

# The goal: strengthening Jewish education

The Centre for Enhancement of Jewish Education in the Jewish Federation has a new strategic program to foster the community's education, formal and informal, placing more weight on the opinions of parents and students

**Jonathan Dahoah-Halevi**

The Jewish educational board in Toronto has changed in past months. The Board of Jewish Education, which was established in 1949, became, in July of this year, the Centre for Enhancement of Jewish Education. The name change was not a simple matter of semantics. It came in the wake of a thorough study prepared with the blessings of the Jewish Federation, and marks a change in direction, in the spirit of modern education and pluralism.

The Merkaz' main tasks are to enhance the quality, quantity and accessibility of Jewish education by placing primary attention on parents and children, increase tuition subsidies to low-income families and explore new education financing solutions for middle-income earners, monitor the quality of all Merkaz-affiliated day schools, supplementary programs and informal education settings, find practical solutions to make a Jewish education more accessible to all families, focus on strategic educational planning for the community, provide professional development opportunities, training, workshops and consultation services for educators and provide services for the community in the area of special education. When the BJE was founded it provided services for 21 day and supplementary schools. Today, the Merkaz serves more than 70 day schools and supplementary programs, 1,700 educators and 17,000 students in the Greater Toronto Area. The Merkaz is headed by Lou

Greenbaum; Sheldon Goodman is the vice-chair. Two weeks ago a meeting has held to introduce Yael Seliger, vice-president of the Merkaz and Dr. Seymour Epstein, senior vice-president.

In an interview with Shalom Toronto, Dr. Epstein noted that the change in purpose would enable the Merkaz to be better at promoting both formal and informal Jewish education. The annual budget is \$12 million, of which \$7 million is allocated for scholarships to children from low-income families. According to Dr. Epstein, financial support for Jewish education is the largest in all North America. The Merkaz supports Jewish educational institutions in other ways, including training principles, homeroom teachers and subject teachers, carrying out projects in special education, public relations and promoting contacts between the schools and the Jewish community, keeping the communication lines open with the ministry of education and universities, etc. There is a Jewish Agency delegate for matters of education, and the Merkaz helps arrange for teachers from Israel who have come to teach in Toronto.

Special education activities, Yael Seliger told Shalom Toronto, have been a success. They began slowly, with providing teachers with incentives to take special education training courses, making it possible for the schools to respond to students having academic problems. Cooperation with principals is based on mutual respect and honoring the autonomy of

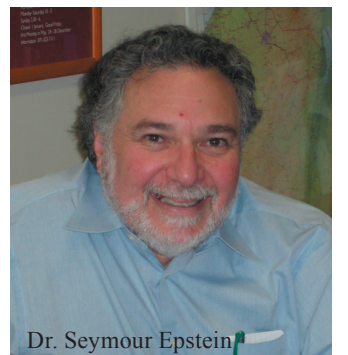
each school. The approach based on teacher training proved itself and gave principals additional educational tools without making them feel coerced.

Dozens of schools and other educational institutions in the Toronto area are affiliated with the Merkaz. When an educational institution asks for affiliation the Merkaz examines whether it is run according to democratic rules, checks its finances, its identification with community values, its connection with Israel, the quality of the education it provides and its curriculum. The tendency is to take the best institutions under the Merkaz' wing, although there are those who do not wish to join (especially from the ultra-Orthodox sector) and one institution was ousted when it was found it did not comply with the conditions. Yael Seliger notes that the Merkaz encourages independent educational frameworks in the community, and that a helping hand will be extended the first steps are taken.

