout the school year at varying times depending on the family education offering
- Community events for which family education credit is offered include a non-denominational Thanksgiving Service in November, a Martin Luther King service in January, and the Celebrate Israel Parade in May.
- Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah meets approx. once a month during the school year on Friday night, Shabbat morning or Shabbat afternoon.

The amount of time dedicated to study during Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah outside of the context of worship varies – 45 minutes on Shabbat morning, 15-20 minutes on Friday night and about 30 minutes Shabbat afternoon. It took the congregation a few years to determine how many times to offer Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah during the year. The current number of offerings – once a month or 9 times during the school year seems to be just right.

WHERE DOES THE MODEL TAKE PLACE?

- The majority of family education offerings including services take place at Temple Israel.
- Events in the local community like the Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King services and the Celebrate Israel Parade take place off-site.

HOW IS THE LEARNING DESIGNED?

- Families must attend five family education programs and any eight services, including high holidays, over the course of the year
- Families receive a “passport”, a tool that lists each of the 25 or so different family education programs they can choose from as well as all the services.
- Family attendance is met whenever one child and one parent from a family participate in an event.
- Parents and kids learn together in many family education programs while others involve parallel learning.
- Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah was created to provide opportunity for families to daven together in different cohorts and to make t’fillah more accessible, engaging and age-appropriate for families with school-aged children.
- During Shabbat Ha-Mishpacha, two to three services take place concurrently to appeal to different ages – Bonim (K-2), Chaverim (3-4), and Machon (5-7)
- Kids’ sessions during Shabbat Ha-Mishpacha involve learning through games while adults study with clergy, knowledgeable adults from the congregation, or occasionally outside speakers.

The Educational Director created a menu of all the Family Education programs throughout the congregation over the course of the year as well as potential events in the local community. Some were intentionally educational while others more social in nature. She made sure that each grade had at least one. Culminating events involving performance got tweaked by adding in a 20-30 minute family learning event. Attendance binders listing every family in the congregation with kids help track who is doing what when. Stickers get used on Shabbat and Yom Tov when writing is not possible. The wide choice of services to attend includes Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah, all adult services for Shabbat and holidays, Jr. Congregation, Machon (for children in grades 5-7 and their parents), and Youth House services.

The congregation provides a variety of incentives to encourage families to fulfill the family education and service participation requirement. These include earning certificates, membership in “clubs” with certain privileges, gifts for those with the highest participation rate, and public recognition.

WHY IS THE LEARNING DESIGNED THIS WAY?

- To move beyond the drop-off model and get parents through the doors of the congregation
- To provide families with choices about when, where and in what context they want to engage in learning together
- Strong desire to consolidate Jewish learning and to have a bigger focus on family participation and t’fillah

Through their participation in the RE-IMAGINE Project, the congregation created a vision for education. Based on the general level of dissatisfaction with the existing model of education going into the project and the vision created during the project, the congregation made significant change throughout the religious school including moving from a three-day a week to a two-day a week model.

Other changes include: shifting the Hebrew curriculum to focus on T’fillah; bringing the clergy into the school weekly to lead lively group t’fillah sessions in grade cohorts; providing snack, including bread, for all students each day so they can practice birkat ha-mazon which is taught incrementally each year; moving the 7th grade to the Youth House, where the Hebrew High School meets, during Hebrew High School hours.

KEY FIRST STEPS TOWARD IMPLEMENTATION

- Beginning school year with Yom Ha-Mishpachah, a back-to-school day for parents and children with lots of family learning activities
- Emphasis on publicity, big posters with photos of family education created to get congregation to notice what was happening in the school
- Experimentation with a variety of family activities during the year

- Adding regular professional learning for teachers to help them fulfill with the new educational vision, including an emphasis on relevant, engaging and interactive classroom learning and more experiential learning.
- Adding requirement for families regarding minimum number of services and family education programs they need to attend each year

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR FAMILY LEARNING

- Religious school education committee oversees operations of the school and makes recommendations for policy changes.
- Educational Vision Team (EVT), a merger of the RE-IMAGINE Leadership Team and the LOMED Educational Leadership Team, oversees education in all the schools.

The EVT meets about five-six times a year as more of a think tank. A mix of lay people and professionals, its primary purpose is to make sure that the congregation continuously refers to and provides educational offerings that are aligned to the vision.

BUDGET/RESOURCES

- It took some time to identify the resources required to support the changes to the structure of learning.
- Tracking family participation required creating a database and administrative support.
- Hired someone to write the curriculum for Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah and someone else to act as the coordinator in charge of all other preparations including acquiring supplies, submitting room requests, and communications with Shabbat Ha-Mishpachah staff including clergy, paid staff and teen madrichim.
- Meals an additional cost

The educational director worked hard to convince the Board of Directors that the new model couldn’t get up and running without adding significant resources to the school. For a while, the congregation could commit the necessary resources, including hiring an assistant school director for 20 hours a week. Much of that has been cut back in recent months posing new challenges for all involved.

INTEGRATION OF FAMILY LEARNING AND THE LARGER CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Teachers do some tracking of their learners' attendance at services or family education offerings. They may also encourage students to attend.
- Grade level family education programs usually take place during school hours. Teachers come and get involved.

IMPACT ON LEARNERS, TEACHERS, CONGREGATION

- Any Shabbat you'll see families with kids here in the synagogue, not just families with their 7th graders attending friends' b'nai mitzvah.
- Kids feel more validated, that what they are doing is more significant because their parents join them for a special program at least once a year.

- Teachers appear excited and enthusiastic about family engagement. Parent participation validates their effort.
- Some families have expressed that they have moved from not being involved to being very involved, bringing what they are learning home.
- Tremendous increase in knowledge and comfort for those who attend services.

For those who do participate, they experience a powerful sense of belonging. They've created a wider network of people to whom they feel connected. Temple Israel is a place where the whole family goes to learn, not just the child.