

January 4, 2021

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CC: Brian Jaffee, Executive Director, The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati; Eric Dauer, Director of Operations, The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati

From: The Rosov Consulting Team

Subject: First Round Focus Groups: Interfaith, Families with Kids 0-5, Young Adults

Introduction

As part of the 2021 Strategic Visioning and Evaluation Process being undertaken by The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati, Rosov Consulting was asked to conduct 3–4 focus groups with several demographics of particular interest to the Foundation to learn more about their current engagement with community in general and Jewish life in specific; what kinds of opportunities and experiences they might be looking for in the Cincinnati Jewish community; and what their barriers to further participation might be.

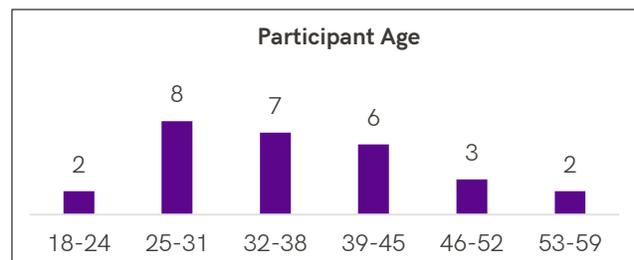
We conducted four focus groups between November 17, 2020 and November 23, 2020, with a total of 28 participants. The groups included one for interfaith families with children 5 and under (n = 7), one for interfaith families with older children (n = 6), one for families with children 5 and under (not specifically interfaith, n = 7), and one for young adults (n = 8). Each group lasted approximately 90 minutes, and all participants received an Amazon gift card for \$65 as incentive to participate.

Demographics

Based on information collected from our short screening survey, we categorized participants' engagement level with organized Jewish life in Cincinnati as low (attend 0–2 Jewish events/year), medium (attend Jewish events sometimes, but less than monthly), or high (attend Jewish events monthly or more often). The focus groups skewed toward those with low engagement, with the remaining participants evenly split between medium and high levels of engagement. The interfaith families generally were on the lower end of engagement levels, while the young adults and families with kids 0–5 were fairly evenly spread across the three levels.

Engagement Level	
High	7
Medium	8
Low	13

Gender Pronouns	
She/her	19
He/him	7
They/them	2



Geography

Focus group participants came from the following areas of Cincinnati and the surrounding region: Blue Ash, Clifton, College Hill, Delhi, Downtown, Hamilton Township, Hyde Park, Loveland, Madeira, Madisonville, Mason, Montgomery, Northern Kentucky, Northside, Oakley, Okeana, Sharonville, West Chester, Westwood, and Wyoming.

Families with young children reported living in the following areas: Blue Ash, Clifton, College Hill, Hyde Park, Madeira, Madisonville, Mason, Montgomery, Sharonville, and Wyoming.

Findings

Current Concerns

At the top of people's minds is mostly COVID-19. Parents are worried about what to do with their children and how their children will stay healthy and socialized even as the parents work their jobs—especially as the weather turns cold. Some are also worried about the health and financial situations of extended family members.

Participants in the young adult group were also worried about COVID-19 but are in the throes of the kinds of life changes and decisions that make that period of time so intense—finishing grad school, trying to start a career, getting married, buying houses, starting a family—all while friends move in and out of town. Some of the least connected people were those who moved away for college and came back no longer connected to the people and places they used to be. It is difficult for people to talk about how they prioritize their lives during this period of time, as so many old avenues are closed and new worries have moved in. Family and work were primary concerns, but all is unfolding in the context of the challenges of COVID-19. Many of the things that people talked about missing were gone because of COVID-19, and many of the things they expressed wanting were for once the pandemic was over.

Both parents and young adults without children expressed concern about mental health; parents primarily expressed concern over the mental health of their children, but one or two also mentioned the difficulty of finding space to attend to their own wellbeing while working and caring for others. A few people expressed more widespread concern about the emotional wellbeing of people in general during this difficult time.

Family Life

Values

Many parents who discussed the values they want to raise their children with did not explicitly mention Jewish values; a large number said that the most important thing to them is that their kids are good people—this was particularly true of parents in the two interfaith groups. Some, however, did mention Jewish values either directly or indirectly; participants seemed to value concepts like repairing the world, which also resonates with comments by a few interfaith participants about the social justice aspects of Jewish values

being particularly attractive to them and their non-Jewish partners. Families with two Jewish parents did not speak as directly about values overall, but all mentioned they were intentionally raising their children Jewish.

