

Services for Children, Teenagers, and Families

 rabbinicalassembly.org/story/services-children-teenagers-and-families

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Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

Despite early claims that children did not become ill from COVID-19, as of May 20, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control have announced that some children who had the virus that causes [COVID-19](#), or had been around someone with COVID-19, developed a serious, occasionally deadly, condition known as Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C). It is therefore apparent to us that gatherings of children have the potential to spread disease not just to the adults in our community who have been identified as being “high risk individuals,” but that they, themselves, are also at risk of becoming seriously ill. As our understanding of COVID-19 and MIS-C continues to evolve, rabbis and lay leaders are advised to consult with their national and local medical authorities for guidance as it is updated and revised for the wide variety of ages we serve in our communities.

As Jews, we believe our children are our most precious legacy, and we place a high value on their education. At the same time, we must do everything we can to protect them and their families even as we seek to educate them about what it means to be a committed Jew in the modern world. How better to train and inspire them and their parents in our fundamental Jewish values of the preservation of life and health than by making communal decisions that protect not just their lives and health but also those of their parents, grandparents, and the entire community.

In person services for children and teen minyanim should certainly be prohibited wherever the local or state government has ordered schools be closed. However, even were schools to be open, running children and family services present all the dangers listed above, complicated by the difficulties children often have with face masks and social distancing in conjunction with a natural inattention to limit touching one’s face, surfaces, etc., among the young. Teen minyanim bring their own challenges as well. As Dr. Claire McCarthy, the Senior Faculty Editor of Harvard Health Publishing points out, because the teens’ frontal lobes of the brain are still developing, “skills like impulse control, delayed gratification, and realizing the consequences of actions are not fully in place,” which means that it may not be possible to ensure that proper precautions are

adhered to consistently. No one wants a decision that we made to lead to anyone, whether child or adult, becoming ill. Furthermore, because children do not attend synagogue on their own, but are accompanied by adult family members or guardians and any youth, teen, or family services also include one or more leaders, the number of people in the space has the potential to rapidly exceed capacity to maintain physical distancing and guidelines regarding gatherings.

Virtual services and creative programming for children of all ages and their families can and should be substituted for in-person services and programming, even if a limited adult option is planned as described above. Packets of materials can be delivered to families or made available for download and printing prior to the holidays that include things for participants of different ages to look or listen for during the main service. Activities that address the themes, liturgy, and/or Torah readings for the holidays can also be made available ahead of time either for the children themselves, or for families together, to complete on the holiday itself or during the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah or between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In communities using two-way technologies such as Zoom, children and teens can be invited to participate at particular points in the “adult” service. Youth of all ages benefit from the opportunity to celebrate the holidays together, and virtual youth and/or family services and programs geared to particular ages allow the younger members of our communities to connect with their peers and celebrate together.