



**National Incubator for Community-Based Jewish Teen
Education Initiatives
Qualitative Research on Jewish Teens
Fall 2014-Winter 2015**

Teen Development and Jewish Life
Building on Research in Jewish Teen Education and Engagement

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This document includes a literature review of recent research in adolescent development and best practices in youth engagement, as well as interviews with a selection of funders, researchers, and practitioners professionally involved in Jewish teen education and engagement. This research from fall of 2014 informed the 16 focus groups conducted by The Jewish Education Project in December 2014-January 2015.

Those critical findings subsequently led to the development of the 14 Outcomes for Jewish Teen Education & Engagement and the report *Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today*

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Teen Development and Jewish Life: Insights from Research and Practice

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Background

The **National Incubator for Community-Based Jewish Teen Initiatives** of The Jewish Education Project, supported by the Jim Joseph Foundation, seeks to expand and deepen Jewish teen education in the United States through its collaborative work with 14 members of the Jewish Teen Education Funders Collaborative—strategic funders re-imagining Jewish life for teens in **10 communities throughout the United States**. The National Incubator consults with these organizations as they develop their strategies and initiatives and supports the Funder Collaborative as a thought partner in this large-scale project.

To augment its work with the Funder Collaborative and create value for the field of Jewish teen engagement at large, the National Incubator is working with a team of researchers and evaluators to create **shared outcomes, indicators, and measurement tools** that will gauge Jewish learning and growth among teens participating in Jewish experiences during their middle school and high school years. The Jewish Education Project appreciates the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, and the Marcus Foundation in this project. These metrics will allow funders and teen educators to collect important baseline data on local Jewish teens and help the communities measure their new initiatives. In the aggregate, with shared tools evaluating each of the local initiatives, the Funder Collaborative will be positioned to conduct a thorough analysis of its collective efforts. This will enable all stakeholders to gain an understanding of their combined outcomes and provide actionable learnings about which strategies are most effective at influencing the Jewish learning and growth among teen participants.

Importantly, these metrics and effective measurement instruments will be adaptable across communities and different Jewish settings. These tools will be made available to educators, funders, professionals, and policy makers from across the Jewish community

to gauge their work as well. The Jewish Education Project and Funder Collaborative seek to engage a **wide range of stakeholders** in this process to ensure that the final set of tools will be **useful and credible for the field at large**.

In this vein, we are pleased to share this interim report as the first installment of our research to date. The research and evaluation team—including researchers from AIR and Rosov Consulting, Dr. David Bryfman of The Jewish Education Project, and Dr. Meredith Woocher—have carefully reviewed these preliminary findings and believe they point to significant trends in the fields of adolescent development and Jewish teen engagement. Augmented by your feedback, these insights will inform the next stage of our research: the facilitation (and subsequent data analysis from) **16 focus groups of Jewish teens** and **16 interviews with parents of Jewish teens** from across the United States. These focus groups and interviews will allow us to hear directly from teens (and their parents) about how they spend their time, their connections to Judaism and Jewish community, and their reflections on their Jewish identity. Their voices will enrich our research and ensure that our measures and tools resonate with the target audience of these cross-community initiatives. We look forward to sharing a final report, including an analysis of these focus groups and interviews and a draft set of Jewish learning and growth outcomes, in winter 2015.

Introduction

It's midnight on a Wednesday night. While her parents and younger brother sleep, Hailey is simultaneously studying for a Chemistry test, texting with her three best friends, and monitoring her Facebook page. Although her distracted study habits are the cause of frequent tensions with her parents (she and her mother had a heated argument about it earlier this evening), in fact Hailey takes tomorrow's test very seriously. She knows that getting good grades in her Junior year will be critical for acceptance into one of the colleges she's aiming for. Also, she'll need a recommendation from her Chemistry teacher in order to take A.P. Environmental Science next year. Environmental issues are Hailey's passion. Although thinking about

what's happening to the climate and the earth can be stressful and overwhelming, Hailey also finds the scientific and policy perspectives fascinating. She feels that there's no better way for her to make a contribution to the world, and that it will be up to her generation to fix the mistakes of the past.

Hailey remembers when her interest in environmental issues was first sparked back in 9th grade. Her best friend Sara had convinced her to come along to a meeting of a Jewish youth group on a day that they were planning a Tu B'Shvat celebration and environmental awareness campaign. Although Hailey had had no intention of doing anything Jewish - other than holiday celebrations with her family - once her Bat Mitzvah was done, she was surprised to find that she actually liked the kids at the youth group and wanted to get more involved. Since then she's organized tzedakah drives and community service events, and traveled to conventions where she's become friends with teens from around the country and even the world. One of the friends she's texting with right now lives in California, and Hailey can't wait to see her again this summer at a national youth group event.

Even though Hailey loves being a part of a group of friends at school that includes people from a multiplicity of ethnicities and cultures, she does find a special level of connection with her youth group friends, as they just seem to share a common language and way of looking at the world. She's found the group to be a "safe space" to escape some of the pressures of school and family, and seek support and guidance when faced with academic or social challenges. In fact, Hailey has only one complaint about her entire youth group experience - she really wishes there were more guys involved.

Although Hailey is a fictional teen, this vignette is drawn from insights into teen life from the fields of adolescent development and Jewish teen and experiential education. Hailey's experiences illuminate what scholars in the field of youth development have identified as the "Six C's" - the characteristics which adolescents need to develop in order to grow into healthy and productive adults, as shown in the table below:

The "6 Cs" of Positive Youth Development¹

Competence:	Positive view of one’s ability to achieve in specific areas, including social competence (interpersonal skills), cognitive competence (intellectual abilities), and emotional competence (healthy choices and self-
Confidence:	An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy.
Connection:	Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in exchanges between the individual and his or her peers, family, school, and community
Caring	A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.
Character:	Respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity.
Contribution	The desire and opportunity to positively influence one’s family, community, and society.

This report will use the framework of these 6 C’s to explore what teens experience as they move through a period of physical, intellectual, emotional and social transformations, and how these transformations can be positively impacted by involvement in Jewish life and community. The focus on Jewish experiences adds two additional “C’s” - the specifically Jewish **Content** and **Context** - which distinguish Jewish teen programs from the Eagle Scouts, Key Clubs, or any of the other secular youth programs which also offer teens opportunities for connection, engagement and service. The discussion is shaped by recent research and insights about teens in general and Jewish teens in particular, as well as interviews with researchers and practitioners who have studied and worked with Jewish teens and youth organizations.

