

Am I big or small? Or nothing?

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Adolescence is a time when one tries to understand things like health, development and rights and develops knowledge and skills. It is also a time when one learns to control emotions and maintain relationships in order to prepare for future life. The boys and girls of this age need proper guidance and emotional encouragement. Psychologists believe that the children should be made aware of adolescence, but on the other hand we see that a large section of society believes that these things are taboo and prefers to remain silent rather than talk about physical changes and emotional side of adolescence. This is a challenging area and I have had some experience regarding this during my teaching in the school. For the past five-six years, I have been involved with teaching in field of inclusive school education. During this period I have mainly worked with children of the rural background who are in the age group of 11 to 15 years. About four years ago, I had to teach a lesson on male and female reproductive system to grade seven. While preparing the lesson plan on this topic, I was a little confused. My concern was that whether it would be appropriate to teach these children about reproductive system who do not have a general understanding of human body. Secondly, would the children feel comfortable in discussing these things? I was in a state of dilemma for couple of days and then I got a book from the library titled '*Bitiya kare saval*', in which the initial chapters had the kind of information that the children could read freely. The good thing was that this reading material created a few questions in their minds and they could get a certain level of information from it. We could start our discussions through these questions in the class and the children could understand the anatomy and functions of human body and were able to have an understanding about formation of human body and reproduction. This teaching experience, institutional training and the need of the school encouraged me to discuss adolescence with children, outside the classroom and on a regular basis. Our school team designated one male and one female teacher to take up this work and we helped in creating '*kishore-kishori*

manch' in school. They primarily worked with the students of upper primary classes and helped them with their curiosity and common problems as per their needs.



The children freely pose their questions in this forum and most of the time, instead of giving them the answers straight away, they are provided with the answers in the form of stories, videos, posters and interactions. Going forward in this direction, we have procured more than 30 books on adolescence for the children and teachers. They are available in our school library. First, these books are introduced to the children in the forum and then they are issued for them to read. This effort helps children in understanding the physical, mental and behavioural changes that occur during this age and also provides guidance in solving their conflicts and problems. We work for two hours in a month with children. So far we have held 40 meetings with them and regular interactions are happening with other teachers as well. These meetings include discussions on anatomy of human body, health and balanced diet, behaviour of children, social issues such as discrimination, untouchability, theft and abduction of girl child, boys and girls not playing together in the playground, grouping (boys/girls, girls /girls, boys/ boys), use of abusive language, security, stress and frustration, first aid, cleanliness, menstruation and superstition and social beliefs. In this plan of work, the children have been able to discuss about 100 questions so far. A common room for the girls has been made in the school through this forum and proper arrangements for things like sanitary pads, cloth and dustbins have been done. The requirements of the boys is also being taken care of equally. During this work we also felt that all the problems of the school cannot be linked to adolescence alone and this forum is not the only option for them. So we meet the children every week on a Thursday and decide on issues like not to waste water and food, keep the school clean, not to fight or quarrel in the school or any other general issue that is important for school.

A few examples of the hundreds of the questions put forth by hundreds of children:

1. Why do I try to humiliate someone?
2. Why don't we form an image of our mother or sister when we look at a girl?
3. We are all together in school then why is there a discrimination in the village?
4. Why do only girls do domestic work and not the boys?
5. Why do only girls menstruate? What is its relation with the creation of a baby?
6. A transgender is a female or a male?
7. Why do people get addicted to intoxicants? Why do they use tobacco or beedi on a regular basis?
8. Why do boys and girls not want to sit next to each other? Whereas this is not the case with small children.
9. I do not know how to read. Why am I mocked at?
10. Why do court marriages take place?

I think this kind of free atmosphere of discussion and dialogue on the untouched aspects of adolescence helps the children to take their own decisions, develop leadership qualities, and have awareness about the body and understanding of democratic values. There have been quite a few experiences with the children but I would specifically like to mention some.

Case -1. A girl had irregular menstruation cycle or periods and was subjected to '*tona-totaka (some kind of black magic/sorcery)*' and visiting '*babas*' for a long time because her family and neighbours believed in these things. The girl decided to share this problem and was given proper assistance. We talked to her mother and encouraged her to seek medical help so as to get favourable results. It is worth mentioning here that this girl opposed the child marriage and forced the society to follow the new way of thinking. The question is, how many girls are given such a platform by their society where they can express their feelings and people can understand them?