“To me it’s more about making good choices and being good to yourself and others, having good values but not necessarily assigning a particular name to it.” —Interfaith families with teens

“I’m not that religious, but I do value the foundation, the values that inform the Jewish religion, never stopping, making things better, repairing the world, hospitality, taking care of everyone.”
—Interfaith families with kids 0–5

Several parents in interfaith households also mentioned being interested in exploring Jewish values more in an environment that is not heavily religious. This resonates with other comments from the focus groups that suggest that among less-engaged Jews there is a perception that Jewish engagement (communal or personal) and, for some, even identity must be wrapped in religious practice. Parents wonder how/where they might engage more deeply with their children around Jewish values without feeling either inauthentic or pressured to do more.

“We just kind of want to explore instilling the values first. It’d be nice to have a group or somewhere we could go where there’s no pressure, but you can have the Jewish experience.” —Interfaith families with kids 0–5

Jewish Education

Only two of the parents (one from an all-Jewish family, one from an interfaith family) over three focus groups reported sending their children to day school—both families attend Rockwern, and both are extremely happy with the experience they are having there. One other parent expressed a desire to send her children to Rockwern but could not see how they could afford it, particularly for four children. A few other families with children in preschool were sending their children to Jewish preschools but likely planned to choose public school once their children began kindergarten. The majority of parents either planned to or already were sending their children to public school, but also either planned to or already were incorporating Sunday school and/or Hebrew school, including interfaith families. A number of parents also mentioned PJ Library as a source of Jewish learning for their kids. One parent who had discontinued Hebrew school during the pandemic was providing that instruction herself, and a few of the parents with very young children also felt that at the current time they could provide the level of Jewish learning appropriate for their kids. It appears that among these participants, Jewish education is important, but not central.

“Jewish education is important, but we didn’t want it to be all consuming, all Jewish all the time, so pursuing a Jewish day school wasn’t the right avenue. They are in Jewish preschool now, but as they get older ... I was in Hebrew school and I went through 12 years or whatever of Sunday school, so they’ll get it in that way.” —Families with kids 0–5

As parents discussed their feelings about Jewish education, particularly considering day school, the most common tension to emerge was between having their children steeped in a Jewish environment (which may be particularly important in a city like Cincinnati where many Jews expressed feeling surrounded mostly by

non-Jews and worrying about the impacts of that on their children) and having their children exposed to more diversity than they expected to find in Jewish schools. One parent commented on wanting the Jewish community to be more reflective of diversity.

“One thing I’ll say is that because the community here is smallish, I feel I have to be more intentional or active with getting them a Jewish education, because it’s not part of school curriculum, they don’t have a lot of Jewish friends, so it’s less embedded in culture than it was for me growing up in New York.”

—Interfaith families with kids 0–5

“One of my concerns about raising a family here is that being a part of the Jewish community is really important to us, and raising our family in a Jewish home, but also exposing our family to diversity, where to send her to school knowing we want her to be part of the Jewish community, but also exposed to diversity and wanting the Jewish community to be reflective of that.” —Families with kids 0–5

Support

Parents mention getting support primarily from extended family and from institutions, especially schools. Two parents mentioned getting support from their synagogues in the form of quality programming for young children, but more participants were not affiliated with a synagogue. Family and friends seem to provide the most support, with friend circles providing more moral support and family providing more material support (e.g., childcare). These support systems have been seriously challenged during COVID-19, however, as have some of the institutional support systems, leaving parents scrambling for both childcare and connection. The majority of participants had family on at least one side nearby, though COVID-19 has interfered with the support systems offered by family. On the other hand, those who did not have any family nearby expressed feeling some precarity around that isolation.

“We rely on our school a lot—they’re all in private school, and we communicate with the family a lot, if we see a problem we talk it through [with] the family.” —Interfaith families with kids 0–5

Several parents mentioned currently wanting or wanting to have had more support in the early months after the birth of a new child. While a few who were connected to Jewish institutions like schools or synagogues mentioned having meal trains brought to them after a birth, others mentioned how isolating the first several months were and wanting to feel connected to others who had had babies more recently than their own parents to ask questions of and get support from.

