

Updated Guidance for HHD Services for Children Under 12 (and their families) for 2021/5782

 rabbinicalassembly.org/story/updated-guidance-hhd-services-children-under-12-and-their-families-20215782

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

This year's High Holiday programming for children under 12 and their families will once again need to take into account safety measures in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As the number of vaccinated adults and teens continues to rise, and the transmission of COVID-19 is slowing in many places, we have begun to reopen our sanctuaries and gather for services once again in accordance with both CDC guidelines and the recommendations stipulated in the teshuvah by Rabbi Joshua Heller.

We have learned that children, including very young children, can develop COVID-19. While many of them have mild or even no symptoms, others have faced serious health challenges, and some have even died. Furthermore, it has been noted that a potentially severe and dangerous complication can occur in children.

While two of the major vaccine manufacturers, Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, have both begun trials in children 6 months to 11 years old, there are still many steps of collecting and reviewing data without cutting any corners on safety before the FDA will decide whether to authorize the vaccines for each age group. It is therefore believed that the earliest vaccines will likely be available for younger children is late 2021, or perhaps early in 2022. This means that we must plan for the upcoming High Holidays with the expectation that children will still be unvaccinated and at risk for contracting COVID-19.

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. We are therefore fully committed to presenting avenues by which children and their families can safely have meaningful experiences of the holidays.

It is incumbent on our communities to follow the guidelines from the CDC which have successfully been employed in schools and other settings to minimize the spread of

COVID-19. To wit, when providing in-person experiences for children, it is important they involve:

- only fully immunized and symptom-free leaders who have no known exposure to COVID in the last two weeks
- only symptom-free children under 12 who have no known exposure to COVID in the last two weeks
- universal, correct use of masks that cover the mouth and nose by all
- physical distancing (a minimum of 3 feet for discussion and activities, 6 feet for singing)
- frequent hand washing
- cleaning high-touch surfaces and maintaining healthy facilities
- good ventilation (such as being outside or opening windows and doors)
- a means to do contact tracing if needed

If a congregation is unable to follow the above safety guidelines, then virtual services and creative programming for children of all ages and their families can and should be substituted for in-person services and programming. 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 holidays. 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 main service.

Children of all ages benefit from the opportunity to celebrate the holidays together with friends, family, and community members. Doing so, however, should not place children or their families at risk of contracting COVID. Each community will need to determine for itself whether in-person or virtual youth and/or family services and programs will maximize meaning while minimizing risk to those younger than 12.