

Jewish Family Education

A Casebook for the Twenty-first Century

by

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The Jewish Family Education Project



Innovation in Jewish Education since 1897

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Jewish Family Education A Casebook for the Twenty-first Century

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—Preface—

Jewish Family Education: What Is It?

Simply put, the first step toward Jewish family education is to get the parents out of the car.

It is the first step in a quiet revolution. It marks the end of the long American Jewish tradition of drop-your-kids-off-for-their-Jewish-schooling.

The following steps involve getting Judaism out of the four walls of the school (synagogue, JCC, summer camp) and back into the car with the family—and then into their homes and real lives with them. Jewish family education strives to bring families and Jewish institutions into a more balanced partnership in the challenge to “Jewish” the next generation.

Practitioners in this new and cutting-edge field have found that parents are seeking “something more” than contemporary American culture has to offer them and their children. We find that Jewish families are seeking community, values, some aspect of spiritual life for the family, and they are serious about wanting to be good families. Parents may experience this as a vague state of unease.¹ Good Jewish family education helps them to meet these needs and also helps strengthen the family as a family by providing an island of quality time and the opportunity to practice patterns of positive communication and interaction (which their busy, crowded daily lives may not allow time for).

The critical attributes of Jewish family education are empowerment and scaffolding. Jewish Family Education covers a wide range of learning opportunities, programs and events that share as their goal empowering Jewish families to take charge of their own Jewish lives, to help Jewish families in their struggle to be, become or remain Jewish families by providing them with the inspiration, information, knowledge, skills and resources it takes to get there. Scaffolding describes the help and support built into every program for families as they stretch themselves Jewishly to reach beyond where they can reach on their own.

The “big Jewish ideas” of our tradition form the core of what Jewish family education has to offer families. Think of the process involved in selecting a gift for someone. Great care, thought and planning go into selecting the gift. When that is done, the decision about wrapping the gift is made. In Jewish family education, the “big Jewish idea” is the gift that is being given to the family. The program in which it is delivered is the equivalent of the gift wrapping.

¹It's important to note that they cannot always identify what they need or how or where to look for what they need. As a result, they don't usually come knocking on educators' or rabbis' doors asking for Jewish family education but when quality Jewish experiences for families are offered, families respond with recognition and enthusiasm

The range of programs that fall into the family education basket is very wide—reading programs for families, a congregational garden, family Torah study, parent-child book (or video) clubs, retreats, Israel trips, hikes, Shabbat dinners, tzedakah projects and more.

Professional Development for Family Educators

Family education requires a new set of skills in addition to the traditional skills we expect of Jewish educators in general. We consider **Jewish**, **Family** and **Education** to be the three strands of which professional development in this area is woven. **Jewish** includes study of traditional Jewish texts and “big Jewish ideas.” **Family** includes family systems theory, family life-cycle theory and a familiarity with the current writings in sociology that include aspects of family life and community life in America today. **Education** includes theories and practical skills that can translate the educators’ knowledge into the design and implementation of Jewish experiences for families.

Because the inter-generational setting is complex and more unpredictable than the standard classroom setting, the family educator has to have (or develop) a high tolerance for noise and commotion along with the ability to attend to many things happening at once. A family educator also needs to have very flexible knowledge—which means very deep knowledge (in all the three areas outlined above). A shallow layer of knowledge will not make one flexible enough to answer questions from adults and kids of widely divergent ages, comfortable with the various social dynamics or able to respond to the many surprising situations that can arise.

In the “phasing in” stages of family education at a site, it is important to work toward dissolving the air of suspicion with which teachers and parents have long regarded one another. And it is important to keep in mind that approaching parents with the same ease that they have with children is often a major hurdle for life-long teachers of children.

We have also found that a background in camping or other non-formal education is often very helpful in acquiring the approach to the type of educational programming that family education requires.

Common Ground: A Learning Conversation for Family Educators

Common Ground: A Learning Conversation for Family Educators was established with a grant to the Jewish Family Education Project² from the Bernard Osher Jewish Philanthropies Foundation. It began with eleven participants and met monthly for two and a half hours. (The length of the seminar was in and of itself revolutionary at the time because conventional wisdom held that Jewish educators couldn't [or wouldn't] concentrate for more than an hour and a half at a time.)