“One of my friends from high school is having her first child, and it’s nice to be the person with a 5-year-old to help her. You need people with young kids. I had PPD for a long time, it went undiagnosed and it would have been nice to have a community of women in a helpful environment to be a support. That would be huge.” —Interfaith families with kids 0–5

Interfaith Families

We had 14 interfaith families represented among participants over three focus groups—there were no non-Jewish partners in any of the groups. Of these 14 families, two were raising their children Catholic, one has a 2-year old and has not completely decided what the religious environment of their home will look like, and the rest are raising their children Jewish, albeit with different levels of religious engagement. The vast

majority of non-Jewish partners are supportive of raising the children Jewish and participate in that aspect of family life to varying degrees. Almost all interfaith families report celebrating both Jewish and Christian holidays in their home, including those raising their children Catholic—although several mentioned celebrating “secular Christmas,” and one or two say they only celebrate Christmas at the homes of their Christian relatives, but not in their own home. Several members of interfaith families mentioned being from interfaith families themselves and gave the impression that aspects of interfaith life like celebrating holidays from multiple traditions or having a doubly officiated wedding are normalized in their experiences.

“I’d say almost exactly the same thing, agnostic husband raised Catholic. Ironically, we sent our kids to Catholic Montessori school. I mostly just want them to have an understanding of spirituality, but they identify as Jewish, they go to temple with my parents, we do secular Christmas, but definitely do the Jewish traditions, because that’s what I know. ... I identify as Jewish, cling to that and want my children to have that, and they do...” —Interfaith families with teens

“In our situation, being Jewish and raising our kids Jewish was much more important to me than the idea of raising kids Catholic. He just wanted to raise kind kids. He’s been all in in terms of keeping Jewish traditions and raising them Jewish. He makes matzo balls and latkes, so he’s pretty all in, and that’s been great. We celebrate Christmas with his family, but not this year because of the pandemic...”

—Interfaith families with kids 0–5

Role of and Participation in Community Life More Broadly

Discussions of participation in community life nine months into COVID-19 were a bit abstract since people have been pretty hunkered down for a very long time. While one or two of the young adults mentioned connecting to the Jewish community during COVID-19 more than previously through numerous Zoom activities, most participants were experiencing less communal participation in general—especially parents, who were preoccupied with balancing work and childcare/socialization. Additionally, participants arrived at the focus groups primed to discuss Jewish community specifically and tended to veer directly into comments about Jewish community when the topic of community engagement arose.

With these caveats in mind, reflections on participation in community among these participants revolve most heavily around family (including extended family), friend circles (particularly for young adults and young families), and the activities of older children (sports, in particular).

“Growing up in New Jersey, I didn’t have a close relationship with [my extended family] ... seeing [my wife’s] family made me appreciate—they’ve always been very close and had a very caring relationship and it was important to them that they stay a part of this extended family, and it’s one of the reasons we moved ... was to be closer to them, so they can be close to cousins and relatives, that’s been very important.” —Interfaith families with teens

Several of the young adults who were in Cincinnati for graduate school cited their academic community as important, and another mentioned generally finding community with friends and work circles. It was generally true among participants in these focus groups that people find community through family, work, and affinity groups (e.g., book clubs, activist organizations, 4H, or mom groups). Participants in the group for interfaith families with teens mentioned such affinity groups most often, likely because their teenage children

had already developed interests of their own, which tended to drive family routines. Other participants seemed to either be tied to Jewish institutions, strong networks of family and/or friends, or were currently (or once COVID-19 passes) still searching for community.

“I am born and raised here, I went to college in [another state] and moved back last year, and I was very involved in the Jewish community growing up and have wanted to but not yet found a way to get back involved since moving back. I’ve tried a few opportunities but haven’t found my right group yet.”