The reasons for using this particular framework for a discussion of goals and outcomes for Jewish teens - despite the fact that it is rooted in a secular field and research literature - are twofold. First, as was demonstrated by the pivotal study

on Jewish adolescent life conducted by Brandeis University in 2000, **Jewish teens to a large extent have similar experiences, concerns and goals as their non-Jewish peers. As the Brandeis researchers stated at the outset of their report, “To understand Jewish teenagers in the United States, it is necessary to understand the context of American teenage life.”**ⁱⁱⁱ Thus it seems that an understanding of key facets of adolescent development is a valuable foundation for reaching and impacting Jewish teens most effectively. Second, the diversity of Jewish teen engagement programs adds to the challenge of developing a set of outcomes that are broadly applicable across the field. By using the framework of positive youth development, it is hoped that a wide array of organizations and practitioners will find elements of this framework that resonate with their experiences and support their visions for their work. As this report will show, this seems to be true for those in field who lent their voices to these pages, as their insights and goals align strongly with the “6 C’s.” Although the studies and interviews that shape this report reveal a great deal about teens today, the field’s understanding of adolescent life and development is rapidly evolving. Our knowledge and assumptions about the much-discussed Millennial generation (those born between 1980-and 2001), may already be somewhat outdated for their younger siblings (“Generation Z”) who are now on the brink of their adolescent years. **Thus, this report is intended to be not the last word on teen development and engagement, but the beginning of a stimulating and fruitful conversation about how to provide Jewish teens with experiences that they need and value, which may in turn encourage far more teens to find their place in Jewish life and community.**

Competence and Confidence - Developing Self-Worth

Increasing feelings of competence and confidence provides teens with the inner foundation of a strong and healthy sense of self so that they can in turn engage productively with their peers, community and the larger world. The skills and capacities teens need to develop during these years include **cognitive competence** - the capacity for more abstract thinking, intellectual engagement,

and problem-solving; and **social-emotional competence** - interpersonal skills, resilience and self-regulation, and the ability to make healthy life choices and cope with stress. Through developing and practicing these competencies, teens gain **self-confidence**: the ability to envision and achieve meaningful goals, assume leadership roles, and take on challenges and appropriate risks.

Cognitive Competence - Engaging Teens' Minds

Studies of adolescent cognitive development have shown that the teenage brain not only able, but primed to engage with challenging and significant ideas.

According to "The Teen Years Explained," a report from the Center for Adolescent Health at Johns Hopkins University:

Newly developed thinking skills are one of the most thrilling aspects of adolescence. **As their ability to think in abstract terms grows, young people love to debate, challenge established ideas or values, and question authority.** They begin to question notions of absolute truth and to acquire the capability to present logical arguments... Only in early childhood are people as receptive to new information as they are in adolescence.ⁱⁱⁱ

As teens move from early to late adolescence, their cognitive capacities expand along multiple dimensions. In the early teen years (ages 10-14), teens expand their intellectual interests and capacity for abstract thinking, or the ability to "think about things that cannot be seen, heard, or touched [such as] faith, love, trust, beliefs and spirituality, as well as higher mathematics." As they continue to mature (ages 15-19) teens develop a richer inner life through the capacity to examine and reflect upon their experiences and insights through "meta-cognition," or "thinking about thinking." They also expand their ability to engage in problem-solving and advanced reasoning, including "thinking about multiple options and possibilities, pondering things hypothetically (the age-old 'what if...?' questions), and following a logical thought process.^{iv} Recent brain research has found that these developments are linked to the fact that the adolescent brain undergoes a process of both developing and "pruning" synapses - much as the brain does in infancy and toddlerhood - guiding certain areas of the brain to become stronger and more agile. In adolescence this happens most critically in the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for "advanced reasoning,

including the ability to plan, understand cause and effect, think through scenarios, and manage impulses.”^v

Many of those working with Jewish teens have seen this capacity and desire for intellectual engagement. An environmental scan of Jewish youth organizations from the Jim Joseph Foundation - “Effective Strategies for Engaging Jewish Teens” - found that many of the most effective programs include “a focus on building teens’ abilities and competencies through programs (often developed by adult experts) designed to provide supportive and empowering opportunities for skill-building, self-reflection and horizon-broadening.”^{vi} A report from the organization Moving Traditions expands upon this point with insights into how to meet the needs of teenage boys, a typically underserved and under-engaged population:

Boys are drawn to programming whose content speaks to their interests and provokes them to think. While they want a degree of relaxation and levity, they also want educators who take the material, and them, seriously. Educators who display knowledge and passion for the subject matter, as well as dedication to their students, will be able to connect to Jewish teenage boys and **tap into their desire for substantive learning.**^{vii}

This perspective is echoed by the observations of Rabbi David Kessel, Chief Program Officer of BBYO, as he reflected on his organization’s response to the challenge of engaging teens through content that is both authentically Jewish and genuinely intellectually stimulating (in contrast to how Jewish youth too often perceive their Jewish educational experiences):

We strongly believe that teens don’t find Jewish content boring, they find boring Jewish content boring. That is a big wake-up call for us because when we push the envelope as innovators and entrepreneurs in the Jewish teen experiential education space, we find that teens are really receptive. They have big questions, which is one of the reasons why “Ask Big Questions at Hillel” is a partner for us. **They’re seeing the world around them, they’re building their identity, they’re developing values. And if we help them do so in a sophisticated and engaging way by providing these content rich experiences, they will come and they will resonate with it.**

One experiment in engaging Jewish teens by developing their cognitive competence is Design Lab, a collaboration of Brandeis University, Combined

Jewish Philanthropies and the Union for Reform Judaism currently being piloted in the Boston area. Participants in Design Lab use the methodology of Design Thinking - a creative process drawn from the technology industry and innovation sectors - to envision and develop their own meaningful Jewish experiences. As Reuben Posner, CJP's Director of Youth Engagement, explained, Design Lab's has the potential to attract teens by presenting Jewish life as something that can engage and challenge them on an intellectual level:

The goal of the Design Lab is to teach teens design thinking, so that they have tools to grapple with meaningful communal challenges, and can then create something that will address the issue and be of genuine value and of interest to them and their peers. **We think that for a student who may be extremely busy, who isn't against the idea of being Jewish but simply doesn't find it compelling to go to another youth group dance or to a synagogue program, the chance to learn something like Design Thinking could be that compelling thing that adds value to their lives.** Simply piloting this program has already proven to be a tremendous learning experience, for them and for us.

Social - Emotional Competence - Helping Teens Thrive

As teens are developing their cognitive capacities, they are also learning how to navigate an often challenging stage of life. In the face of growing academic responsibilities, new social dynamics, and physical, hormonal and neurological transformations, teens must develop effective strategies for negotiating relationships, managing stress, and making healthy and productive life choices. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois-Chicago, has identified five inter-related social and emotional competencies that must be developed throughout youth and adolescence in order to thrive:

- Self-awareness: The ability to accurately assess one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths and to maintain a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
- Self-management: The ability to regulate one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; to set and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals; and to express emotions appropriately.

