



EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS: NEEDS AND CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Despite having the largest population of adolescent girls in the world, biased behaviours and mindsets about adolescent girls are fairly universal across India, and are manifested in key aspects of their lives – gender-based discrimination, early marriage and pregnancy, lack of education and a dearth of formal employment opportunities. As a Powerful socializing agent, the school plays a crucial role in the transformation of cognitive, linguistic and psychosocial competencies and creating happy, and harmonious schools for mental wellness of children, who are crucial demographic divided and the most important national asset.

KEYWORDS : Adolescent, Wellbeing, Mental Health,

It has been stated by, WHO (2016), that nearly 20 percent of children and adolescents suffer from a disabling mental illness worldwide. Suicide rates in Indian adolescents appear to be several –fold higher than anywhere else in world, accounting for 25 percent of deaths in girls aged 10-19 years. Most mental health problems, though manageable are not identified or formally diagnosed at an appropriate time of child development. Therefore, as parents, teachers, educators and professionals dealing with the future of tomorrow, it is imperative to consider child and adolescent mental health as a necessary priority for the healthy development of societies.

Education holds the power to transform fortunes within the human lifespan. Education is progressively seen with an inclusive perspective, symbolizing a strong emphasis on integrated learning. Schools must respond to the diverse mental health and wellbeing needs of the students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning thereby ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curriculum, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies and resource support. Children with learning difficulties or poor academic performance should not be labelled as per preconceived notion.

In this context, schools have an unprecedented opportunity to improve the lives of young people. Progressively, schools are finding it necessary to expand their role in providing services for overall child development and wellbeing. As a powerful socializing agent, the school plays a crucial role in transformation of cognitive, linguistic and psychosocial competencies and creating happy ,healthy and harmonious schools for mental health wellness of children, who are crucial demographic divided and the most important national assets.

Here are some facts from WHO:

- Depression alone accounts for 4.3 percent of the global burden of diseases and is among the largest single causes of disability worldwide.
- Suicide is the second most common cause of death among young people worldwide.
- 20 percent of children and adolescents suffer from a disabling mental illness worldwide ICMR statistics reveal.
- 12.8 percent children suffer from mental and behavioural disorders.

Counselling skills as a tool for change

While counselling as a skill has been though to involve basic communication and talking, it is more than that. Stated by American

Counselling Association, Professional counselling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellbeing, education, and to achieve career goals. Thus, it is essential that professionals and educators willing to help children and adolescents are trained professionally and have the necessary skills that quip them with both theoretical and practical information to bring positive changes with regards to mental health in the children community.

Perspective policy approach

India yet does not have a comprehensive approach to school mental health promotion. The children mental health policy is nonexistent and behavioural and emotional aspects of social needs. Children are a completely ignored area. The five year plans, until recently , have set aside only a few crores for mental health of the entire country with the child's mental health promotion receiving a very low priority. Lot of complexities exist in multiplicities of laws related to child mental health or associated disabilities.

School play a large role in development of children and adolescents and provide a room and scope for interventions at all levels of the schooling span. There is a need to train manpower in child and adolescent mental health at various levels of schooling especially the role of teachers and student peer group as first aid counsellors, mentors, and peer educators. The exiting counsellor need constant up gradation in their role and responsibility for school mental health promotion and special education for the disability group of children. Child and adolescent research has not received the deserved attention so far. There is a great need to coordinate our efforts. The non-governmental organizations have an important role to play in advocacy, awareness and comprehensive and continuous training of man power.

How gender affects adolescent's mental health

Socialization of both boys and girls begins early on the basis of gender, and it is important to initiate change processes at a young age to shape attitudes and transform behaviours. Schools and colleges play a major role in this regard, because students spend large amounts of time engaged with peers. Creating positive social norms in educational institutions that value girls and their rights is important to improve the well-being of girls and achieve long term and sustainable social change.

“Differences between women and men in roles and responsibilities, status and power,, interact with biological differences between the sexes to contribute to differences in the nature of mental health problems suffered , health seeking behaviour of those affected and responses of the health sector and society as whole. During

adolescence, girls have a much higher prevalence of depression and eating disorders, and engage more in suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than boys. Mostly Boys experience more problems with anger, engage in high risk behaviours and commit suicide more frequently than girls. In general, adolescent girls are more prone to symptoms that are directed inwardly, while adolescent boys are more prone to act out."

