

Teaching Young Children about the Holocaust

To date, there have been very few studies on how old kids should be before they learn about the Holocaust as part of their formal school studies. Nonetheless, there are lots of opinions people hold about the subject of how old is old enough, and people often hold their opinions passionately, basing their ideas on their personal convictions, experiences or dispositions. Roughly speaking, there are three schools of thought on the issue.

In the first are those who argue that early childhood should be a protected time, a time when adults need to shield the curious minds of children from the harsher aspects of the world they inhabit. This group tends to argue that teaching the Holocaust to youngsters is also developmentally inappropriate; young minds are simply not sophisticated enough to comprehend the complexities of the Holocaust, and young hearts are not well-equipped to tackle the enormity of this tragedy. "Why risk giving children nightmares needlessly?" this group asks. "When the students are old enough and more mature, they will be ready to learn, and until then, we shouldn't teach about it."

In the second group are those who claim that it is the duty of adults to teach children, even young children, about the Holocaust. While children cannot fully comprehend its complexities, they can nonetheless begin to learn about it in a simplistic fashion. This group's proponents tend to agree with Jerome Bruner, the educational theorist who believed that "there is an appropriate version of any skill or knowledge that may be imparted at whatever age one wishes to begin teaching—however preparatory the version may be."¹ Kids can be taught what racism is, for example, or how important it is to speak up when someone is being hurt. In other words, kids can be taught about the social dynamics at play during the Holocaust as a way to prepare them for learning about its specific history in greater depth later. These proponents consider it better for students to be ushered into Holocaust knowledge slowly than not to be exposed to it at all; otherwise kids will be utterly unprepared for its horrors when they do encounter the Holocaust later.

In a third group are those who advocate teaching young children about the Holocaust without intellectually simplifying or emotionally minimizing its tragic content. According to this argument, it is the unenviable role of teachers sometimes to confront their students with the horrors of the world, the Holocaust among them. And it is better for kids to learn about the Holocaust for the first time from adults who can shape the experience carefully and caringly than for kids to learn about the Holocaust for the first time randomly, from a television show, older kids' insensitive renderings or widely circulated rumors. As the Holocaust survivor Batsheva Dagan puts it, "Today's children grow up in a world without secrets";² better then to help them navigate what they will learn about anyway.

¹ Jerome S. Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1966), 35.

² Batsheva Dagan, "Heutige Kinder wachsen auf in einer Welt ohne Geheimnisse" 6 Wie können wir Kindern helfen, über den Holocaust zu lernen? Ein psychologische-pädagogischer Zugang. Warum, was, wie und wann?, in Jürgen Moysich and Matthias Heyl (ed.), *Der Holocaust: Ein Thema für Kindergarten und Grundschule?*, (Hamburg: Krämer, 1998,) 36-50.

Most people can find some claim in each of these orientations to agree with. In fact, there is a way in which all three orientations are compatible if the age barriers between the orientations are left unexplicated. The question at the heart of all three, though, is still “how old is old enough?” or, put differently, “how young is too young”? What could we take as a sign that a child is ready to move from the protected zone of early childhood to a later stage of gentle exposure to the Holocaust, and then again, from gentle exposure to full confrontation? At what age or grade should we teach kids formally about the Holocaust or some preparatory version of it? And, more importantly, if we *are* going to teach young kids about the Holocaust, what should that preparatory version look like?

Although far from conclusive, Simone ran one of the only studies of what happens to young kids when they learn about the Holocaust as part of the formal school curriculum. She found that students in the 3rd grade were too young to learn this material in any depth. While the parents and teachers in that study thought the kids were old enough to confront these horrors, the kids themselves wished they had been older before learning about it in school. If we are serious about listening to kids’ voices and valuing their opinions, the results of this study seem pretty persuasive. (It’s also clear that more studies need to be done.)