—Young adults

Current Jewish Involvement

Synagogues

Of participants in the three groups of parents we spoke with, approximately half were members of synagogues. One participant had joined a synagogue years ago when her son wanted a bar mitzvah and stayed for a number of years until a change in rabbis led her to cancel her membership. One or two other parents were not members of a synagogue but did occasionally bring their child/ren to programming at either Wise Temple or Temple Sholom. Those who are currently involved in synagogues generally express having a very positive experience, enjoying the community, and appreciating the offerings for their children, although the amount of engagement some have are tempered by obstacles such as living far away or not feeling able to continue participating during pandemic conditions. Not everybody named the synagogue they belonged to, but Wise Temple and Temple Sholom were mentioned often, and one participant who is Sephardic with a Sephardic spouse reported going to Chabad, where there tended to be more Sephardic participants, and which felt more comfortable to the family than the Ashkenazi-centric synagogues elsewhere.

“When we came back we shopped around and ended up at Temple Sholom, which has been amazing. ... It’s 80% interfaith at this point, so it’s a good place to have dialogue in the synagogue, I appreciate that space is there and ... when my husband and I walk in, nobody wonders who’s Jewish or not, you just come in and are who you are. I didn’t think I’d be this connected, it’s been a wonderful surprise.”

—Interfaith families with young children

The JCC and PJ Library

The JCC was one of the most consistently referenced Jewish institutions in the focus groups with parents of young children from both all-Jewish and interfaith families. Parents of teens and young adults did not reference the JCC at all. Several parents were sending their children to preschool at the J before COVID-19 hit, and at least one has been sending her daughter to the day camp they currently run. Although a number of parents reported living too far away to use it as much as they would like, most people really like the J while simultaneously thinking its offerings could be improved in some ways. People like that programs and preschool at the JCC present a Jewish influence and programming for their young kids. While some wished for more flexible day care enrollment, those who did want to use it for full-time day care were happy with the flexibility in drop-off and pick-up times, particularly important given the large number of families with two working parents and/or separated/divorced parents.

“My daughter went to the JCC, so I knew what was going on, but I can’t say what a wonderful thing that coffee machine in the lobby of the JCC early childhood program was, because I got to talk to more people and meet more people that way than anything else.” —Families with kids 0–5

A number of parents mentioned using PJ Library, which they welcomed as a supplemental source of Jewish exploration and learning for their children. Both all-Jewish and interfaith families made use of PJ Library, and one parent reported that once she signed up for PJ Library she began getting emails about JCC programming and has been bringing her children there more often since then.

Rockwern Academy

While there were only two parents throughout the groups whose children attended day school, both had children at Rockwern; and both were delighted by the strong community feeling they experience there, citing it both as a source of support and community.

“We ended up at Rockwern because my sister’s kids are there. We probably would have gone with public school just fine, ... but since going there it’s got a hook in us. The community there is really incredible, and it just enriched our lives in an unexpected way. ... It caught us by surprise how good it was to be involved in Jewish education.” —Interfaith families with kids 0–5

One thing mentioned by this parent that may be of particular note in strategic planning around community building is that although she worked full time, she would go to the school and go into the building frequently before COVID-19—in large part because they have a community room where parents could congregate, catch up, and offer one another support. This resonates with the quote above about the coffee machine at the JCC facilitating community, as well as with social scientific research that demonstrates that having physical space to congregate informally is an important component of building solidarity.

Young Adults

Young adults who were in Cincinnati for graduate school were connected to those graduate institutions, and one young woman who was in rabbinical school at HUC mentioned having connections at multiple Jewish institutions in Cincinnati as a result of their connection to HUC. One described returning to his home temple after college but finding different and tight-knit groups there, and another reported being a Sunday school teacher, but otherwise young adults did not report much engagement with large Jewish institutions in Cincinnati. A participant who had left Cincinnati since the pandemic began mentioned her increased need for Jewish community and study during this time and described pursuing online connections and webinars through organizations like My Jewish Learning.

The one formalized local program mentioned frequently by young adults was Access, which was described disparagingly by almost everyone who had encountered it as basically a stand-in for a Jewish dating service. One young adult mentioned the “cringe factor” of almost every event she’d seen or gone to for young adults that were planned by people who were not young adults.

“Access was the only hub, but it was just ... it wasn’t structured to help people connect or stay in touch as friends. It felt very forced and made me uncomfortable as a young woman to be there—it felt like there was an expectation to date people in the group.” —Young Adults

“I’ve been told about these groups, and just the ways they’re advertised, I don’t even want to go. I can see right through it, the way they set them up. It makes sense the coordinators think that’s what we want, it’s probably what they wanted when they were young, but this is 2020, a very different landscape.”

