

Adolescent Attitudes and Relevance to Family Life Education Programs

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The study was conducted in seven private co-educational English-medium schools in Cochin to understand adolescent attitudes in this part of the country. Queries submitted by students ($n=10660$) and responses to separate pretested questionnaires for boys ($n=886$ received) and girls ($n=589$ received) were analysed. The study showed a lacuna of knowledge among adolescents with the most frequently asked queries being on masturbation, and sex and sexuality. More than 50% of adolescents received information on sex and sexuality from peers; boys had started masturbating by 12yr age and 93% were doing so by 15yr age. Although 73% of girls were told about menstruation by their parents, 32% were not aware, at menarche, that such an event would occur and only 8% were aware of all aspects of maintaining menstrual hygiene. 19% of boys succumbed to peer pressure into reading/viewing pornography; more than 50% of adolescents admitted to having had an infatuation around 13 yrs of age or after. 13% of boys admitted to having been initiated into smoking by friends; mostly between 14-16 yrs age; 6.5% boys had consumed alcohol with peers or at family functions, starting between ages of 15 to 17yrs. Though >70% of adolescents were aware about AIDS, adequate knowledge about its spread and prevention was lacking.

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Whenever secondary schools permit students to participate in the determination of the family-life education (FLE) curriculum, information on sex, sexuality and substance abuse is almost always demanded. For discourses on these delicate issues, schools depend on the services of experienced teachers and doctors(1).

Cochin is transforming into a metropolis and the influence of urbanisation is bound to change adolescent attitudes to various issues. The Family Life Education Programs for schools in the city need to be tailored to cater to the existing scenario. Hence, an analysis of the issues that have been engaging the minds of adolescents in Cochin over the past 5 years was undertaken to propose guidelines for the

program that would suit the requirements in private co-educational English-medium schools in the city.

METHODS

During FLE programs for classes IX and XI in private English-medium schools in Cochin, school authorities were requested to collect queries of students, on chits of paper without disclosing their identity, a few days prior to each session. Students were also requested to anonymously answer a pretested questionnaire (separate, for boy and girls). The query chit papers were collected over the last 5 years during 36 sessions conducted in 7 Private Co-ed English-medium schools in Cochin. Each session was attended by around 150-200 students. Three schools gave consent to distribute the questionnaire.

The queries and responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in a descriptive manner. Responses by the boys and girls were compared by chi-square test.

RESULTS

The boys and girls together submitted 10660 queries; multiples queries were received from 2289 students. The frequently asked questions included that on masturbation ($n=2278$), sex and sexuality ($n=1684$), academic problems ($n=1545$), substance abuse ($n=1355$), psychosocial issues ($n=922$), pornography ($n=877$), and love and infatuation ($n=801$). Queries also pertained to problems related to parents ($n=827$), menstrual problems ($n=241$), and other medical problems including HIV/AIDS ($n=124$).

Questionnaire response was submitted by 886 boys and 589 girls. Comparison of answers submitted by girls and boys to common questions in the questionnaire are presented in **Table I**. The answers to questions in the questionnaire exclusively for boys and girls are given in **Table II**.

Difficulty controlling emotions, lack of person to share and help out with problems, anxiety and feeling of sadness and depression were the issues raised in 2%, 2.37%, 2.47% and 1.85% of the queries, respectively. Twelve adolescents admitted, through the queries, to be contemplating suicide.

DISCUSSION

There is need for educating our adolescents on various issues specific to their age group, through meaningful Family Life Education Programs, and its importance is being realized of late(2,3). The knowledge about menstrual hygiene, among girls in India, is unsatisfactory(4). Therefore, sessions on menstruation for girls needs to be dealt with at PTA meetings and in school by the fifth Standard about a year before the onset of menarche in that social setup. Boys need separate sessions to clarify myths regarding masturbation by the seventh or eighth Standard as masturbation-related myths may be the most frequently harbored anxiety among the male adolescent(5). Common source of knowledge about sex and sexuality for children in India are their peers(6). To ensure that they are provided with accurate and authentic information, lessons on safe

sex(7), reproductive anatomy, birth control measures and HIV-AIDS need to be included in the curriculum(8,9). Sessions on substance abuse must start by Standard VIII or IX as most children, who start smoking, do so by that age(10).

Collecting queries on chits of paper from students, in their own handwriting, a few days prior to a session is an extremely useful tool in assessing the level of knowledge and the requirements of the target group. The adolescents are able to freely pen their apprehensions and fears and clear all their doubts. The disadvantage is that students may not phrase the query as they actually intended to.

The pretested questionnaires are cost effective, can be used for studies involving large sample sizes, allows introduction of a number of research questions, reduces bias, is easy to analyse, familiar to most students and most importantly, it does not make them apprehensive(11). The limitations of using this method are a low return rate and that the responses may not correspond with actual behavior.