We base our recommendations in part on this empirical research, which is why we advocate strongly that kids in Kindergarten through 3rd grade not be exposed to the Holocaust as part of their formal school curriculum. That is, we don’t advocate that you teach about the Holocaust to this age child. While you ought to teach “preparatory Holocaust education” to young kids—teaching them the importance of accepting difference, caring for the hurt, not judging others superficially, thinking critically, Jewish mitzvot etc.—we don’t advocate that you teach about the Holocaust directly until 5th or 6th grade at the earliest. And, even then, we hope you’ll make accommodations by teaching kids in those grades about the Holocaust’s more redemptive aspects only—rescue, resistance, and stories that soften the harder blows of this history. We think that the earliest young people ought to be taught about the Holocaust in depth is when they are older, when as a group, they are mature enough to be appropriately staggered by its enormity and developed enough to discuss its implications. Some communities insist that students become bar or bat mitzvah, 7th grade before studying about the Holocaust in-depth; others put off study until even later.

As conservative as it may sound, this means that we advise you to keep younger students out of school-wide Holocaust commemoration activities if the ceremonies are to be overly explicit; in other words, if you are planning to commemorate the Holocaust in your school, plan to have separate arenas running simultaneously so that the K-3rd kids can have their own program separate from the older kids. This will allow you to help both groups commemorate an important part of Jewish history in an age-appropriate manner. Below are some ideas to help you plan such single-session educational commemorations.

Teaching Ideas

Pre-Kindergarten (ages 3/4/5)-Kindergarten:

1. **Candles:** Bring to class an array of different types of candles—Sabbath candles, a *havdalah* candle (braided candle used in the service that marks the end of Sabbath), birthday cake candles, decorative candles, and a *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle. Ask the students to describe what they know about each kind of candle and if they’ve used each kind in their home, and when. (This is an important step

since it may let you know if your students have lost a family member.) Then, explain that some candles we light to celebrate happy events (birthdays); some we light to mark special times (Sabbath); and some we light to mark sad events, to remember people we love who are no longer with us.³

2. **Happy/Sad Holidays:** Ask your students to move around the room with their bodies showing that they feel happy. Then ask your students to move around the room with their bodies showing that they feel sad. Then ask, what did you do to show that you felt happy? What did you do to show that you felt sad? How did you feel doing each? Explain that in the Jewish tradition, we have some holidays that are happy (*Simchat Torah*, *Purim*, *Tu B'shevat*) and some that are sad (*Yom HaShoah* or the 10th of the Hebrew month of *Tevet*). Just as people sometimes feel happy and sometimes feel sad, so we have holidays that either celebrate happy times or help people remember sad times. Use an artistic medium to have students render happy holiday feelings and sad holiday feelings. (For example, they may make paper plate faces, paintings, drawings, collages, body tracings of both feelings, etc.)
3. **In God's Image:** Sitting together, explain to your students that it says in the Hebrew Bible that people are made "in the image of God" (Genesis 1: 26). That means that people are made to be like God, not the same as God, but like God in some way. Ask what your students think is like God in each of them. What do they think is "Godly" in them? What do they like about themselves? What do they like about each other? Then ask if we're all of us made to be like God, what does that mean we're doing to God when we hurt each other?
4. **Losing Things:** Ask the students to imagine for a moment that they've lost something they love—maybe a stuffed animal, a pet or a special toy; what do they think would make them feel better if they knew they wouldn't find it again? What might they do to make someone else feel better when they've lost something (or someone) they won't see again? (There are a number of sweet children's books that could help you talk about this issue further. **Flora's Blanket** is about a little bunny at bed-time who has lost her special blanket. She finds it in the end, but you could talk about how she felt before she found it; the same goes for **Laney's Lost Mama**, which is about a little girl getting separated from her mother in a department store. While this story has a happy ending, too, it is more conducive to talking about losing people and the feelings you might have in that situation.)
5. **Jewish Life Before the Holocaust:** Another appropriate way to introduce this age child to what they will later learn about the Holocaust is to acquaint them with stories about Jewish life before the Holocaust. (Because *shtetl* life is often imbued with a kind of nostalgia, these books tend to be utterly charming. These are good texts for educators wary of any explicit Holocaust content.) A few recommendations wary of any explicit Holocaust content.) A few recommendations include: **Joseph Had a Little Overcoat**, which is graphically interesting, playfully ironic, fun for parents and kids from ages 0 on up, and even includes Yiddish song lyrics and music. Although **Hannah's Sabbath Dress** is set in a non-specific time period, it has a sweet "old-world" feel about it and is appropriate for ages 3 and up. **You Never Know: A Legend of the Lamed-Vavniks** has a specific European setting and is appropriate for slightly older kids, 4-8. **The Feather Merchants & Other Tales of the Fools of Chelm** is good for

³ Thanks to Janet Harris, Berkeley, California-based early childhood educator, for this activity idea.

slightly older kids, 5-8, since the younger ones don't understand its kind of silliness.

