

Jewish Routines for Children: Creating Positive Educational Experiences for Your Family

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Routines are essential building blocks of life. Parenting books, pediatricians, and early childhood experts will tell you that routines provide young children with a measure of predictability that is necessary and comforting. They give children a sense of safety in an unsafe world.

Routines and rituals are emotional regulators, guides to positive behavior and safety and social development, transition-helpers for children and parents, a way to decrease conflict, and perhaps most importantly, a basis for learning. Parents who establish routines and incorporate rituals into their children's lives are providing them with an invaluable foundation and tools for living a full, rich life.

From the earliest days of a child's life, parents and other caregivers can incorporate Judaism into routines and family rituals. There are some routines to which you can add a Jewish spin and other routines that are wholly Jewish. The patterns families establish for their children now will have a lasting impression on their children as they grow and develop.

Music, Television, and Books

Consider the CDs you are playing in the car or at home for your children. Why not make at least some of your musical selections Jewish? Debbie Friedman, Craig Taubman, and Judy Caplan Ginsburgh are just three of the many contemporary Jewish musicians who have Jewish children's music CDs. Many parents use soothing music as part of the bedtime routine. How about Jewish lullabies?

Children's television viewing evokes strong feelings and a wide-range of opinions, but within limits and with parental supervision, television can be an educational tool. "Shalom Sesame" is the Jewish version of "Sesame Street" and provides your children with the same format as "Sesame Street," in a Jewish context. "Oy Baby" is a series of DVDs and CDs combining Jewish music with puppets and pictures for children. Set aside a special time when you and your children can watch Jewish-themed DVDs such as these together. As you are preparing for Shabbat or a Jewish holiday you can use the DVD or CD to help get the children "in the mood" and to set the tone for the upcoming celebration.

There are many wonderful children's books with Jewish themes. Some are based on biblical stories and rabbinic tales. Others focus on a specific Jewish holiday or offer a Jewish twist on an everyday theme. For ideas, check out The PJ Library, The Association of Jewish Libraries, and Jewish publishers such as Kar-Ben, Jewish Lights, Jewish Publication Society, and Union for Reform Judaism Press.

Morningtime & Bedtime

You can incorporate Jewish-themed songs, music, and books into your child's morning and nighttime routines quite easily. Consider incorporating traditional Jewish prayers that are recited upon waking and going to bed as well. The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) has downloadable informational pamphlets on morning and bedtime rituals for children available on its website. Most Jewish prayer books will contain these prayers, too.

Another bedtime ritual can be blessing your children. My children cannot go to sleep without our sharing the traditional "Birkat Kohanim" prayer. Until I've "blessed" them, our bedtime ritual is incomplete.

Mealtime

Just as there are traditional blessings and rituals associated with waking and sleeping, there are many Jewish traditions surrounding food (and we know that food is a big part of a child's life). Expose your children to "traditional" Jewish foods or foods that were traditional on Shabbat and other Jewish holidays in your house growing up. Don't just serve these foods to children--encourage them to assist in the preparations. This is a great way to get grandparents and other older relatives involved. Have the children help Bubbe make latkes for Hanukkah or hamantaschen for Purim. Make matzo balls and chicken soup together for Shabbat or Passover. Consider reciting blessings before and/or after eating. Also consider the Jewish dietary laws. While some Jews keep kosher as part of their traditional observance of Judaism, others who are less traditionally observant feel that observing kashrut reminds them of their relationship with God and the chosenness of the Jewish people. With a wide variety of kosher food available in supermarkets and specialty stores today, keeping kosher can feel much less restrictive than you might expect.

Shabbat

The Jewish calendar provides many wonderful opportunities to create Jewish routines for your family. Every week we are given the gift of Shabbat. As any modern parent will tell you, each day is filled to the brim with activities, errands, birthday parties, play dates, sports leagues, and lessons. How fortunate we are as Jews to have 25 hours set aside each week to step back from the hustle and bustle and enjoy some much-needed downtime. Recent studies on child development show that children need more opportunities for unstructured time--the Jewish people have known this for thousands of years.

Celebrate in a way that is comfortable for your family. In some families it's the one time of the week that everyone makes the effort to be home to eat dinner together. Others go to the grandparents' home every Friday evening or make time to be with friends. Still others may opt for more traditional Shabbat observance, including lighting candles, synagogue attendance and other rituals. What's most important is setting aside this time for family.

Consider incorporating traditional Shabbat rituals into your observance at a pace that feels right for you. Perhaps you will start by lighting candles together, and saying kiddush and motzi every Shabbat. Many parents bless their children on Friday nights. Why not add a special, modern twist with your own special blessing for each child?

And how about going to synagogue? Chances are a synagogue near you has special family services, learners' minyans, tot Shabbats or a junior congregation. These services are tailored to young families and can make synagogue feel more warm and welcoming. Your children will look forward to Friday night or Saturday morning services when they know they get to wear their special Shabbat clothes and participate in their special services.

Holidays

The Jewish holidays provide other wonderful opportunities for establishing meaningful and memorable routines. Go apple-picking for Rosh Hashana. Decorate and eat in a sukkah for Sukkot. These days you can buy a pre-fabricated sukkah from websites like www.sukkah.org. Dance with the Torah on Simhat Torah, and consider buying your child his/her own plush, stuffed Torah for this holiday and for bringing to synagogue on Shabbat. Light candles and spin dreidels on Hanukkah. Plant trees or flowers on Tu Bishvat. Dress up on Purim, and shake the grogger and boo every time you hear the name Haman read in the megillah. Get together with family and friends for the Passover seder, and teach your children the four questions. On Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day, consider ways your family can support Israel, from attending a community-wide Israel fair to purchasing Israeli products. Study some Torah on Shavuot.

Shabbat and Jewish holidays provide an opportunity to create routines--in the form of customs, traditions, rituals--that your children and your entire family will look forward to each week and every year. The details are not as important as the acknowledgement of these Jewish holidays as special times for your family. Do not feel that it has to be "all or nothing" in terms of your observance--do as little or as much as feels comfortable and be open to modifying your routines as the ages and stages of your family dictate.

Be a Jewish Role Model

Whether it is making the mundane sacred, or incorporating the sacred into your family's routines, there are a variety of ways to develop Jewish routines for your children and your family. It is as important for parents to model the rituals and routines as it is to encourage them in your children. As your children's first and most important role models, you need to "practice what you preach" to your children for them to truly absorb the values and traditions you are trying to instill in them through the practice of Jewish rituals and establishment of Jewish-themed routines. Before you know it, your children will be making Jewish memories that will last a lifetime.