The Merkaz hosts a variety of programs for students from the Jewish schools in Toronto, especially the Zimria, the Rikudia and the Bible Quiz. Seventeen glee clubs and 550 students participated in the annual Zimria on February 4, 2007 at Toronto Centre For The



Yael Seliger



Dr. Seymour Epstein

Arts. This year's theme was "Together." The audience watched a video of Israeli students from the Almog school in Eilat, Toronto's twin city. The 37th Rikudia was held on May 6, 2007, in the Tait McKenzie Hall at York University. More than 250 students from 15 schools participated with friends and family. This past year there was a project called "From Generation to Generation" in which 2nd grade pupils danced with their parents. The project lasted a year. The audience watched performances by the Chai and Nirkoda groups. For the Bible Quiz, three students (including from CHAT) were chosen to represent the Canadian Jewish community at the International Bible Quiz held in Israel on Independence Day. In addition, the Merkaz encourages activities such as creative writing contests, chess tournaments and events in support of the community (packing products for Passover, a charity project, etc.)

## Welcome to School

### Getting ready for changes as your child goes into the first grade

**Gadi Rosen**

**Advice and tips for parents on how to get their children ready for the first days of school, whether they are going into the first grade or changing schools or kindergartens**

Starting first grade is always exciting and emotional for both parents and children. Graduating from kindergarten and entering grade school is one of the most significant moments in a child's life. It means leaving the warmth and security of the kindergarten and entering the demanding, sometimes inflexible world of "the big children." There are many differences between kindergarten and school: in kindergarten the emphasis is on interper-

sonal learning and expression, on behavior, cooperation and mutual aid; at school, most of the emphasis is on studies and personal academic achievement. Kindergartens are usually small and intimate, and their agendas are flexible, while schools are large and many children of different ages are thrown together, the school day is marked by bells and there are many fairly inflexible demands: punctuality is demanded, the school uniform must be worn, homework must be done, the pupil's desk must be neat, etc. And while the parents picked the kindergarten and the kindergarten teacher, they have almost no choice when it comes to the school they send their children to.

It is only natural for parents to feel apprehensive and under pressure as the school year approaches. For some, it brings back unhappy memories of their own school days: failures, anger and disappointments. Sometimes they have had bad experiences with their older children, who had problems with punctuality or homework or exams. There are parents who are afraid their children will fail because they weren't properly prepared for school. In many instances parents are afraid of something new or unknown.

Many parents secretly ask themselves if their child is mature enough, if he will be accepted by the other children and will be able to adapt himself to the rigid rules and boundaries, to the high demands of the tasks which will be set before him. Many children secretly ask themselves the same questions, and their insecurities multiply when they sense their parents are worried or are uncertain of their ability to cope successfully with the change. Older siblings often contribute negatively from their own experience: "School is boring, you'll wish you were back in kindergarten," making things worse.

What can be said or done to avoid all of the above, to support your child, reinforce his self confidence and make it easier for him to cope with the changes involved in starting school? The most important thing is to help your child feel he belongs, that he is accepted. That is done by reinforcing his sense of social acceptance. The more the child feels he belongs, is loved and wanted by the children in his class and the better his relations with them are, the greater his chances of successfully finding

his place in class.

What can parents do to help their child adapt to changes?

You can strengthen your child's relations with his classmates by having him meet them, if he is willing. He can meet them and get to know them before school begins and even during the school year. Generally speaking, there are children from his kindergarten in his first grade class and it is a good idea to strengthen relations between them so that he has friends and feels comfortable in his new environment. You shouldn't choose his friends for him, but discuss it with him and find out who he wants to play with.

Visiting the school beforehand will make his first days easier. It will make the place seem less alien and threatening if he walks around and plays in the school yard, knows the way to school, sees his future classroom and knows where the bathroom is and where his parents will be waiting for him when school is over for the day. If he has an older sibling at the same school, he can be shown his or her classroom as well.

Talk to your child about the change and most important, listen to him, let him express his fears and ask questions that will legitimize everything he may be feeling: fear and apprehension, joy, excitement, confusion, etc. Listening to him and finding out what he feels will enable you to respond, calm him down if need be and thus reduce his insecurity.

Present the school in a positive light, not as cold, rigid and threatening, but as a place where he will learn a lot of new, important things, meet lots of new friends and go on



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field trips to all kinds of interesting places. However, unrealistic expectations should not be fostered.

