

“It’s not just the kids, it’s the parents.”

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Project Focus: Reproductive health education program for Asian American parents and students

Project Site: Project Vision

Reproductive health education is crucial not only for kids, but for parents too.

My sex education came in two forms: an abstinence jingle in middle school, and a sock on a banana in high school. My parents offered a third option: silence. Decades later, not only are individuals’ reproductive rights being stripped away, but reproductive health education in any form is threatened by the federal government at all levels, from elementary schools to medical residencies.

If we cannot rely on our schools to provide this knowledge to children, then parents may be dueling with TikTok to become that secondary source of information for children. However, too often parents give antiquated advice, alienating their child. Particularly in Asian communities, topics such as menstruation, menopause, reproductive health and sex remain taboo. As such, parents never want to discuss this with their kids, believing that avoiding these subjects will dissuade their child from engaging in these activities.

Contrary to this belief, studies show early exposure to comprehensive sexuality education actually delays sexual initiation, reduces teenage pregnancies, and increases contraceptive use.

However, talking with your kids about sexual health is not intuitive! Just as students need to learn in school about contraceptives and signs of sexually transmitted diseases, parents need to learn how to

communicate with their children about these sensitive topics. While all parents would benefit from this education, Asian American communities are particularly vulnerable to disparities in reproductive health information. Cultural taboos, language barriers and lack of culturally tailored education hinder open communication. First-generation immigrant parents, especially, never received formal comprehensive sexual education in their childhood and continue to perpetuate stigma and taboos with their children.

In addition to offering culturally competent programming, we need to provide spaces for parents to practice communication skills that will empower families to engage in ongoing, informed and open conversations about women’s health.

Every month, in a basement classroom in Chicago's Chinatown, several parents file in after work, grab snacks and spend two hours learning how to talk to their kids about puberty. I have spent my last year in medical school with them building this “third space.” In the early sessions, it was like pulling teeth to get any parent to raise a hand. Once, no one bothered to show up. But, as the space became a place where parents could make mistakes, role-play awkward conversations and compare notes with neighbors navigating similar parent-child dynamics, something shifted.

Now, the room is loud with chatter. Parents pair off to practice starting conversations they have dreaded

and avoided. And as the workshop wraps up, a few find me to say, “Thank you for providing space to learn something we never experienced with our own parents.” 95% of parents surveyed said the workshops helped them build confidence and cultivate their interest in the topic, and believed this would improve their relationship with their child. Community-led initiatives with parent role models organizing third spaces for their peers belong in every city in this country.

While I was in the midst of organizing sessions, I presented a thought experiment to my mother, an Asian immigrant from Taiwan who has been in the United States for over 20 years: “Imagine we are back to 10 years ago, and I came back from school after a puberty and sexual education talk. How would you discuss this topic with me?” My mother thought for a second and said, “Don’t get pregnant.” Those words sounded familiar from previous sessions. So we sat down virtually, and I walked her through the same workshop I’d been running in Chinatown. We practiced the role plays, stumbled through the awkward parts and laughed at ourselves. By the time we finished, she said, “I wish someone had taught me this when you were younger.” This work isn’t just about preparing the next generation. It’s about healing the one that came before.

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