

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

PARENTS' VIEWS ON PROVISION OF INFORMATION AND EDUCATION OF SEX RELATED ISSUES TO THE ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Objective: Sex education in the schools has been a controversial issue in India. One can find debate in media and in different forums. Different groups in the society have different opinions. So our aim was to find out the parents view on it.

Design: A cross sectional study was designed to find out the views of the parents on provision of sex education to the adolescents through a specially designed questionnaire. Parents were contacted through schools.

Results: One hundred ninety six (29.6%) parents identified that sexuality is a common issue among the adolescents and 125 (19.23%) parents expressed concerns about sexuality related issues among their own adolescent children. Majority of the parents i.e. 419 (64%) were of the opinion that the doctors should routinely discuss this sensitive issue with the adolescents and 530 (81%) were of the opinion that sex education should be compulsory in the schools and should be started from the 8th standard.

Conclusion: Majority of parents in urban area want their wards be given sex education.

Keywords : adolescents, adolescent health, sex education, confidentiality, parent's perception

Introduction

Sex education has been very sensitive social issue in India. Parents feel it is difficult to communicate about sexuality with their adolescents. But in today's scenario it is important to talk about the sexuality to the adolescents as media exposure (1-3) and globalization (4) have changed their sexual behavior and increased their vulnerability to several health problems like sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and unwanted pregnancy as well as coerced sex and abuse. A Parliamentary committee has disfavored introduction of sex education in schools and suggested inclusion of appropriate chapters only in biology syllabus, but not before eleventh standard. The Rajya Sabha (upper house of Indian Parliament) committee on petitions said in its report, "Message should be given appropriately to school children that there should be no sex before marriage which is immoral, unethical and unhealthy" and "there should be no sex education in schools". (5) On the other hand many Asian conservative countries have shown interest to implement sex education. (6) It is considered that the children should know the fact about sexuality from school rather than getting wrong ideas from the different unauthentic sources. Parents of adolescents are an important constituency and stakeholders in this matter. Therefore, this study was planned to obtain the views of the parents about this sensitive issue in our society.

Methods & Materials

An anonymous, structured, self-administered questionnaire covering the relevant aspects of the study objectives was developed. The questionnaire was designed to know the perceptions of the parents regarding the common adolescents' issues and particularly to know the views of the parents about the sexuality and sex education for the adolescents. This was pre-tested in our adolescent health clinic at our hospital in New Delhi on parents of the adolescent clients and necessary modifications were done in order to get the maximum results. The plan was then discussed with the principals and the teachers of the five schools of urban Delhi (three private schools out of which one in a very affluent area to covers the higher income group and upper middle class and two government schools mostly having lower middle and the poorer class to cover all socio-economic class parents) which were covered under the Safdarjang Hospital Adolescent Healthcare Network (SHAHN) to take into account their views. Parents were contacted through their wards through a note by the teachers to explain them the objectives of the study and methods of filling the up the performa. Sections of the classes from standard 6th to 12th were selected and questionnaires were distributed to be taken home for their parents. Those who received the questionnaires were requested to have either parent complete it anonymously and return it. The results were analyzed from the completely filled forms.

Results

The questionnaires were distributed to 1500 students for their parents to fill in but only 1010 questionnaires were returned. Out of this only 655(43.66%) were completely filled and these were utilized for analysis. Out of these 655 parents, 531 (81%) were graduates and above, and 124 (19%) were not graduates; 260 (40%) were mothers and 395 (60%) were fathers. Number of boys' parent were 365 (56%) and girls' parent were 290 (44%). It was observed that 460 (70.23%) parents indicated that adolescents have specific needs and problems. Only 196 (30%) of respondent parents identified sexuality as a concern among the adolescents. This was reported more by the boys' parents than the girls' parents (35% vs 23%, p value 0.0015) and by the parents of older adolescents (15-19 years) than those of younger adolescents (10-14 years) (39% vs 21%, p value of 0.0092). Only 125 (19%) parents perceived the need for attention to sexuality related problems for their adolescent children currently (23.4% girls' parents as compared to 15.9% boys' parents, p value = 0.0194). Only 170 (26%) parents reported that they discussed sexuality issues with their adolescents, with a larger proportion of girls' parents as compared

