

Executive Summary: Select Findings from an Evaluation of the RSJ Camper Outreach Initiative

THE INITIATIVE

Created by the Genesis Philanthropy Group and conducted in partnership with the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC), the Russian-Speaking Jewish Camp Outreach Initiative (RSJ Initiative) works to engage more campers and staff from the Russian-speaking Jewish (RSJ) community in North American Jewish camps. A grant from Genesis Philanthropy Group to FJC supports 15 camps in building capacity to recruit RSJ campers as well as provide the campers with a high quality camp experience. FJC supports these camps with consultation and training, and through the One Happy Camper® (OHC) incentive program and camp scholarships. Since 2013, the RSJ Initiative has helped 15 camps enroll approximately 1,300 new and returning RSJ campers in their programs.¹

In 2017, the Genesis Philanthropy Group partnered with Informing Change to conduct an evaluation of the Initiative. Informing Change surveyed RSJ campers who attended camp between 2014–17 and studied a subset of OHC survey data collected from 2014–17 from RSJ parents, identified by country of origin. Grant reports from participating camps to FJC were also reviewed. In addition, camp directors and RSJ camp counselors from RSJ Initiative camps were interviewed, as well as FJC staff.

THE RSJ CAMPERS & FAMILIES

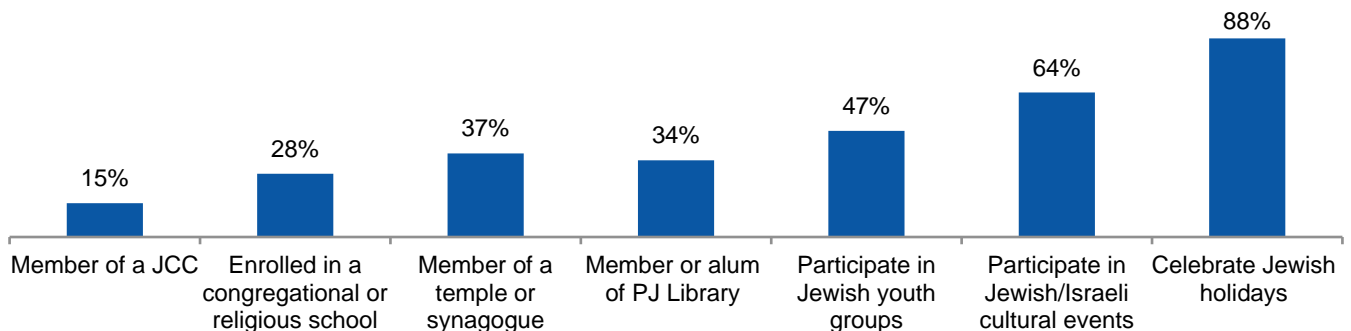
Most of the campers and families served by the Initiative report few connections to Jewish institutions such as a synagogue or a JCC. A little more than one-third of families report that they are members of a temple or synagogue. However, the families are not completely disconnected from Judaism and some report connections with congregational and religious schools, PJ Library, and Jewish cultural events (Exhibit ES-1).

Two-thirds of the RSJ families report that no one in their family previously attended a Jewish overnight camp.

Exhibit ES-1

RSJ families have some connections to the Jewish community.

OHC Parent Survey; n=99



According to responses from RSJ OHC recipients about the frequency of their child's engagement in Jewish activities, **RSJ campers are much less likely to participate in organized Jewish activities on a regular basis than OHC recipients overall.** Specific comparisons include:

¹ This figure represents the number of camper-summer, not unduplicated individual campers (e.g., one individual who attended camp for three summers is counted three times).

- Only 43% of RSJ families say their child is attending a Hebrew or religious school, compared with 81% of families in the general OHC population.
- Only 55% of RSJ families report that their child attends synagogue or temple services, compared with 89% of families in the general OHC population.
- RSJ families and the general OHC population report that their children participate at similar rates in Jewish youth group activities (47% and 55%, respectively), and at the same rate in JCC programs (33% for both).

RSJ Campers

RSJ campers are having great camp experiences, and their connections to their Jewish friends and counselors extend beyond the camp session. Approximately three-quarters of campers who responded to the survey (71–77%) agree that they were happy with their experience at camp, that they did a lot of fun activities at camp, that camp staff cared about them, and that they made good friends at camp. Slightly more than half of RSJ campers (56%) report attending an RSJ Initiative Camp two or more times between 2013 and 2017.