First-3rd grade:

Many of the activities in the above section can be adapted for use in the older grades. For example, you may use the same candles activity for older kids, explaining more specifically who lights a *yahrzeit* candle, when, and why, etc.

6. **Kaddish Yitom--Mourner's Prayer:** Sing or play a recording of the song, "Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head up high, and whistle a happy tune, and no one knows that I am afraid...." Make sure everyone understands the words of this song before asking the question, "Why would someone who felt afraid whistle a happy tune?" (The kids will come up with good explanations.) Then, ask why someone who felt sad might say a happy prayer? Explain that there's a prayer called the Mourner's Prayer that makes people feel better when they're mourning, when they miss someone they love who's no longer there. The words of the Mourner's Prayer express our belief in the greatness of God, and when people who are in mourning say that prayer, they feel better (maybe not all at once, but after saying the prayer every day for a while they do). Explain that in some synagogues, when someone is mourning, everyone in the congregation says the Mourner's Prayer with that person while in other congregations, just the people who are mourning say *Kaddish* alone. (Your kids may know how it's done in their congregation. They may also have someone in their family who has said that prayer.) What's nice about saying a prayer with other people at the same time? What's helpful about saying the prayer alone? Brainstorm together what your kids could do to make a mourner in their community feel supported. (As a follow-up, in one synagogue school, for example, the 2nd graders researched how many mourners their congregation had in a typical year and then produced that number of cards to be sent on behalf of the congregation at the appropriate time.) If you know of someone in your community who has lost someone in their family, observed the practice of saying *Kaddish* and who would be a sensitive and engaging speaker, invite them to come in and discuss what it was like to observe this ritual. (Make sure they know, though, that it's not appropriate to lecture. Instead, invite them to tell stories about the person they lost, how it made them feel and what it was like to say *Kaddish*.)
7. **The Sneetches:** This Dr. Seuss book is a wonderful way to expose kids to the ideas of prejudice, discrimination, conformity (and commodification). Read this book aloud and talk carefully about what's going on in it both as you read and after. Kids will often listen, but they may not always understand the story. What do your kids think happens after the book ends? We like following up this book with a "stand-and-smile" exercise meant to show ways that the kids in your class are alike and different from each other. Ask the kids to stand up, smile and thumb their chests when you say a statement that applies to them. ("I have brown hair."; "I'm 5 years old."; "I'm wearing white shoes."; "I have friends who aren't Jewish."; "I have a star on my belly.") The kids themselves can take turns supplying statements once the pattern is set up.
8. **Holocaust Picture Books:** There are an increasing number of picture books about the Holocaust targeted for young children. Many of them are very good: sweetly storied, rich in Jewish culture, enfolding loss within continuity, emotionally moving. All of them may evoke complex questions, though, which you should

think about how you'll engage before beginning, questions like: "Why do people go to war?" "Why did people blame Jews?" "What happens when people die?" Don't be afraid of asking the kids to elaborate their own thoughts about each of these issues. Don't feel, in other words, that it's your job to answer questions. It is worth reiterating, too, that we suggest the titles below for single class period readings. We don't recommend that you read more than one of these to your students as this age child is simply too young for a mini-unit.