to boys' parents (34% vs 20.5%, p value 0.00019). Our study found that 91 (35%) mothers discuss the sexual issues with the adolescents compared to 82 (21%) fathers (p value = 0.00007). Out of those parents who do not discuss these issues with their adolescents, 269 (41%) parents reported that they did not feel the need, 226 (34.5%) felt hesitation as they are not frank in communicating with their adolescent children, 98 (15%) parents did not approve it, 26 (4%) parents were afraid that information could be misused and only 26 (4%) responded that they were not aware of these issues. Four hundred and ninety three (64%) parents reported that their children discussed their personal / confidential issues with them; mothers were preferred to fathers (73.5% vs 63.5%, p value = 0.01). This study revealed that 412 (63%) parents wanted that the treating doctors should discuss sexuality with the adolescents during the routine visits and also the same proportion of parents felt that doctors would be comfortable to do so. Similarly 478 (73%) parents opined that sex education should be provided by doctors and this opinion was supported by fathers more than the mothers (77% vs 66%, p value = 0.0024). About three-fourth, 485 (74%) of the respondent parents expressed that issues like pregnancy, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS should be routinely taught in the school. On this, the proportion of fathers 291(73.7%) and mothers 190 (73.7%); boys' parents 279 (76.4%) and girls' parents 203 (70.3%) and parents of younger adolescents (73.9%) and older adolescents (72.9%) were comparable indicating a uniform view. Four hundred and ninety two (75%) parents indicated that they were confident that teachers can handle these sensitively of which 57.25% parents were of the opinion that such education should be started in class 8 (52% girls' parents vs 60.5% boys' parents) whereas 43% of girls' parents vs 35% boys' parents recommended that it should start from 11th class.

Eighty one percent parents expressed that sex education must be a compulsory part of school education and it was almost equally ascertained by mothers (78%), fathers (82%), boys' parents (82.5%), girls' parents (78%), parents of younger adolescents (80.6%) and parents of older adolescents (80.7%). At the same time 31% parents fear that sex education may induce sexual urges and lead to free and loose character among adolescents and it was more a concern for the parents of older age adolescents' parents as compared to those of younger adolescents (44% vs 30%, p value = 0.04).

Discussion

From this study, it was found that 70% parents feel that the adolescents have specific problems and 30% of them feel that sexuality is a major concern. But it was unfortunate to find that although 19% parents indicated that their adolescents require help in sex related problems. This may be due to the non-availability of adolescent friendly health centers and assurance of confidentiality as observed in many studies. (7-9)

We found that 35% mothers discuss sexual issues with the adolescents compared to only 21% fathers. Fisher et al (9) in their study from USA reported that nearly 98% parents discuss sex related issues with their adolescents in contrast to 26% in this study. The probable reason of difference between these two studies may be related to cultural differences in respective societies. In our study 74% of parents do not discuss sexuality and among these 41% do not feel the need and 34% feel hesitant to do so. They also think that this may lead to sexual urge. This is in contrast to the fact that sex education delays the early sexual contact. (10-13) In India only 66% parents, compared to 80% by Fisher et al (9) recommended that sexuality related issues should be discussed routinely by doctor with their adolescents. Regarding sex education, 73% parents agreed that it should be provided by doctor. In one Indian study the opinion of the adolescents were also the same. They preferred doctors to impart sex education to them. (7)

In our study nearly 74% parents also agreed that the sex related problems should be routinely discussed in school by teacher and in large proportion (57%) they indicated that it should be started from 8th class. However, about 1/3 parents have indicated that it should be started from 11th class. Fisher et al (9) in his study find out that 90% of parents considered that the sex education should be provided by teacher in school and it should be started from 9th class. The findings are similar to our study even though the cultural back grounds are different.

In this study, parents reported that the most appropriate person to provide information /education on sensitive issues like sexuality and drug abuse to adolescent would be doctors. The girls on the other hand, prefer their parents, specifically their mother (68%) for this. (8) While adolescents expects their parents to play a more active role in educating them on sexual and reproductive matters, still majority of parents apparently feel hesitant and are more keen to pass on their responsibility on to the teachers, school counselor and doctors. This is in contrast to a recent survey in US, where the parents found themselves more suitable to provide sex education to their adolescents. (14)

The most encouraging outcome of the study is that 81% parents of the parents who reported sexuality as a problem in their wards recommend compulsory sex education should be the part of the school education and this is equally recommended by all groups of parents. This will help the adolescents in getting appropriate knowledge about sexuality and the sexually transmitted diseases. In this study we have studied the views of parents in the urban area only and not included rural population. Also studies from other parts of the country are to be studied to have a larger opinion.

Conclusion

From this study we could know that the society has started accepting sexuality as an issue in adolescents and want to deal with it in a more scientific way like sex education in the school. A nationwide debate

is required regarding the content and the mode of implementation of sex education in school curriculum. Most importantly, it is the need of the hour to have more and more adolescent friendly centers for the treatment and counseling of the adolescent specific problems.

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