Case-2. During physical changes in the body, one child was under lot of stress because he thought that he has a lump in his chest (nipple) which is painful and so it is a disease. The child knew that something like this happens in cancer. So he was told to discuss it with other children of his age to find out whether they also had the same issue. And if there is any problem then why not contact a doctor? Can we forget this delicate period at all?

Case-3. We often talk about children being rude and disobedient. But the point is why do they behave like this? It is very important to know the reason. And do all children behave like this? May be not. There was a child in our school who lived with his grandparents. He unsuccessfully tried to cut his wrist veins. During personal interaction it was revealed that he was frustrated with the continuous ruthless behaviour of his family, friends and neighbours towards him and the recurring emotional instability made him very sad and he thought of taking this extreme step as the final solution to his problem. What is worrying is that we do not hesitate to take a biased decision and have very little interest in knowing the actual reason behind such drastic actions of children.

Case-4. This student, who had completed grade eight, was eldest among four sisters and used to help her parents in arranging vegetable cart, wanted to leave school because she was suffering from stomach pain for the last two or three years. But the family was not interested in getting any medical help for her. According to her, she was disturbed because she did not want to create a scene in front of her friends and teachers on account of her stomach pain. Surprisingly she never let anyone feel anything about her condition whether it was playground or any other school related activity. It is obvious that there may be many such reasons for school dropout and these small things prompt teenagers to take their own decisions like this.

Case-5. There was some misunderstanding between the boys and girls of grade seven and eight and they were hardly communicating with each other. So they were not playing together in the playground and there was some disturbance in the classroom teaching as well. The school had to organise annual sports week. I could clearly see the disunity and conflict within the groups of boys and girls. I was in the school sports committee and had to prepare sports timetable. Instead of making twelve teams for Kabaddi from our side, we allowed children to form their own teams and told them to have equal number of boys and girls in their team. The result was quite unexpected. We witnessed a very spectacular and energetic game where six boys and six girls were captains. The boys and girls were cheering their teams sitting together in the final match and the boys were happily playing for their team under the captaincy of girls. The point I want to make here is that as a teacher we get many opportunities and it entirely depends on us how we

utilise them. The playground abolishes distance.

I cannot say that this forum is a panacea for all the problems but one thing is sure. It is the responsibility of the school to come up with such innovations, as and when the needs arise, to change the educational scenario. We get immense satisfaction that this effort is helpful in moving towards child-centered, inclusive and accessible education. Kasturba Gandhi residential schools, Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya schools are working in this area in collaboration with UNICEF. Apart from this, NCERT has also taken the initiative to make adolescence a part of the curriculum. But the most important thing is that the teacher plays a critical role in this regard because s/he has to be fair and mature, and adhere to moral values in front of children which is scarce in mainstream society but it is not difficult. It can be done. Psychologists consider adolescent stage to be very difficult, stressful and full of turmoil but efforts like these can make it a little less difficult and smooth. It is important because when the child is small, she is very close to her parents but as she grows the closeness reduces. So as a teacher, can we give them emotional strength and be sensitive towards them? That too at a time when they need their parents or someone who understand their feelings most. According to the keynote speaker of Mission Genius Mind, an organisation on behaviour of children, the effect of the words is more than an atom bomb. He says that if a child is repeatedly told that he is lazy and cannot do any work properly then she will become lazy and not do her work

properly for sure, more so during adolescence. Many a time such words are used for children either because we are angry or by mistake. The parents have to understand that unknowingly they use such language many times. Do they realise that it is wrong? These issues can be discussed in parent teacher meetings. We need to tell them about the adolescence forum and the work that is being done with the children in school. These things have to be conveyed in a very mature and careful way. We even try to talk to the mothers separately so that their participation in the development of the child is ensured.

Adolescence is the age of change. We must understand that the children are going through many changes between adulthood and childhood. At times they behave like adults and their search for identity in the society begins in the adolescent years. They are confused about their role. They feel responsible as growing adults while they still have their desires as children. If they want to put forth their thoughts before elders they are told that they are small. And if they behave like children then they are told that they are big and should mend their ways. The fact is that they are very confused and cannot understand whether they are big or small or nothing.

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