

Sex Education to Indian Adolescents – Need of the Hour

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I. Introduction

Sex is very sensitive subject and public discussion on sexual matters is considered as a taboo Indian society. Most of us do not talk openly about the topic in presence of our elders. But there are certain things that the youth of our country need to know.

Sex education refers to a broad programme designed to impart knowledge/training regarding values, attitudes and practices affecting family relationships. It aims to develop the qualities and attitudes on which family life depends. The real purpose behind sex education is the transfiguration of a male child into manhood and female child into womanhood. The education that provides knowledge on physical, social, moral, behavioral and psychological changes and developments during puberty is termed as sex education. It teaches the adolescents about the role of boys and girls in family and society, responsibility and attitude of boys and girls towards each other etc. within social context. Many psychologists believe that sex education begins at an early age and continues throughout the life of an individual. The purpose of sex education should be to facilitate the best possible integration between the physical, emotional and mental aspects of the personality and the best possible assimilation between the individuals and the groups. Sex education also instills the essential information about conception, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. It is a continuous process of developing attitudes, values and understanding regarding all situations and relationships in which people play role as males or females.

The major objectives of sex education can be broadly described as follows:-

1. To develop emotionally stable children who feel sufficiently secure and adequate to make decisions regarding their conduct without being carried away by their emotions.
2. To provide sound knowledge not only of physical aspects of sexual behavior but also its psychological and sociological aspects so that sexual experience will be viewed as a part of the total personality of the individual.
3. To develop attitudes and standards of conduct which will ensure that young people and adults will determine their sexual and other behavior by considering its long range effects on their own personal development, the good of other individuals and welfare of society as a whole.

More than biological specifics, sex education should also include social and moral behavior, proper attitudes and values towards sex, love, family life and inter-personal relations in the society. Due to growing incidents of sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS, sexual crimes and teenage pregnancies, there is a need to impart sex education among adolescents.

Adolescence (10 - 19) is an age of opportunity for children marked with a time of transition from childhood and adulthood wherein young people experience substantial changes in their physiology after puberty but do not imbibe the various associated roles, privileges and responsibilities of adulthood. This crucial period in the lives of young people presents prospect to promote their development and equip them with appropriate knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and skills to help them successfully navigate through various nuisances and vulnerabilities of life and realize the full development potential. Current statistics indicate that almost one in every fifth person on the globe is an adolescent as they comprise eighteen per cent of world's population with 88% living in developing countries. India has the largest adolescent population (243 million) followed by China (207 million) with more than 50% of adolescents living in urban areas which is expected to reach 70% mark by 2050.

Recent literature on adolescents have documented that irrespective of being relatively healthy period of life, adolescents often engage in risky and adventurous behavior that might influence their quality of health and probability of survival. During adolescence not only do the hormones work overtime but there are physical changes too that are taking place in body structure, particularly so in the sex organs, making teenager curious to explore these changes. Added to all this there is often an impulsiveness to indulge in what is forbidden combined with the absence of adequate wisdom to control these impulses. The sexual area is in constant focus among the teens in the absence of proper guidance, this results in more harm than good.

In India parents are also shy and unenthusiastic to consider any query or doubt in their children's mind about sex. Ideally home is the best place for sex education and attitude of parents are of vital importance but par

ents in India are least attentive that their unconcerned approach further pushes their child to the unrestricted source of knowledge today such as internet which is offering free pornography at the click of the mouse.

A survey conducted in Mumbai found that 88% of the boys and 58% of the girls among the college students had received no sex education from parents and their source of information were books, magazines, internet and friends. Studies have shown that vast majority of Parents do not accept the responsibility for providing sex education to their sons or daughters. The apparent stigma attached to any discussion of sex in India is due to the fact that people tend to view sex education in a narrow sense, that is, the mere explanation of anatomical and biological differences.

