

Eight Tips for an Accessible Chanukah

Newton, MA (JTA) - Gateways: Access to Jewish Education, a Boston-based agency for Jewish special education, is offering eight suggestions from experts for a Chanukah celebration that is child friendly and fully accessible for children with special learning needs:

1. As Jewish parents and educators, we place a lot of importance on students learning how to say the Chanukah blessings. However, the act of reciting a blessing isn't as meaningful if a child is simply repeating words in Hebrew that have no meaning to them. Since students with special needs are often strong visual learners, adding symbols to the blessings can help them to learn the meaning of the Hebrew words and phrases. As an added bonus, over the past few years many parents of students with special needs have told me that they had been reciting these blessings all their lives without understanding what the words meant until they looked at our visual blessings.

- Rebecca Redner, teacher, Gateways

2. Did you know that the body learns 10 times faster than the brain - and forgets 10 times slower? Here are some ways to incorporate movement into your Chanukah traditions, providing a fantastic opportunity to incorporate practicing fine and gross motor skills while having fun: build menorahs out of Legos or

Play Doh; create a 2-D menorah out of shaving cream or finger paint, and cut strips of paper to make a paper chain menorah (all help with motor, visual and spatial planning). Depending on the material used, they can also serve as a multisensory experience. And did you know that spinning the dreidel helps improve finger movement for a child's pencil grip?

- Ilene Greenwald, occupational therapist

3. One menorah for each family is good - but one for each person in the family is even better. When you have multiple children and only one menorah, siblings may feel left out or have a difficult time waiting for their turn to light the candles. Having a menorah for each member of the family helps the kids feel more engaged and invested in our traditions. Plus, it is an opportunity to practice properly setting up the candles and lighting them. For very young children, you can buy or create a fabric or paper menorah with Velcro candles and flames.

- Sherry Grossman, director, Community Special Education Services, Gateways

4. Making - and eating - latkes is an integral part of Chanukah, and children with an array of needs can participate in helping to prepare them. The key is breaking the process into easy, single-action steps that match your child's abilities and motor challenges. Do

this by creating step-by-step instructions using simple language and pictures. Set up stations - one step per station - with all the supplies the child will need for that step. This gives the child independence and a sense of ownership - and makes cooking with your kids less stressful for you.

- Arlene Remz, executive director, Gateways

5. Many children have difficulty with transitions and waiting. That's why it is a good idea to separate gift giving from lighting the menorah. I find that kids just want to rush through lighting the menorah to get to the gifts, making it less special. Also, giving kids toys at night (especially on school nights when they won't have time to play with them) can be challenging. In our house the gift can come at any time during the day, depending on its use: pajamas and books at bedtime; new shoes or winter coats, scarves, etc., before school; and toys after-school so they have time to play. When we light the menorah, we have time to enjoy the process of setting up the menorah, lighting it and playing dreidel.

- Nancy Mager, director, Jewish Education Program, Gateways

6. Games are a great way to develop social skills and practice taking turns. Here are some great Chanukah gift ideas that in addition to social skills also will help develop executive function and

other critical skills:

* Guesstures: One-word charades in a fun format. Helps kids practice reading and using body language to convey messages.

* Getta Letter: One-minute rounds thinking of words in categories. Learning to categorize is an important skill.

* Guess Who? and Hedbanz: Children guess their opponent's "person" or object by asking descriptive questions. Helps kids use descriptive words and deductive reasoning.

* Rush Hour: The object is to move cars out of the way so one car can exit the board. This helps with motor and visual planning.

- Sharon Goldstein, director, Day School Programs, Gateways

7. In advance of Chanukah, one of my teachers has a discussion about Jewish heroes in her class (you can easily do this at home). The students identify eight heroes who made an impression on them; the teacher makes up a packet with information about each one to send home. The students then can read about a different hero

with their families each night while lighting the candles. The heroes they choose range from the obvious to the unsung.

- Ilene Beckman, director, Rabbi Albert I. Gordon Religious School, Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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8. For children who love and learn best through engaging technology, there are some great Chanukah apps out there for iPads and smartphones! My top five favorites are 123 Color (iPad, free); iChanukah (iPhone, 99 cents); Light My Fire (iPad, free); DreidelTap (iPhone, free); and Chai on Chanukah (iPhone, 99 cents).

- Beth Crastnopol, director, Professional Development Programs, Gateways

(Visit Gateways' website for Chanukah blessings with visuals, social stories and more.)

Eight days the light continued on its own:

A miracle, they say, but not more so

Than ordinary lives of flesh and bone,

Consuming wicks burned ashen long ago....

~Nicholas Gordon, poemsforfree.com

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