

# Raising the Bar for Parent-and-Me Classes

by **LESLEE KOMAIKO**, *Contributing Writer*

**V**ictoria Mann Simms has spent much of her professional life looking at the lives, brains and development of very young children. A clinical psychologist for 25 years, she founded in 2011 the Los Angeles-based Simms/Mann Institute for Education and Community.

One of her latest endeavors at the institute is The First 36 Project. As the name suggests, the project's focus is on children in their early formative years, from birth to age 3. But The First 36 Project does not work directly with children. Rather, it works with early childhood educators at local Jewish schools.

The first cohort of 12 educators was chosen by Builders of Jewish Education (BJE), which partnered with the institute on the project and represents the early childhood centers at six local congregations. Two educators each from Temple Beth Am, Temple Sinai, Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Valley Beth Shalom, Temple Judea and Temple Beth Hillel started their journey late last spring, and receive a small stipend for their participation. According to participant Sari Edber, 37, a parent-and-me facilitator at Temple Beth Hillel in Valley Village, "It's been a really powerful and enlightening experience. I came into this with all of these hopes of gaining the neuroscience research aspect of the program, and I'm coming out with not just the information but the practicality and tools and friendships and resources to implement it as well."

The core of the curriculum is the *Building the House Within Guide*, authored by Mann Simms in collaboration with institute colleagues. The guide reflects the latest in neuroscience research and child development theory, gleaned from the work of some of the world's most respected authorities, and is organized into six distinct categories: temperament, communications, self-regulation, executive function, empathy and gratitude, and synchrony, which is about attunement between parent and child.

"All of the principles are tried-and-true, old-fashioned ideas," said Phil Liff-Grieff, associate director at BJE. "The piece that is unique here is that it is grounded in the latest understanding of what is happening in the brain. It's not just someone's grandma telling them how they should behave. It's CAT scans and MRIs that tell you, 'Yes, indeed, your grandma was right.'"

According to Mann Simms, a grandmother of four who lives in Los Angeles, *Building the House Within* is "a metaphor for building the house we have within ourselves, the psychological inner world. ... It's about building resilience: how one builds resilience within themselves and what does that have to do with attachment and all the other parts of connecting?"

Although initially planned to be a yearlong course of study, the program has been extended to 18 months for the first cohort. The First 36

Project participants have been meeting approximately every six weeks to discuss the material. Discussions are often facilitated by Project Director Leslie Silverstein, a former teacher with a double master's degree in social work and Jewish communal services who provides personalized, one-on-one coaching as well. The participants also have a very active private Facebook group on which they post relevant articles and ideas for sharing the knowledge they have gleaned with parents during their parent-and-me groups.

"A lot of infant and toddler groups are more about meeting places, not as much about [gaining a] knowledge base," said Mann Simms, who is Jewish. Her hope is that The First 36 Project will help educators create more classes that combine the two.

"A lot of schools already had parent education components, but ours did not," said Lisa Whitman, 48, assistant director of the Early Childhood Center at Temple Judea in Tarzana.

with our babies — talking, singing, gaze, touch — are more than just fun and loving. By doing those things, we are helping to form neural pathways in our babies' brains that will help them throughout their lifetimes." That's pretty powerful stuff."

"It has worked out beautifully," Whitman added. "Sometimes the topic really hits and turns into a big discussion."

BJE also contributed to The First 36 Project curriculum. "We took what we were given and added a Jewish component, a layer of Jewish wisdom that relates to [each of] the specific areas," Liff-Grieff said.

"There are lots of Jewish texts that provide deeper insight and meaning into what is being presented," he added. "What we're trying to do is show them how Jewish wisdom is a useful tool in thinking through their parenting strategies." Liff-Grieff offered as an example a popular Hasidic saying that was introduced as part of the temperament module: "If your child has talent as



**Paloma, with parent-and-me facilitator Sari Edber during Shabbat singing.**

"Our mommy-and-me program was all child-based. We do indoor and outdoor play, art, music and movement, and Shabbat. There was always casual talk between parents and teachers, but never a formal time. It was always something I wanted to do." Now, thanks to The First 36 Project, Whitman and her colleague Erin Aghai, who is also in the first cohort, lead regular discussions with the parents of their youngest charges.

"We would get a 60-point Power Point on attachment," Whitman explained. "It's ... information we all instinctually knew. But it is amazing to have it backed up by science. Instead of saying to a parent, 'You should put down your phone just because,' you can say, 'The interactions we have

a baker, don't ask him to be a doctor."

"It's about being sensitive to your child's temperament: how it's like yours and different from yours and understand it's OK for your child's to be different," Liff-Grieff said.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles is also involved in The First 36 Project, conducting an in-depth, ongoing assessment of the project. The Simms/Mann Institute has made a three-year commitment to the project, and a new cohort will begin early in 2017.

Ultimately, Mann Simms said, "It's about the children: helping our society be a society of people that are managing in their world and adapting and positive." ■