

The Role of Health Education in Maternal and Infant Health

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Abstract

Maternal and infant health outcomes in the United States remain concerning despite advances in medicine, with persistent disparities in underserved communities. This article highlights the role of health education as a preventive strategy to improve outcomes for mothers and babies. By providing expectant and new parents with knowledge on prenatal care, nutrition, breastfeeding, infant safety, and postpartum wellness, health education programs empower families to make informed decisions and adopt healthier practices. Drawing on professional experience in maternal and infant nutrition and health education, the article introduces Healthy from the Bump, a tailored program designed to provide culturally relevant, accessible, and practical education for parents and their support partners. While immediate results may be difficult to measure, health education's long-term benefits include reducing risks, fostering healthier habits, and strengthening caregiver confidence. Investing in maternal and infant health education is an essential step toward closing health gaps and building healthier generations from the very start.

Introduction

Improving maternal and infant health shouldn't be such a hot topic in the United States, but with 669 maternal deaths in 2023 and 20,500 infant deaths in 2022, it needs to be.^{1,2} Despite advances in medicine, maternal and infant health outcomes continue to fall short, especially in underserved communities. But there is a powerful, often overlooked tool that can help improve those outcomes: health education. Yes, some causes of maternal and infant deaths are outside the scope of health education. However, maternal and infant health education programs can help improve health outcomes, by reducing prematurity and low birth weight, and increasing positive health behaviors and breastfeeding initiation rates.³

What is Maternal and Infant Health Education?

Maternal and infant health education entails providing expectant and new parents with information, skills, and support to promote healthy pregnancies, safe childbirth, and positive outcomes for both mothers and babies. This type of education covers a wide array of topics including the importance of prenatal care, maternal and infant nutrition, breastfeeding, infant safety and wellness, and postpartum care. Programs should be tailored to the audience's cultural and personal needs, since this will increase their understanding and engagement with the material.⁴ The goal is to empower parents with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions, reduce health risks, and feel confident about caring for themselves and their infants.

Creating the Healthiest Generations of Children

Nemours Children's Health is on a mission to create the healthiest generations of children. I believe that healthy children start with healthy parents and healthy pregnancies. When the Community Health Education team at Nemours Children's was first created, we dove headfirst into creating curriculums for children. But we soon learned that we could provide all the health

education in the world to the children, but unless we educated their caregivers too, some of it would be lost. Prior to joining Nemours, I worked for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program in three different states over five years, and held a variety of nutrition-focused positions. Between my experience there and my career change into health education, I realized that there was a huge health information gap with parents, whether they are first time parents or experienced several times over.

Healthy From the Bump

I wanted to create a health education program that encompassed maternal and infant health information that was accessible to everyone. I researched topics that moms said they wished they knew more about before giving birth, and created a series of sessions that focused on staying healthy during pregnancy, breastfeeding basics, infant nutrition, infant wellness, infant safety, and postpartum care. Each session came with an incentive to support the topic, like a hand pump, baby's first cup, and postpartum self-care items. These sessions were designed to be in small group settings to build trust among the parents, encourage sharing, and improve learning. I also wanted to include a support partner for each parent, so the people supporting them could learn the same information. After months of researching and building the program, Healthy from the Bump was born.

The Future of Maternal and Infant Health Education

The future of maternal and infant health education lies in creating more accessible, inclusive, and tailored learning opportunities for all families. As healthcare systems begin to focus more on prevention, health education programs can be delivered in a multitude of ways: digital platforms, community outreach, and culturally tailored programs that meet parents where they are. While most health education programs don't have immediately measurable outcomes, their long-term impact is significant, shaping healthier habits, reducing risks, and improving quality of life for mothers and babies. By combining evidence-based information with community-centered approaches, maternal and infant health education can help close gaps in health outcomes and ensure that every mother and baby is Healthy from the Bump.

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