

An ageing process in which people remain active physically and mentally

A mostly ceremonial sequence of actions performed in the hope that they will solve a computer problem

THE ASIAN AGE

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Keeping kids safe: Schools must get basics right



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When an accident happens or a child has been harmed in school, it is only natural for all schools to review their safety measures. However, attending to safety should be an ongoing concern and not just a knee-jerk reaction to the immediate calamity.

The most recent instance was the horrifying Ryan School incident in Gurgaon when a Class 2 boy was found in the toilet with a slit throat. From all accounts it appears that the basic precaution of barring adults from using children's toilets had not been taken. But the nation went into overdrive and all kinds of weird theories and suggestions were bandied about. Indeed, some of the measures recommended by the relevant authorities are quite absurd. Perhaps they were hastily broadcast to prevent

A basic safety audit would cover potential hazards from various sources such as electric gadgets, food, water, furniture and fixtures, chemicals used in labs and playground equipment. Are licences in order, are electric outlets and wiring checked, is the furniture examined for jagged edges, are railings and window grilles securely fixed, are doors

the intensification of public protests that invariably follow.

It was reassuring to read Dr Krishna Kumar's article titled "Ryan murder: Why installing more CCTVs will not protect our children". "The real problem", he says, "lies in the commercialisation of education, not just the verification of staff". I agree wholeheartedly. Contractual staff and outsourced labour will not generate a safe and congenial school environment where each individual has a sense of belonging and feels responsible for the welfare of the school. We need to look at school safety from different perspectives.

So far as deliberate harm inflicted on children by employees of the school is concerned, background checks

to the roof, lab stores and electric meter boxes locked, are the fire-fighting devices functional and can they be efficiently used when required, is medical help at hand in an emergency: these checks must be routinely made. Nevertheless, accidents will happen, but they should not happen because of negligence. The other day a young father who was rather well-built tripped and fell on top of his tiny daughter on the pavement outside my school. Subsequently, we heard that the little girl had to be operated on for a thigh bone fracture. The father too had broken his elbow. Curiously, the pavement itself was not uneven and we tried to figure out what it was that had made the gentleman trip and fall. This accident led me to wonder what the consequences would have been if a similar accident had occurred in our playing field. If a solidly built senior student had tripped and fallen on a frail child and the latter had fractured a bone, what a hue and cry there would have been — depending of course on the nature of the parents concerned. We really need to accept that even with close supervision accidents can happen.

I am convinced that in the long run, it is education for all that is required to ensure a safe environment. Focusing on young girls and women and

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and police verifications are understandable. But the suggestion of psychometric tests to diagnose criminal propensities is quite ridiculous, to put it mildly. If such tests were effective, policemen all over the world would have no problem identifying criminals.

Another strange suggestion that is made each time a girl is harmed is to employ only women employees. Women security guards, women sweepers and cleaners and now women bus drivers — there is no word about women gardeners as yet — are preferred in girls' schools. I seriously wonder why only women should be perceived as trustworthy and why girls should grow up in a single-gender world.

Respect for women is something that has become a myth in our cities. It is a matter of great concern that sex education is not imparted to boys. Boys need sex education more urgently than girls. They have to be taught about basic civil behaviour and respect for women's bodies. The fact that women demand equality with men also implies that there should be mutual respect. This holds good for teachers and students as well. Unfortunately, we have had cases of teachers misusing their positions of authority and harming their students physically and psychologically. Children must feel safe with their teachers. In my opinion, the first requirement of a schoolteacher is that she has a genuine love for children. A teacher may deliver brilliant lessons in the classroom but she is not fit to be in school

unless she knows how to handle them sensibly. When we consider support staff, we need to remember that merely being a woman does not guarantee safety. Sadly, there are instances where women have colluded with men to kidnap children for monetary gain. The answer is to have a team of trustworthy men and women working in every school.

Then there are other kinds of dangers. Awareness programmes with regard to the dangers of the cyber world, drug and substance abuse need to be held regularly by experts

but at the same time care must be taken to see that children don't become nervous wrecks in the process. In fact, children should be made to develop a sense of responsibility so that they feel that it is their duty to report to their teachers if they suspect any of their peers of indulging in dangerous activities including "self-harm".

It is particularly important in these violent times that our children should feel safe and happy — at least in school.

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