

# Connecting with Jewish Tweens



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IT'S 3 P.M. IN CLEVELAND, 2 P.M. IN DALLAS, AND NOON IN SAN JOSE, and dozens of kids from across America are logging onto a webinar to learn techniques for making podcasts. All come armed with unique experiences, projects, and stories: Hanah, 9, from Florida, recently made a video about a Jewish holiday; Josh, 11, from Illinois, designed a fun book quiz; and Rylee, 10, from New York, just interviewed an author. As each child's face appears on the screen, parents wave hello in the background, and curious younger siblings check out what is going on.

Who are these dedicated, creative, energetic tweens? They are members of the PJ Our Way national kids' teams who are creating content for the PJ Our Way website, reading and reviewing potential PJ Our Way books, and engaging in Jewish conversations in a way that has never been done before.



Atlanta, Georgia



Toronto, Canada

Young children love to sit on their parent's lap and have a fun picture book read to them. They often care more for the experience than the content. The excitement of a parent connecting with them through a story creates a closeness.

Tweens do not operate this way. Already beginning to differentiate from their parents, 9- to 12-year-olds thrive when given the ability to make independent choices. To be told to read a book that someone else chose for them is, in their words, "a big fail."

The key to designing a program that speaks to a particular age group is to include those very people in the planning process. The initial PJ Our Way Design Team was made up of three boys and four girls. Under the guidance of a Jewish educator, the team read advance copies of the book selections and populated the PJ Our Way website with reviews,

videos, author interviews, and blogs to help PJ Our Way members choose between the books.

The combination of purposeful work, stimulating stories, and social engagement with peers from around the country kept the first Design Team members engaged and committed. Since then, the program has expanded. The Design Team now focuses on multimedia content. A Content Team develops written and graphic projects. An Advisory Committee shares valuable feedback about books that PJ Our Way is considering adding to the lineup.

In 2015, stimulated by the PJ Our Way national kids' team, communities across America started to create local design teams. Lori Rubin, then the Director of Family Engagement at the Jewish Learning Venture, and her PJ Library colleague Robyn Cohen put out the call to tweens in the Philadelphia Jewish community, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. "It was an incredible way for tweens to get together and see themselves as part of something big. Many of them don't have other Jewish kids in their neighborhoods, so getting together on an ongoing basis allows them to make Jewish friends and talk about the content of the books they have read with others."

Like the kids themselves, each local design team comes with different interests, and the process of letting kids choose what they want to focus on produces excitingly different results.

This year the Milwaukee Design Team will be partnering up with a new local design team that just launched in Winnipeg, Manitoba. To get to know one another, the two teams are planning a package exchange and have excitedly brainstormed what kinds of things to include. Maps, special foods, letters, and photos all go into the mix to answer, "What it is like to be Jewish in Winnipeg or Milwaukee?"



Orlando, Florida

# The Decline *by Nine*

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There are currently more than a dozen local kids' teams throughout North America. They flourish in Jewish communities as large as Baltimore, Los Angeles, Miami, and Atlanta, and as small as Rochester and Tallahassee.

In the world of Jewish engagement, a lot is known about programming for families with young kids. Parents with infants, toddlers, and kindergartners have at their fingertips parent groups, tot Shabbats, Music Together classes – a variety of hands-on programs that meet their child's developmental needs. There are also viable options for Jewish teens who are independent enough to get involved with youth groups that give them meaningful Jewish experiences. Where our community had been particularly lacking is in the area of innovative Jewish programming for tweens. The key is involving the children themselves in the process. And if you do so in a fun, meaningful way, these tweens shine. Confident about their abilities and excited about their heritage, they are already rejuvenating our American Jewish community.

Columbus, Georgia



It's become a monthly ritual that my daughters (ages 9 and 11) always look forward to. It generally goes something like this: I tell the girls it's time to select their PJ Our Way books. They bicker about who gets to choose first, we flip a coin, someone disputes the results of the coin toss, we toss again. Eventually, both girls take the time to read each book description and other kids' reviews before settling on their choices. After they've read their books, they use some of their precious screen time to log on and write their own reviews, and the process begins again.

My girls think of PJ Our Way as something fun they get to do every few weeks. And while I agree with them, I also see it as a powerful tool for their ongoing literacy development. Children who reach reading proficiency by third grade (which is when both of my girls signed up for PJ Our Way) are more likely to be academically successful in the future than those who don't, according to research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Unfortunately, this also seems to be the age at which many kids are putting down their books. Recent research by Scholastic has identified a "decline by nine," in which the percentage of children who report reading books for fun – five to seven days a week – drops from 57% to 35% between the ages of 8 and 10.

## Yikes!

Fortunately, we parents can do something about this. Experts have offered a variety of ideas for keeping pre-tweens' noses in books, such as allowing them to choose what they read, providing opportunities to connect with other kids who have read the same books, and using technology as a bridge to reading.

Check, check, and check. PJ Our Way nails them all, and I'm seeing the magic happen in our home.

The girls get to read books that align with their interests, whether it's a biography of Albert Einstein or Judy Blume or a story about what it would be like to travel back in time to the days of Moses and Miriam or live with a golem in your town. My voracious reader who doesn't love to write gets excited to craft her reviews, and I wonder when my reluctant reader will stop being surprised by how much she enjoys books about everything from being the only Jewish kid in your class at a new school to preparing for a bar or bat mitzvah you're not entirely sure you want. As for me, I'm so grateful that my daughters are learning the stories of our people – both past and present – connecting to the Jewish community, and strengthening their own evolving identities. And I know that we're combating the decline by nine, one PJ Our Way book at a time.