



Division for Research on Disabilities

Evaluation of a Mentoring Program for Parents with Disabilities in the Haredi Community

Ellen Milshtein ■ Chaya Gershuni

The study was conducted for JDC Israel Unlimited and funded with its assistance

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Abstract

Background

One basic right of people with disabilities, as stipulated in Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) is the right to parenthood. To successfully exercise this right, people with disabilities often require counseling, support, and assistance. Yet the State of Israel provides virtually no parenting-related support or assistance services to people with disabilities. In light of this situation, JDC in 2012 launched Israel Unlimited,¹ a pioneering program in the provision of support to parents with disabilities. One program component is the accompaniment of parents with disabilities by parent-mentors authorized by the Adler Institute. Following the findings of an evaluation study (Rivkin & Milstein, 2015²) that indicated high satisfaction with the program and a substantial contribution to parents with disabilities in the general population, it was decided to expand the program to the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) population. Volunteers from the Bnei Brak training institute for parent-mentors made home visits to parents with disabilities once every week or two to meet with mothers for about an hour and offer guidance on parenting problems.

Goal

The program for the *haredi* population, as for the general population, was accompanied by an evaluation study. The previous study focused on the effectiveness and contribution of the mentoring; the current study sought mainly to examine the changes to be made in the original program to adapt it to the characteristics and special needs of the *haredi* population.

Method

The study was qualitative. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with seven mentored families, with eight volunteer mentors, and with six of the program's key figures and leaders.

Main Findings

The format of the mentoring was found to be suitable for the *haredi* population, albeit with minor changes.

- All the interviewees agreed that the volunteers for the *haredi* population had to be ultra-Orthodox.
- The duration of volunteering was shortened to about half a year as the volunteers were laden with their other duties as mothers of large families and as breadwinners.

¹ Israel Unlimited is a partnership for the planning and development of services to advance persons with disabilities and integrate them into the community. Partners are JDC, the Ministry of Labor and Social Services, and the Ruderman Family Foundation.

² Rivkin, D., Milshtein, E. (2015). *Israel Unlimited Program at the Adler Institute to Support Parents with Disabilities: Evaluation Study*. Jerusalem, Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (RR-703-15, Hebrew).

- Because of their overload, some volunteers expressed an expectation to receive material and other rewards for their mentoring.
- Surprisingly, even though fathers did not meet with mentors on the whole, they appeared to be very involved behind the scenes through the mothers who shared the program content with them.
- Like the program for the general population, the mentoring dealt mostly with the mothers' conduct with the children. Unlike the mentoring for the general population, the question of disability hardly came up at all.
- All the mothers and fathers interviewed said that the mentoring program had greatly contributed to them.

Conclusions

The format of support for parents with disabilities by volunteer parent-mentors for a limited period at the family home was found suitable for the *haredi* community. It is certainly recommended that the program be instituted in Bnei Brak and expanded to other *haredi* communities, with the help of *haredi* mentors. Similarly, it is recommended that the volunteers be offered a variety of rewards and that the current format continue of sharing with, and involving, fathers through the mothers. In addition, the program should accept families who could potentially benefit from short-term intervention, while families with complex needs should be referred to other services.

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