Almost all campers (89%) report that they stayed connected to camp and their community of Jewish peers. Almost half (47%) also attended a camp event after the summer season, such as a reunion or family event; this proportion is substantial considering the logistics of attending a camp event versus staying in touch on social media.

Attending Jewish camp seems to make indelible impacts on campers’ lives. When asked to name something big that changed in their lives because of going to camp, 39% of campers report making lasting social connections; 23% describe improved social skills, confidence, and independence; and 11% report feeling like part of a community.

POSITIVE JEWISH CHANGES FOR RSJ CAMPERS

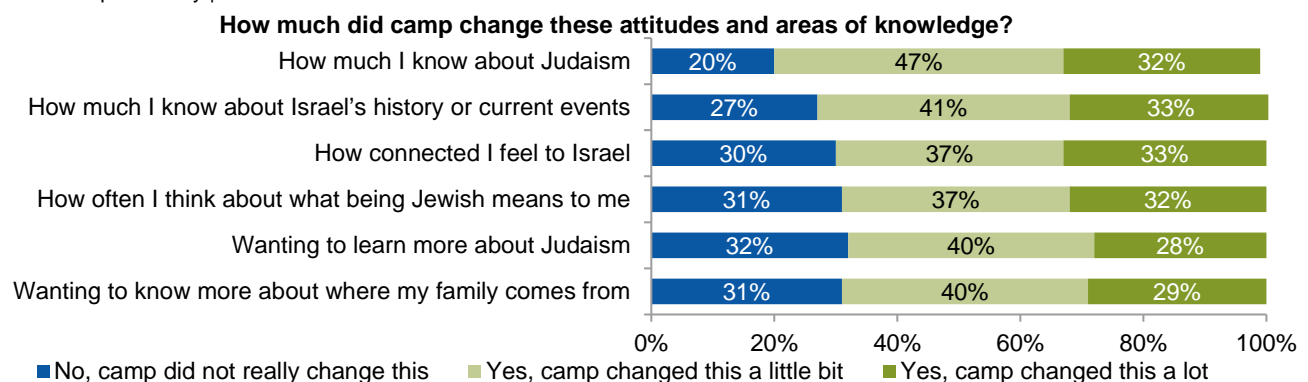
The majority of RSJ campers report some Jewish changes after attending camp, and **about one-third report that camp made a big change in how they feel or think about Jewish things.**

Campers report the most amount of change in how much they know about Judaism, and report similar changes in other items related to gaining knowledge about Judaism or their family’s history (Exhibit ES-2). On the other hand, RSJ campers report slightly fewer changes in how they think or feel about involvement in Jewish things like youth groups, volunteer opportunities, or other camps, or engaging in Jewish actions such as celebrating holidays, talking about Judaism with their parents, or saying prayers (Exhibit ES-3).

Exhibit ES-2

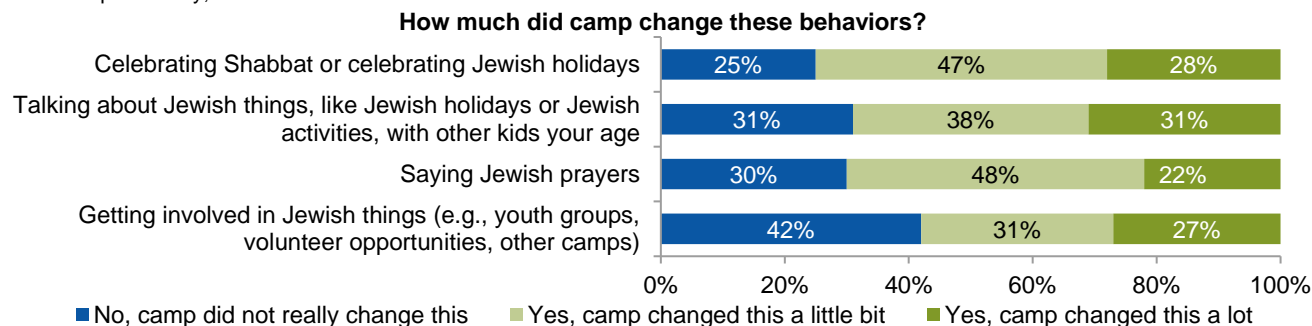
Attending camp increased most RSJ campers’ knowledge and interest about Judaism.