- Social awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures; to understand social and ethical norms for behavior; and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- Relationship skills: The ability to build strong relationships with diverse individuals and groups—communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- Responsible decision-making: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior—taking into consideration ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.^{viii}

As an powerful example of how Jewish engagement can help teens develop social-emotional competencies, Moving Traditions’ research on Jewish boys found that those who were most immersed in Jewish traditions and social settings found it easier to develop healthy conceptions of what it means to be male in today’s society:

One of our most striking and encouraging findings is that **the stronger a boy’s Jewish identity, the more his personal conception of masculinity can withstand the distorting pressures of mainstream, secular culture**. Like many teenage boys, the boys we interviewed feel restricted by conventional definitions of masculinity. Their development and self-expression are challenged by masculine norms of “toughness” and stoicism, and often are policed by homophobia, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. **The more Jewishly-affiliated boys we interviewed evinced greater resilience: a nuanced self-understanding, a particular kind of maturity, and an expressivity that gives them freedom to operate outside restrictive social norms.**^{ix}

As Deborah Meyer, Moving Traditions’ Executive Director, further explained in an interview, exploring and understanding gender roles is a critical dimension in all teens’ social-emotional development. Any organization that works with teens needs to consider the gender messages they send, particularly today when ideas

about gender are expanding to encompass those that don't fit neatly into the usual categories:

The guiding frame for Moving Traditions is gender, because we believe that **what it means to be a human being gets refracted in our culture through messages about what it means to be male or female.** In advertising and movies and TV and all those messages that come at teens through their different screens in different ways, everything is put through the lens of gender. **Even for our Jewish institutions that want to be egalitarian and include everybody, gender is still in there, and for teens it's incredibly important. And that includes their awareness of what it means to be trans-gender or gender non-conforming.** In some ways the kids who are gender non-conforming throw into a new light for all of us what it means to be female and what it means to be male and what it means to be human. Because when you say that gender has nothing to do with me or you can't put me in a gender box, you really see how important it is in our culture.

Of course, Jewish teens are not immune to the many other emotional challenges that teens often face and must learn to manage in healthy ways. In a 2011 study of Jewish teens in the New York area, researchers from Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies found that "stress is an important issue in the teenage years and the Jewish teens are certainly not immune from it. About 45% are highly stressed about school and another 31% are somewhat stressed."^x The table below shows the areas of life of greatest concern to this cohort of teens:

	% Very/ Extremely Concerned
Doing well in school	82
Figuring out the future	61
Finding "free" time	56
Getting enough sleep	53
Body image	33
Being teased or bullied	19
Being sexually active	13
Using alcohol or other substances	11

Although these teens expressed low levels of concern about some of the more worrisome dimensions of teen life - such as being bullied, being sexually active and using alcohol and drugs - their greater concern over academic and future success, as well as the fairly high levels of concern over what might be seen as quality of life and wellness issues (finding free time and getting enough sleep) certainly suggest that stress management, emotional health, and resilience in the face of challenges are critical goals for Jewish teens no less than other groups. This fact is becoming increasingly apparent to those who study and work with Jewish adolescents. Rabbi Bradley Solmson, Director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Campaign for Jewish Youth, envisions rethinking Jewish education and practice to make emotional well-being for students and families a central purpose and goal:

I think we have an obligation to think about both the substance of what we're offering and language we use around wellness, stress, and healthy living. **We have an opportunity in the Jewish community to present to youth and their families opportunities that not only don't add stress, but might help relieve it.** The obvious is the college application process. But just living as an adolescent today we know comes with stress. For instance, if one of the hallmarks of being a teen is poor impulse control, how do you navigate what it means to have in your pocket a device that is meant to be used impulsively, to tweet or post on Facebook or Instagram in an instant? That's a challenge and stressor that most parents today didn't have growing up. So how do we support our teenagers to navigate life stress, relationship stress, family stress, academic stress, growing up stress? Because I think we may have inadvertently contributed to this more than not - the bar mitzvah being one example of this. **Could we position the bar mitzvah as the beginning of an experience where young people say, wow, that actually helped me navigate my world and my relationship with my parents, and I want more of that in my life?**

Developmental psychologist Michael Ben-Avie has observed both through researching teens in Jewish and non-Jewish settings, as well as among the college students he advises, the particular emotional effects of recent history on this generation of adolescents:

One factor that I don't see discussed much in Jewish education - but we're discussing it a lot in higher education - is that today's kids are the children of 9/11. They were old enough to understand that something happened and everything changed in one day, but too young to really understand what happened. And then, as they entered into high school, the recession hit. **So we are speculating that today's entering college students - and this is also relevant for high school - are less secure than previous cohorts of students. They are less likely to feel that the world is a stable place. They're more fearful of change.** And they are more preoccupied with financial paths and less with service for the public good, because there is a sense of anxiety about a secure future. And the implication for Jewish schools is that if Jewish education is trying to enlarge who they are, to help develop their characters and expand their focus beyond the chemistry test that's coming up on Tuesday, then we may need to change how we think we're doing that. **Because if Jewish education is not dealing with their anxiety, and their fragility, then they won't be prepared to hear and understand the other messages we're trying to tell them.**

Mastery and Confidence - Letting Teens Shine

As teens develop both intellectually and emotionally, they are increasingly able to envision and work towards goals which help them gain self-esteem and self-confidence. Whether in academics, sports, artistic endeavors, or a variety of other arenas, the ability to achieve a level of mastery in something which is perceived as enjoyable and meaningful is an essential component of healthy adolescent development.

Although there are certainly Jewish teens that find such opportunities in Jewish-related activities, some research suggests that the perception that Jewish life is enjoyable and meaningful - and thus worthy of deep engagement - is not widespread. The Moving Traditions report found that while many boys found that becoming a Bar Mitzvah gave them "a sense of accomplishment and competence" and made them "interested in continuing to explore what it means to be Jewish," they were then left "uninspired by post-bar mitzvah offerings that might help facilitate this exploration. As one [boy] says, 'There's this gap, from your middle school and high school years, where there's really nothing strong. There are youth groups and things, but they're honestly pretty weak and they don't keep kids connected.'"^{xi}

Similarly, the Cohen Center's study of Jewish teens in New York found that few cited a Jewish activity or program as a main interest or top priority:

The main reasons teens choose the activity in which they are most involved is that it is fun and gives them opportunities to learn new things and develop skills... This finding holds equally for Jewish and non-Jewish sponsored activities. **When it comes to their #1 activity, the teens in our study are drawn by interest, enjoyment, and even passion for the particular activity. This motivation largely explains why only 7% cite a Jewish activity as their top involvement.**^{xii}

Despite the perception of the teens in these studies, many Jewish teen engagement programs and organizations do in fact provide opportunities for challenge, mastery and leadership. "Effective Strategies for Engaging Jewish Teens" reports on a number of programs that prioritize strategies to make teens "feel personally empowered. This can range from young people driving the vision and design of the work, such as providing leadership or serving in governance roles, or teens participating in developing content, leading events or activities, being responsible for giving or receiving grants, or simply providing participants with choice in what they do."^{xiii}

The problem may be that many teens are unaware of what Jewish programs have to offer, particularly when so many other activities are making demands upon their time. David Kessel spoke about how in an increasingly competitive environment, BBYO seeks to highlight the unique opportunities it provides for leadership and for meaningful connection (which will be further explored in the next section) that teens may not be able to easily find elsewhere:

I think over and above all it provides an opportunity for teens to lead in a way that they're not able to lead elsewhere. **So you get the community piece, you get the leadership piece, and we offer them opportunities and experiences that they wouldn't get somewhere else.** And we're very proud of that, because we don't want to just blend in. We want to be attractive to the teen audience, which is a pretty sophisticated and savvy consumer. **They are busy, and we have to make sure we can provide something that adds value to their lives.**

In addition, as Bradley Solmson emphasized, the Jewish world needs to do more to create and demonstrate authentic connections between Jewish life and the things that teens are passionate about:

We want to make it clear to our youth that their passions and their interests are inherently connected and connectible to Jewish life, to Jewish thinking and to Jewish practice. It's not, stop doing the things you love and start doing Jewish things. **We want to build bridges, if you're a dancer, or a baseball player, or a musician or a scientist, the message to family and to youth is that being Jewish and being interested in, for instance, science and technology are not two different things.** You're Jewish every day, and your Judaism needs to permeate your whole life on a regular basis. In too many cases the message is, you're Jewish when you go to synagogue, or you're Jewish when you go to Israel, or you're Jewish on Friday night. **We're trying to create a menu of options that allows a teen to see, 'Oh wait a minute, my Judaism connects to my whole life!'"**

Solmson also touched on a critical point relevant to developing mastery and confidence - not every participant must become a leader in order to have a meaningful experience. One can learn and grow through "deep participation" as well:

We need to offer more than leadership experiences. We think what the Jewish community needs is more deep participants, more people who show up fully engaged. Of course we need the leadership pipeline - we can't ignore the question of who's going to be the next generation of leaders. But what I think we have ignored is, who's going to be the next generation of participants? One of the both implicit and explicit messages in what we do is to say, we want you to come and show up. We want you to come and participate. You might come once a month or 5 times a year, and you don't need to be a leader. **There's a rich, deep, substantive set of menu options for you that add depth and richness and meaning to your life and help you make the world a better place.**

Competence and Confidence: Summary of Key Themes

- Healthy adolescent development includes strengthening cognitive competence - the capacity for more abstract thinking, intellectual engagement, and problem-solving; and social-emotional competence - interpersonal skills, resilience and self-regulation, and the ability to make healthy life choices and cope with stress.

- Through developing and practicing these competencies, teens gain self-confidence: the ability to envision and achieve meaningful goals, assume leadership roles, and take on challenges and appropriate risks.
- In the early teen years (ages 10-14), teens expand their intellectual interests and capacity for abstract thinking. As they continue to mature (ages 15-19) teens increase their abilities to examine and reflect upon their experiences and insights and engage in problem-solving and advanced reasoning.
- Many Jewish educators and organizations have observed that teens seek and respond to opportunities for intellectual engagement. As one observed, “Teens don’t find Jewish content boring, they find *boring* Jewish content boring”
- As teens are developing their cognitive capacities, they are also learning how to navigate an often challenging stage of life. In the face of growing academic responsibilities, new social dynamics, and physical, hormonal and neurological transformations, teens must develop effective strategies for managing stress, negotiating relationships and making healthy and productive life choices.
- Jewish youth organizations have a critical role to play developing teens’ emotional competence by helping them manage stress and anxiety, and providing ways to conceptualize social and gender roles that can counter unhealthy messages teens receive from media and the broader culture.
- Although many Jewish teens do not perceive Jewish activities as enjoyable or meaningful, those that do become involved in Jewish youth organizations and activities often find them to be valuable opportunities for developing leadership, mastery, and empowerment, all of which lead to self-confidence.
- Two avenues for increasing the potential for Jewish teens to choose and value Jewish participation are connecting Jewish activities to teens

personal interests and passions, and creating opportunities for “deep participation” as well as leadership roles.

Connection and Caring - Finding One’s Place

As teens develop their inner strengths and sense of self, they are also increasingly focused outward on their external connections to peers, communities, and the broader world. Through these connections, teens strengthen their ability to empathize and see the world through others’ eyes - the foundations of becoming caring and compassionate individuals. According to the Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Development, the teen years are a time when “close friendships gain importance; social networks expand and new friendships are formed; concern for others increases; and interest in social, cultural, and family traditions expands.”^{xiv}

Peer Connections - Fun, Friendship and Support

For most teens peer relationships take on a central place in life, even as navigating those relationships and their consequences becomes more complex. The increasing importance placed on friendships and group acceptance is deeply rooted in adolescent brain development, as much so as the cognitive changes discussed in the previous section:

One of the many fascinating contradictions in adolescence is that teens desire independence, and at the same time have a deep need to fit in and belong. **The impulse to join a group is thought to stem in part from changes in the teen brain. Emerging brain science indicates that during adolescence social acceptance by peers may be processed by the brain similarly to other pleasurable rewards**, such as receiving money or eating ice cream. This makes social acceptance highly desirable and helps explain why adolescents change their behavior to match their peers’. Social acceptance by peers triggers stronger positive emotions (a bigger “reward response”) during the teen years than it does in adulthood.^{xv}

While the need for social acceptance can certainly be a negative force if a teen’s favored social group engages in undesirable behaviors, in most cases the

positive impacts of friendships and social interaction outweigh the negatives.

Adolescent development research has found that:

Friendships are the primary settings in which youth practice the intimacy skills involved in initiating, maintaining, and ending relationships. **Within friendships, adolescents learn what it means to be trustworthy, honest, caring, and thoughtful with same-age peers...**In addition, most teens find it supportive to be part of a group going through the same transitions. Teens often feel unsure about what grown-up life will be like and wonder whether they will succeed or fail when it is their time to contribute. This ambiguity is easier to bear when shared with young people going through the same experiences.^{xvi}

Research focused specifically on Jewish teens reinforces the importance of meaningful friendships and peer connections. When the Cohen Center researchers asked teens to rate the importance of various dimensions of their lives, “Have good friends” topped the list, with 96% rating it as very or extremely important. The researchers further noted, “Reflecting on the extracurricular activity in which they are most involved, over half (53%) say that the presence of their friends was very important in attracting them to the activity...The importance of friendships is clearly not a question of popularity, which is in last place on the list [at 16%]. Rather than seeking popularity, which suggests positive regard within broad social networks, teens value the close friendship circle.”^{xvii}

The Moving Traditions study similarly found that friendships are central to the lives of Jewish boys, providing both emotional support and opportunities for relaxation and fun in the midst of otherwise stressful lives:

Teenagers value peer friendships highly and experience them as central to their lives and emerging identities. **The boys we interviewed turn to friends for advice on everything from new topics and trends, to what to do after school, to how to handle personal problems and challenges.** Amid the pressure of school and stress of adolescence – for younger boys, the transition to high school, establishing a group of friends, and dealing with puberty and for older teens, obtaining a driver’s license, finding a first job, and thinking about college – **boys enjoy simply “being a teenager” more than anything else. They look for opportunities to be with their friends and have fun.** As one boy tells us, “In my free time I like to hang with my friends. We play Xbox or watch TV. We play sports or go to the movies, but mostly we hang out and just chill.”^{xviii}

Jewish Community - Comfort and Cohesiveness

In addition to rewarding individual peer connections, Jewish organizations and groups offer broader connections to a community which shares a culture and many life experiences. The importance of religious, ethnic and other identity-based connections transcends cultures and groups, as the Johns Hopkins report explains: “A sense of self also is connected to identification with a particular group, like female, black, Jewish, Hispanic, gay or lesbian, etc. A few studies have found that a solid sense of belonging to one’s ethnic group and its traditions—referred to as ethnic identity— is associated with many benefits, such as high self-esteem and high academic performance.”^{xix}

Just as teens in general learn interpersonal and identity development strategies from their peers, Jewish teens may learn as much or more from their peers about how to develop into Jewish adults as from the adults who seek to guide them. A study of NFTY participants found that “90 percent of the NFTY respondents indicated that their friends “support and guide them as Jews” and only 62 percent indicated that their teachers do.”^{xx} Michael Ben-Avie, author of the NFTY study, further explained in an interview that teens benefit from their NFTY connections because belonging to a group helps develop the ability to “self-regulate,” or controlling impulses towards negative behavior that violates group norms:

What belonging gives the students is self-regulation, because in order to belong to the group you have to adhere to the group’s standards. And it’s very important to have that sense of standards. Not for the sake of adults, but because it’s what teens themselves yearn for and need. It gives them a kind of structure, and the sense that they’re part of a group. **A lot of Jewish experiential education talks about nurturing people on their own Jewish journey. But that education also has to give them the sense that they’re part of a group for it to really be effective.**

For some Jewish teens, Jewish settings also provide a sense of security and comfort in a society where their Judaism may lead to discomfort or discrimination. One teen quoted in the Cohen Center’s report “chose Jewish youth group [as a primary activity] because “it is a place where I feel welcome and my ideas are welcomed. It is also a place where I don’t need to hide my Judaism.”^{xxi} This sense of Jewish community as a refuge was also expressed by the Jewish teen boys profiled by Moving Traditions:

The teenage boys feel strengthened by Jewish connection, which provides respite from the marginalization and stereotyping they sometimes experience as minorities in secular environments. In short, the Jewish connections in their lives give them a gratifying sense of belonging. "You have stuff in common with people at school," explains a boy who attends public school, "but you don't totally know them. **When you go to temple, you're raised the same way generally. You just have this natural connection.**"^{xxii}

As the second half of the above passage suggests, Jewish communities are valued by teens not just as a bulwark against marginalization or prejudice. The Cohen Center study also found that many of the teens they spoke with also cited the connection, support, and friendship that seemed to them to occur more easily and naturally among fellow Jews:

Sense of community and connection to other Jews sit at the top of the list of positives [about being Jewish]. Many teens feel comfortable in the community and find it welcoming and respectful. **They speak about "the support of the community," its "cohesiveness," and their own sense of "being part of something greater than just myself." They love that "all Jews look out for each other," and that as a Jew "you are at home anywhere in the world just with one other Jewish person, no matter how different you are in other ways."** The sentiment of connection was well expressed by a 9th grade girl: "I like that when you are Jewish and you meet someone else who is also Jewish, it is very easy to make a connection with them and become friends. I also like the sense of community I get from having a close group of Jewish friends, because with similar backgrounds it is easy to relate to them."^{xxiii}

In interviews with Jewish young adults, researcher Ari Kelman heard similar stories about the value of Jewish connections during the teen years. The value and meaning of these connections were often highlighted by their contrast with other experiences and environments:

For students who recalled positive Jewish experiences - usually camp or some other informal educational experience - they often said, **I love camp because I can fit in in ways I don't at school. We heard lots of stories like that. They find that camp or youth group clicks for them in a way that school doesn't.** The real meaning of that experience is only visible in contrast to being in school for 10 months, or going to school during the day and youth group in the afternoon. So to fully understand the impact of

Jewish camp or youth group, you need to understand the contrast between experiences.

Jewish youth organizations often also have the reach and scope to provide Jewish teens with feelings of connection beyond local peers to the broader Jewish community regionally, nationally, and even internationally. Rachel Hillman, Associate Director of Planning and Strategy at BBYO, explained how the opportunity to develop connections both within one's town and around the world has become one of things that teen participants value most about their BBYO experience:

The balance between being hyper-local and being part of a global network is important to our teens. We have the chapter experience which is very local, whether it's their town or their high school. But also knowing that they're plugged into a global network where they have connections across North America and world doing the same things, using the same language, having the same experiences, is exciting and meaningful to them. So the balance between having something on the local level and having this global experience has been successful for us. We've made the idea that they're connecting to something bigger than themselves an even larger part of the experience. **It creates a connection to global Jewish peoplehood which is very real, because if you go through the BBYO experience you will have opportunities to meet teens from Argentina, Bulgaria, countries of the former Soviet Union. It's quite remarkable, and our teens are very, very passionate about that.**

The connection to "something bigger" that Jewish involvement offers operates "vertically" - across time and generations - as well as "horizontally" - across geographic distance. The teens studied by the Cohen Center (who were on the higher end of the spectrum of Jewish connection) expressed highly positive feelings about Jewish traditions such as Shabbat and holiday celebrations, which connect them to Jewish history both past and future: **"Many teens... like the sense of continuity embedded in the traditions and take pride in the fact that 'these rituals and holidays have survived so many years.'** As one teen said, 'I like celebrating the holidays and hearing the stories that I will pass down to my children one day.' These comments, it should be noted, come from across the religious spectrum."^{xxiv}

Parents and Caring Adults - Less Central, but Still Critical

The teen years have often been perceived and portrayed as a time when parents and other adults become little more than a vague presence on the fringes of a peer-dominated culture. However, research suggests that this may be an outdated perception that doesn't reflect the reality of teens today. A Pew Center research study of the "Millennial" generation - which now includes older teens and young adults - found that in contrast to the Boomers famed "generation gap," Millennials "get along well with their parents. Looking back at their teenage years, Millennials report having had fewer spats with mom or dad than older adults say they had with their own parents when they were growing up."^{xxv} A study of participants in 4-H programs across the country similarly reported that relationships with parents were both deeply valued and served as a potent force in shaping teen's attitudes and values:

While teenagers spend much more time with their peers than with their parents and may, sometimes for the first time, openly challenge their parents' actions and beliefs, **they value their relationships with their parents tremendously. They also tend to incorporate their parents' core values in such areas as social justice, spirituality, and the importance of education into their own values.** Indeed, most adolescents select friends in part because they share these core values and similar perceptions of the world.^{xxvi}

The Cohen Center research found that meaningful family interactions and conversations were both common and important in the lives of the majority of the Jewish teens they studied:

Three-fourths of the teens in our study regularly have dinner with their family, a rate significantly higher than the national figure. The literature makes clear that this simple behavior is associated with higher quality relationships with parents and siblings. **Our finding thus suggests that the parents are regularly talking with their teens and have the possibility of influencing them.** Almost all of the parents feel that honest conversations with their teens are very important. The teens do not always agree with their parents on this question but, nonetheless, **about two-thirds say that honest conversations with their parents are very important to them.**^{xxvii}

This is not to say that “easy” or “conflict-free” would be the first terms many parents would apply to their relationships with their adolescent children. A hallmark of teen life and development is the growing desire for independence, which, though healthy and normal, can at times be expressed in ways that challenge and frustrate those who care for them. The Johns Hopkins guide to teen development captures the contradictions and tensions that families often experience as teens strive for independence and autonomy:

Developing autonomy often means trying out different ways of being, thinking, and believing. While it may not be easy for adults to deal with the “Who am I this time?” aspects of adolescence, achieving autonomy is necessary if a teen is to become self-sufficient in later years. As teens develop autonomy, they have more contact with the outside world and, at the same time, may require more privacy and time alone. It is important to remember that young people are taking steps toward independence, but they are not skilled at autonomy. The parts of the brain which control reasoning, planning, and problem-solving are not fully developed in adolescents. Thus teens are unable to accurately assess risk in a situation. They both need and want limit-setting to function and grow. To be of the most benefit to adolescents, an adult needs to be a consistent figure who provides and maintains safe boundaries in which the young person can practice their independence.^{xxviii}

