



Citation information:

Subhashree Pattanayak, 'Does India need comprehensive sexuality education?' (2022) 1(1) Your Voice Magazine 7-9.



Short Articles

Does India need "Comprehensive Sexuality Education"?

- By Subhashree Pattanayak

Sex is a hush-hush topic of discussion behind closed doors in India to date. Ironically, openly talking about sex is frowned upon in India, which is the second most populous nation in the world with nearly 138 crore inhabitants.

Even today, in the 21st century, "sex", "sexuality", and "sex education" are only preferred to be discussed discreetly or perhaps not at all by most parents, teachers, or elders.

So, let's first unpack and understand from a socio-cultural perspective the reason for sexual discourse to be a no-no topic in India and why there is a necessity for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). The Indian society projects that it is vile and "cheap" to talk about sex openly and only sees sex as an act or means for the married couple to produce babies. With time the Indian culture slowly imbibed this vicious mindset and passed it down to the next generations. However, it forgets that India is the land of the "Kama-sutra", a historical piece of Indian Sanskrit literature on human sexual behaviour. So, shying away and forbidding to talk about the very natural instinct of any living being paves a path of ignorance and evokes unwanted curiosity in young minds.

The adolescent gets vague, half-baked answers to no answers at all, with their inquiries or questions, often being brushed off by their elders/parents/teachers, leaving them to seek information from their friends (who are in the same boat), senior high school students, or the internet (probably their best friend in this journey of exploration).

Young teenagers are natural inquisitors. Their curious mind often tries to find answers to the questions for topics around conception, contraception, relationships, consent, puberty, and gender. Upon not getting their queries resolved sensitively, the young individual often falls prey to the abundance of unverified and incorrect information. Adolescents seldom receive reliable information, and the process of self-discovery leads them to receive sensational, incorrect information, ultimately causing them to acquire false beliefs and notions about the very natural human sexual instinct, as Sigmund Freud termed it "basic urges".

And right here lies the REAL problem when adolescents access incorrect information in their transitional and transformative years. So, let us now examine and bust the most common MYTHS around the idea of sexuality education!



MYTH 1: Sexuality education is culturally inappropriate.

FACT: Culture is a set of beliefs, norms, habits, practices, and customs evolving with time. Sexuality education will increase the awareness, attitude, behaviour, and practices of individuals related to sexual and reproductive health. In no way is Sexuality education detrimental to the overall well-being and health of an individual.

MYTH 2: Sexuality education will teach children to have sex at an early age.

FACT: Sexuality education does not teach the child to have sex at an early age but equips them to be aware and have sound knowledge about the biological and social attributes of a healthy sexual life for the future. This includes not only the physical act of intercourse but also gender identity, mutual consent, puberty and awareness about sexual abuse, birth control measures, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS and STDs.

In India, as per the National Family Health Survey (2015-16), about 27% of all women between 20-24 years were married before 18 years, with 8% of women aged between 15-19 years getting pregnant, even before their bodies are fully developed. This shows that these young girls have no reproductive autonomy, and they probably faced gender-based violence apart from early, life-threatening, unintended pregnancies because of a lack of Sexuality education.

MYTH 3: Sex is an adult topic, so sexual education will pollute the young minds.

FACT: In India, about 53% of children are subjected to sexual abuse between the age group of 5- 12 years. Most often, these vulnerable children do not even realize that they are being abused and assaulted. The shame and social stigma surrounding sexual issues often prevent victims from speaking up. Therefore, there is an immediate need for sex education to teach children about good touch and bad touch, among other topics, so that they can speak up when abused, harassed, or assaulted.

MYTH 4: Children will grow up as homosexuals.

TRUTH: Homosexuality is absolutely normal and natural. Sexual education rather will help the child to be aware of concepts such as gender identity and gender dysphoria. Often children suffer from emotional and psychological issues like depression and anxiety when they are not accepted for who they are by society. Thus, the need for sexual education is the need of the hour as it's crucial and vital in today's day and time.

MYTH 5: Sexual education is only for girls.

TRUTH: Sexual education is for one and all, irrespective of any gender. Its aim is to empower and creates awareness with the right information.

Now, here comes the need for "Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)"!!

But what is it? Let's find out!



According to UNESCO, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a comprehensive, curriculum-based teaching and learning about the different aspects of sexuality like- cognitive, emotional, physical, and social. It aims to empower and equip children and teenagers with age-appropriate, scientifically accurate knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes towards having respectful social and sexual relationships, at the same time ensuring that awareness is generated around the protection of rights throughout their lives. Thus, CSE is a rights-based, gender transformative approach.

CSE plays a crucial role in addressing the well-being and overall health of children and adolescents, such as creating awareness about menstrual awareness, good hygiene practices, etc.

It provides the platform to present sexuality with a positive approach and also emphasizes instilling values like inclusion, respect, equality, non-discrimination, empathy, responsibility, and reciprocity with a focus on sex, sexuality, body image, relationships, and puberty.

About the author

Subhashree Pattanayak, is a final year student of Master of Education at The West Bengal University of Teachers' Training Education, Planning and Administration (WBUTTEPA). Her research interests include sustainability in education, inclusive practices in education, teacher development, and educational policies of the Global South.

So, who can be facilitators of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)? ...

Caregivers, parents, and teachers act as role models in a child's life and ought to be the sources of authentic and credible information. Hence, they should be the facilitators for the successful transition and navigation of children from childhood to adolescence by equipping them through Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Both teachers and parents should provide safe spaces for open dialogue free from biases, prejudices, and stigmas for CSE to be facilitated both in formal and informal settings sustainably.

Although at present in India, there are few national programs like Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karykram (RKSK) under Ayushman Bharat, an initiative launched by the Government of India and several others that aims to provide age-appropriate information on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), but a lot needs to be done to ensure the proper implementation of the programs at the grass-root levels.

In the current context, it, therefore, becomes imperative that we break the age-old norm of silence around sex education by sensitizing children, young individuals, and the gatekeepers with the correct information by ensuring universal access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). It is time that we stop considering sex to be a taboo in society.