



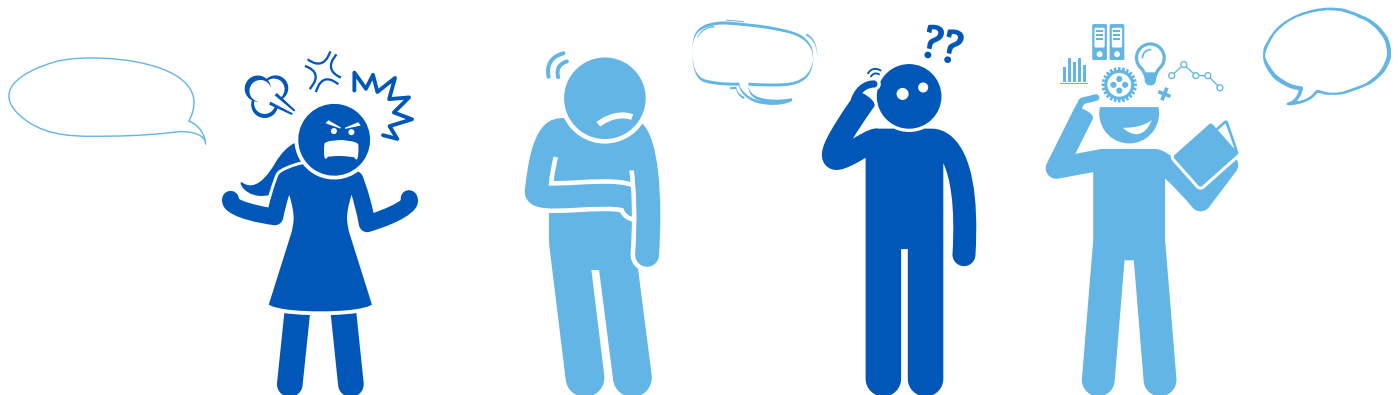
THE FOUR MENTAL HEALTH CHILDREN OF THE SEDER

What Can We Learn about Mental Health from Passover Traditions?

Passover, or Pesach, is a spring festival holiday that lasts eight days (some observe it for seven days) and celebrates the Exodus story. It is traditional on this holiday to have a Seder (ritual meal) and to eat matzah, a special cracker-like flatbread, instead of chametz (a variety of foods that rise from leavening). During most Seders, we read from a book called the Haggadah that retells the events of the Exodus, so we remember our escape from slavery. Jews around the world perform the mitzvah (commandment) of passing along this tradition, and the story of liberation, to members of the next generation, so they can connect with their Jewish heritage.

The Haggadah speaks of four types of children who react differently to the Passover Seder: the “[wise](#)” child, the “[wicked](#)” child, the “[simple](#)” child and the child who “[doesn’t know how to ask](#).” From here it becomes our job to create an inclusive space where we can provide answers to questions raised by all of these children and help them engage in the Passover traditions. Each one is immersed in their own way, and we can learn something about mental wellness and how to create community from all of them.

Reading about these four children, we get to learn more about ourselves and how we can build more holistic, inclusive and affirming Jewish communities. [These four archetypes aren’t here to teach us about children; they are here to teach us about our role in passing Judaism and its traditions l’dor vador \(from generation to generation\).](#)





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The Wise Child

The wise child asks, "What are the testimonies, statutes and judgments we learn through the Passover story?" We are told to discuss with that child the order and meaning of the Seder and teach them the rules of observing the holiday. The wise child is seeking connection. "Please explain to me what I am supposed to learn from this," they ask.

They are reaching out.

The wise child has trust in their community, and we need to respond to, validate and build that trust. On the surface, the wise child appears to be the easiest child. They are engaged, ask the question the way we want to hear it and listen to us speak. But we must be mindful; we never know what's going on under the surface and should not assume a person who is smiling is okay.

Everyone experiences mental health challenges to some degree, and struggles affect us all. Moreover, it's hard to be the wise child. The drive to fit that role and be high achieving can put a lot of pressure on a child, and it doesn't always lead to a healthy sense of self-preservation, boundary setting and a work-life balance that encourages self-care.

We live in a world that's afraid of failure, one that translates "I failed a task" to "I am a failure." We need to remember that even the wisest among us is constantly learning and to teach the next generation that failure is not a tattoo but merely a bruise.





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The Wicked Child

The wicked child asks, "What does this service mean to you?" By using the word "you" and not "us," the child is not including themselves in the community. We are told to respond by saying, "This service helps us remember and learn from our people's journey to freedom." It's worth noting that not one of these children is disengaged.