Encourage your child and express your confidence in him. When speaking to him about school, stress his talents and ability to cope with a new environment, to succeed in his studies and make new friends. Don't try to lead his social life for him or do his schoolwork instead of him, but allow him to develop and practice the social and academic skills which will enable him to succeed.

Assure him that pass or fail, you will always love and support him. Give your child the feeling that you are always on his side and that he can always count on you, that you will not judge or criticize him, but accept him and support him and that he will never be alone if he is in difficulty, and always keep that promise.

Be aware of what is happening to him, especially during the first days of school, but afterwards as well. Remember that the language he uses may not always be verbal, and that his behavior can often express his true emotional state.

Help your child with his studies when necessary, either by yourself or with a tutor. If he is having problems with his studies or with the children in his class, don't let him remain disappointed or frustrated, but help him cope and get over them. If there are signs that he

is having academic or social difficulties, consult his homeroom teacher or the guidance counselor.

Trust the educational system, especially the homeroom teacher. Parents have to trust the school, it employs many adults whose job it is to help, support and watch over your child. It is important for you as parents to feel you are sending your child to a safe place, and not to have him pick up on your fears and learn that there is a good reason for the little voice inside him telling him there is something to be afraid of.

Don't pressure your child or have too many expectations. Don't let him feel he has to be the best student in class, and as successful as his sister because he belongs to a family of winners. Let him go to school from a place which is calm and secure. Don't turn the last days of summer vacation into a marathon of preparing him for the first grade and push him ahead by teaching him everything he is going to learn to make school easier for him. Show interest and listen, but don't interrogate your child when he comes home from school, despite the fact that you want to know how his day was. You have no way of knowing whether or not he will tell you, and you have to learn to live with what he is willing to share, and that is connected to the communication lines within the family. When the child remains silent to see whether the parent is critical or

judgmental, perhaps intra-family communication and cooperation should be improved.

Don't be judgmental and don't evaluate your child according to the grades he receives. It is only natural for parents to expect their child to make an effort and take responsibility for what he learns, but it doesn't always turn out the way parents want and it is extremely important for the child to know that his parents love him unconditionally and that there is no relation between their love and his success at school.

Give the school relevant information about him. It is important for his teachers to know to be able to help him and make his daily experience easier. Tell the school about the difficulties that arise at home, divorce, moving to a new home, a sickness or death in the family, or if he is being treated for something. Hiding information to keep the child from being stigmatized is not a wise course. Telling his teacher can explain difficulties or behavioral problems he may be having, and she can help him cope successfully.

Saying goodbye to your child in the morning is very important. It should be short and sweet, and if it is hard for him to go (or hard for you to let him go), ask his teacher for help, even physical help. It is not wise to hide behind the bushes under the classroom window to listen to what is going on inside. Remember, you have not left your child in a

dangerous place, and in a few hours he will be home again. If parting is hard, it is important not to be embarrassed by the child and as a result to hurt his feelings or insult him, which will be as hard or harder for him. Be with him, encourage him to believe he is big now and can say goodbye. If the situation is extreme, it is worthwhile to speak to the guidance counselor.

In conclusion, the role of parents in the passage from kindergarten to first grade is like that in other processes of passage, change and adaptation. They have to accompany the child and be there for him, involved but not interfering, watching from the side. It is important for the parents themselves to keep in contact with the school to know what is going on with the child and to defuse his fears. The child should be allowed to cope with difficulties and overcome them alone, and parents should interfere only when necessary and with sensitivity and insight. Parents must enable their child to cope with change, to be self-reliant and trust his ability to find creative solutions for his problems to cope with difficulties and achieve his goals as an independent, confident person.