—Young Adults

Affiliation and Connection

Many of the people we spoke to who were not affiliated with institutions, including some who were only affiliated with the JCC, reported having few to no Jewish friends. Almost all said they wanted Jewish friends, however. One of the few participants who has a group of Jewish friends who also have small children is affiliated with a synagogue and is engaged in at least one other way. It does appear that institutional affiliation is the main key to gaining a network of Jewish friends, but this poses a problem for the number of participants in the focus groups who are reluctant, at best, to participate in something they perceive as religious. For these participants, synagogue attendance or membership feels inauthentic or dishonest, and several wondered how to connect with Jewish folks outside of religious institutions.

“It’d be nice to have a group where people are culturally Jewish and some are observant, and being able to hang out in that kind of scene or with people with similar backgrounds or shared heritage, but not all the same views. I don’t necessarily think we feel comfortable going to become part of a congregation or something like that.” —Interfaith families with kids 0–5

“As more and more people have less emphasis on religion, how do you still create a Jewish identity for your family?” —Families with kids 0–5

Barriers to Participation

Information Pipeline

Most participants report getting information about programming and activities through social media or email, often associated with institutions like synagogues or PJ Library. However, there is a clear disconnect in informational networks between those who are already involved in the Jewish community (usually through the JCC or a synagogue) and those who are not—those who know and those who can’t find out. It does appear that there are offerings in Cincinnati that do match up with what several people reported looking for but not finding: more than once in the focus groups one participant described a desired kind of engagement that another, more engaged, participant knew where to find. Many people in the groups had never heard of Cincinnati Vine but wished there was some kind of centralized information hub where they could find out about all the different Jewish things going on in Cincinnati.

“When we were on the West side, we weren’t that far from JCC, only about 20 minutes, but you just didn’t hear about things going on there if you’re not here. So, once I joined PJ Library, I got lots of emails that included events going on hosted through the JCC.” —Families with kids 0–5

Geography

Proximity is an important barrier. Participants in the focus groups were very spread out, and many did not live close to the geographical center of organized Jewish life. Particularly given how busy people reported being and the fact that most families were dual income, driving long distances to attend synagogue, events at the JCC, or other programming presents a large obstacle.

“If we’re talking about Jewish community, the bulk is centered around particular areas, there’s like 6 or 7 temples in one area, and none of that is easy for me to get to. ... It’s a big deal.”

—Interfaith families with teens

Time

There are many pressures on people’s time, and children participate in numerous activities. This of course reduces the amount of free time to devote to Jewish activities. Many parents respond to this time crunch by only doing Jewish activities occasionally, rather than on the full basis on which they’re often offered. However, part-time attendance comes with its own difficulties: reduced connection to others who attend more frequently and a sense of violating expectations around commitment (though participants weren’t always entirely clear whether those expectations were coming from themselves or from other members or leaders of the Jewish community).

“I know there are events, were events happening through JCC, PJ Library, Wise Temple, but time and feeling overextended is a big deal. The other things I was going to say is, in some ways, maybe by not going, when I do go I feel more uncomfortable than if I went regularly. Some of that is internal, the feeling you’re not as into it as you should be, but between all the things, I can’t go all in.”

—Interfaith family with teens

Social Barriers

Participants in the three parent focus groups also mentioned barriers that are more connected to the social or cultural atmosphere of Jewish events or institutions in Cincinnati. Unsurprisingly, a common general complaint was around the awkwardness of trying to meet strangers, especially when strangers know one another, and particularly at large events. This is of course not specific to Cincinnati but is an important consideration in thinking about how to bring people further into the community. While many people reported feeling generally welcome at events or in synagogue, they also did not necessarily feel *welcomed into* the places they visited.

This feeling may relate to what was alluded to in the discussion of time constraints: some participants who do not participate often or ever, or who do not see themselves as religious or knowledgeable, seem to feel like interlopers if they try to participate in something through the Jewish community or express feeling there is an expectation to do more, or give more, or commit more, which most experience as off-putting. This seemed to be particularly true for those in interfaith families who were not already synagogue members, although one participant who was both also reported being pressured by her rabbi when the family stopped attending Zoom events during the pandemic. However, she mentioned it in an offhand way that indicated she was not particularly put off by the pressure—this may suggest that what feels like undue expectation or pressure may

vary quite a bit between those who are engaged and those who are not. While these findings are somewhat vague, they do suggest that careful attention to the presentation of activities geared toward the less engaged is likely very important in alleviating anxieties around expectations of participation.