A Parliamentary Committee with a varied political membership recently recommended that there should be no sex education in schools. The committee has recommended that Chapters like physical and mental development in adolescents and AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases be removed from general curriculum. Instead they want these topics to be included in biology syllabus school leaving classes. This leaves the students of non-biology stream at sea. In school two years before school leaving exams, I remember waiting expectantly as our Biology teacher reached the last Page of a chapter on the skin which ended with a description of the anatomy of a female breast. The teacher, a female, was an old hand and probably sensed the collective eagerness. She promptly skipped the chapter. A couple of years later as a biology student the most dog eared pages in our text book described the physiology of female orgasm and the female reproductive system. These pages too were skipped on the plea of self-study. At home any discussion of 'these' was possible only in hushed tones with peers or friends. Involving parents was out of question. Nice kids are not supposed to take interest in these things. It's a given. Things were much the same for my parents and my generation. But are they going to change for the coming generation. That is a big question. Many Indians don't see it as a reason to deny adolescents the right knowledge, especially with 2.47 million cases of HIV Infected Persons in the country and with sexual transmission being the predominant mode of HIV transmission. With increasing exposure to television and internet sex education does not imply teaching kids about sex, which knowledge they will pick-up anyways, but for many proponents of sex education, it definitely means teaching them about what safe, healthy and acceptable sexual behavior is.

A whole political culture has been built upon sexual mores – ranging from the Congress led Government calling homosexuality a disease to Hindu fundamentalist groups equating women visiting Pubs as 'Loose'. The lesson that Indian leaders seem to take from sex education is that 'Prevention is better than Cure'. But this may not be the best formula for a country with high incidents of Child marriages and teenage pregnancies. The experts say that the case for sex education in India is quite different from the west because child marriages here make certain that you do not only indulge in legal sexual activity at a young age, but you also have teenage pregnancy. According to National Family healthy survey conducted by the International Institute for population sciences and Macro International in 2005-06 12% women aged between 15-19 years are mothers. The survey said that one in six Indian women aged 15-19 years starts to have children. 47.4% of all women aged 20-24 are married by the time they are 18. About 18% are married by the time they are 15.

Nation-wide study by the department of Women Child development says that 53.2% of children have faced one or more forms of sexual abuse and at least half the perpetrators were known to the child. Therefore also sex education might help the vulnerable young population to be aware about their sexual rights and empower them to protect themselves from any undesired act of violence, sexual abuse and molestation.

The problem of over-population also demands sex education, including family planning as a priority as many of the young people are about to be married and should be aware of the responsibilities they have. Sex education can also help With India's fight against AIDS. Govt. statistics indicate that 40% of new sexually transmitted infections are in the 15-29 age Group. More than 31% of all reported AIDS cases occur in this age group, which indicates that young Indians are a high risk demographic. India has become the second largest hub of HIV/AIDS pandemic in the world.

This inadvertent scenario calls for a serious and comprehensive public health initiative to provide Indian Adolescents and youth with accurate and age appropriate essential information and skills for a responsible life style that might help in reduction of risky sexual behavior, early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Recently recognizing the need of the time, government of India has experimented with the provision of Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) to lay the foundation for a responsible life style, including healthy relationships and safe sex habits among adolescents and youth. However, this initiative attracted mixed reactions from different sections of the Indian society. There is scanty scientific literature which throws light on the level of knowledge, perceptions among Indian adolescents and youth. Are adolescents and youth in India really prepared to understand and benefit from this new experiment, hence there is a need for study that scrutinize and critically evaluate the knowledge, attitude, perceptions, skills and experiences of family life education among Indian adolescents.

We need to accept the fact that we are living in a complex world leading complicated lives, Preventing access to pornographic movies or erratic contents on television shows is not prudent but adding a single chapter to the school curriculum is relatively simple and practical. Mass media being highly influential has been part of

both solution and of the problem as it has helped to bring sexual topics into discussions. It has been the medium in opening doors to the deliberations of several topics which were previously considered as taboo.

Sex education to the teenagers is the responsibility of every parents and teacher. It is better for them to get the right information for their parents rather than getting misinformation from other sources. Usual educational practices are very simple to learn but we cannot consider sex education on the same line. It comprises of physiological, psychological and social issues, especially when we think of including it as a part of academic syllabus. While children reach teenage level, lack of sex education may lead the way to unusual behavior. If not corrected at the right time, it may generate problem of immature misbehaviors in these children's life. They need to understand very early that "it is better to be safe than sorry".

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