



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 20, 2009.

I Believe in Children
Gillian Stauch

I believe in the importance of early childhood mental health, as human beings have amazing potential for growth and development during the first several years of life. This core belief is what drives me in all my work as an early childhood special educator and has motivated me to go back to graduate school in my late 30s for social work, to get a clinical background to better enable me to work with children and families.

It is so simple yet so powerful: just as children have the strongest capacity to learn a language during this time of life, they also have the greatest potential to develop emotionally healthy patterns of communicating and relating that can last a lifetime. Children's early relationships, with parents, teachers, family and friends, serve as the building blocks for later relationships and actually shape their brain development. This belief is backed by solid scientific research, of course, not just by whimsical, Mary Poppins-like thinking on the magic of childhood (I am a smart, cynical Humanistic Jew from New York after all).

If only there were a God who was powerful enough to create all children equally....so all would have the luck of being born with solid developmental capacities, into stable situations surrounded by nurturing, responsive adults. The sad reality is that many children are not so fortunate: some early relationships can be challenged by environmental stress and traumatic circumstances. It amazes me how some families thrive despite these challenges and create an emotionally nurturing space for their children. I have met families like this at my current social work internship at Bank Street College's Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice, with the City Congregation's own Lesley Koplow, whose work on emotional development continues to inspire me.

There are also children who face the struggle of serious developmental issues, such as autism, that hinder their ability to have early bonding experiences, even when surrounded by the most loving adults. My own fierce desire to help these children and their families has led me to study the groundbreaking work of Drs. Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder, and discover DIR/Floortime, their relationship-based approach to working with children with autism. To me, there is nothing more rewarding reaching into the frustrating, overwhelming world of a child with autism and (literally and figuratively) joining him in the simple act of opening a door and seeing his face light up. She may have repetitively pulled open that door a hundred times on her own, but when someone else joins her in the task, she experiences connection rather than isolation. When his own parents stand in that doorway and he looks up at them, this can be the beginning of a powerful two-way emotional relationship.

The moments I have shared like this with children and families have been the most moving experiences in my life. I think of them as I face my own challenges of figuring out how to change or combine careers, while still struggling with my own unresolved learning issues. I try to remind myself that we all develop at our own pace, as I find myself an underemployed graduate school student and unpaid intern at the age of 38. I try to stay focused on the big picture, of sharing those small but powerful moments with young children that are the foundation for solid emotional relationships, and empowering children and families to overcome the challenges they have been dealt. It all comes back to this core belief, the belief that motivates me every day: we can literally save futures and families by sharing moments with the very young.