Parents are not the only adults who play a critical role in helping teens develop and thrive. Researcher Michael Ben-Avie has studied the impact of caring adults on teens in both Jewish and secular settings by posing a seemingly simple question: how many adults in your life care about what happens to you? As he explained, “One of the questions we asked was, who are teens talking to? Are they turning to people in the congregation? Is the rabbi helpful? Is the Cantor helpful? Is the youth guide helpful? That led to asking, how many adults do they have in their lives that care about them? **We’ve found that that factor alone is a very strong predictor of self-regulation, of achievement, of positive interpersonal relations.**”

Ben-Avie’s study of NFTY revealed that being part of a Jewish youth organization not only helps connect teens to each other, but increases the number of connections with caring adults (as compared to a control group):

Among NFTY teenagers, 54 percent indicated that between 11 and 30 adults care about what happens to them. An additional 18 percent indicated a number greater than 30 adults. The comparison public school sample had more young people at the lower end of the scale than the NFTY teenagers; 42 percent of the comparison students indicated 12 or fewer adults vs. 36 percent of the NFTY teenagers. Still, more than a third of NFTY teenagers indicated a number on the lower end of the scale. All the more so, it is important to consider the relationships between NFTY teenagers and adults. **For teens, one of the most noteworthy benefits of their participation in a youth group is the potential to increase the number of adults who care about them. This is especially important for youth who do not almost-intuitively evoke positive regard in adults.**^{xxix}

Ben-Avie has also focused on whether teens connect with adults in ways that can help guide them through rough patches during adolescence, finding that:

Of the NFTY respondents, 46 percent agreed that they seek advice when making a decision about their future from a Jewish adult because they want a Jewish perspective. Moreover, 56 percent agreed that there is at least one adult in their congregations to whom they can ask “an embarrassing question” if they want to (Note: the youth were not asked to specify which “adult”). **Seeking adult guidance is not only an effective problem-solving strategy, but also an indicator of healthy development.**^{xxx}

The concern this finding raises for Ben-Avie and others is that not enough teens in general, and Jewish teens in particular, are taking advantage of this problem-solving strategy and turning to adults to seek help. He speculated that this may in part be an unintended consequence of the emphasis placed by many Jewish educators and youth organizations on Tikkun Olam and helping others through service, without a corresponding message that it's also OK to seek help for oneself:

In Jewish education we teach students to help others, but not to ask for help for themselves. That's what we found in our studies of Jewish adults. They are reluctant to ask for help from others. So because they're not forming certain types of relationships with the adults in their lives, they don't feel that they have people they can turn to. **We have to teach them that seeking adult guidance is a very good problem solving strategy. That's the message we need to give in Jewish education - we have provided you with so many adults who can help you, so you need to**

turn to us. I don't think we're doing a good enough job at that. **We need to promote the key message that if you give then you can also take.** This is the key characteristic of a functional society or group. We need to help students understand that they need to turn to adults before a situation escalates beyond recovery.

Teens and Tech - Always Connected, But to What?

Although this section has focused on connections that are assumed to take place in person, whether one-on-one or in group settings, increasingly these live interactions are being overshadowed in teens' lives by the connections they create via apps, emojis and pixels on a screen. The most recent Pew Research study on Teens and Technology (2013) found that "Fully 95% of teens are online, a percentage that has been consistent since 2006. Yet, the nature of teens' internet use has transformed dramatically during that time — from stationary connections tied to desktops in the home to always-on connections that move with them throughout the day...About 3 in 4 teens (74%) say they access the internet on cell phones, tablets and other mobile devices at least occasionally."^{xxxix} A 2011 Pew Study found that 80% of teens online used social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter (today the list would likely also include Instagram, Vine and Snapchat). The Pew report on Millennials echoed these findings and highlighted the differences that have opened up between the generations regarding the use of technology:

[The Millennials] are history's first "always connected" generation. Steeped in digital technology and social media, they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part – for better and worse...Millennials' technological exceptionalism is chronicled throughout the survey. It's not just their gadgets—it's the way they've fused their social lives into them. For example, three-quarters of Millennials have created a profile on a social networking site, compared with half of Xers, 30% of Boomers and 6% of Silents. There are big generation gaps, as well, in using wireless technology, playing video games and posting self-created videos online. Millennials are also more likely than older adults to say technology makes life easier and brings family and friends closer together.^{xxxix}

A marketing study conducted by the advertising firm Sparks & Honey asserts that "Generation Z" - the newest generation entering their teen years - are even more connected and tech-savvy than their older siblings: "They multi-task across 5

screens...Their social connections are global...Two-way live-streaming and video-conferences (think: FaceTime and Skype) are their preferred ways to communicate.”^{xxxiii}

This new world of ubiquitous, virtual connection has sparked much thought and discussion among those who study and work with Jewish teens, even if the full implications of the phenomenon are not yet clear. Some have focused more on the downsides of cyber-connectivity, questioning whether this form of connection can provide the same meaning and emotional richness of in-person connections. Michael Ben-Avie expressed the concern that “We have the sense that everyone is connected, everyone’s on their cell phones all the time. But we’re finding that the opposite is true. It’s not giving them that sense of belonging. I don’t think any of us in the field are really understanding what’s going on and the implications.” In an article on teen development and self-regulation, he quotes a Brandeis University student who wrote in his campus newspaper:

As of writing this article, I have 1052 friends on Facebook, but it only feels equally, if not less, reassuring than my four close childhood friends. I was initially surprised by this observation, because more is better, right? But the connections I have made and maintained over Facebook and the persona I’ve created for myself feel artificial in comparison with real life. I cannot even imagine how content I’d feel if I had 1052 friends in real life and four Facebook friends... We belong online and are alone in person.^{xxxiv}

Others, however, are more optimistic about the potential of technology and the instantaneous, global connection it offers. Bradley Solmson suggests that teens could be encouraged to use the power of networked technology in the service of causes they care about (thus also engaging in another key youth development outcome, “contribution”):

We’re thinking a lot these days about how young people navigate the world through technology. For instance, if we know from the research that teenagers want to make a difference in the world, and we know that in their pockets they have the ability to conceptualize, shoot, produce and distribute a video to millions of people that could make a difference in the

world, how can we ensure that we are providing them with experiences that take all of that into account and build on it rather than ignore it?