Even the wicked child, who gets a bad reputation, engages in the material. A child who genuinely doesn't care would not say anything. The wicked child pushes back, because they are feeling something. Perhaps they are struggling and feeling alone, or maybe they don't see themselves represented in the Passover story. Still, the wicked child doesn't stick their hands in their ears, and they don't text under the table. They push and lash outward, trying to find their place. Perhaps they don't feel secure. Think about how frequently we say, "Psht, I don't care" or "Whatever, I'm fine" when we are hurting.



And the wicked child has a purpose.

Although they are trying to test our patience, they teach us to examine our own behavior. We can learn through this child how to support our loved ones and become their allies. But first we need to learn to listen, reflect and understand why the wicked child feels this way. When a child feels like they don't fit into their own community, it's up to us to change it.

We have to reply to the wicked child's question with our own. Yes, we can try and show them we identify with the story, but we need to ask them why they don't. The onus is on us.



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The Simple Child

The simple child asks, "What is this?" To this child, we are told to answer plainly: "This is the story of the ancient Jewish people's journey to freedom." The simple child doesn't know where to start. We've all been there!

No one should feel ashamed to ask basic questions. The simple child teaches us to meet people where they are emotionally. When someone doesn't understand something, we don't use words that make sense to us; instead, we are asked to use the language they already have.

[The simple child teaches us empathy.](#)

We all think and react differently, and when communicating with someone, we need to try our best to really see them, to validate their understanding of the world and to seek connection. We don't try to change the simple child. We don't tell them their question is silly, childish or naive. We don't give them a vocabulary lesson. We learn to make space for them by putting ourselves in their shoes. By acting as a role model in answering questions as they are asked, we can prevent shame and stigma from developing.

And in doing so, we learn how to see other people's perspectives and how to value others for who they are.





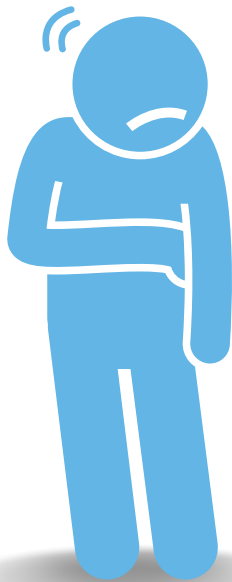
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The Child Who Doesn't Know How to Ask a Question

We are instructed to help this child by telling the story of when the Jews went forth from Egypt. Open and honest conversations start with us. From the child who doesn't know how to ask a question, we learn accountability by helping them learn, whether it is about the Passover story, mental health or anything in between.

For those who don't know where to start, we can begin the conversation. Almost all of us are the child who does not know how to ask at some point in our lives. There are so many reasons we may not know how to ask a question: We don't have the vocabulary, we don't know there is a question to ask, or perhaps we aren't feeling comfortable and safe enough yet.

Just as our children may not know how to enough to ask questions during the Passover seder, they might also struggle to ask questions about other important topics in life, such as mental health. [Let's face it; we don't learn how to talk about mental health in school.](#)



We live in a world with a lot of shame and stigma around mental health disorders, substance abuse and even things as "simple" as depression. The child who does not know how to ask doesn't yet have the language to share what's going on for them, because we have not provided it to them yet. And this is where every Jewish person can have a role.

When we are willing to stand up and share our experiences, to be open and vulnerable, and to start the conversation, we make space for everyone else to share. We send the clear message they are not alone and are supported by their community. And they allow us to enact the Jewish value of kol Yisrael arevim zeh la eh (All Jews are responsible for one another) and tikkim olam (repairing the world).



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Questions for Discussion:

- We are not just one child; we are often a mix, and we change over time.
- Which one represents you right now?
- Keeping in mind the child who currently represents you, does this change the way you understand yourself now?
- How does the child who has represented you at other times in your life shape your understanding of that moment in time?
- Do you think we can invite all types of children (people) to sit at the table and connect?
- What do you feel each of these child archetypes needs most?

It is customary in the Jewish tradition to bless our children, and in the spirit of this ritual, we have created a prayer with these four children in mind. We offer it to you with wishes for a chag Pesach sameach.



Prayer:

Blessed are you, Holy Source of Wisdom, bless us so we may know, understand and accept our inner child. Guide us as we ask the questions to better understand ourselves and our world as we try to make sense of our emotions. Guide us as we try to find our place in a caring community, even when we resist those who want to help. Guide us to find the safe and brave spaces filled with people who can show us empathy. Guide us as we learn the language we need from those who model vulnerability. Blessed are you, Holy Source of Love, bless us so we may know, understand and accept the children among us. Help us to notice the message behind the questions others may ask, ensuring each person gets the help they need. Help us to create shame-free and stigma-free environments for each other, developing a culture of understanding. Help us to approach others with empathy so they can feel safe. Help us to offer support to those who may not know what they need. May we each approach our inner child with curiosity and insight. May we each be compassionate toward our inner child from moment to moment. And may we each learn what we need from the inner child of those around us. Amen.