On a similar note, many people said that they were unlikely to attend events that seemed too religious; Jewish members of interfaith families in particular noted that they were unlikely to get their spouse/partner to attend events with them if they had much religious connotation at all. While people seemed drawn to holiday events, most did not want them too religiously tinged.

Young Adults

The problem of information access operates almost identically for participants in the young adult group as it does for those in the other groups, but young adults face slightly different barriers than the others we spoke with. They did not discuss having a time crunch or feeling that events were too far away. The largest barrier mentioned by almost all the young adults had to do with the kinds of events and programming that were offered not aligning with their interests. As mentioned above, they reported many events having an air of a dating event about them; while it is worth noting that at least half of the participants in the young adult group were either married or partnered, they very much gave an impression of *never* having been interested in such events, and those who were still single mostly just wanted to find more Jewish friends.

Desired Jewish Involvement

Parents

A number of parents from across all three parent groups were members of a synagogue and generally felt that their needs and desires for Jewish involvement were being met in Cincinnati. One or two had tried to get better connected to the Jewish community at times and seemed to have mostly given up after not finding an institution or way to connect that felt comfortable to them. But the majority of the remaining parent participants were either marginally involved or were contemplating it and had things to say about the kinds of offerings they'd like to see and when they'd like to see them.

Programming and Activities

There were two types of programming that were mentioned the most frequently by parents. One was one-time events planned for families around holidays that include things like arts and crafts, music, and other fun activities that expose kids (and parents!) to holiday rituals and possibly even light learning. The emphasis, however, was on light-hearted events that were not heavily religious and that did not require a lot of previous knowledge in order to participate. An example of this kind of event given by a few participants was the “Gymboree” that used to occur in Cincinnati, possibly specifically catering to interfaith families.

The other highly desired type of programming was something for expecting parents and families with babies. Several people with babies and very small toddlers mentioned the difficulty in finding good things to do with children that age, and how isolating the first months after childbirth can be. Some of the parents with older kids mentioned how valuable it might have been for them to have more connections to other parents by the

time their first children were born, so they could have people to ask questions of and share challenges with. They were also looking for a wider range of offerings for young kids around physical activity, music, and art.

“When I was in NY there was programming not just for kids, but for expecting parents. Then there was a new mom support group for moms on maternity leave. I met two of my best friends to this day there. It doesn’t need to be programming geared to kids. Got involved when expecting, when I had a two-week-old. Those first months are so difficult, and isolating, and it was something I could take my daughter to when she was two weeks old. It needs to go beyond programming and a class here or there to really build community.” —Parents with kids 0–5

Lastly, several participants (both young adults and parents of young kids) mentioned being interested in having Jewish community that was oriented around some of their other interests, such as volunteering or social justice activities. One person claimed most of what she saw around volunteering was through the Catholic community, and another discussed bringing her daughter to Black Lives Matter marches and wanting to find a community of Jews in Cincinnati interested in such issues.

“We’ve been taking her to BLM protests for a long time, but that’s a little lacking here and I don’t know where to go to find like-minded Jewish parents that will bond over that aspect. ... These are crazy times ... and there are all these difficult conversations to have, and I think we need to start them young and don’t know how to form a support group around all that.” —Families with kids 0–5

Timing

A number of parents mentioned the fact that activities were often at times that were difficult for them, especially activities designed for parents to attend with their children. Given the number of dual-income families, and how quickly many parents return to work after the birth of a child, most parents were only available in evenings and on weekends and complained that many activities (and all mommy groups) tend to be held during hours that were extremely difficult for working parents. Events on weekday evenings, however, are best when food is available, as one parent mentioned that she could generally not feed herself dinner AND take her child to a weeknight event. Along this theme, a number of non-observant parents from both groups with young children asked for events on Saturday.