Moving Traditions highlights the fact that while both genders are equally enamored of technology, their engagement with it is not identical. While this may present challenges for those who don't take this difference into account, it also opens up opportunities for youth educators and programs that learn to understand and incorporate the modes of technology that most appeal to boys:

Research shows that digital life has a particular twist for boys: they spend more time than girls alone or in small groups playing video games. This can make it difficult to engage them in face-to-face, group-based programming. **At the same time, it represents a new opportunity to engage Jewish boys by incorporating electronic communication, game play, and other technology-oriented activities into Jewish educational programming.**^{xxxv}

Connection and Caring: Summary of Key Themes

- As teens develop their inner strengths and sense of self, they are also increasingly focused outward on their external connections to peers, communities, and the broader world. Friendships and peer groups are the primary settings where teens learn interpersonal skills - such as trust, caring and empathy - and find support during times of challenge and insecurity.
- Research on Jewish teens reinforces the importance of meaningful friendships and peer connections, as large majorities cited their friendships as one of the most important dimensions of their lives, providing both emotional support and opportunities for relaxation and fun.
- In addition to rewarding individual peer connections, Jewish organizations offer broader connections to a community which shares a culture and many life experiences. Jewish settings provide a sense of security and comfort, and teens value the connection, support, and friendship that may occur more easily and naturally in a community of fellow Jews. Jewish involvement also provides teens with the sense of connecting to

- “something bigger than themselves” both “vertically” - across time and generations - as well as “horizontally” - across geographic distance.
- While the teen years have often been perceived and portrayed as a time when parents and other adults become little more than a vague presence on the fringes of a peer-dominated culture, this may be an outdated perception that doesn’t reflect the reality of teens today. Research on Jewish teens in New York found that meaningful family interactions and conversations were both common and important.
 - Parents are not the only adults who play a critical role in teens’ lives. The number of adults a teen can identify as caring about what happens to him or her is a predictor of interpersonal and academic success. Studies have shown that being part of a Jewish youth organization not only helps connect teens to each other, but increases the number of caring adults in a teen’s life.
 - Even as Jewish teens are guided to serve and help others through Tikkun Olam activities, they also need to hear the message that it’s OK to ask for help for themselves when they need it, as being able to seek guidance is itself a measure of emotional health.
 - The ubiquity of virtual connection among teens through technology has sparked much thought and discussion among those who study and work with Jewish teens. Some have focused more on the downsides of cyber-connectivity, questioning whether this form of connection can provide the same meaning and emotional richness of in-person connections. Others are more optimistic about the potential of technology, suggesting that teens could use the power of networked technology in the service of causes they care about, or that Jewish youth organizations could engage teens (particularly boys) by incorporating video games and other popular technology-oriented activities.

Character and Contribution - Developing Values and Helping the World

Through strengthening internal confidence and self-worth along with interpersonal connections, teens develop their characters - an understanding of how to live a moral and valuable life - and contribute to the well-being of society. In early adolescence, according to the Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Studies, “more consistent evidence of conscience becomes apparent” and “ideals develop, including selection of role models.” By the later teen years, “interest in moral reasoning increases” and “interest in social, cultural, and family traditions expands.” This expanded sense of morality, along with their increased cognitive capacity, often leads to increased interest in and commitment to larger causes:

Cognitive development prompts teens to become outward-directed and interested in something larger than themselves. The newfound ability to consider abstract concepts may make teens want to become involved in things that have deeper meaning. They want to tackle the big issues and are often drawn into causes. This not only widens a young person’s perspective but also is greatly empowering.^{xxxvi}

Character and Jewish Values

Traditionally, developing character is one of the primary purposes of nearly all religions, Judaism included. One of the many ways in which modernity has changed Jewish life is that Judaism is now only one of many sources from which young people can draw lessons about values, morality, and how to live in the world. As Jewish education scholar Jeffrey Kress explained, his research on Jewish teens has revealed that the relationship between values and Judaism is often complex for teens in a multi-cultural world, making them more hesitant to express Jewish particularism in a society that values universalism:

The bulk of the work I’ve done has been in pluralistic schools, and I’ve seen a real sense of rejection of particularism. I don’t think that’s just the result of being in a pluralistic school and dealing with diversity. I think that it’s out there in society - a by-product of the multi-cultural society. So it’s a new twist on this question of, “Does my Tikkun Olam work have to be Tikkun Olam work in my mind in order to ‘count?’” The added complexity

is the feeling among many teens that there's something inappropriate or limiting or "religion-ist" to thinking that a value is specifically Jewish. **They're trying to balance being a Jew with being a citizen of the world. So they're concerned about, "am I allowed to say that I think Judaism has a unique set of values, or does saying that make me a chauvinist?"**

However, Kress has found that the more immersed teens are in Jewish culture and community, the more comfortable they are identifying their values as specifically Jewish values - not because they don't recognize their universal meaning and applications, but because they have a language to conceptualize and express the specifically Jewish roots of their worldviews:

In the tighter-knit communities of observance - whether an Orthodox community or an active liberal community - the kids seem to arrive at adolescence with a certain set of language and assumptions that are more grounded in Judaism. **The default position is that I'm looking at something through a Jewish lens. I might question that, but I still get that there's a Jewish way and Jewish values involved. So it's no surprise that the kids who have gone through their childhood in more of a Jewish context, even if they're not observant, are more comfortable talking that talk.** The kids who are less connected to a base of community don't have a place to hang those terms, so it feels like it's putting up a wall. The kids in the observant communities are out in the world and experiencing multiculturalism, but they're more comfortable saying, "This is who I am and this is what my Judaism is."

Many Jewish youth organizations strive to make Jewish teens from a broad range of backgrounds - even those who didn't grow up in active Jewish communities - comfortable "talking the talk" of Jewish values and meaning. Deborah Meyer of Moving Traditions shared her conviction that illustrating "how to be a human being" is one of the most important roles Judaism can play in the lives of teens:

When you look at what does Judaism offer us - everybody, not just teens - it's really, what does it mean to be a human being? **How do we relate to ourselves and to each other and to the community? I think that's the focus of Judaism, and it needs to be the focus of our work with teens. Because it's exactly what teens need in this stage of development.** Thinking about how we can reach our full human potential is something the Jewish community can really make possible for teens.

There are so many Jewish teachings on all of this: from Maimonides and his idea of Middot and balance - how do we balance our different aspects - to teachings on Lashon Hara and how we relate to each other, and teachings around sexuality that are so relevant to kids around 15-16, which they'll never get to if they drop out after Bar and Bat Mitzvah.

Giving Back

Whether they call it Tikkun Olam or community service, many Jewish teens seek to express their values through action to improve the world. The Cohen Center study of Jewish teens in New York found that “63% of the teens engage in volunteer activities, an impressive result in comparison with national data that place teen voluntarism at approximately 26%.”^{xxxvii} The researchers asked the teens to choose from among a list of nine societal challenges the two they would most want to focus on to make a difference in the world. Poverty, hunger and homelessness topped the list with 36%, followed by environmental problems (23%), people with disabilities (22%) and Anti-Semitism (20%). Other responses were selected by 19% to 12% of respondents.^{xxxviii} The fairly even spread of responses (with no single response selected by a majority) suggests that teens have a wide range of interests when it comes to helping society, and thus the opportunities to engage them through service may be widespread as well. This fact is well-known by many Jewish youth organizations, which have made service opportunities a central facet of their work. BBYO, for example, has designated “Improve: Change the World” as one of the three Core Outcomes of its educational framework (alongside “Identify: Strengthen Jewish Identity” and “Connect: Create Jewish Community”). The components of Improve include: “Teens understand current social issues;” “Teens use Jewish values to guide involvement in service, philanthropy and advocacy;” and “Teens use leadership skills to mobilize peers around social issues.” Rabbi David Kessel described one BBYO strategy for involving teens in Tikkun Olam that also bridges their Jewish and secular connections and interests:

We have a partnership with Do Something, a mass-scale service and advocacy platform that offers campaigns for teens to opt into. The campaign we have with them is a can collection and hunger awareness campaign that culminates with pre-screenings across the country for The