It was a two-year cycle with most educators taking year one and then year two, but many also joining for year two and then year one. The number of participants grew to sixteen the second year and then to twenty-two for the third and fourth years. The structure of the seminar evolved as we went along, from one seminar in years one and two to two parallel seminars in year three. In year four we have had one large group seminar one month, followed by two parallel smaller seminars ("sections") the next month. The case was introduced in the large group seminar, and then the smaller parallel sections would have an opportunity to delve more deeply into the case. Over the years the length of the seminar also grew, to three hours in the third year and then to three and a half hours in the fourth year.

The guiding theory of *Common Ground* is that educators can generate their own professional knowledge when guided to think reflectively about their own practice and the practice of others. We have tried to help them develop a stance of inquiry toward their own practice. Journal writing is an important tool in developing the habit of reflection. We built journal writing time into each seminar, setting aside time at the beginning and at the end of each seminar to do this. We have urged participants to develop the habit of journal writing between seminars (but this has proved a difficult discipline for them to make part of their routines, so that most of the journal writing was done in the seminar setting [at the beginning and at the end of each seminar]).

The structure of the course is true to the three-fold structure outlined above. It is built around Jewish, Family and Education.

- **Jewish:** Text study occupies the first hour of every seminar. For the most part we have chosen to study our texts *hevruta* style, providing participants with short texts and guiding questions that they study in small groups of twos and threes for as long as half an hour. Following this, the whole group comes together to consider additional aspects of the text. The choice of *hevruta* style was guided by our strong feeling that this was the best way to empower the educators to feel competent to handle a text that was new to them. In addition, we felt it provided the most powerful model for how they were most likely to structure text study for the families they work with.

²The Jewish Family Education Project is part of the Bureau of Jewish Education a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma counties

- **Family:** In year one of the cycle we read articles (academic and popular)³ about the life of families in America today and studied aspects of family systems. In the second year of the cycle (which is built around cases) many of the cases we studied prompted deep discussion about the families we work with, mostly drawing on the experience of participants—intermarried families, single-parent families, quirky families, stressed-out parents, reluctant participants and so on.
- **Education:** In year one we read articles about education both general and Jewish. During the second half of year one the participants worked together in a kind of “lab” setting to create a program for families built around a “big Jewish idea” which they then were able to try out at their sites.³ In year two the cases provided many opportunities for discussing a range of practical considerations affecting programming and educational decision-making. We also tried to set aside time for a “Jam Session” at each seminar during which participants could present a practical family education problem in their current practice with which they wanted the group’s help.

A typical *Common Ground* session looked somewhat like this:

Journal writing (10 minutes)

Text study (60 minutes)

Family education (year one) / case study (90 minutes)

Jam session

Journal (reflections on day’s discussion) (10 minutes)

Wrap-up of loose ends (10 minutes)

Other important details:

- We always served a pretty generous breakfast.
- Participants sat around a table at which everyone could see everyone.
- We (audio) taped each session so that when someone missed a seminar, it would be easy to listen to the seminar and catch up. (We mailed the tapes out to anyone who missed a session.)

The Case Writing Seminar

The case writing seminar was a professional development opportunity for our staff and a select group of educators with some experience working with families.

The seminar took place in the fall of 1997. It brought together the staff of the Jewish Family Education project and dozen educators. They were brought together by a grant from the Bernard Osher Jewish Philanthropies Foundation to the Jewish Family Edu-

³The first year’s seminar designed a family “travel curriculum” to accompany their summer vacation travels which was built around the concept *Mikadesh Hol*, (seeing the holy in the ordinary). The third year seminar developed two site-based family experiences—one designed around *G’milut Hasadim* (acts of loving kindness) and one based around *Derekh Eretz* (common decency toward humanity).

cation Project of the Bureau of Jewish Education of San Francisco, Marin, the Peninsula and Sonoma.

The idea for the project came from discussions with Judy Shulman, a nationally known author and consultant in the area of case methods in the world of general education and a member of the advisory committee of the Jewish Family Education Project from its inception. As our own thinking advanced about the potential power of cases in professional development settings, we realized that Judy would be the perfect consultant to guide our work because she knew the case-writing field and had become quite familiar with the field of family education.