In order to promote gender equality, guaranteed by the Indian constitution, we need to change the mode of interaction at all levels home, school, and workplace, and so on .This can be done in following ways-

- Organize awareness programmes on various gender issues including legislations to influence behaviour change. This could be facilitated through workshops, theme based plays, films, painting competitions etc.
- School and college functions should focus on theme of gender equality and empowerment and encourage students to sign up and express their support for gender justice and equality.
- Aware for providing necessary life skill education and information/guidance about existing public services to their fellow students.
- Document is a best practice to measure the extent of behaviour change and display the same through exhibitions, fests, annual magazines etc.

Many of the things we need can wait. The children cannot...Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed to him we cannot answer "Tomorrow". His name is "Today". - Gabriela Mistral, 1948

Promoting mental wellbeing of students

1. Mental Health & Life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviours need to be mandated for helping children and adolescents to effectively deal with demands and challenges of everyday life. Integration of age appropriate life skills throughout the schooling period of 12-13 year imbues a rounded development of children as a lifelong human resource for self and the environment and the nation at large.
2. The policy should encourage ongoing 'comprehensive curriculum' for sensitisation of principals, teachers, managers and all students towards Gender Issues, Substance Abuse Prevention, Understanding and Management of Aggression and Violence, Promotion of Emotional Health, Safety & Positive Citizenship. School systems must organise sequential age appropriate programmes and campaigns to spread awareness and responsibility about all dimensions of health.
3. Peer educators (adolescent students), play a vital role in becoming 'life skills and wellbeing ambassadors' of the school and the nation at large). Teacher supported and peer educators driven life skills, health, values and wellbeing programmes should be implemented for all groups of students in schools, so that they feel aware, responsible & empowered for all aspects of their personality development and well integrated with the paradigm of health and wellbeing.
4. School counsellor and special educators and/or trained teacher counsellors should be appointed for every school to facilitate effective guidance and counselling for students and their families, across the entire span of schooling. This is to help them cope-up better and plan the choices in academics and co-academic areas effectively.
5. The components of the school mental health programme must be an integral part of 'Health and Physical Education'. In fact health and nutrition programmes should form the basis for health and nutrition education rather than just focusing on 'Creating Awareness' in children about what they should eat, especially when a large percentage of children do not have access to adequate food.
6. Make all early childhood education and care programmes from

0–6 years sensitive and responsive to the children with special needs, including training of community teachers, family volunteers and anganwadi workers in the identification of the needs of the children with disabilities, use of age-appropriate play and learning materials and the counselling of parents and teachers.

7. Removing physical barriers & reviewing barriers created by admission procedures (screening, identification, parental interaction, selection and evaluation), this should include private schools. Making the curriculum flexible and appropriate to accommodate the diversity of school children, including those with disability in both cognitive and non-cognitive areas and all types of slow learners.
 8. Gear up for all Teacher Education Programmes (both pre-service and in-service) to developing the pedagogical skills required for mental health & inclusive classrooms for integrating the EWS (Economically Weaker Sections) and the complete range of CWD's (Children with Disabilities) and SEN (Special Educational Needs) children.
 9. All teacher education courses must include 'health', esp. mental health, yoga and physical education as a compulsory subject. For effective implementation of this subject, advocacy is required at different levels of the education and health systems—primary, secondary & tertiary care.
 10. For children with special needs and all slow learners, Early detection and intervention of common developmental problems and disorders is imperative as part of the specialised support to these children. In this, majority of schools find comorbidity of learning problems of school children such as conduct disorders, childhood depression, autism, attention deficit disorders, slow learners, etc.
- Coordinated efforts of mental health professionals, educationists, school counsellors and employees from government, voluntary and self-help groups are urgently required for this massive task.
 - Individualised home and education plans for behavioural modification, occupational therapy and sensory integration, speech therapy and remedial education esp. in the semi-urban and rural setting with the help of local educational and health care providers.
 - Positive parenting sessions in the context of child mental health and resilience and responsible child care. Capacity building for teachers and non-teaching staff, ensuring entire school awareness and sensitivity for child abuse (including the POCSO Act 2012) and all the other legal instruments important for the schooling systems.
11. Encourage government & non-government organizations (NGOs) working in these fields to develop state and national level trainers and master trainers for positive school mental health promotion and coaching of school leadership for all principals, teachers, senior students and education leaders of the community.

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