

## **Staying Present: Adult Mentors are Essential to Teens' Lives and to Effective Jewish Teen Engagement**

I was lucky.

When I was 13 and trying to figure out the world around me, I had a camp counselor who really “got” me. She taught Israeli dance, which I learned I loved. In a circle under the willow trees, she inspired me with a discussion about the United Farm Workers’ grape boycott and rabbinical teachings on living wages. And she helped my friends and me figure out how to handle our disagreements. This *madricha* was truly a guide along my way to womanhood.

Too few Jewish teens are as fortunate. After b’nai mitzvah, far more teens drop out of their Jewish communities than stay engaged. This missing majority deprives our communities of young people who could help sustain it into the future.

Even worse, by leaving during this most challenging and risky time of life – adolescence – Jewish teens miss out on being guided by the rich spiritual and ethical resources and the caring adults that Jewish communal life can provide them on their journeys to adulthood. The Jim Joseph Foundation report, [“Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens,”](#) does a service to Jewish teens and to those of us who care about them by focusing communal attention on a central question: how can we connect teens to Jewish life?

**To keep teens present in our lives, we adults need to stay present in theirs. We need trained educators who understand how to build relationships and how to deliver an experiential curriculum that explores, through a Jewish lens, the issues of central importance to teens.**

In working with more than 12,000 Jewish teens across the country, Moving Traditions has learned that qualified adult mentors are essential to engaging teens and helping them *experience* the benefits of Jewish peer communities.

As the Foundation’s report notes, and as the scholarly literature confirms, attentive and caring adults are key to the healthy development of teens. Our programs, *Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing!* and *Shevet Achim: The Brotherhood*, train professional and volunteer adult mentors to facilitate conversations of meaning in a safe space. Teens tell us in surveys and interviews that they find these peer communities deeply satisfying, and many groups continue past b’nai mitzvah and throughout high school.

We have found success in engaging teens in honest, gender-focused discussions about the issues that are highly relevant to them. Certainly there are other strategies to be implemented in teen engagement. But one common factor in any strategy is the trained adult educator who can cultivate relationships, facilitate meaningful and honest discussions and experiences, and connect the learning to Jewish identity and community.

We know that it is challenging to craft educational programs that appeal to teens, precisely because adolescence is itself such a challenge. Our convictions and our experience tell us that one way to effectively meet that challenge is by focusing on a key issue of adolescence: navigating society's narrow gender codes.

By doing this, we have developed a scalable teen program that demonstrates for teens the benefits of confronting their challenges and questions within the context of a strong peer Jewish community.

As teens move from childhood to young adulthood, they feel pressure to conform to gender expectations in every aspect of their lives: friendship, family, romance, sexuality, appearance, academic performance, and work. They navigate a multicultural, interfaith world not only as Jews, but specifically as "Jewish girls" and "Jewish guys."

At the same time, teens are deeply interested in wrestling with core questions about gender and identity. What does it mean to become a man or woman? To "act like" a man or woman? To define and pursue success? Work for a living? Care for children? Experience a safe, satisfying sexual life? Be connected to others as Jews? Make the world a better place?

Well-trained, self-aware adults can help guide teens in their collective explorations. A knowledgeable, skilled adult mentor can understand and connect genuinely with teens, creating spaces that allow meaningful conversation and community to flourish. This applies not only to Moving Traditions' core focus of gender, but also to a wide variety of issues teens seek to explore.

Regardless of the specific approach, authenticity is paramount. As noted by Sylvee Legge, one of the report's teen advisers, in her [contribution](#) to this series, "We don't like manipulation, and if we start to get annoyed with a situation, then forget about it. It's over!" Thus, when educators feel secure in who they are and what they can bring to the table – when they are present and authentic – they are able to instill confidence and build trust with teens.

Being present means raising questions, not simply giving answers. If teens sense an adult is looking for a "correct" answer, they'll tune out and drop out. It also means inviting teens to be critical thinkers while holding one's own snap judgments at bay, avoiding wholesale criticism of teens' music, dress, and manner of speech. It means learning to sit with complicated questions and to trust teens to participate actively in the questioning process.

In our model, adult mentors need to understand gender as variable and socially constructed. A male facilitator who values introspection, self-expression, and relational interaction, and who models respect for girls and women as an integral part of Jewish manhood, will have a powerful, positive impact on boys' learning and development. A female leader who enjoys girls' energy and values truth-telling above "being nice" will have a powerful, positive impact on girls' learning and development. And, for us, it is critical that adult mentors be welcoming and comfortable with boys' and girls' varying sexual and gender identities.

What does this example demonstrate for the broader community? Training and ongoing coaching is essential to prepare and support a successful mentor. And this should include training on how to consider core issues in teens' lives within a teen community, and in a Jewish context.

In connecting meaningfully with Jewish teenage boys and girls, we enact two of Judaism's most important imperatives: *talmud torah*, critical learning, and *rodef tzedek*, pursuing justice. The post bar and bat mitzvah years offer the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of teens and to help them come of age as men and women with strong Jewish identities.

If we train and support adult mentors to be meaningfully present in teens' lives, Jewish educators will be able to inspire teens to create their own future Jewish communities. They'll become the "lucky ones," and all of us, the entire Jewish community, will be fortunate indeed.

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