

Sexuality Education: When, Where, How and What? An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

Sex education is a highly controversial topic in India. Indian society being a sexually conservative society, discussions and deliberations about sex education in public are frowned upon and has resistance from many quarters. Though, sex education plays an important role in development of adolescents into responsible adults, young people are deprived of this in many parts of the world including India due to traditional ideologies, religious values and cultural inhibitions. This article discusses important aspects of sexuality education like content, modus operandi and practical issues of implementation.

Introduction

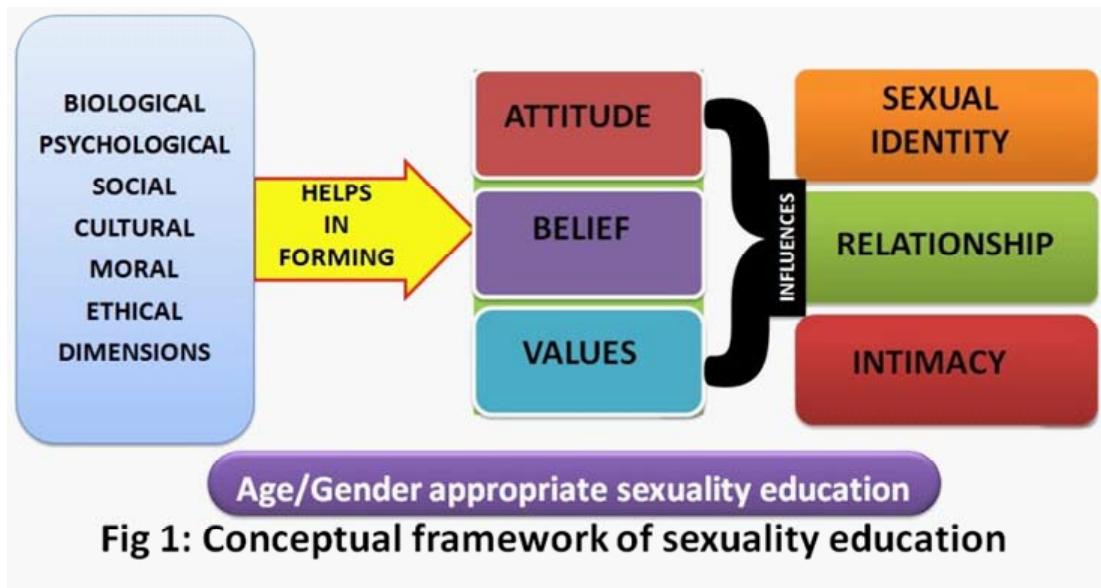
Sexuality is an important personality dimension and refers to a whole range of behaviors associated with the psycho-biological phenomenon of sex. Additionally, expressions and experiences of sexuality are socio-culturally embedded, politico-historically influenced and behaviourally constructed and reflected. Sexual health is fundamental to the physical, psychological and emotional health and the well-being of individuals, couples and families, and to the socio-economic development of communities and countries. It also has a significant influence on the overall development, functioning and placement of an individual in family and society. Awareness, acceptance and a clear understanding of one's own sexuality may prove to be crucial for an individual. Especially, sexual health, when viewed affirmatively, encompasses the rights of all persons to have the knowledge and opportunity to pursue a safe and threat-free sexual life.

Numerous definitions of sexual health have been proposed. The most commonly used definition is perhaps given by the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO defines sexual health as "A state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled" [1].

Sex education plays an important role in overall growth and development and helps prepare young people for a healthy and fulfilling life. However, due to restrictions in culture, sexually conservative traditional ideological views, religious value systems, denial and embarrassment of society in general and policy makers in particular, young people are deprived of their right to receive proper sexuality education in many parts of the world and in India also. As a result, millions of young people around the world are devoid of crucial information related to sex and sexuality. Discussions related to sexual health related topics are widely considered a taboo in Indian societies [2]. Sex and sexuality education attract apprehensions and obstacles from wide variety of people in society therefore, it still remains a controversial area. A large part of controversy arises due to a misconception

that sexuality education can increase the sexual experimentation among the adolescents and that it would compromise the moral fabric of the society. But, the truth is exactly the opposite. Though, universal comprehensive sex education was proposed in Indian schools by central government, opposition from parents, teachers, socially influential people and politicians led to banning this proposal in many states like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh etc as education is the state matter in India and federal structure of the constitution allows states to take their own decisions.

