Adolescent Health – High time we adopted a responsible approach to Sexuality Education

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Published on 10th March, 2014

“.....The sex education that I stand for must have for its object the conquest and sublimation of the sex passion.....” - Mahatma Gandhi

The 2009 Parliamentary Committee Report¹ that forestalled the introduction of Sexuality Education in to Indian school curricula begins with this quote by Mahatma Gandhi. Only, the committee did not realize that in the Mahatma’s time, 10 year olds were not watching pornography on smartphones and laptops. When the committee went on to justify that sex education goes ‘against the ethos of our society and would uproot the cultural values that we’ve cherished since the Vedic Age’, it turned a blind eye to the reality that children today live in a highly globalised society which, over a short period of time, has accepted everything that is western in every field of life.

There is no contention to the committee’s observation that the materials produced under the name of Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) by NACO, UNICEF and UNFPA for the Ministry of HRD, with the purpose of implementation in CBSE schools, was inappropriate for the Indian context. This author had the opportunity to review the materials a few years back and the content and images seemed more suited for a society where sexual activity among adolescents was the norm, than the exception. But that in no way justifies the committee’s recommendation to completely ban Sexuality Education from school curricula and replace it with education on cultural heritage, morality and yoga. The reason is that, whether we like it or not, teenagers in the country find the western way of life more appealing; are increasingly becoming western in every field of life.

A study done in Ajmer, Rajasthan found that 17.4% of adolescent school girls are sexually active.³ In another study in Pune schools “About 30.08 % of boys and 17.18 % of girls reported having had sexual contact.”¹⁴ These figures would seem rather conservative, if we go by the reports rife in popular media in the country, as exemplified by a 2011 India Today survey.¹⁵ Thus it is an undeniable fact that the country is witnessing a massive cultural shift, ushered in by an age of information explosion and best evidenced by the rapidly changing sexual behaviour among adolescents.

In a country where online media enjoys unlimited freedom, accessing pornographic content is ‘child’s play’. Add to this the networking opportunities provided by social media obscure from parental supervision and we have an explosive combination. Since children are smarter than their parents, they easily find ways to bypass all kinds of parental controls and restrictions. Even if we somehow manage to safeguard them from the internet, the messages conveyed by our movies and television channels are more than sufficient to drive the inquisitive teenager in to a world of unrealistic desires and dreams.

The point here is that, when our society has willingly adopted an environment that not only fuels carnal tendencies among children, but also encourages them to explore their sexuality, it is highly irresponsible not to provide them with the insight and awareness to handle it in ways that are safe for themselves and for others.

One contention that the self-appointed ‘guardians of Indian moral consciousness’ make is that sex education “will lead to the creation of an immoral society”.² The answer to this is that our society is already highly immoral, and women and young children, who neither have the awareness nor the capacity to defend themselves, are the greatest victims of it. The following statistics provide evidence in this regard:

1. 27.5 million women in India are affected by rape, of which 24% are adolescent girls. Only 1% of all rapes are reported to find place in national statistics.⁶
2. More than 200,000 young women and children⁷ fall victims to sex trafficking in India every year and are pushed in to a sex industry which constitute roughly half of the world’s 28 million⁸ sex slaves.
3. The social evil of child marriage is still so widespread in the country that 47% of girls are forced to be sexually active before the age of 18 years.⁹
4. 50% of new HIV infections in India are among adolescents and young adults in the 15 to 24 years age group.¹⁰
5. And most shockingly, as per a Govt. of India study in 2007, 53.22% of children in the country are victims of some form of Sexual Abuse.¹¹

These glaring evidences should spark in us a sense of urgency to put aside our long cherished hypocrisies and double stand-

*See End Note for complete author details
ards, wherein on one hand women and children are oppressed, exploited and treated lower than objects, and on the other hand all efforts towards creating awareness on issues related to sexuality are resisted using bogus arguments.

**Sexuality Education is not about teaching children how to have sex. It is about implementing a well-researched, age appropriate, culture sensitive, life-skills based educational programme that will empower and enable our children to defend and safeguard themselves against the sexual vices of the society.** In a country like India, it cannot be a one-size-fits-all package imported from the west. It has to be tailor-made for different sections of our society in such ways that, teenagers in big cities are enabled to take responsible decisions to refrain from high risk sexual behaviour and young girls in villages are empowered to resist being pushed in to sex trade and slavery. Most important of all, the programme should be fine-tuned to help reduce the incidence of Child Sexual Abuse in the country.

So the question is not ‘whether’ we need to implement Sexuality Education in India, but ‘how’. First and foremost, the political establishment in the country, instead of irrationally adhering to whims and prejudices, should take informed policy decisions, recognizing that schools are the most effective channels for the implementation of the programme. Secondly, the responsibility of preparing plans and strategies for the programme should be vested on a body of accomplished life skills experts and educationists hand-picked from different parts of the country. Thirdly and most importantly, the grass root level problem of “who will bell the cat” has to be resolved in a pragmatic manner.

The most pertinent grass root level obstacle in the implementation of Sexuality Education in schools is that our teachers, even when properly trained, find it highly embarrassing to deal with topics related to sex. One solution to this is using the children’s benefit, the same media technologies that are used for misguiding them. During specified hours, under the supervision of well-trained teachers, children can be exposed to media content prepared scientifically by life skills experts and the teachers can limit their role to addressing queries. The success of this method will depend not only on the appropriateness and quality of the materials produced, but also on an environment of trust, which can be built by selecting and training teachers who go well with the students.

To conclude, a sensibly produced Sexuality Education Programme will not be about promoting the act of sex or the use of condom among teenagers. It will be about responsible grownups doing a little handholding as children move in to a wondrous new world, which is also beset by pitfalls and dangers when trodden carelessly.

**Keywords:** Adolescent Health, Sex Education in India, Sexuality Education

**End Note**

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**Acknowledgement**

Acknowledgement goes to Arun B Nair et al and Liaquat Roopesh et al whose papers published in this issue inspired the writing of this editorial. Special regards to School Health Foundation of India and Prajwala for the inspirational work in their respective fields of Life Skills Education and Child Trafficking Prevention.

**Conflict of Interest**

None Declared

**Cite this article as**


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