

## Youth Groups Are Worth the Fight

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Here is a dreaded conversation familiar to most parents of Jewish teens:

Them: “Hi, this is your synagogue youth adviser calling to make sure you received the flyer about our upcoming youth group event. Will your child be joining us?”

You: “Thank you for your phone call. I talked with Jordan (or David or Rafi) about this, but the thing is, he is already over-booked. With soccer practice, homework, birthday parties and baseball games, he has too much on his plate and doesn’t want to go. I’m choosing my battles, and I don’t want to fight this one.”

Come to think of it, I’m not especially fond of that conversation either, because I’m the person on the other side, the one urging you parents to send your child to the Jewish youth group.

Everyone who has ever worked with Jewish kids will tell you that Jewish youth group, camping and informal education are influential and meaningful activities, more so than many competing ones. They create memories, friendships and a positive Jewish identity. It is during these informal experiences that learning is truly natural and exciting. Kids form friendships with Jewish peers that might not develop in the classroom. And hanging out with positive Jewish role models creates lasting bonds and deeper levels of understanding and appreciation for Jewish culture.

Most of us who are youth advisers have chosen this profession because of our experiences. Ask us -- we’ll gladly tell you about that amazing sleep-away camp we attended or about the kids from youth group that we are still “best friends” with today or about the religious school weekend retreat we attended in the seventh grade that opened our eyes to Judaism.

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My response is this: Parents must choose to fight this fight. I say “must” because the teen years are the most critical socializing years in anyone’s life. Your child’s peer group during these years can determine what kind of Jewish life your child will lead in young adulthood and beyond.

Don't you want to know that your children are in a safe, nurturing environment where positive Jewish role models, Judaism and acceptance are the norm? (By the way, these experiences, too, hold weight on a college application and provide great material for essays.)

It might be hard to get your child to attend those first few events, which don't start at age 4, like soccer practice. But it's worth the push, because if your child does not attend youth events, the chances of him or her continuing Jewish involvement past confirmation get much slimmer.

To this day -- more than 10 years later -- my closest friends are not the kids from my sports teams, my clubs, auxiliary or classes. My closest friends are still the people I knew from youth group and camp.

At a youth group event not long ago, a parent offered the sort of analysis I love to hear. "Why wouldn't I want my daughter coming to this event?" the parent said. "There are other Jewish teens, and an adult adviser I trust looking out for her. She feels comfortable enough to come to you if she needs anything. Plus, you're celebrating Shabbat. Of course I want her with you!"

Later on that night, as the teenage board members reminisced about the event and their youth-group lives, they began to talk about how youth group put them on a path they never knew existed.

"For some reason, I feel closer with you guys than my friends at school," one said.

Another said: "This is the only place that I felt truly accepted."

A third voice added: "I see us still being friends in 30 years."

When asked if any felt that youth group was too much on top of sports, drama, school and other activities, one teen responded much as I would have hoped and predicted.

"God no!" she said. "At first, when I didn't know anyone it was a bit intimidating, but then I realized that everyone was in the same boat."

"From then on, I always looked forward to coming to meetings and having events. Youth group has always been the calming part of my week. We have so much stress in our lives, coming to youth group is sometimes the only peaceful thing I have."

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Lisa Greengard is youth and camp director for Temple Isaiah in West Los Angeles and a member of the Bureau of Jewish Education's Youth Professional Advisory Council. This article originally appeared in the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles and can be found online [here](#).