

A STUDY OF PERCEPTION OF PARENTS ABOUT SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOL IN MIRA-BHAYANDAR AREA, MUMBAI

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ABSTRACT

Sex education has always been a controversial topic in India and it has remained one of the most debated topics over the decades. Introducing a curriculum focusing on reproductive system, sexual interaction and other facets of human sexual behaviour and educating the children, seems to be one of the most desirable ways to handle teenage pregnancies, a phenomenon still exists. Also, there is considerable evidences of child abuses and increasing risk of HIV infection among youth. Taboos and stigma have created hurdles for initiating sex education in educational institutes in India. Some of the significant factors could be cultural resistances, wherein people believe that imparting sex education is against the Indian culture and against morality. Also sex in itself is considered to be a taboo and conversations on it are generally shushed and not encouraged in conservative families. Some groups are of opinion that teaching children about sexuality and sexual behaviour would otherwise authorize it and would be considered as an inducing factor for engaging in sexual activities by the children at a young age. In recent times, sex education has received mixed views from different sections of the society. However, it is assumed that the perception of parents would matter the most for bringing any strategic change in the domain. The present paper makes an attempt to examine and present the views of parents about the scope for providing sex education to their children in schools.

KEYWORDS: *Sex Education, Parents' Perception*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

Sex is a topic which is still considered taboo in India. Especially whenever children are concerned, conversations about sex are generally swept away and not considered important enough to be discussed with them. It is believed that talking about sex would instigate children to engage in sexual activities. This appears to be one of the reasons that sex education faces resistance in India. However, sex education does not teach just about intimate sexual relationships, but according to Ismail (2015) sex education aims to build a strong foundation for a lifelong healthy sexual relationship by acquiring information and attitudes, beliefs and values about one's identity, relationships, and intimacy. Adolescence (10-19 years) is the time when a child experiences various physical as well as psychological changes and it may be an appropriated time to empower them with adequate information. If neglected, they remain curious, anxious and may try to explore means or channels to experience sensations and pleasure to satisfy their impulses, and that further maylead them to different risky behaviour (Datta,2012). Unavailability of any formal and proper channel of communication may indulge

children towards hazardous sources, such as internet, adult magazines and movies, which might provide them with inaccurate and distorted information which would prove to be harmful. According to Tripathi (2013) there is a substantial difference between the number of youth that perceive sex education to be important and those who actually receive it. Also, those who received sex education were found to be more aware regarding the reproductive health issues than those who did not receive it. Hence, it is important to establish a formal channel to provide the children with such information.

Another issue which can be handled with the help of sex education is the prevalence of STIs among the young population. According to the NHFS-4 (National Family Health Survey – 4) report, only 20.9 percent of women had comprehensive knowledge about HIV, whereas among men the number was just slightly higher to around 33percent. The data indicate that it is necessary to create awareness of such health hazards.

Sex education in schools has been a hot topic majorly due to the social and parental interpretation of what is right or wrong, and because it gets intertwined with people's feeling about religion and culture. However off late different sections of society have started realizing the importance and scope of sex education to reduce STIs and unintended teenage pregnancy (Christ, 2002). The debate about sex education generally centers on the negative impact of teaching sex education to children. Hence, the paper attempts to understand the perception of parents about the importance of sex education, the topics they would prefer to be the part of such initiatives, the age they think would be appropriate to impart such knowledge etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, as parents have been flexible for their children to gain the knowledge and understanding to improve their sexual health, there are sporadic instances of imparting related knowledge and information at educational institutions. Till very recently 'sex education' focused on the human reproductive system, but in the contemporary classrooms the concepts of sexual health and sexual health promotion have started to replace the traditional approaches.

Sexual health is defined by the World Health Organization as "the integration of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of sexual being, in a way, that are positively enriching and enhance personality, communication and love, and every person has a right to receive sexual information and to consider accepting sexual relationships for pleasure as well as for procreation" (World Health Organization, 1975).

Kearney (2009) defines sex education as "involving a comprehensive course of action by the school, calculated to bring about the socially desirable attitudes, practices, and personal conduct on the part of children and adults, that will best protect the individual as a human and the family as a social institution."

A number of scholars have attempted to identify the factors that are critical to success in sex education programs. A 1996 project to develop a strategic plan for HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STI) and blood borne virus (BBV) prevention education in secondary schools in Australia, included an extensive review of literature, as well as a nation-wide consultation with experts in the field.

Ollis (1996) suggests a framework for the development of a comprehensive programme in STI prevention education with the following five key elements:

- Taking a whole school approach and developing partnerships;
- Acknowledging that young people are sexual beings;

- Acknowledging and catering for the diversity of all students;
- Providing an appropriate and comprehensive curriculum context;
- Acknowledging the professional development and training needs of the school community.

