

# 7 Ways for Parents and Teachers to Stop the Rise of Antisemitism

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With two young kids in elementary school, I am probably as fearful as most parents when it comes to concerns about school shootings, but I reassure myself every day that gun violence in schools is actually statistically a far lower risk factor to the mortality of our children than riding to school in a car, contracting a potentially deadly disease while in school or suffering a life-threatening injury while playing school sports. Antisemitism, however (and its precursor — if these things exist on a continuum — the ostracizing of Jews in America), is more prevalent than it has been in recent memory.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the U.S. Jewish community experienced near-historic levels of antisemitism in 2018, including a doubling of antisemitic assaults and the single deadliest attack against the Jewish community in American history.

The good news is that while school shootings are hard to predict and stop and many of us feel powerless against random acts of violence, we can all take steps to create more inclusive spaces and push back against the harm antisemitism and “othering” does. If you are worried about this in your community, whether you are Jewish or not, here are some steps you can take:

**For teachers and school administrators:**

Teachers can craft lessons around seasons rather than holidays. Years ago, my son's preschool teacher taught about the harvest season instead of Halloween (which people of many faiths do not celebrate). She also focused on celebrating "winter" rather than Christmas and "Friendship Day" instead of St. Valentine's Day. While it may be easier to rely on holidays kids know to get them excited about learning, focusing on seasons is a more inclusive way to go.

Likewise, end-of-year "holiday concerts" should be celebrations of a variety of traditions and cultures — adding "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel" to a lineup of Christmas carols is not true inclusion. Secular celebrations are also possible.

Rather than letting kids skip activities that center on Christian celebrations (which is the standard practice in my district), schools can eliminate activities that would necessitate a student opting out. I understand that the opt-out policy follows the letter of the law, but schools can strive toward the spirit of the law in a nation which was founded, in part, on a tenet of religious tolerance and freedom.

Teachers can assign books about Jews that do not center the Holocaust and books about the Holocaust that are written by and about Jews. Holocaust literature like "The Diary of Anne Frank", "Maus," and books by Jane Yolen teach the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective. Similarly, recent Young Adult titles by Katherine Locke and Rachel Lynn Solomon, and "It's a Whole Spiel," an anthology by Jewish writers, provide a window into Jewish stories that don't center on our greatest modern collective tragedy. Similarly, classroom book bins and libraries should be overhauled so that all students see themselves represented in the literature they read.

Adults in public schools and secular private schools can be alert and take measures to ensure educational spaces are non-proselytizing spaces. When administrators say they cannot control the beliefs of their students, I understand their point of view. But, when students tell their classmates of other faiths that they are going to Hell because of their beliefs, it's not enough to say that each kid is different in their own way and we respect those differences. An honest acknowledgement of the current climate of intolerance needs to be in place so that when a student is singled out because of their belief system (or on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation or other inherent or innate characteristics), the aggression is treated more seriously than when a student is singled out because his clothes aren't "cool," or because she's good at science, or because they don't like the "right" music.

I have heard from administrators that hiring and keeping teachers of color is difficult in certain areas of the country. But many schools have budgets for guest teachers, guest speakers and artists-in-residence. Bringing in People of Color — and people who subscribe to marginalized belief systems — for visits is a great way to expose students to what it means to see people in positions of authority who don't look like them or pray like them.

For schools with smaller budgets, creating a practice of a common reading of books by marginalized authors is a great start. [WeNeedDiverseBooks.org](http://WeNeedDiverseBooks.org) is a resource for making these kinds of choices. More diverse spaces are better for everyone.

## For parents:

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Parents can talk to their children about respecting their friends' beliefs even when they're incompatible with their own. I know parents can't control everything their children do, and kids are their own beings with their own thoughts and emotions. Mine are perfect examples of that. When my kids are told by their friends that they are going to Hell because they don't believe in Jesus, my husband and I have asked them to respond by saying, "You believe in what you believe in, and I believe in what I believe in." But my kids don't always listen to us. Sometimes they say, "If the person who told you that is the same person who told you Santa is real, I have some news for you."

Am I proud of those moments? No. Do I understand how frustrating it can be to be damned to Hell by your playmate? Not really — it never happened to me as a kid. But do I fear for a future in which my children's friends will grow up not understanding that my Jewish children are ethical, important, valuable members of society just as they are? Absolutely.

Don't let your kids, or your kids' teachers, conflate Christmas and Hanukkah or Passover and Easter. They are not analogous holidays just because of how the dates can overlap on the calendar. And, if you go to a church that appropriates Jewish customs in a Christian setting (such as hosting their own Passover Seder), you can talk to your clergy about partnering with a Jewish organization to establish an ongoing, meaningful dialogue, either in person or via a virtual connection.

I make these suggestions from a selfish place: I may be able to hold my anxiety about school shootings at bay by digging into the data, but the data don't help quell my fears when it comes to the damage antisemitism does. I want to protect my kids. But my motives are not purely selfish. There are benefits to acknowledging that Christianity is the *majority* religion in the United States, without simultaneously asserting that people of all other religions — or people who subscribe to no religion — are *wrong*. This is important in educational settings, whether or not Jewish students are present, and may be more so when there aren't any Jews in the room. Clarifying the difference between *majority* and *correct* or *normal* can have transformative value for all people, adults and children alike, and our culture at large.