Sex and Sexuality education addresses the biological, psychological and the spiritual dimensions of a person's wellbeing and thus, helps young people to form attitude, belief and values about their own identities and relationships [3]. It has been stressed that sex education is like immunization. It can help to prevent physical, psychological, marital and social problems related to sexuality [4]. A WHO document titled 'Developing Sexual Health Programs: A Framework for Action' has defined a framework for operationalizing and promoting sexual health across a variety of settings. It identifies five key domains in which action must take place if the sexual health of people is to be promoted, namely, laws; policies and human rights; education; society and culture; economics and health systems [5]. It largely remains relevant to Indian situation also. A conceptual framework for sexuality education is presented in figure 1.



When Should Sexuality Education Begin ?

It is a lifelong process of acquiring information, forming attitude, belief and values. It should begin whenever a child asks questions, regardless of the age of the child [4]. Children are curious about almost everything they see and sexuality is no exception. Age appropriate scientific and objective information, honest and frank responses assures that children can develop a healthy outlook for sexuality. Although, there is virtually no lower age limit to start this education, the level and degree of information will greatly vary according to the intellectual development and understanding of an individual. Contrary to popular belief, it does not increase further or inappropriate curiosity of the child [6]. Parents should disclose the correct names of genital organs to their children, else they learn slang words from friends or media. Information should be provided before it is needed. Early and appropriate sexuality education increases the

comfort and confidence of interaction on child in such matters and help in protecting children from potential sexual abuse by making them vocal and seeking early help if any untoward things happen.

How and Where can Sexuality Education be Given?

Sexuality education can be imparted in many forms and settings. It can be formal, and informal both for in and out of the school. It is better to include overall health promotion and disease prevention model [3]. Often, it is taught in a graded manner like every other subject. Gender, culture, social perspective and religious sensitivity should be understood and can be incorporated as far as practicable. Permission of parents can be sought and it can be kept optional if it is provided in schools. In the long run, this increases the acceptance and the effectiveness of the education. The subject is an emotional one, therefore, the language, the manner of conducting

and the setting provided should be socially acceptable. There should be transparency, fair communication with parents and possibility of receiving feedbacks for the programs. Studies have found that comprehensive school-based sex education interventions adapted from effective programs and those involving a range of school-based and community-based components can have the largest impact [7]. Integration of sexual health with the overall health promotion program can be ideal. Selection of trainers is an important aspect and should be done very carefully. An open, honest, modest and considerate approach is needed for the trainer. A proper training of the trainer too is essential before starting formal sexuality educational programs.

What is Taught in Sexuality Education?

Sexuality education programs are likely to be more effective if it approaches sexuality in a more positive way. Various programs have different components of sexuality education. Many a times, people involved in sexuality education have experienced defensive reactions and outright oppositions. Hence, sexuality education is sometimes disguised with a variety of other names like Family Life Education, Population Education or Adolescent Health Education.

