Imagine that a caterer wants to decide whether or not to include fruit in her meal. In order to determine how much people like fruit, the caterer conducts a research experiment. She gives one group of participants an apple, one group an orange, one group a grapefruit, one group a banana, one group a pear, and one group grapes and then asks them to rate how much they enjoyed their piece of fruit. The caterer then combines the answers of all participants to decide if most people like fruit and would therefore enjoy it in a dish. However, she ignores the fact that someone in the grapefruit group may hate grapefruit but love bananas or that diners may prefer fruit in their dessert rather than their entree. The study tries to draw generalizations but in doing so loses the nuances of the preferences for different types of fruit.

The field of Jewish family education has fallen prey to the same logical fallacy as this caterer—Jewish educators are aware that there are different types, but in discussions of the topic lump all categories together. After reading many articles on Jewish family education, it becomes apparent that each recognizes that there are many varieties, from weekly parallel parent learning to once-a-year attendance in children’s classes, from weekend retreats to material to be used at home, and everything in between. However, what the articles fail to do is seriously analyze the differences among the types of programs, especially in regards to implementation, advantages and challenges, or effectiveness. Without this differentiation it is just as difficult to assess which forms of family education meet which goals, as it is to determine which fruit people like best.

This problem is evident both in the research on Jewish family education and in the resources available for professionals on how best to implement these programmatic strategies. For example, one study examines the impact of Sh’arim, an initiative in the Boston area to
support Jewish family education. The study attempts to identify who is most likely to participate in family education and what impact family education has on a family’s Jewish practice. The study recognizes that there is a wide range in the type of programming offered. In terms of frequency it states, “61% of all family education programs are one-time events, 9% are two-session programs and the remaining 30% are programs extending over three or more sessions” (Sales, Koren, & Shevitz, 2000, p. 10). What this study and others like it fail to do is differentiate responses from those who participated in the various programs. It is impossible to know from this report if the one-time events have comparable impacts to the two-session programs or those which last at least three sessions. In 2003 JESNA published a Spotlight on Jewish Family Education intended to help communities begin to think about how they might introduce family education. It identified examples of eight different models of Jewish family education. It even included sections about what it takes to implement effective Jewish family education on the institutional level and how the community can support the effort. However, what is still missing is any evaluation of the different models or an indication of how to determine which model of family education might work best in a particular community.¹

This concern is not entirely new. In 1991, then executive vice president of the Board of Jewish Education of New York, Alvin Schiff, wrote that there is a “need, given the plethora of Jewish family education efforts currently taking place, to define the elements of effective Jewish family education (Jewish family education means so many different things to different people)…and evaluate the effectiveness of current program prototypes” (p. 267). Schiff was writing at the initial outburst of family education throughout the country. His caution is even

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¹ Some research is starting to move towards differentiation. The Coalition of Innovating Congregations in their handbook identifies steps towards integrating family learning experiences into children’s Jewish education (p. 148). Isa Aron identifies an alternative educational model of “Family School” but acknowledges that it is difficult to determine how many sessions is required for a program to qualify for this category and that there remains much variety among programs.
more critical now since we are in a time when family education is present in almost every Jewish educational institution (Wolfson, 2012). Remarkably, family education is something everyone is doing, but no one knows exactly what works.

In order to prevent an even greater proliferation of undifferentiated, fruit platter-esque family education, here are two initial steps the field could take:

a) Congregational leaders must think explicitly about the goals of Jewish family education in their own institutions.

b) At the same time, researchers need to create criteria to differentiate between various models of family education that can be used across the field. These standardized criteria would help congregational leaders choose a model that best fits their institution’s goals.

If Jewish educational institutions are not intentional about why they might include family education, it becomes difficult to measure success. Some possible but very different goals include: ensuring that parents know what topics their children are covering in class, building relationships and a community among families with children of similar ages, giving parents tools to bring Jewish learning into the home, engaging parents in their own path of life-long Jewish learning, and modeling for children that Jewish learning continues beyond adolescence. Each of these goals implies a very different model of family education. Hence, the first step in clarifying our thinking about family education is for each congregation to identify and state explicitly the most relevant goals for their specific community.

Identifying goals is only helpful if educators can then determine which models would best fit those goals. Currently, Jewish family education is considered to be anything that brings children and parents (and sometimes other family members) together in a joint learning program. However, it is important to categorize differences such as parallel learning versus learning together, frequency of learning, educational setting, and whether it is whole family learning or grade-specific family learning (e.g. all parents of first graders joining their students in class).
From there, research can and should be conducted to learn about what goals each type of family education best meets. This research should also assess what makes each model successful, what challenges there might be in implementation, and questions that institutions must take into account when considering each type of program and how it would work in the culture of their community. This would then create a body of knowledge that would help communities determine which models of family education would be most effective for them to implement. This research would likely also uncover limitations of different models of family education, allowing professionals in the field to think deeply about how to maximize their resources.

There is an incredible variety of flavors and textures to explore in the field of Jewish family education. The task we are now faced with is that of learning what pairings go best together, so that a congregation’s goals and family education program model are as well paired as strawberries and chocolate, and just as deliciously sweet.
References