The above five elements are supported by Gourlay (1996), who sought to identify and document the critical factors for successful sex-education programmes and suggests ten interconnected features for the planned and effective outcomes:

- Showing an acceptance of adolescent sexuality,
- Adopting a multi-dimensional approach to sexuality and sexuality education,
- Avoiding making generalizations about adolescents,
- Adopting a developmental-based approach to curricula,
- Ensuring programmes are gender inclusive,
- Incorporating peer education strategies,
- Introducing sexuality education early,
- Involving parents and the community,
- Providing sexuality educators with adequate training and support and
- Working at a systems level as well as an individual level.

The present research will focus on the elements for success in teaching sexual health as identified by Ollis (1996) and Gourlay (1996), and explore relevant critical factors that could address the taboo about sex education in India and understand the benefits of imparting sex education.

Problem Statement

With 1.2 billion people, India finds itself at a critical juncture of moral, demographic and social crossroads. The growing number of teenage pregnancy and sexual activity has boiled the pot of a growing debate around the need for sex education in schools. The argument on one side says that sex education will give a free gateway to the world of sexual activity and on the other side, it will help people to learn about gender and will help them to be more informed about their own body. The problem lies here is that with highly conservative society and many parents and teachers still believing that sex as a topic should be swept under the carpet has caused resistance to sex education in schools around India.

Research Objectives

- One of the major objectives of this study is to identify the benefits of imparting sex education in schools.
- To understand the perception of parents about the necessity of sex education programmes in schools.
- To identify various programmes and methods through which sex education could be imparted to children.

METHOD

The universe is comprised of respondents, the parents, in the age group of 25 years to 50 years from various backgrounds ranging from working professionals to homemakers. Only those respondents were included in the study whose children were in the age group 5 to 17 years. The respondents were selected purposefully from Mira-Bhayandar area in Mumbai. Only those fulfilled the criteria and were willing to participate are included. Total 52 respondents were interviewed. An interview schedule was used to collect primary data. For analysis and interpretation descriptive statistics were used.

RESULTS

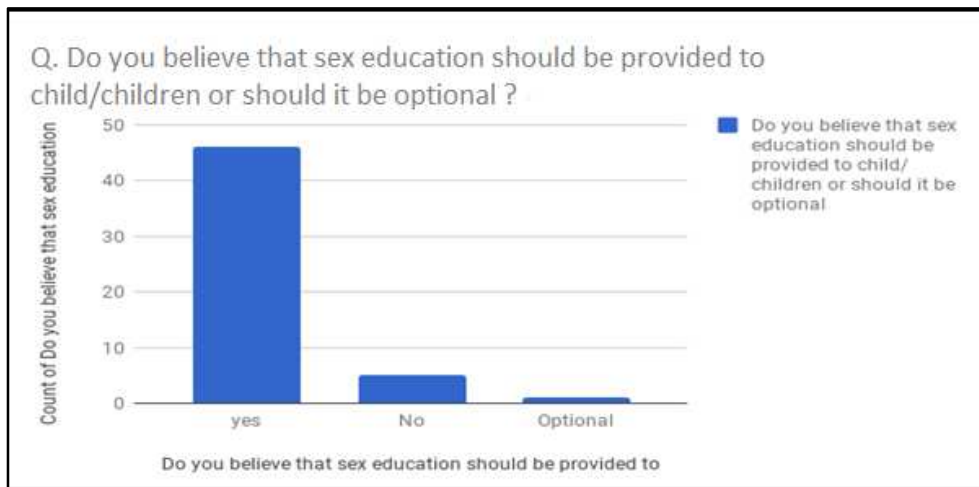


Figure 1: Distribution of Parent's Perception on Whether to Teach Sex Education in Schools

The majority of respondents (88.5%) were of the opinion that sex education should be provided to children. The respondents believed that it would create awareness amongst the children and it would better equip children to deal with unwanted advances towards them. When asked about the appropriate age, most of them believed that the age between 10 to 16 years is the most appropriate. A few were of the opinion that it should be provided as early as possible so that children can differentiate between good and bad touch. They also felt that the best way to impart such knowledge would be either through schools using visual representation or parents themselves could talk to the children. They further elaborated that imparting knowledge using these methods would make children more responsible as they would be aware of the consequences of their actions and would refrain them to obtain such information from an inappropriate sources.