Hunger Games movie, Mockingjay. **What's nice about this partnership is that we're able to take Jewish content and Jewish values and leverage a mass, secular platform that's very appealing to teens. So the more we can partner in a way that creates experiences that teens can't get elsewhere, the more successful we're going to be at engaging them.**

Character and Contribution: Summary of Key Themes

- Throughout their adolescent years, teens develop their sense of morality and values and increase their interest in making a contribution to the world. In early adolescence, according to the Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Studies, “more consistent evidence of conscience becomes apparent” and “ideals develop, including selection of role models.” By the later teen years, “interest in moral reasoning increases” and “interest in social, cultural, and family traditions expands.”
- One of the many ways in which modernity has changed Jewish life is that Judaism is now only one of many sources from which young people can draw lessons about values, morality, and how to live in the world. The relationship between values and Judaism is often complex for teens in a multi-cultural world, making them more hesitant to express Jewish particularism in a society that values universalism.
- The more immersed teens are in Jewish culture and community, the more comfortable they are identifying their values as specifically Jewish values - not because they don't recognize their universal meaning and applications, but because they have a language to conceptualize and express the specifically Jewish roots of their worldviews.
- Whether they call it Tikkun Olam or community service, many Jewish teens seek to express their values through action to improve the world. This fact is well-known by many Jewish youth organizations, which have made service opportunities a central facet of their work, including partnerships with secular organizations and service campaigns that use the internet and other engagement tools that are particularly appealing to teens.

The Jewish “C’s” - Content and Context

As noted in the introduction, the work that Jewish youth engagement organizations do to encourage the “6 C’s” of positive youth development is shaped by various dimensions of Jewish tradition, practice, and culture. The particular content and context of a given Jewish program - which encompasses knowledge, experiences, social milieu, and educators/facilitators - is determined by the program’s focus, goals and denominational affiliations. Thus, the Jewish texts and practices emphasized by NCSY will be different from that explored by The Jewish Lens, the American Jewish Society for Service, or the Rose Youth Foundation. But in all cases it is the Jewish context that makes the work of these organizations of particular interest to the Jewish community. Alongside the goals and outcomes focused on Jewish teens’ intellectual, social and emotional development, Jewish community institutions and leaders must also prioritize outcomes that benefit Judaism and Jewish life - namely, the continued strength and development of the Jewish people. To paraphrase the iconic political adage, we must both ask what the Jewish community can do for Jewish teens, and what - if given the right guidance and knowledge - Jewish teens will do for the Jewish community, both as adolescents and for decades beyond. Philanthropist Lynn Schusterman cited these intertwined missions in her 2011 Op-Ed calling for greater investment in Jewish teens, “Upping the Ante: Why I’m Doubling Down On The Teen Years:”

Recent research on Jewish teen experiences makes clear that investing in Jews during their teenage years pays significant dividends toward ensuring their involvement in Jewish life well into adulthood... result[ing] in young adults who are more inclined to remain involved in Jewish life, hold leadership roles in their community, invest time and money in Jewish causes, develop a strong Jewish network, and give their children a Jewish education.... Effectively designed Jewish teen experiences successfully reach and engage youth, helping them feel pride in their Jewish identity, encouraging them to contribute to Jewish life, and even ensuring a greater resiliency against the pressures that are commonplace in the teenage years.

It is clear that fun, meaningful, affordable Jewish experiences have a deep and significant impact on teens. It is clear that they are vital to ensuring our teens stay engaged with our community and develop the necessary skills to lead it. And it is clear that it is time for us to elevate our investment in the teen years — when individuals begin exploring their identity, defining their values and shaping who they will become as adults — as a priority on our communal agenda.^{xxxix}

The question this dual mission raises - which will be a central dimension of the conversations during the next stages of this initiative - is how to define the optimal relationship between the specifically Jewish goals Schusterman touches upon, and the broader developmental goals explored in this report. Three possible approaches have been suggested (and likely many more will arise):

- Viewing Jewish and developmental outcomes as operating in domains that are highly compatible and equally desirable, yet fundamentally separate, and thus requiring separate measurement approaches.
- Seeing the Jewish cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral impacts (e.g., having Jewish friends, feeling connected to Israel, gaining familiarity with Jewish texts) primarily as pathways to positive youth development, rather than as ends in themselves. This has the benefit of helping to answer the fundamental question of “Why Be Jewish” in the 21st Century, but may seem to treat the Jewish dimension as too “instrumental” rather than of inherent value.
- Finding ways to express the developmental and “whole-person” outcomes in distinctly Jewish language that also expressed elements of Jewish values and historical memory. For example, the goal of “connection” could be expressed as “Hevra” and encompass not only relationships with Jewish friends and participation in Jewish groups, but an awareness of models for friendship, connection and community within Jewish sources (e.g., David and Jonathan, the reasons for praying in a minyan of ten, texts on how to function as part of a Jewish community, etc.). This third approach may well be the most compelling, but will require further development by the field to fully actualize.

While this report cannot yet fully answer the question of how to seamlessly merge these two dimensions - Jewish and human - when determining the impact of Jewish teen engagement, the hope is that it has presented compelling ideas and possibilities that will successfully launch the next steps of this critical process.

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Rabbi Bradley Solmson, Union for Reform Judaism

End Notes:

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- ⁱ Adapted from Lerner (2013) p. 6
ⁱⁱ Kadushin et. al. (2000) p. 2
ⁱⁱⁱ McNeely et. al. (2009) pp. 21, 24
^{iv} McNeely, p. 22
^v McNeely, p. 22
^{vi} Rosov Consulting et. al. (2013) p.8-9
^{vii} *Engaging Teenage Boys: A Call to Action* (2010) p. 14
^{viii} “Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies” (2014)
^{ix} *Engaging Teenage Boys*, p. 12
^x Sales, et. al. (2011) p. 24
^{xi} *Engaging Teenage Boys*, p. 11
^{xii} Sales, p. 66
^{xiii} Rosov Consulting, p. 7
^{xiv} McNeely, p.22
^{xv} McNeely, p.34
^{xvi} McNeely, pp. 48-49, 52
^{xvii} Sales, pp. 20-26
^{xviii} *Engaging Teenage Boys*, p. 13
^{xix} McNeely, p. 49
^{xx} Ben-Avie, (2007) p.6
^{xxi} Sales, p. 32
^{xxii} *Engaging Teenage Boys*, p. 11
^{xxiii} Sales, p. 40
^{xxiv} Sales, p. 41
^{xxv} *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change.* (2010) p. 5
^{xxvi} Lerner, p. 5
^{xxvii} Sales, p. 68
^{xxviii} McNeely, p. 46-47
^{xxix} Ben-Avie (2007) p. 5
^{xxx} Ben-Avie (2007) p. 5
^{xxxi} Madden, Mary (2013) p. 2
^{xxxii} *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change.* p. 10
^{xxxiii} *Meet Generation Z* (2014)
^{xxxiv} Ben-Avie (2014) p. 6
^{xxxv} *Engaging Teenage Boys*, p. 13
^{xxxvi} McNeely, p. 27
^{xxxvii} Sales, p. 28
^{xxxviii} Sales, p. 28
^{xxxix} Schusterman (2011)