RSJ Camper Survey | n=116–125



About half of the RSJ campers say camp changed the level of their involvement in Jewish activities and actions.

RSJ Camper Survey; n=116-125

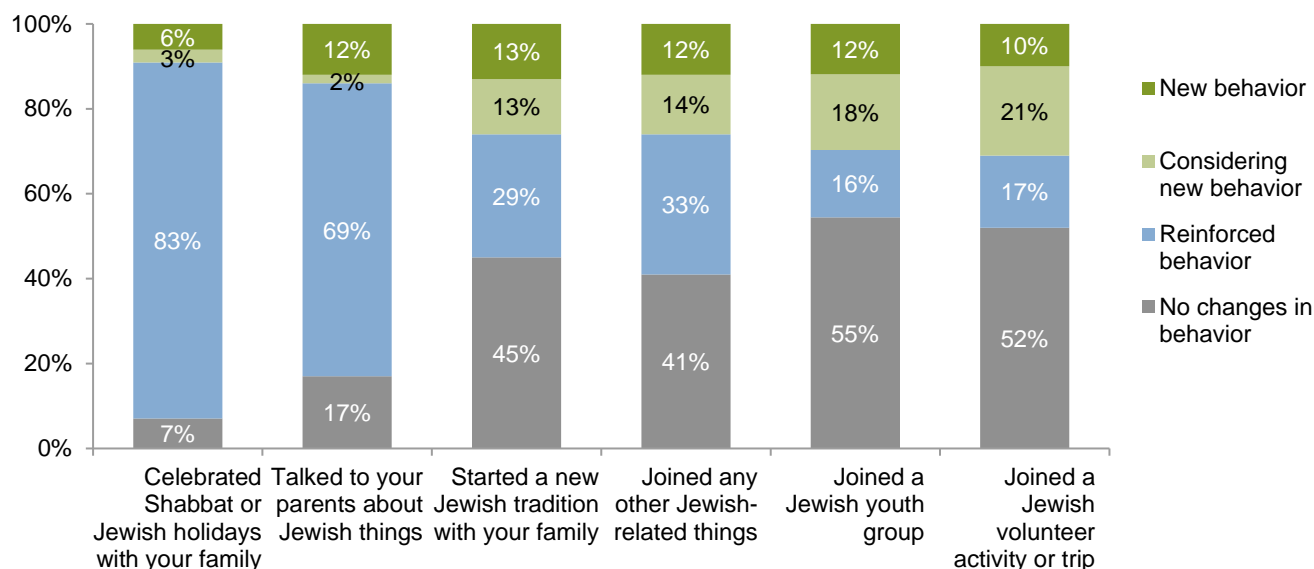


In examining all of the items that could have changed for a camper because of camp, more than half of campers (59%) report a little or a lot of change for 8 or more of the 10 items included in the survey.² There were no significant relationships between the changes and camp attendance, meaning that those campers who attended an Initiative camp more than once did not report more changes than campers who attended an Initiative camp only once.

In addition to changes in their perception of Judaism and Jewish activities, many campers report continued engagement in Jewish behaviors after camp, some report adopting new behaviors since returning home from camp, and some report interest in engaging in new Jewish activities (Exhibit ES-4). Overall, camp appears to be supportive of youths’ previous connections with the Jewish community, and to some extent is piquing the interest of some campers to engage in Jewish activities.

Camp prompts 3 out of 10 RSJ campers to join or consider joining a Jewish youth activity or youth group.

RSJ Camper Survey | n=117-125



² The 10 items are: 1) Wanting to know more about where my family comes from; 2) Wanting to learn more about Judaism; 3) How often I think about what being Jewish means to me; 4) How connected I feel to Israel; 5) How much I know about Israel’s history or current events; 6) How much I know about Judaism; 7) Getting involved in Jewish things (e.g., youth groups, volunteer opportunities, other camps); 8) Saying Jewish prayers; 9) Talking about Jewish things, like Jewish holidays or Jewish activities, with other kids your age; and 10) Celebrating Shabbat or celebrating Jewish holidays.

