



photo: creativejewishmom.com

celebrating the
High Holy Days
with kids

18 DOORS

Unlocking Jewish

High Holy Days

Ages & Stages

Babies and Toddlers

Bringing babies and toddlers into the sanctuary is an individual call; sleeping or cooing infants add a beautiful presence to services, but a wailing baby can be disruptive and should be soothed outside.

Synagogues vary in the quality of babysitting and early childhood programs for children. Even if good care is available in your synagogue, some children will not tolerate being left with others if they know that a parent is on the premises. Sometimes hiring a babysitter at home or taking a toddler to her regular daycare is the best option, especially if parents want to participate in the service. Besides, some children are too sensitive to the noise and crush of a big crowd to be anything but miserable in the synagogue.

If you are not sure how your baby will react and want to try bringing him to synagogue, be prepared to leave if he gets fussy. If you can let go of expectations of what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are “supposed” to be like, you may find a different religious experience in the lobby with the nursing mothers, or watching your child run around the synagogue’s playground.

The High Holy Days, also known as *Yamin Nora'im* (Days of Awe), encompass the period of ten days that begins with *Rosh Hashanah* (literally the “Head of the Year,” the Jewish New Year), continues through the Days of Repentance and ends with *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement). This whole period is a time of serious soul-searching for adults. It is a time to reflect and resolve to turn away from the wrongdoings of the previous year.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur demand a great deal of self-reflection and self-control. At first glance, this might make them seem irrelevant or even oppressive to children under the age of ten or even thirteen, but the gravity and universal pull of these two holidays – when North American synagogues are filled beyond capacity – is felt by youngsters, too.

While the meaning and impact may be far less intellectual or spiritual for children, these holidays are impressive in their solemnity and sheer size. In addition to special meals and attention from family and friends, children will notice the crowds and expanded size of the sanctuary. The annual beginning-of-school excitement will become associated with the start of the Jewish year. For kids who attend secular schools, if they miss school to observe these Jewish holidays, that will seal their importance.

As children grow, they understand more about the themes of the liturgy and grapple with the powerful stories in the Torah readings. But even for very young children, participating in the Jewish community’s biggest convocations – amid mixed generations, from infants to grandparents – can lead them to feel that they belong to a Jewish community that is big and vital.



Preschool Children

Preschool children may enjoy parts of the service. If you are familiar with Shabbat services, you can point out how different the music is, and how the Torah is “dressed up,” with special covers, just as the people are especially dressed up. On Rosh Hashanah, the crowd tends to be upbeat and festive, great for people watching. Remark on all the different faces, the different ways there are to “look Jewish.”

Serve any snacks outside the sanctuary. Be sure to keep food out of the synagogue on Yom Kippur; children should eat at home, or outside of the synagogue, out of consideration to those who are fasting.

School-age children

As children mature, parents can offer synagogue as reward for coming-of-age. You know your child best, and know what might work with them. Try something like, “Now that you can read Hebrew so well, I think you can stay in the service a little longer.” or, “I think you’re old enough to come to Kol Nidre with us.”

If you think your child is ready, talk to her about the topics in the Torah readings. Solicit her opinions about why Jonah ran away when God asked him to try to help the people of Nineveh, for example. If he attends religious school, he may well have discussed some of this in class, and may enjoy sharing what he knows on the way to and from services.

Some of the concepts of the High Holy Days may be too complex for children, but the holidays do offer parents the opportunity to talk about growing and changing, and about the importance of saying “I’m sorry” to people and to God.

There is a fine line between exposing children to the experience of services and causing them pain. Yom Kippur can be arduous for adults, let alone children. “It’s so boring” is an accurate description from a child’s point of view, so do not ignore your ten-year-old’s fidgets. Be judicious about insisting on a child’s presence in the sanctuary, otherwise the holidays will be overshadowed by dread and a terrible war of wills. Make sure there is decent programming for your child’s age group – a junior service or other activities.

Adolescents

Once children turn thirteen – the age of bar and bat mitzvah and religious maturity – they have the right to decide on how to observe mitzvot. You can help your child make a thoughtful choice about the holiday, and you might even offer some choices:

- “If you don’t want to sit at services, would you like to help out with a program for the younger children?”
- “Do you want to help collect canned goods for the temple’s Yom Kippur food drive?”
- “How about getting the youth group to run Rosh Hashanah services at the nursing home this year?”

In the days leading up to the High Holy Days, parents have an opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to raise the themes of repentance, self-examination, and resolving to be a better person. Each of these themes resonates for adolescents, who are struggling to figure out who they are.

Try talking to your teen about your own reflections and desire to be a better person. In the spirit of *teshuvah* (repentance, from the verb “returning” in Hebrew), offer an honest apology yourself: “I’m sorry for nagging you so much about your homework. I really do have a lot of faith in you. I’m going to try harder to remember that you’re growing up and are more responsible for yourself.”

If you are silent and patient, you may hear some teshuvah from your teenager, but even if she doesn’t respond, you have doubtlessly initiated some reflective thought. Modeling is one of the best methods for teaching serious religiosity – at any age or stage of development.



Ideas For Celebrating The High Holy Days With Your Children

- Bring apple juice, a round challah, sliced apples and honey to your child's secular or public school class. Explain the meaning of the holidays and how you celebrate them.
- Read books about the holidays, listen to CDs or watch DVDs that include holiday melodies and themes.
- Write "I'm sorry" notes and put them in lunch boxes or out on a holiday table.
- Make a special bowl or dish out of clay for apples and honey.

This booklet was adapted from How to Raise a Jewish Child: A Practical Handbook for Family Life by Anita Diamant and Karen Kushner.



photo: jerribenjamin.com





18Doors mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

18Doors offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

This booklet is one of a series originally created by Karen Kushner at The Jewish Welcome Network and revised and redesigned at InterfaithFamily with support of the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. Previous versions of some of the booklets were published by Project Welcome of the Union for Reform Judaism: www.urj.org/outreach.