



WELCOMING ALL FAMILIES

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I REGULARLY MAKE PEOPLE CRY. I would say it's a perk of the job.

I know it sounds odd, but let me explain: They're tears of joy, coming from parents who find themselves overwhelmed by unexpected evidence that they and their family are welcome, wanted, and included as involved members of a community.

There are families in every Jewish community who feel they experience the Jewish community from the margins. These include interfaith families, multicultural

families, LGBTQ families, or families with members who have special needs.

In some cases, these families have tried to participate in formal Jewish programs and found them to be less than welcoming, either unintentionally or by design. Some never bothered to try for fear of being rebuffed. However, if we want a strong, vibrant, growing Jewish community, we must take steps to be explicitly and fully welcoming to all. At the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, we're doing just that.

WELCOMING...

FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A typical Purim celebration can be overwhelming for some children, especially those on the autism spectrum or with sensory sensitivities. At Sensory-Friendly Purim, we adapted the *megillah* reading by making signs instead of noisemakers; having a slide show that offered visual cues to when Haman's name would be said; having a quiet area for children to retreat but still participate; and writing a social story to help parents prepare their child. In addition, we had an ASL interpreter to aid our deaf parents. One parent shared that Sensory-Friendly Purim was one of the best inclusion events she ever attended.

LGBTQ FAMILIES

LGBTQ families want to connect with other families like theirs, so we co-sponsor smaller social events like Paint with PJ Library where families can paint Hanukkah items at a pottery studio. LGBTQ families also want to be part of mainstream Jewish life. In response, we co-sponsor programs like drag queen story times that appeal to the broader community and feature stories about being yourself and respecting others. We also try to feature same-sex couples in the images we use in our educational materials.

MULTICULTURAL FAMILIES

Using PJ Library books that feature multicultural families is another way to be explicitly welcoming. We planned multiple programs around the new PJ Library book *Queen of the Hanukkah Dosas* by Pamela Ehrenberg. This story about a Jewish and Indian family celebrating Hanukkah resonated with many local families who said it reflected their experience. Developing programs that emphasize the similarities between these two cultures sends a strong message to our multicultural families and creates a learning opportunity for all families.

INTERFAITH FAMILIES

For interfaith families, navigating competing holidays and traditions can be tricky. To help, we offer a series of "City Jews Pop-Up" programs that are designed with interfaith families in mind. Programs include a Havdalah with a planetarium show; Shabbat dinners in underserved neighborhoods; and "Make Room for Matzah" and "Make Room for Latkes," which offer ideas for families new to celebrating Passover and Hanukkah. In addition, we hold workshops and go on local morning television to talk to parents and help them navigate what we dub "The December Opportunity."

We use language in all communications to let our community know that our programs are open to all: "The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington welcomes the participation of interfaith couples and families, and people of all abilities, backgrounds, and sexual orientations." Beyond the fine print are event descriptions that are inclusive (e.g., "this is a perfect program for Jewish and interfaith families...") and marketing images that show diversity.

For families who might feel marginalized for multiple reasons, the work we are doing resonates and reaffirms their desire to be part of the Jewish community.

"It is very progressive of our Jewish community to make a home for all children in celebrations. My husband is Catholic, and we have chosen to raise our new daughter Jewish. She is very new, but we are already seeing signs of sensory concerns. [Your email] confirmed for me that we made the right choice as it is evident that the Jewish faith and community are inclusive and welcoming to all who want to participate... Thank you so much for the work that you do; it means a lot to families."

Families each have their own unique story, but we can make educated guesses as to their needs. And when they say, "*Hineni*" (I am here), they need to hear our Jewish community respond, "I see you; I hear you; I'm glad you're here."

SARAH RABIN SPIRA works for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and is the parent of two PJ Library subscribers, Henry and Elana.
