

JEWISH IDENTITY

How do we best engage our children to learn — and hopefully embrace — Jewish values?

Defining Jewish identity

BY DAN WEINSTEIN

A person's Jewish identity can be defined in many ways. Jewish identity can be described as the degree to which a person perceives oneself as being Jewish, which may involve participation and commitment in Jewish activities and the Jewish community, as well as the positive feelings, attitudes, and behaviors associated with being Jewish. Simply put, Jewish identity can be the degree to which one feels Jewish.

Jewish identity usually begins in childhood, continues to develop into adolescence, and evolves throughout the lifespan. Numerous influences help determine one's Jewish identity. The level of synagogue involvement, Jewish education, peer influence, and parental affiliation and involvement in Jewish traditions, practices, and community events all are strong determinants. One's awareness of anti-Semitism or sense of affiliation with Israel also may contribute to the person's sense of Jewishness. Religious camps and youth programs can lead to an emotional connection with Jewish ideas and friends, as well as engender behaviors in line with one developing a strong sense of what it means to be Jewish. Israel programs and tours have demonstrated the ability to strengthen one's

Jewish identity, especially among youth.

In conjunction with how a child's sense of being Jewish can develop in response to parental, community, educational, peer, synagogue and other outside influences, children's identification with Judaism also is determined by various psychological determinants. A closer look at the relational, intrapersonal, developmental, cognitive, and behavioral factors can provide a better sense of these variables from a psychological perspective.

Among the various factors, family dynamics (e.g., the parent-child bond), can play a vital role in a child's overall development of identity, including Jewish identification.

For example, research has shown that rejection or departure from one's religion has been associated with poor parent-child relationships while positive religious feelings have been associated with feeling parental support and a concurrent sense of control.

There are many definitions of identity from the psychological perspective, and many focus on the person's self-image (i.e. mental model of him/herself), self-esteem, and individuation (i.e. process of becoming aware of oneself). The formation of one's Jewish identity, similar to identity in general, develops

rapidly throughout one's youth and adolescence. Identity is conveyed to children by their parents' approval and disapproval of the child's compliance and efforts to emulate their role modeling.

As a young child, the parents' beliefs and attitudes tend to have their strongest impact on their identity development. As the child enters adolescence, other influences become more prominent in shaping the developing teen's Jewish identity (e.g., peers, school, synagogue youth group, religious school, the media).

The developmental stage of a child or adolescent directly influences one's sense of identity, and Jewish identification is no exception.

For example, consider a young teen attending a school with very few Jewish students who comes from an observant family and wants to be liked but does not want to stand out as being different

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The St. Louis Jewish Light asked four individuals in the community to reflect on the topic of Jewish identity — How important is it? How can we best instill those values in our children? We asked a psychologist, a local mom, along with a professional Jewish educator, and a local teenager. This week, we feature psychologist Dan Weinstein and Sharon Dunski Vermont, a self-described "pediatrician-turned-stay-at-home-mom." In a future issue, we will include essays from Michael Raileanu, director of Shaare Shalom religious school and local teenager Anna Dardick.

encourage Jewish identity development and minimize the child's anger or resistance.

Other ways to foster Jewish identification include youth groups or the more obvious inclusion of regular religious practice and rituals (e.g., performing mitzvot, lighting candles and saying prayers on Shabbat, attending services, community involvement, educational activities).

The formation of one's Jewish identity, similar to identity development in general, is a lifelong process. Despite the various existing resources and opportunities for assisting with youth Jewish identity development, there are some children and adolescents who may not develop a strong identification with being Jewish.

Others may not begin to develop their Jewish identity until they are well into their adulthood or raising their own children. Akin to our evolving understanding of who we are in the world, the establishment of one's Jewish identity evolves from a number of influences and can be fostered but not forced.

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Teaching our children to love Judaism

BY SHARON DUNSKI VERMONT

"Mommy, does salami have pork in it?" my then six-year-old daughter asked me over the phone from her friend's house.

"Many times it does," I answered curiously. "Why?"

"Well, Jenna's mom was going to give me a salami sandwich for lunch. But I told her we don't eat pork. And she didn't know what was in the salami!" Jordyn answered innocently. "So, I think I'll just ask her for cheese!" she announced, and then quickly got off the phone.

As I hung up the receiver, I was beaming with pride. It isn't everyday that a mother actually gets to witness the fruits of her labor. As parents, we talk and teach and remind our children what we want them to do and then send them out into the world, hoping they'll actually follow our

instructions. Yet, on this particular day, it was clear to me that all of the discussions my husband and I have had with our kids about our Jewish identity had actually sunk in. Without any reminders at all, my kindergartner had called me to make sure she didn't consume pork. I couldn't have been prouder.

Honestly, I shouldn't have been shocked by Jordyn's phone call. I talk with my kids almost daily about our Jewish identity and why we should be proud of who we are. But the truth is I do more than just talk. I act. My girls see me make *challah* most Shabbats. They come with me to the Jewish Food Pantry to donate groceries to the poor. They know the importance of being kind to others and demonstrate that value often with their friends. Both girls assist me with cleaning out our kitchen for *Pesach* and

then shop with me for their favorite Passover foods. On Hanukkah we light candles as a family all eight nights and enjoy latkes together at dinner. My girls have a love for their religion because they experience it and live it. Judaism isn't something my children just learn about in Sunday School. It's a huge part of who they are each and every day.

My friends and I often discuss the ways in which we try to impart our values to our kids. In my mind, there is only one way to do this. Our children need to see us valuing our Judaism or they never will. We can talk with our kids ad nauseum. Yet, if we don't practice what we've tried to teach them, our talk was for naught. The parent who refuses to give *tzadakah* and treats others rudely shouldn't be at all astonished when her daughter feels no

connection to her religion. How can we expect our kids to love their heritage, unless we demonstrate to them that we have that love inside of us?

Similarly, we should not be astounded to see our children act intolerantly towards others if we haven't reinforced to them the importance of respecting those who are different from us. I tell my daughters over and over that, although we love being Jewish, we should never show disrespect to those whose beliefs are different from ours. Not only is tolerance a huge part of being a good Jew, it is an immeasurable part of being a good person. Because my children see that in my daily life, color and religion do not affect my choice of friends and acquaintances, they in turn, are learning to be color blind. In order to raise respectful,

benevolent, broad-minded children, we must demonstrate these virtues ourselves.

Most of what children learn is from what they see in the world around them. Since we, as their parents, are their world, most of what they learn comes from our behaviors and actions. I will always discuss my love of people and of Judaism with my daughters. It's in my nature. Maybe next time they call me with a question about *kashrut*, I'll remember not to be surprised.

Sharon Dunski Vermont is a pediatrician-turned-stay-at-home-mom with a lifelong passion for writing. She has a B.A. in biology and an M.D. from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She lives in Chesterfield with her husband and their two daughters, Hannah, 9, and Jordyn, 7.