Other Considerations

For parents, smaller events with more intimate (but not too intimate) opportunities for socializing might be highly desirable, so long as childcare is included! A paella night with a small bar for 25–30 people was an example of the kind of event some people were interested in. Parents are largely preoccupied with finding things for their children, but they are also looking for community for themselves. They talked about the difficulty of talking to anyone when they are at an event with their children, and the desirability of having childcare available.

“And we’re all saying that there’s great kids’ programs, but not a lot that’s supportive for families as a whole, not a lot of childcare opportunities during events, there’s not a lot of opportunities to acknowledge that the parents are also there, and people, with the children also being there.” —Families with kids 0–5

One thing that seems clear is that social events that have carefully facilitated opportunities for people to interact with new people, rather than just letting people mingle freely, would be really helpful. Also, as noted earlier, setting up informal time and space for parents to congregate when/where their children are occupied can be really important for community building—for example an open gym on a Sunday (or Saturday) morning with coffee and seating available for parents.

Young Adults

Young adults were somewhat split in the kinds of involvement they were looking for. For all of them it was important that they have Jewish friends, though some of them were further along in that department than others. Several participants in that group had a deep interest in Judaism, either through religious practice, text study, or both. These participants craved a deeper kind of engagement than most of the others. One of them mentioned the importance of being part of an intergenerational Jewish community and was currently participating in a tiny Zoom congregation of about a dozen people in addition to webinars on Jewish topics. Another said:

“I personally hate young adult Jewish events and groups. I’m very into the religion aspect of Judaism. I love being Jewish, I’m down as hell for the holiday. I love Talmud, I teach Sunday school. I want the meat of it, I don’t want any of this bulls#t.”*

However, while all members of the group agreed they did not appreciate matchmaking events, other participants had a very different relationship with Judaism and were looking for a lighter and less-religious way of participating in Jewish community. Some had Jewish backgrounds and simply didn’t know many other Jews in the area, while at least one other had almost no connection with her Jewish heritage growing up and was interested in exploring it more in a very low-pressure way.

“My husband and I went to Passover and Hanukkah once at a temple, and I love it because it wasn’t religious, but we just ate latkes and lit menorahs, so I’m really new at making these connections and I’m turned off by the religious stuff. ... I’d definitely be interested in connecting if it was in a context that I didn’t feel like I was lying about my belief. I was always jealous of friends who were able to do these cool community things that didn’t have to be religious, ... but I don’t know where that exists.”

The rest were in-between—looking for ways to connect with other young adult Jews, to expand their Jewish friendship circle, and to have people with which to explore some of their ideas and questions about Jewish identity, but without joining religious groups or sitting through painful and awkward happy hours. A number of these young adults suggested organizing activities around interests like hiking, volunteering, or author lectures.

High Points to Build On

Participants pointed to a number of Jewish institutions that they felt were strong and meaningful institutions but could be better leveraged in terms of building stronger Jewish community. HUC was one such institution—while HUC does seem to be connected to other Jewish institutions, several participants in the young adult group wanted to see more ways to connect with the institution itself and with the students who attend it. And while various participants mentioned Wise Temple and Temple Sholom, in particular, as

synagogues that provide excellent programming for families and are very welcoming to interfaith families, the JCC really stood out in conversations as a strong touchpoint for Jewish life for young families among those who lived close enough to take advantage of its services and programming.

Despite a very wide range of expressed religiosity, and even knowledge of Jewish traditions and communal life, there is a great deal of interest and curiosity in participation in Jewish life among most focus group participants. Among interfaith families we spoke with, the majority are raising their children Jewish, and there seems to be both a low level of religious conflict in interfaith families and a very high level of support among non-Jewish spouses for raising Jewish children.

Young adults and families with young children are particularly interested in finding more ways to connect with Jewish community, and they generally perceive the community to be welcoming and dynamic for its size. While the small size of the community can mean tighter-knit groups for newcomers to break into, participants did note that breaking in was possible, and people who had broken into Jewish communities (primarily through participation in Jewish institutions like synagogues or schools) found them to be incredibly warm and supportive. Even participants who had not yet found their “true place” in the Jewish community saw Cincinnati as a place where they could be connected to Jewish life. Several people appreciated that Cincinnati was the home of Reform Judaism and see Cincinnati as a place with “good Jewish bones”—a rich history to be claimed and built upon.