Judy and the twelve case writers (two of whom were staff members) participated in a day and a half residential retreat together which was followed a month later by a one-day retreat in the city. Over the first day and a half we studied a case together⁴ that consisted of reading, analyzing and discussing the issues in the case itself. We followed this by putting our own learning experience with the case under a microscope to investigate what we had learned from the way we had learned. This gave us first-hand insight into a way of learning that was new to all of us, as it would be to the people who would study these cases with us.

We began writing our own cases right away—beginning with a fifteen-minute writing stretch after which we shared our writing with the group and were guided to think more sharply by the group’s questions. The remainder of the retreat included increasing amounts of time spent writing on our own followed by feedback sessions in pairs or triads. By noon of the second day we all had drafts of cases which we were committed to proceeding with. In the month that followed we each re-wrote and re-wrote and brought our almost finished product to a one-day in-city retreat. At that retreat we listened and polished and came to the completion of the writing process feeling we had a set of ten well-written and varied cases.

It’s important to note that the retreat accomplished more than the creation of this product. It proved to be an important professional development experience for all who were involved. We all developed a new way of examining our own work and often thereafter would say, “I see cases everywhere.” Or “It helped to ask myself, ‘what is this a case of?’ when I was stuck.” The writing of the cases was valuable for the professionals at the retreat even if the cases had never seen the light of day.

And then?

By the following year we had decided to use the cases as the core of the curriculum for the second year of Common Ground. Over the past three years, all of the cases have had at least one “test run” with family educators—at Common Ground, at the Whizin Institute’s summer intensive and in several other professional development settings across the country.

⁴As there were no cases in family education, we needed a case to “prime the pump,” and felt it would be better to develop a case in family education rather than using one of the cases about group-work or diversity issues that we had at hand. Vicky Kelman, director of the Jewish Family Education Project, working closely with Judy Shulman over several weeks, wrote this first case. It is one of the cases in the collection.

It was during that year that we commissioned the commentaries from family educators outside of our community. Again, this was at the suggestion of Judy Shulman, who had added commentaries to some of her case-study books. We saw this as a way of expanding and deepening the conversation by adding more voices to the discourse.

And now?

It is our hope that this set of commentaries, now in book form, can play a central role in the professional development of family educators. In cities and on campuses where professional development for family educators takes place, this book of cases can serve as a textbook. Individual family educators without a community to study with can learn a lot by working through the book on their own. We are excited to realize that what began as a professional development opportunity in our community is in a form that can be shared so it can play a national role in the development of our profession.

–Casebook Overview–

Only if we think well to discover what the actual problem is can we move towards a solution, says Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

...a problem well put is half solved. To find out what the problem and problems are which a problematic situation presents to be inquired into, is to be well along in inquiry. To mistake the problem involved is to cause subsequent inquiry to be irrelevant or to go astray.⁵

What is a case?

Our definition of case is: a verbal snapshot of a dilemma in practice written by the person who has experienced the dilemma.

Why cases are important

Because cases capture a slice of real life, they provide a powerful tool for professional development (in both pre-service and in-service settings). A case provides exposure to the texture of the day-to-life of the “practitioner” in a safe space, protected from the winds and storms of the real world of practice. It enables case-students to sharpen their ability to identify the problems that a problematic situation presents. Every case is a “case of” many things at once.

This collection of cases, all of which document dilemmas in family education, can play a role in the education of both experienced and novice family educators. These cases can be part of preparing a beginner to enter this complex field by providing a way to practice analyzing and solving problems and can also serve to deepen the work of someone already “doing” family education by exposing him/her to situations as yet unencountered as well as an opportunity to re-visit familiar situations and gain deepened understanding of them.

Cases have two main functions.

To teach: Cases are a way of passing on what Lee Shulman calls “the wisdom of practice.” They provide a way of learning from experience without having to experience everything firsthand.

To promote reflection: Those who write cases are encouraged to reflect on the dilemmas of teaching in order to tease out and clearly explicate a difficult situation in which they have been caught. For the reader of the case, it brings alive the complex dynamics of real teaching situations. The reader can experience the pulls of the situation and

⁵ Michael Rosenak (quoting John Dewey) in his article “From Strength to Strength” in *Courtyard*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1999/2000, page 69.

think through the multiple issues and crosscurrents in such a way that he/she can play out the various possible “solutions” or pathways out of the tangle.