A few of the titles we especially like include: **Grandma Esther Remembers** is great for younger grades and includes beautiful photographs. It is not too graphic of a story, but it is still honest with a great layout and perfect for activity extension ideas (a good recipe for *tsimmes* too). **The Tattooed Torah** follows the story of a Torah through the war (and after,) and in that way shields readers from thinking too much about people. The subtitle of **One Yellow Daffodil** claims that it is a *Hanukkah* story, but it is really a Holocaust story, and a good one to read on *Yom HaShoah* rather than *Hanukkah*. **The Feather-Bed Journey** is a gorgeous book about a family's (and a mattress') transformations from generation to generation. Because the storyteller's family is killed, it's better for older children. **The Never-Ending Greenness** has Van-Gogh-ish illustrations, and follows a young boy's childhood in Poland as the German's take-over. It follows his subsequent move to a ghetto, his escape and his life planting trees in Israel after the war. **The Terrible Things** is marketed as an "allegory of the Holocaust," and tells a version of Pastor Martin Niemoller's famous quotation, "First they came for the communists, but I wasn't a communist, so I didn't speak up..." through the use of animals. If you use the book, it's important to talk about why the "terrible things" did what they did. For a nice follow-up activity, Simone once saw a teacher have his students break up into animal groups shown in the book, and each group had to think up what they would do if the "terrible things" were trying to catch them. What could they have done if they had known what was coming? How could the animal groups have organized a resistance? Have them brainstorm and act out their resistance plans.

4th-5th Grade:

It's worth noting that, except for the first two, all of the picture books in the section above work beautifully with 4th and 5th graders, too.

9. **More Picture Books:** These picture books are more explicit, more depressing, more graphic or more evocative than the preceding ones, which is why it's worth reading them aloud to the whole class or a small group and discussing them together.

The Yanov Torah is Simone's favorite Holocaust book for 4th/5th graders since it reveals glimpses of human atrocity but through the lens of the holiness of Torah. It's the true story of a Torah smuggled into a labor camp one scroll at a time. We suggest you edit out the last section of the book which focuses on the Torah's being smuggled out of the former Soviet Union, not because it isn't interesting reading, but because it takes about 45 minutes to read the whole book in total without that section. In **Nine Spoons** a grandmother explains to her grandchildren the origins of a very unusual *Hanukkiah* that she lights every year. The *Hanukkiah* was crafted from spoons in a children's barracks of a slave labor camp. The illustrations are not great, but the story is very moving—uplifting, but still provocative, and centered on Jewish survival and continuity. You may want

to not show the pictures and have students design the *Hanukkah* themselves, based on their imaginations. **Rose Blanche** is told from the perspective of a young, non-Jewish German girl who smuggles food to a group of children in a nearby concentration camp. This story requires some explanation as 4th graders often don't understand the last few pages of the book where Rose Blanche herself is killed since it's only implied. The pictures are riveting, and the bleakness of the story is tremendously powerful. You can have students write letters to Rose Blanche's mother, pretending that they survived their stay in the concentration camp thanks to Rose Blanche's food. **Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story** discusses the amazing rescue activities of Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat in Kovno who was able to save 1,000's of Jews during the Holocaust. It is told from the perspective of his young son. Make it a point to read aloud the "afterward" to your students, too; written by Sugihara's actual son, Hiroki, which discusses the repercussions post-war of Sugihara's rescue activities. **Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen** is based on the actual rescue activities of a Dutch heroine. This book contains a marvelous "epilogue," which you should read aloud. **The Grey Striped Shirt** is a little longer than the others and will take more than a single class period to read aloud. It is about a little girl who finds a grandparent's concentration camp uniform in the closet. The story discusses the Holocaust in very simple terms as the grandparents explain their experiences to her. There are no graphic images.

Family Book Groups: There are a number of good chapter books for kids of this age, too. If your students are strong readers, you can assign them to read these books aloud to their parents at home, chapter by chapter, and you can discuss the chapters in class. It's a great opportunity for family education, too. For example, you can organize "book groups": kids in one, parents in another, then 2-3 families in each group, etc. You can have one family session at the mid-point of a book and another at its conclusion. The kids might put on a skit of a powerful scene for the parents and vice versa, to serve as launching points for the discussions. The three best chapter books, interestingly, all focus on girls' experiences: **Number the Stars**, **The Devil's Arithmetic**, and **The Upstairs Room**.

- 10. Films:** There are not many good films for this age child, but there are two that are both excellent in different ways. If you can find a copy, **Daniel's Story** is the video accompaniment to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's exhibit for young children. It takes about 15 minutes and brings up many questions specifically about the Holocaust, and yet it is not graphic or scary. It's a great video that sadly went out of print, but lots of Jewish institutions own it and would likely loan it out. Another good one is the Frontline Video, **A Class Divided** (sometimes referred to as the "brown-eye/blue-eye" experiment). Students are very adept at analyzing why the kids acted the ways they did, what they should learn from the simulation, and how antisemitism works as a form of racism. We recommend that students watch the video and talk about how they think they would have reacted rather than having teachers perform this kind of simulation.