Wishing parents and children a successful, productive school year  
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# Going back to school healthy

Experts explain how to diagnose undetected crossed eyes, when a child should have his hearing and vision tested, when he should be gotten used to going to sleep on time again, and more

## Galit Yitzhak

The new school year is right around the corner. Summer camp is over, no more sleeping all day, and only a few days are left to stay up till the middle of the night with friends.

Before they go back to school, here are some tips for parents from health experts.

### Diagnosing undetected crossed eyes

A significant percentage of attention and concentration disturbances in children are caused by problems related to vision, such as undetected crossed eyes. To that end, children between six months and six years of age should be tested.

Dr. Ami Hirsch, head of a chain of vision clinics, had the following to say: Normally, both eyes function in a symmetric, synergetic fashion, as do the muscles which control them and the angle of vision. When the eyes are crossed, even if undetected, there is a minute difference in the angle which is invisible to the naked eye.

Dr. Hirsch suggests a number of situations which might identify that a problem exists: The child's eyes are momentarily crossed, or one eye turns in another direction for an instant.

The child customarily closes one eye, which indicates that binocular vision is not synchronized and he sees double for an instant.

The child tends to approach objects to see them better and cannot perform tasks which require simple coordination, such as drawing, lifting, etc.

When it is a question of a school child, a number of problems should be noted:

The child skips lines or words while reading. The child cannot draw all the legs of a triangle, square or other geometric figure.

The child's handwriting is unclear, and he writes above or below the line.

Dr. Hirsch notes that the earlier the diagnosis is made the better, otherwise the child may develop a "lazy eye."

### Hearing and vision tests

Dr. Adi Klein, head of pediatrics at Hillel Yaffe Hospital in Hadera, notes that there is a close relationship between academic achievement and good sight and hearing. Therefore, she recommends periodical vision and hearing tests.

Dr. Klein suggests that parents do the following:

Note if the child complains of headaches at the end of the school day.

Check whether difficulties with certain tasks at school might indicate problems with his vision.

Make sure the child sits far enough away from the TV, since sitting too close can cause problems with vision.

According to Dr. Klein, hearing problems are almost always discovered by the time school starts, but there are kindergarten children who suffer from repeated ear infections which entail a chronic buildup of fluids in the middle ear, and they can, in time, result in impaired hearing.

How can impaired hearing be detected?

Impaired hearing is often indicated by a speech impediment, loud voice, unclear speech, and turning the volume of the TV up high. Such children can easily be tested using a non-invasive process which will show if medical intervention is necessary.

### Sleep

Summer vacation changes the sleeping habits of most children and they gradually have to be changed back. Dr. Klein notes that children need seven hours of sleep, and that during the last week of the vacation children should start going to sleep at regular hours to prevent difficulties in getting up



when school starts.

Dr. Klein says that sleep has been medically proved to be important in the removal of substances which influence brain function and concentration. Various studies have shown that a chronic loss of sleep is the neurological equivalent of four doses of alcohol. In addition, it is known that growth hormones are excreted into the blood during sleep.

Headaches and stomach aches

Complaints of headaches and stomach aches are often heard at the beginning of the school year, and can be divided into two categories:

One is purely physical pains. They will also appear at night and can be gotten rid of through a change of diet so as not to influence the child's behavior during the day.

The other appear in the morning and afternoon, when the child is in the company of friends and family. They can school-induced and result from excitement or anxiety caused by the changes in the child's life.

According to Dr. Klein, "such things may also be the symptoms of serious problems, and the advice of a health professional should be sought."

### Hyperactivity

One of the issues that worries parents is the diagnosis

and treatment of hyperactive children. The last year of kindergarten and the first few grades are the years when Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, often mistakenly called "hyperactivity") can become apparent. ADHS is a neurological syndrome which must be diagnosed exactly.

The diagnosis is made after a questionnaire has been filled out by an educator (teacher or kindergarten teacher) and the child's parents, and according to the results of a neurological examination.

Today there are also very exact, computerized diagnoses. Only children who have been professionally diagnosed receive medication to improve their academic achievements.

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