The advantages of a case-based curriculum

Cases have long been a staple of business school and medical school curricula. They are newer to the field of education.

Case-based teaching can prepare novices for the complexities of practice or for deepening the understanding of a more experienced practitioner. Study of theory and principles provide a framework for thinking but “cases illustrate how complex teaching really is....because they tell vivid, moving stories, cases give life and staying power to concepts...Novices learn how to name problems, interpret complex situations and identify decision points and possible consequences.”

The commentaries

As a way of extending our learning from these cases, we asked leading practitioners of family education across the country to share their wisdom with us by becoming commentators on our cases. We asked twenty family educators to play Rashi⁶ and by doing so to enhance our understanding of the complexities of this field. Each case has a complement of two “Rashis”. These incisive and perceptive commentaries illuminate the issues and challenges of the practice of family education in way that expands and deepens the discussion of each of the cases.

These commentaries are very much the personal opinions of the writers and in no way constitute “the” take on a case. For this reason we feel it is crucial that reading of the commentaries follow the group exploration of the case. The educators who work with cases prefer to study them over two sessions, plumbing the issues presented in the case in a group setting before reading the commentaries. A second round of discussion can follow, based on the reading of the commentaries.

Although we began by devoting one session to each case, we quickly found that our groups have preferred devoting two sessions to a case, reading the commentaries between the two sessions. The discussion based on the commentaries adds interesting angles to the second go-round with the case.

Text study

A hallmark of *Common Ground: A Learning Conversation for Family Educators*, the seminar in which we first studied these cases, is that about a third of the three-hour session was devoted to Jewish text study. In the years in which we studied the cases (the second year of the two-year cycle, i.e., years two and four) we tried to select Jewish texts that were related to the case we were about to study. We selected important Jewish ideas that illuminated the case. For example, two texts (one Talmudic and one modern) about Shabbat preceded the discussion of a case in which an educator shares his/her conflict over

with a ⁶Rashi is a famous medieval commentator on the Bible whose commentaries are thought to be indispensable to the study of the Bible.

tutes quality *Erev Shabbat* programming for families. A text about *tochecha* complements a case in which a participant reprimands the group leader.

The inclusion of text in conjunction with each of the cases is a way of deepening the discussion and bringing the Jewish tradition to bear on some of the issues raised. Text study can be used in the following ways:

1. Before a case is discussed
2. In the middle (if a case is studied over more than one class session a text study can be used at the beginning of the second session)

The text studies we have developed come from a variety of traditional Jewish sources including the Tanach, Rabbinic literature, liturgy, and Hasidic tales. We tried to select texts that complemented at least one significant issue raised by the case. We did not choose these texts because we think they give “a Jewish answer” to the dilemma of the text but rather because they deepened participants’ Jewish knowledge and widened their angle of observation. Many of the texts also led to reflection on personal practice and personal experience.

All text studies presented here have a *hevruta* component. *Cheuruta* study is the traditional model of Jewish text study where students are paired (or placed in very small groups). The students are given the text (sometimes with an introduction by the teacher and sometimes without) and a set of study questions. Students read and study together as the teacher circulates among the pairs and pushes them to deepen their discussions.

In our model, *Hevruta* learning is guided by a set of questions, then followed by large group discussion. The latter allowed for some unstructured exchange about the texts and raised additional questions that were held in reserve in order to extend the discussion (rather than reiterate the *hevruta* discussions).

NOTE: *Hevruta* comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for “friend”—*haver*. The idea behind this type of study is sometimes expressed as follows: The Torah is compared to fire. To make fire spark, it takes two sticks rubbing up against each other (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 7a). *Hevrotot* (pl.) are the pair of learners and the two sticks. They are meant to combine people who enjoy studying together but who do not agree with each other all the time. The intimacy of the pair that studies together regularly is intense and gratifying and should be created with care. For this reason we have found it helpful to assign people to *hevrotot* at the beginning of the year and then after several sessions to let participants choose regular partners. It also works to have *hevrotot* that organize themselves each time. The learning relationship may not go as deep as a permanent *hevruta*, but this approach builds a web or relationships among participants.

