American psychologist and behaviorist, B.F. Skinner said, “Education is not just the filling of a pail; it is the lighting of a fire.” University Synagogue’s Pre-School has been lighting a fire in the minds and souls of Pre-School students since 2006. Now in its fifth year, the program has gone from being a pre-school at University Synagogue to University Synagogue’s Pre-School. Directed by award winning early childhood educator Heidi Kahn, the Pre-School has grown into a diverse consortium of programs for not only its Pre-School students but members of the students’ families and Pre-School faculty as well.

Just as the formative years of a child count as some of the most important years, so too have the first five years of the Pre-School proven to be salient to its growth. Kahn and the faculty have nurtured the school and helped it develop and grow into a healthy place for children to learn, grow and thrive.

Kahn takes a holistic approach to early childhood education. The environment at University Synagogue’s Pre-School is warm, nurturing and provides requirements necessary to build strong, early development; however, she ensures that the staff and families are educated as well. One of the new programs the Pre-School is involved in for the 2011 – 2012 school year is Irvine Unified School District’s School Readiness Program. A partnership between University Synagogue and IUSD, the program provides support and services to the Pre-School, the students and families, ensuring the children’s readiness for kindergarten. Some of the specifics of the program include: teacher training and support; classroom strategies designed to work with the routines and environment of children; individualized interventions to meet students’ and families’ unique strengths and needs; and parent workshops ranging from kindergarten readiness to challenging behavior. Most recently, Sandy Avzaradel, M. Ed. (IUSD) and Haley Goldberg, MFT met with 40 of the Pre-School families, answering questions about kindergarten readiness and helping families navigate the transition from Pre-School to primary school.

And there is also the traditional side of Pre-School. Kahn has creatively interwoven early childhood enrichments, including art, singalongs, storytelling, photography, creative dance, sports and even math and science into the daily curriculum. All of the Pre-School classes are taught by accredited, early childhood education staff, with special appearances made by
University Synagogue congregants and members of the greater Orange County community, which include other synagogues and Jewish organizations. Finally, in addition to the traditional developmental components of education, the Pre-School offers a warm and creative representation of the Jewish values and culture that provide its foundation. Regardless of the religion or culture of the student, everyone celebrates the Jewish holidays together in a way that is comfortable and welcoming.

Understanding the importance of early childhood development and the formative years, the Pre-School also offers programs that are open to the public and provide outreach to every member of the student’s family and the greater community at large. The programs are designed to introduce the members and non-members to the environment and ethos of the Pre-School and build community within the framework of the Pre-School’s culture. Beginning at the age of three months, parents and their infants can join the Cuddle Club, a walking club that meets Wednesday mornings or join parents and toddlers in a warm and nurturing setting for Parent and Me.

These programs also provide an opportunity for a child to make a comfortable transition into the academic environment, such as in the case of Nicole Green, who said, “Our experience at University Synagogue Preschool has been priceless. We have been at the school since our oldest daughter, Leah, was 6 months old. We participated in the Cuddle Club every week. It was wonderful! Leah got time to engage other babies, and I got time to engage other parents… As Leah grew into a toddler, we then participated in the weekly Parent and Me program… All of this great preparation made her transition into the two-year-old classroom nearly effortless last fall. Leah was surrounded by familiar faces and familiar routines, as now she would participate in her first classroom experience without me present three days a week. Yes, we had our days of separation sadness, which quickly became history as she realized she was still surrounded by people who loved her and cared for her and were really fun to be with… Now my youngest daughter Clara is 1½ years old and participating in the weekly Parent and Me program. I am once again amazed at how she has taken to the structure and music and crafts and snack time. I know she too will have a smooth transition into her independent class time next fall.” It is evident that all of the programs, from Cuddle Club to the Pre-School, provide an opportunity for parents to develop new friendships and for children to interact with children of similar age.”

Within the community of families is a strong commitment and turnout by parents and family members. Parents and significant caregivers of students meet regularly to organize fundraisers for the school, support and promote programs, welcome new families and support Pre-School faculty. Andrea Norman, the mother of twin boys attending the Pre-School stated, “The experience [of having children in the school] inspired my volunteering as one of the Parent Committee presidents, so that I might be a small part of helping in providing the
school and the teachers with the extras that are needed each year to give our children all that they do.”

Nadine Dubery, a Pre-School parent, was recently pleasantly surprised by the dedication of parents, remarking, “You should know that this type of participation is unique and does not [always] happen at other pre-schools.”

The dedication of faculty and staff is evident in the responses of parents. Norman went on to say, “University Pre-School has provided a safe, warm, loving, and creative environment in which my children have been nurtured for three years. They have grown and blossomed and love going to school.” For Dubery the Pre-School holds an extraordinary element. Her daughter Lili “just loves her teachers and her classroom, the yard and her new friends... each day is an awesome adventure in learning and becoming more self expressed for her...” She went on to say, “Your [Heidi Kahn] leadership, love, warmth and energy are not taken for granted for even one second... We may have to adopt another child, so that we can continue coming to your pre-school when Lili is finished there!”

Adding to the uniqueness of University Synagogue is the richness and diversity of students, family and faculty. Families represent almost every continent on the planet – a tribute to the openness and diversity of University Synagogue. And then there are the dozens of cultures across students and staff, creating an environment rich in cultural awareness and providing fodder for creatively educating the young minds and souls about the diverse world they live in.

The first five years of life are formative – even a pre-school. It is important to have that guide or caregiver who can take one through developmental milestones, nurture, love, educate and discipline – sometimes all at once. Perhaps it is best said by another parent, Jennifer Anderson, a mother to three-year-old twins: “I feel so incredibly fortunate to send my children to this pre-school, and why I believe it stands out from the rest is something that I cannot even quantify, because it is a feeling; a feeling I get when I walk into this pre-school... every time I walk into University Synagogue Pre-School, I feel like I am coming home.”