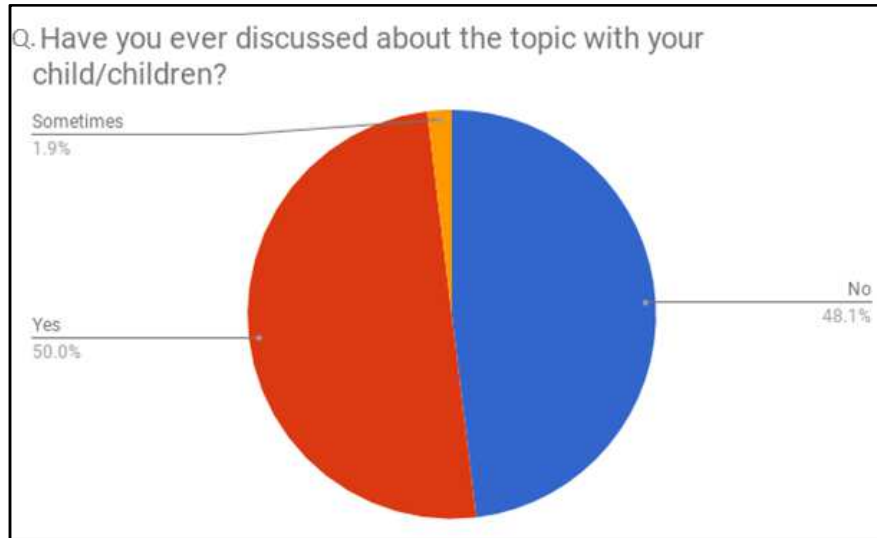


Figure 2: Percentage of Parents Discussed About Sex Education with Their Children

Whether parents have ever discussed about sexual behaviour with their children? The probe reveals a split among the respondents. While 50 percent had earlier discussed with their children about the issues, the other half of them were hesitant. Some faced cultural barriers believing that the Indian culture prohibited them from discussing such matters with their children and others were unaware about how to deliver such knowledge in an effective way. Also, they were worried about how the children would react. Among those, who were unaware about how to deliver such knowledge, were mostly happy to welcome such initiative, if taken by schools and they wanted this to be part of the school curriculum.

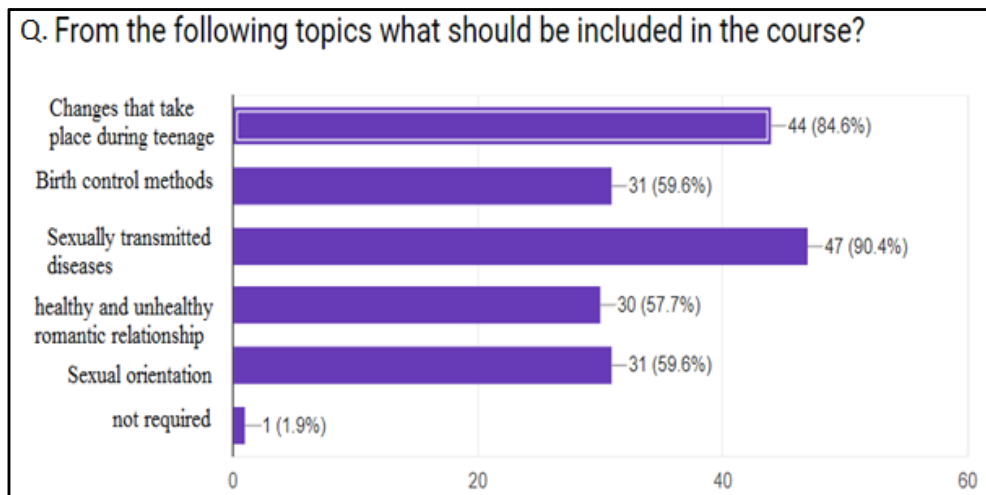


Figure 3: Perception of Parents about Content of Sex Education

The topics or areas parents want their children to be taught were included in 5 major categories (Fig-3). A larger majority (84 percent) agreed to include ‘puberty and physical, social changes that take place during teen years’ in the course content. About 59.6 percent of parents agreed for content on ‘birth control methods and their effectiveness’. About 90.4 percent respondents wanted to include ‘sexually transmitted diseases’, about 58 percent for ‘healthy and unhealthy romantic relationship’ and nearly 60 percent of them agreed to have discussions and awareness on ‘sexual orientation’.