Resources for Teaching

(Please see the section above for plot summaries or highpoints of the books below.)

A Class Divided

Website: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/>

This website houses the Frontline Video in which Jane Eliot divides her kids into blue-eyed and brown-eyed kids. It's moving and fascinating, and despite the fact that it looks somewhat dated (made in 1968), all kids get involved in it quickly.

Daniel's Story

Produced by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1993, # minutes

This short video, though now out of print, was distributed to Jewish institutions as part of the Jewish Heritage Video Collection.

The Devil's Arithmetic

Written by Jane Yolen and published by Puffin Books, London, 1990

The Feather-Bed Journey

Written by Paula Kruzband Feder and published by Albert Whitman & Co., Morton Grove, ILL., 1995

The Feather Merchants & Other Tales Of The Fools Of Chelm

Written by Steve Sanfield and published by Scholastic Books, New York, 1991

Flora's Blanket

Written by Debi Gliori and published by Orchard Books, London, 2001

Grandma Esther Remembers

Written by Ann Morris and published by Millbrook Press, Brookfield, CN, 2002

The Grey Striped Shirt

Written by Jacqueline Jules and published by Alef Design Group, Los Angeles, 1997

Hannah's Sabbath Dress

Written by Itzhak Schweiger-Dmi'El and published by Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat

Written by Simms Tabak and published by Viking Children's Books, New York, 1999 (This version of the book won a Caldecott Medal.)

Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen

As told to Michelle R. McCann by Luba Tryszynska-Frederick, and published by Tricycle Press, Berkeley, 2003

The Never-Ending Greenness

Written by Neil Waldman and published by Morrow Junior Books, New York, 1997

Nine Spoons

Written by Marci Stillerman and published by Hachai Publishing, Brooklyn, 2002

Number the Stars

Written by Lois Lowry and published by Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1998

One Yellow Daffodil

Written by David Adler and published by Harcourt Brace, Orlando, 1995

Passage to Freedom: the Sugihara Story

Written by Ken Mochizuki and published by Lee & Low Books, New York, 1997

Rose Blanche

Written by Roberto Innocenti and published by Harcourt Brace, city, 2003

The Sneetches

Written by Dr. Seuss and published by Random House, New York, 1961

The Tattooed Torah

Written by Marvell Ginsburg and published by UAHC Press, New York, 1983

The Terrible Things

Written by Eve Bunting and published by the Jewish Publication Society, New York, 1989

The Upstairs Room

Written by Johanna Reiss and published by Harper Trophy, New York City, 1990

The Yanov Torah

Written by Erwin Herman, published by Kar-Ben Publishing, Toronto, 1985.

You Never Know: A Legend of The Lamed-Vavniks

Written by Francine Prose and published by Greenwillow, New York City, 1998

Resources for Further Learning

Peaceman, Heike Deckert. "Should There Be Holocaust Education for K-4 Students? A Reply to Dr. Samuel Totten"

This article is one of a series which addresses the question of how old is old enough for students to learn about the Holocaust. It was written in response to Samuel Totten's arguments (cited below).

Seppinwall, Harriett. "Incorporating Holocaust Education into K-4 Curriculum and Teaching in the United States," Full text available at:

http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Educational_Resources/Curriculum/Incorporating_Holocaust_Educat/incorporating_holocaust_educat.html

The website is produced by the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota, and the full texts of responses to her article are posted there as well.

Totten, Samuel. "Should there be Holocaust education for K-4 students? The answer is 'No.'"

http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Educational_Resources/Curriculum/Curriculum_Concerns/curriculum_concerns.html

The website is produced by the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota.

Wieviorka, Annette. *Auschwitz Explained to my Child*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 2002.

This is an excellent introduction to the Holocaust, written as a series of common questions children have and the kinds of answers we as parents wish we could supply. Not suitable for young children, though, given its graphic content.