RECRUITMENT, RETENTION & FINANCIAL AID

In addition to recruiting new campers, camps in the Initiative gained lasting benefits from building relationships in the RSJ community. Camp directors say the greatest benefit of the Initiative has been that it allowed their camps to invest in tailored marketing to reach the RSJ community and expand the circle of RSJ families who can talk about the benefits of camp. Only 6 of the 15 camps report trying to reach RSJ families prior to joining the Initiative.

The two most commonly reported challenges in enrolling new RSJ campers are:

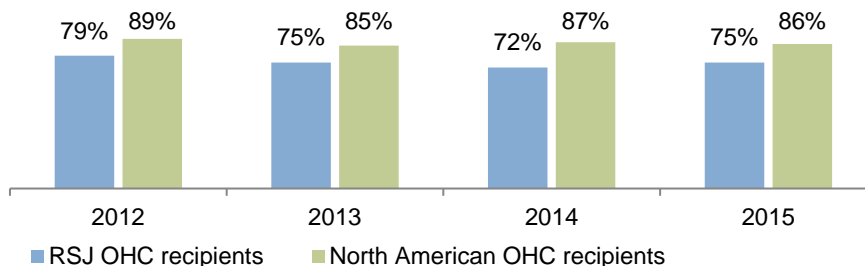
- The multiple interactions needed to build RSJ families' trust in the camp and its director. Many of the first-year RSJ families do not have a trusting relationship with anyone at camp.
- The amount of time and effort needed to overcome RSJ parents' resistance to the concept of overnight camp. Sending a child away to camp is not culturally familiar as it is to many American and Western European families. RSJ parents do not want their children to be away from home overnight.

Initiative camps demonstrate a successful rate of retention for RSJ campers, just a bit lower than their overall camper retention rate. Based on OHC data, **three-quarters of RSJ campers receiving OHC grants return to camp for another summer** (Exhibit ES-5). Initiative camp directors are satisfied with their RSJ camper retention rates, which they say are similar or just a bit lower than those of their general camp population.

Exhibit ES-5

A high proportion of RSJ OHC recipients return to camp the following summer.

2017 OHC Retention Survey | North American OHC recipients n=1,014–1,480 | RSJ OHC recipients n=19–44



Camp financial aid helps recruit new RSJ campers and plays a much more important role in retaining RSJ campers than it does for the general camper population. The majority of RSJ parents (63%) say they had been considering only non-Jewish summer activities for their children prior to receiving their OHC grant, and half (51%) say it was not likely that their child would have attended Jewish summer camp without the grant. Camp directors say RSJ families of all economic levels put forward a much smaller proportion of family funds to pay for camp than camp families overall, putting a greater burden on the camps to provide financial aid.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

From interviews with camp directors and FJC staff, a few themes emerged about the implementation challenges presented by the Initiative:

- Camps are unsure how to grow their RSJ connections beyond their current circle of RSJ families and the networks known by their RSJ recruiters.
- Camps currently design and implement their RSJ recruitment plans as short-term, year-to-year components within the camp's annual work plan, rather than a multi-year strategic approach. Most of the camps wait for confirmation of Initiative funding to begin implementation and commit scholarship dollars.

- Most camps have incomplete market data about their RSJ camper families, which hampers their ability to envision and implement a strategic marketing approach.

IMPLICATIONS

The evaluation findings suggest some implications about the Initiative's work and opportunities for the future:

- Access to **OHC incentives** and **camp scholarships** enable the large majority of RSJ campers to attend camp. Scholarships continue to be critical for maintaining attendance by RSJ campers who wish to return for multiple summers.
- **Specialized marketing** designed to reach and build relationships with RSJ parents is essential to enrolling first-time RSJ campers.
- Having RSJ camp counselors on staff does not significantly affect the RSJ camper experience. A more direct way to engage older RSJ campers and develop their Jewish identity would be to **support transitions of RSJ campers into Counselor-in-Training programs and junior counselor roles.**
- Camps would improve the effectiveness of their RSJ outreach and recruitment if they had a **12-month plan** that began in the fall. A yearlong plan would help camps be more strategic in allocating their recruitment time and dollars.