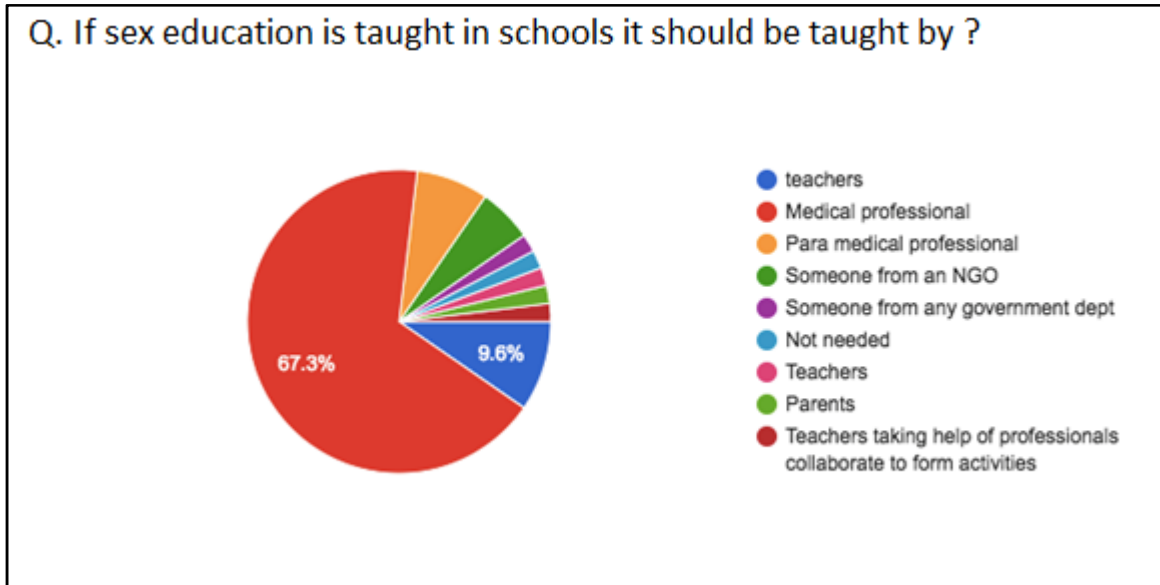


Figure 4: Percentage Response to Those the Parents Think Should Provide Sex Education in Schools

Most (67.3 percent) of the parents thought that Medical Professionals were better equipped to give accurate information and that would help to address taboos and myths in the domain.

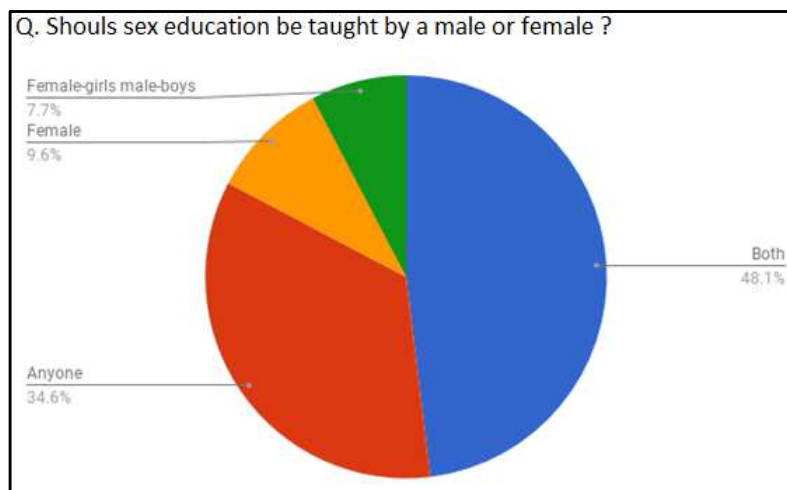


Figure 5: Gender Preference for Imparting Sex Education

While the majority of parents did not have any gender biases and were comfortable with both male and female dealing with the subject. About 35 percent of them believe that either male or female should independently deal with the subject. The majority (48.1 percent) believes that co-ed teaching would be effective because that could better address, gender sensitivity and develop appropriate inquisitiveness among children. However, some of them had cultural barriers and felt that children would feel less awkward and more comfortable if taught by the same gender.

In the consecutive part of the interview process, it has been revealed that 98.07 percent of the parents were of the opinion that including sex education in the curriculum would make children more responsible about sexual behavior and they would be able to understand and handle various situations in an effective way. They even believed that this would be helpful in preventing teenage pregnancy as they would be well aware about the consequences and hence would take preventive measures.

One of the major resistances of sex education was that it could lead to promiscuity among youth. However, parents believed that depends upon perception and understanding of the child and the way the knowledge has been imparted.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study show that the parents were in support of giving sex education to children in schools after they are 10 years old. The parents agreed that sex education would reduce teenage pregnancy and prevent and control several sex related problems. From the major findings of the study, it can be concluded that in today's world, there is a need of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). The collective perception and understanding establishes that sex education does not only focus on an individual, but more on interpersonal and collective responsibilities about sexuality, gender sensitivity and on the importance of effective sexual behavior for our overall personality development and social behavior. It covers the physical, biological, psychological and social aspects of a person's being and sexuality and also provides information about sexuality along with the importance of consent and safety, all through age and stage specific terms. In a culture where children and young people have to confront silence, misinformation and moral-laden ideas about sexuality, leading to anxiety, worry, unsafe sexual behaviour or sexual abuse, Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a necessity but not a choice. The Comprehensive Sexuality Education is expected to be a guide to help them navigate puberty and adulthood, understand themselves better and build healthy relationships with others.

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