

INTRODUCTION

Project With is a 12 lesson literature-based curriculum that is being rigorously evaluated to increase protective factors, strengthen sexual risk avoidance and decrease teen dating violence by utilizing trained culturally relevant facilitators. This innovative approach relies on the trusted practice of allowing elders within the community to share stories that share life lessons that allow young people “to gain knowledge about this important part of life (intimate relationships) by promoting conversation and reflection about our common human experience.” (Art of Loving Well, page 5). We believe that doing life with those who guide and teach is the most effective way to influence the next generation in our community.

Project With has selected 12 short stories and/or poems that allow our facilitators to have conversations about what has affected their own life decisions based on life experiences. These stories challenge participants to deal with our family, friends, personal insecurities, death of loved ones, and experiences of early love and loss that have shaped how we deal with relationships and finding our future partner.

Project With challenges young people to reflect on these stories with videos and engaging activities to determine who they will do life with in the future. The curriculum allows the space for the young people to decide whether they choose to do life with those who support them toward a better future, or with those who influence them toward a different path.



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SEXUAL RISK AVOIDANCE PROTECTIVE FACTORS

AN INNOVATIVE STRATEGY TO BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Project With, an adaptation of the Art of Loving Well teaches students about the complexities and joys of a wide variety of relationships including friendships and family, infatuations and first romances, enduring commitments and marriage. It treats sexuality education as a part of general character development and helps students develop strong personal and social ideals. Studying believable situations in short stories, poems, essays, folk tales, and myths can empower students to make wise decisions about their own lives and to grow into responsible citizens capable of a full range of healthy, loving relationships.

It is designed to help equip students with the inclination and ability to make careful, wise, moral choices. Each of the activities accompanying the stories helps students understand Erich Fromm's conclusion that all healthy relationships include basic elements of care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge (Fromm, 1956). "Growth" was added to Fromm's list as a fifth essential ingredient.

LITERATURE-BASED EDUCATION ADDRESSES LIFE'S COMPLEXITIES

Rich literature is an effective antidote to the intrinsic impulsiveness of adolescents, especially in an electronic era. If it is true that the medium is often the message, curricula that depend on careful reading and thoughtful conversation are powerful models for the responsible, informed, respectful communication essential to all healthy human relationships. Fine literature etches life's complexities clearly and when well taught inspires us to discover wisdom for our own lives. Good teachers first urge students to react to the selections intuitively, emotionally, vigorously, to note the appealing and appalling traits of the characters, the nuances of conflicts, and the consequences of decisions and actions. They then encourage students to go beyond their initial impressions, to revisit and refine their insights, to respect differing opinions, and to appreciate life's ambiguities. An important axiom of Project With is that haste is an archenemy of wisdom.

Finally, and most importantly, good teachers connect ideas in literature to choices in real life. Conversations begun in the classroom may be expanded to include parents, other adults, and friends who are not classmates to help teenagers come to appreciate the value of collective wisdom. It also helps teens realize that we continue to grapple with the intricacies of relationships throughout adulthood and that the potential rewards are worth the effort.

As students consider the connections to their own lives, the story can remain a sanctuary. Talking about fictional characters and events affords a measure of safety but can address very personal issues. Although not every discussion will have immediate connections to every student's life, we believe in the squirrel theory of knowledge. Students will accumulate literary referents or nuggets of wisdom to store away until they need them sometime in the future. In any event, the facilitators will have promoted the principle that slowing down, observing carefully, reflecting and deliberating are sound habits for making important decisions and building healthy relationships.

In a most basic sense, Project With is an anti-impulse curriculum. The characters, their problems, their feelings, and their relationships, are interesting enough that the reader wants to slow down and revisit various moments of the story for a more complete understanding. Skilled teachers reinforce this habit of reflection and sense of detail as essential to resolving each story's problems. Vivid literature entices readers to become involved vicariously, to care about the characters and their fate. The situations are believable and relevant.

Vicarious literary experiences, well taught, enable a student to enter subsequent real-life situations as an experienced person. Awash in the insecurities typical of their age, adolescents entering their teenage years tend to think confusion and uncertainty uniquely theirs. In the words of Parr (1992), an authority in the field of

character education,"...literature has the ability to break into the sense of individual isolation that so often induces moral apathy and me-ism. By giving students an awareness that they are part of a larger community, it reassures them that they alone do not carry the burden of certain thoughts, ideas and feelings"

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