Appropriate contents of sexuality education are framed in a way that participants would be able to gain a positive view of sexuality, have information and skills about taking care of and promoting sexual health, prepare for mature, responsible and mutually satisfying relationships, learn to enjoy, control their sexual behaviours and understand a positive view of

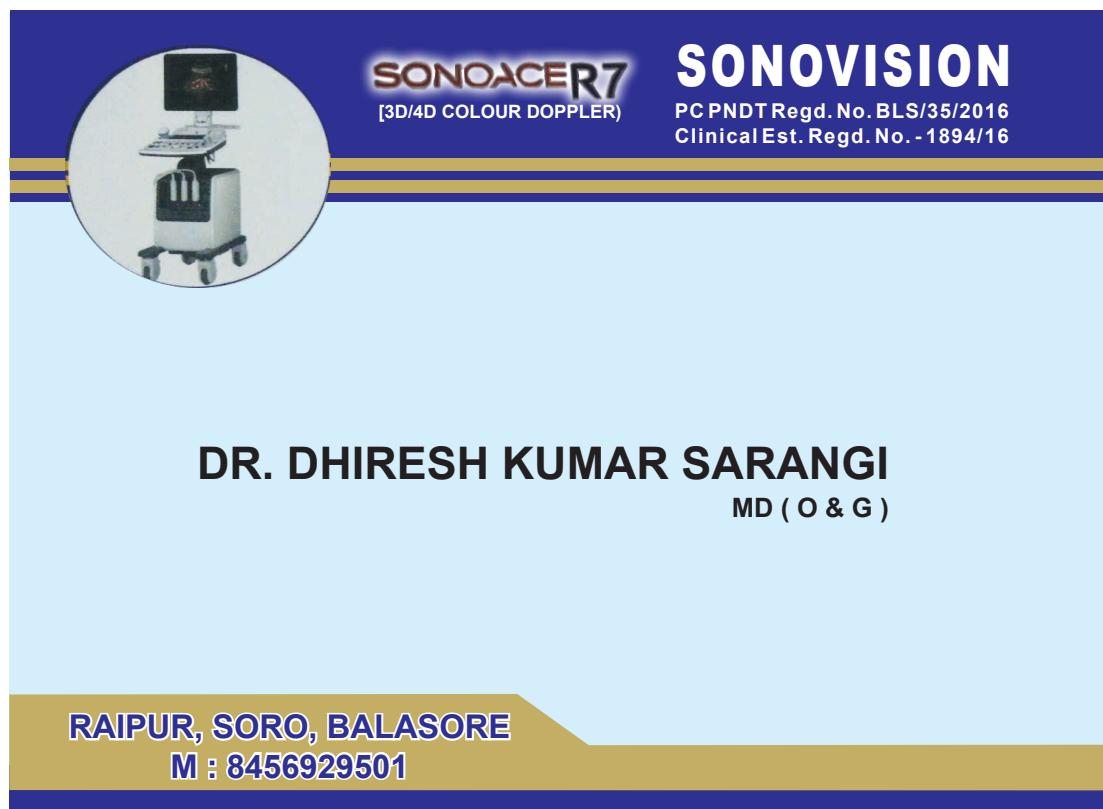
sexuality, i.e. not merely focussed on abstinence only. They should have freedom from guilt, shame and false belief from sexuality, know and avoid sexual abuse as potential victim and perpetrators, stay away from unauthorized, popular but unscientific sex literature and stay away from quackery if sexual health related issues arise [4]. It should include anatomical, physiological and psychological development, social and cultural attitude and values, common myths and misconceptions related to sexuality and sexually transmitted infections. Issues related to homosexuality, gender violence, sexual abuse and masturbation are to be incorporated. It should also provide the participants, necessary skills and attitude to negotiate transitions during sexual developments, control unhealthy peer pressure and appropriate communication skills and language. Studies have found that adolescent in India have insufficient knowledge related to sexual health and even brief sexual education session may be beneficial and it reduces the possibility of engagement in risky sexual behaviour [8].

Conclusion

Sexuality education programs can be highly strategized to help improve sexual and reproductive health of society as well as effectively reduce sexual diseases/dysfunctions, sexual abuse, gender-based violence and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections. If implemented properly, it helps improve responsible decision making and often delays the age of first sexual experiment. Flexible and innovative strategies are needed for a country like India to fulfil its needs for sexual education. Gradual but consistent efforts can really improve the level of sexual literacy in India.

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