

Why sex education in schools is vital



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Since the importance of an all-round education is stressed worldwide, most schools teach certain life skills to their students even if the official curriculum does not require them to do so. Children learn to garden, cook, stitch, administer first-aid, follow the traffic rules and so on. The board curricula have, over the years, included environmental studies, work education, community service and even disaster management. However, we in India have studiously neglected the one life skill that is most urgently needed by schoolchildren today — which is sex education.

It is really puzzling why we haven't even started thinking about introducing a graduated Sex and Relationship programme in our schools. Apart from the usual consequences of underage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and non-consensual sexual acts, we are currently going through seriously troubled times. All across the world, India is being labelled as a country of rapists. Every single day there is some news about a gory incident of child abuse or gangrape. We know that rape is a very complex matter, and apart from raw lust it can involve the assertion of power and entitlement or a crude form of revenge. History informs us that young girls and boys were procured to satisfy the rich and powerful. But surely in this day and age, we can

expect a more civilised attitude towards sex? So far, as a society, we have always balked at the thought of speaking openly about sex and sexuality — leave alone explaining these important issues to our children.

It was hoped that the Prevention of Child Sexual Offences Act (passed in 2012) would facilitate the reporting of cases and act as deterrent to potential molesters and rapists. Indeed, statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicate that under the Posco Act the number of cases registered for child abuse increased from 8,904 in 2014 to 14,913 in 2015. At present, the rape of a minor under the age of 12 invites the death sentence. But clearly, these steps are not enough. Rape stories still abound, and children continue to be abused. It is high time we recognised that the only way to bring about a change of attitude is through appropriate sex education. Self-defence training for girls has been strongly recommended by many, but it often proves to be ineffectual as the findings indicate that most predators are members of the family or are well-known to the victim. Children are quite helpless in such situations. The disclosure by a recent survey that more than 50 per cent of our children are sexually abused is shocking, and surprisingly, we also learnt that a little more than half (52 per cent) of the abused children are boys. Yet,

neither family nor school does anything concrete to address the issue.

Truth to tell, there has been some reaction. Suddenly, everyone has become exceedingly enthusiastic about teaching small children about “bad touch” and “good touch”. While this may seem sensible, great care has to be taken as to how to get children to understand the difference. It is quite possible for a child to be confused between a good and a bad touch, and some touches may seem quite ambiguous to them. These confusions can have serious consequences and innocent relationships can be marred by misperceptions. Only trained and reliable persons should be entrusted with the responsibility of sensitising children to the implications of sex and sexuality. It is not only the threats posed by sex-hungry perverts and other dangers of sexual relationships that young people should be made aware of — it is equally important for them to know the beauty of physical intimacy and ultimately the miracle of birth.

Some time recently Satyagopal Dey, Child Protection and Advocacy Head, Vikramshila Education Resource Society, sent me his article that was carried in a Bengali daily. It was an excellent piece which called for appropriate sex education to combat the growing menace of child abuse.

Since voices are now being

raised for the safety of children, let us stop feeling inhibited or squeamish about dealing with sexuality at the school level. Our children are already exposed to much more than we would like to believe. Social norms have changed radically in recent times — so let us not be hypocritical and pretend that “Indian culture” does not breed promiscuity and that our young are as pure as driven snow. We must come to terms with reality, and do what we can to nurture our children to develop an informed, respectful and healthy attitude towards their own bodies, and that of others. Finally, let us remember that more boys than girls are sexually abused, so they must be an integral part of this programme. Besides, just as girls (and so should small boys) are taught to protect themselves from potential molesters and rapists, boys as they grow older must be taught to be respectful and responsible in their behaviour towards the opposite sex. And at an appropriate time, children must be helped to understand that it isn't just a simple binary world of males and females that we live in — there are many shades and nuances of sexuality and sexual orientation. Inclusivity and compassion must be fostered from the beginning. We must remember sex education is not about safety alone.

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