–Facilitating A Case Discussion–

Excerpted from *Facilitator’s Guide to Groupwork in Diverse Classrooms: A Casebook for Educators*, edited by Judith H. Shulman, Rachel A. Lotan, Jennifer A. Whitcomb (NY: Teacher’s College Press, 1998).

Preparation and Process

Much can be learned just by reading cases. But a good facilitator can expedite that learning by prompting a group to examine the case’s issues in ways that readers by themselves might not. Far more than a lecture, case discussion enlivens content and helps participants internalize theory. Still, the idea of facilitating such discussion can be intimidating: when you don’t do all the talking, you relinquish authority and therefore can’t be entirely sure how the class is going to go.

This concern is heightened when the cases are problem focused—as all these cases are—and the authors are honest about the dilemmas they face in their [situations]...the surprises that occur, and the reflective questions they ask themselves about how they handled the situation. In the pilot test of [these case studies], teachers identified with authors as they struggled to cope with events. The stronger their identification with an author, the more vulnerable they often were during a case discussion because a criticism of the way the author handled a situation was considered a criticism of themselves....”

Preparing to Lead Discussion

Careful preparation is critical to leading case discussions successfully. You’ll need a thorough knowledge of the case as well as clear ideas about how best to use the... [annotated lesson plans] to guide the sessions.

Reading the case. To facilitate a discussion effectively, one cardinal rule applies: you must have a good grasp of the case and its nuances....The only way to develop deep familiarity is to read the case several times. The following suggestions will help guide your reading:

- As you begin, take note of your first impression. What excites you? What bothers you? With whom did you relate? Subsequent readings may change your answers to these questions, so it’s important to jot down your initial reactions to use as diagnostic tools. Initially they help you gauge your values and empathic response to the case. Later they may be key in helping you understand participants’ starting points in the discussion.
- Since each case has many layers of meaning, each reading yields more information and understanding. As you read, ask yourself “What is this a case of?” and

“What are the different ways to interpret this case?” Also note the descriptive words, key phrases, and dialogue used....

- The more perspectives you have on the case, the better equipped you’ll be to prompt broad-ranging discussion, thus reinforcing the idea that there is no one “right answer.” Try to keep group participation balanced. Should one person’s viewpoint tend to dominate, your suggestion of another lens to look through can draw out participants whose knowledge and experience make them identify with the case in an entirely different way.
- Look for pressure or stress points in the case—instances when [an educator]...is confronted by angry...[individuals], puzzled by a dilemma, or experiencing doubt or remorse about his actions. These events serve as teachable moments in the discussion....
- Look for subtle cues....In many of the cases, information about individuals’ perspectives is couched in subtle details. The group needs to look beneath the surface of what occurred. What might have happened if the...[family educator] had perceived the [individual] differently? What might the [case writer] have done, and how might the [individual] have responded?

Using the [annotated lesson plans]. [The annotated lesson plans] are resources designed to help you plan each case discussion....Though the teaching notes are structured to help you analyze specific issues and provide examples of probing questions, they are not designed to give you a particular pathway for moving a group through the case. Instead, they are meant to help you make your own plan for discussion, from which you can deviate as you ascertain the group’s direction with the discussion. Anticipating this, you can use the notes to identify stages of discussion and plan probing questions that enable participants to view the case through different lenses. Just as you customize case selection and sequence, you’ll want to tailor questions to suit the profile of your particular group or school.

Planning the physical space....We have found that a U-shaped arrangement with participants seated at tables on the outside of the U works best. This arrangement enables participants to maintain eye contact with one another during a discussion and allows the facilitator to move within the circle at will.... We also place either a board or an easel with chart paper at the head of the U for recording major points made during the discussion....

Providing adequate time. It takes time to peel away the surface layers of the cases and get to the underlying problems. If you allow two hours for case discussions, you should have adequate time to delve deeply into most of the cases. But what if you have only an hour to an hour and a half? This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to discuss any cases, but you will have to plan your time accordingly....[We always] distribute the case before the actual discussion and ask participants to read it carefully, jotting down questions and noting issues *before class*.