

Making Shabbat More Fun For Young Children At Home and In Synagogue

Rabbi Ari Cartun

At Home:

Let Shabbat be a **day of things one "allows oneself / is allowed to do"**

—not (just) a day of restrictions.

- Special "Shabbat Cereal:" e.g.: sweetened cereal if it is normally not allowed.
- Special "Shabbat Treats:" e.g.: pastry for breakfast, soda for lunch, dessert at all meals.
- Special "Shabbat Table:" e.g.: using a table cloth, cloth napkins, etc."
- Special "Shabbat Foods:" e.g.: splurge for the first fruits of the season.
- Special "Shabbat Clothes:" e.g.: dresses, shoes, etc, especially for girls."
- Special "Shabbat Guests:" e.g.: invite families, or at least friends of your kids over.
- Special "Shabbat Rest:" e.g.: make it a day with no "grunt" chores.

Learn to **bleed your children**, and keep it up as a sign of love. It is a wonderful time to connect and say good things to each other.

Special Kley Kodesh (Ritual Objects) for kids

In general: make Shabbat colorful, interesting, honest, participatory, and fun.

- Give each child their **own Kiddush cup** of silver/pewter/glass. (*And have one for each parent, too!*)

Let them choose the kind of grape juice/wine (children drinking wine is up to you). There are sparkling wines and juices that are also appropriate for kiddush. There are other foods over which kiddush may be done.

- **Candlelighting:** Try using barbecue matches and guiding their hands. A parent lights the match, the kids get to light the candles.
 - Light more than two candles—one for each kid in addition to the basic two.
 - Let them choose and have their own candlesticks.
 - Dealing with "Who goes first."
 - Make an order keeper (out of Legos, etc) for candlelighting.
 - The one who lights first is blessed last, etc.
- **Challah-days:** Let kids lead haMotzi, salt the challah, and break off the first bites.

At the Shabbat table: **"Prouds and compliments":**

- Let each person/child speak of things of which they are proud, as well as compliments they wish to give each other and others.
- Display and/or talk about what they made/did in religious school/Judaica classes the previous week.

In the Synagogue:

Develop a checklist (or even a standard bag) of things to bring to services:

- **Snacks**, if absolutely necessary (do not use these in the middle of people on Yom Kippur). This is more necessary for a longer service, like a morning service, or a High Holy Day Service. (Be sure to model good behavior by not partaking in the snacks yourself, nor by giving them chewing gum).
- **Books** to read. These may be Jewish books, but need not be (exclusively) Jewish.
- **Quiet toys** (nothing that clicks or clacks, not by itself, and not if it falls or is played with on the ground).
- **Writing implements** (pencils, crayons, etc) are not OK in traditional services, but are usually OK in Reconstructionist and Reform services.

Have a flexible set of expectations

- *Mentally*
 - Whether you are a kid or an adult, feel free to let your mind wander. It could be revelation you are receiving!
 - Just showing up for services means you have already "done your duty" by G0d and the Jewish people. Do not feel you need to say every word. You may also say none of the words that are being said, and still get a lot out of being there . . .
- *Spiritually*
 - . . . if you can learn the songs by heart. If you cannot learn the words by heart, you can hum the melody/harmony, and still get the mood of the service.
 - Buy and play tapes CDs of Shabbat music, both at home and on the way to services. One of the ways kids connect most with the service is through singing. They do not usually respond to "meaningful words."
- *Physically*
 - Learn to move (sway) as you pray, and allow your kids to fidget Jewishly. Sitting still and staying in one's seat is important, but teach them (learn to model) "dancing in your seat."

Where possible, act as a team

If you are not a single parent (in fact, or due to the, disinterest of your spouse) embrace "Active Parenting." This is the traditional rationale behind exempting women/mothers from "time-generated mitzvot" like worship. Whoever wishes or is next in line "gets" to be the active parent to deal with meltdowns and tending to, and the other one can participate in the service this time.

If you are a single parent, then realize that you are always the active parent, and your major mitzvah is the kids. But what if you want to participate in the service from time to time? Try "adopting" a friend or relative as an active parent every so often as a helper.

Or, from time to time, find a (Shabbat-like, if possible) place to leave your kid(s) so you can meet your own spiritual needs. Don't let your spirituality and familiarity with the service ossify while your kids are small, or it may not be there when you have the leisure to enjoy it, as well as the opportunity to be a Jewish role model for your kids.

Special Kley Kodesh (Ritual Objects) for kids

- Boys and girls can have/choose their own **kippot**.
- If one or more parent brings a tallit bag to services, the children can bring a "**Shabbat bag**" (a bag that looks like a tallit bag) with their toys, books, etc in it.
- **Tallitot**: by and large, young children do not have the patience to wear a tallit for an entire service. If they wish to wear one for a while, let them. One good way to be close is to cuddle them in your tallit. Kids love to hide in it, and to finger the tzitzit.
- **Shofarot**: By and large, kids can learn to blow a shofar fairly well. If they have their own (make sure to get one with a large mouthpiece) they will pay great attention, not to mention give them a great sense of Jewish pride and identity.

And the moral of the story is:

Stick To It . . .

Set a **Family Table ritual** and stick to it. The more you do it, the more familiar with it the children will become.

Set a **Family Friday night policy** and stick to it through their High School years. E.G.: Having Shabbat Dinner at home before going out.

The same goes for a **Services policy**. Find a policy of how often to go, your expectations of behavior, how long to stay in the service, & what to take with you, and stick with it.

. . . But Stick To It Flexibly

If you are just starting out, start out gradually and add things as you learn to do them well. Do not try to go "whole hog" into a Shabbat policy. Hogs are not kosher, and doing too much is the same as doing nothing, for it is bound to fail.

Be patient with each other. "Shabbat Shalom" is a wish that Shabbat should bring peace. No Shabbat will ever be the perfect Ozzie and Harriet Nelstein Shabbat, so let's keep our expectations humanly possible.

If you can't get started until way after sundown, get started when you can. Let there still be Shabbat every week.

If you haven't got the time/energy to make a big dinner for Shabbat, then go out to a restaurant that has tablecloths, wine (for kiddush), bread on the table (for Motzi), and candles. Yes, you can do a candle blessing, short kiddush, and motzi at your table. Why should you be embarrassed to be Jewish?

Don't just go to a fast food place. Make the Shabbat dinner special. Let there still be Shabbat every week.