When it comes to educating parents about parenting and child development, the preschool and daycare centers of their children are usually the first stops for passing on information. However, NELL O’DONNELL WEBER, ED.M.’10, ED.D.’19, believes that if we begin doing this after people are already parents, we may be missing an opportunity. What would happen, she wondered, if we instead taught high schoolers how children grow and learn?

“High school is a good setting because it’s kind of the last time you have everyone together. Not everyone goes to college, not everyone accesses the same kind of social services, but pretty much everybody goes to high school,” Weber says.

She found that 23 states already had at least one academic standard about parenting or child development though most classroom activity involves taking care of an egg or a sack of flour, focusing on the physical care of a child rather than developmental needs.

With this in mind, Weber wondered what high school students already knew about parenting. For her dissertation, she created and administered a questionnaire online to 1,044 high schoolers, all roughly representative of the American population of high schoolers. She hoped to gain insight into typically held beliefs about intelligence, the role of caregivers in development, and parenting skills, among other categories.

She found most high schoolers believe adults should and do play important roles in their children’s early learning. However, the data also showed that students were answering questions about child development correctly approximately half the time. “That’s the same as if they were answering them by chance. There’s not a lot of evidence to show they actually know a lot about how a child grows and learns,” she says.

Using her findings, Weber and her adviser, Professor Meredith Rowe, are currently creating a parenting curriculum for high schoolers focused on addressing these gaps in knowledge about learning, child development, and the role parents can play.

“The motivation for this [curriculum] is the early achievement gap,” Weber says. “One way to address that is to use a preventative approach where we equip people before they are even parents to support their child’s early learning to reduce that gap. It’s useful for certain populations, but it’s really for everybody.”

They are hoping to pilot their curriculum soon. “There are a lot of schools interested, and that’s promising,” Weber says.

However, there is some hesituation around teaching high schoolers about parenting. “So many of the policies in this area are centered on preventing teen pregnancy and preventative instruction. This work does not promote teen pregnancy. In fact, it likely has the opposite effect,” Rowe says. “It’s worth the investment because it will end up saving money” on other early intervention programs.

By targeting high schoolers, Weber and Rowe are working to ensure everybody is set up with a strong foundation for success in later life.

“When we think about how to improve educational outcomes at scale, we have to start early,” Weber says. “In this case, we might have to start very early — before children are even born or even close to being born. And to equip people for this incredibly important event, even in a relatively small way, is valuable.”

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