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TABLE I COMPARISON OF ANSWERS SUBMITTED BY ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS

Question Options	589 girls (%)	886 boys (%)	Question Options	589 girls (%)	886 boys (%)
1. Initial information on sex and sexuality? (could give multiple answers) [†]			iii) Do not remember	26 (4.5)	50 (5.5)
i) Friends	359 (61)	484 (54.5)	iv) None so far	97 (16.5)	109 (12)
ii) TV	85 (14.5)	282 (32)	v) Do not know	19 (3)	173 (19.5)
iii) Parents [†]	107 (18)	1 (0.1)	vi) No answer	149 (25)	137 (15.5)
iv) Books [†]	37 (6)	137 (15.5)	5. What is AIDS?		
v) Others	79 (13.5)	70 (8)	i) Correct answer	294 (50)	529 (59.5)
vi) No answer	16 (2.5)	3 (0.3)	ii) Partially correct	130 (22)	131 (14.5)
2. Peer pressures encountered? (could give multiple answers)			iii) Incorrect answer	116 (19.5)	167 (19)
i) Bunking class	180 (30.5)	199 (22.5)	iv) Do not know	1 (0.1)	47 (5)
ii) Reading/seeing pornography	0	167 (19)	v) No answer	48 (8)	12 (1)
iii) Copying	61 (10.5)	157 (17.5)	6. How is AIDS spread? (> 1 answer may be correct – 5 correct and 6 incorrect options provided)		
iv) Smoking	0	116 (13)	i) 1/5 correct	53 (9)	216 (24)
v) Drinking alcohol	0	31 (3.5)	ii) 2/5 correct	173 (29)	141 (16)
vi) Going out with boys on the sly	46 (8)	0	iii) 3/5 correct	214 (36)	344 (39)
vii) Others	13 (2)	184 (20.5)	iv) 4/5 correct	126 (21)	135 (15)
viii) None	148 (25)	142 (16)	v) 5/5 correct	3 (0.5)	48 (5.5)
ix) No answer	201 (34)	4 (0.4)	vi) No answer	20 (3)	2 (0.2)
3. What is infatuation? [*]			vii) Incorrect answers	11 (2)	55 (6)
i) Correct answer	391 (66.5)	570 (64.5)	7. How could AIDS be prevented? (>1 answer may be correct – 5 correct and 1 incorrect option provided)		
ii) Incorrect answer	32 (5.5)	57 (6.5)	i) 1/5 correct	311 (53)	351 (39.5)
iii) Do not know [*]	23 (4)	151 (17)	ii) 2/5 correct	178 (30)	173 (19.5)
iv) No answer	143 (24)	108 (12)	iii) 3/5 correct [†]	39 (6.5)	347 (39)
4. Age of 1 st infatuation			iv) 4/5 correct [†]	3 (0.5)	2 (0.2)
i) 12yr and less	72 (12)	5 (0.5)	v) 5/5 correct	0	3 (0.3)
ii) 13 yr and more	226 (38)	412 (46.5)	vi) Do not know	5 (0.8)	4 (0.4)
			vii) No answer	36 (6)	6 (0.6)
			viii) Wrong answer	28 (4.5)	20 (2)

* $P < 0.01$; [†] $P < 0.001$

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TABLE II ADOLESCENTS' ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS n(%)

A. Boys (n=886)		(ii) no	828 (93.5)
1. What are 'wet dreams' or 'night emissions'?		(iii) age when started 15yr – 17 (2); 16yr – 15 (1.5); 12yr – 1 (0.1); 14yr – 1 (0.1); 10yr – 1 (0.1); no response 21 (2.5)	
(i) pleasurable dreams	424 (54.5)	(iv) circumstances – with friends – 22 (2.5); at family functions – 12 (1.5); no response 22 (2.5)	
(ii) ejaculation in sleep	217 (24.5)	(v) no answer – 2 (0.2)	
(iii) passing urine in sleep	65 (7.5)		
(iv) others	57 (6.5)		
(v) do not know	119 (13.5)		
(vi) no answer	4 (0.5)		
2. When did you masturbate first?		B. Girls (n=589)	
(i) never	42 (4.5)	1. Who told you about menstruation (multiple answers obtained)	
(ii) yes	830 (93.5)	(i) parents	434 (73.5)
(iii) mention age 12yr – 56 (6.5); 13yr – 306 (34.5); 14yr – 205 (23); 15yr – 260 (29.5); 16yr – 1 (0.1); 17 yr – 1 (0.1); do not remember – 1 (0.1)		(ii) friends	84 (14.5)
(iv) no answer 14 (1.5).		(iii) others	88 (15)
3. Is masturbation harmful to health?		(iv) no answer	3 (0.5)
(i) yes 59 (6.5)		2. How do you maintain menstrual hygiene? (> 1 answer may be right)	
(ii) no 592 (67)		(i) frequent change of pads	389 (66)
(iii) no answer 120 (13.5)		(ii) washing with each change	236 (40)
(iv) do not know 115 (13).		(iii) keeping pubic hair trimmed	51 (8.5)
4. What is your reaction after masturbating? (multiple answers obtained)		(iv) all of above	47 (8)
(i) guilt	338 (38)	(v) others	1 (1.5)
(ii) thrill	158 (18)	(vi) no answer	32 (5.5)
(iii) disgust	151 (17)	(vii) do not know	5 (8.5).
(iv) others	180 (20.5)	3. Were you aware that such an event would occur?	
(v) no answer	59 (6.5)	(i) yes	366 (62)
(vi) never masturbated	42 (4.5)	(ii) no	189 (32)
5. Have you smoked? When?		(iii) no answer	34 (6)
(i) yes	113 (13)	4. What is the most common cause for missed menstrual period?	
(ii) no	771 (87)	(i) hormonal imbalance	325 (55)
(iii) age when started 14yr – 32 (3.6); 16yr – 21 (2.5); 15yr – 11 (1); 11yr – 1 (0.1); 10yr – 1 (0.1); no response 47 (5.5)		(ii) normal in first few years after menarche	125 (21)
(iv) circumstances - with friends 41 (4.5); no response 72 (8)		(iii) pregnancy	70 (12)
(v) no answer 2 (0.2)		(iv) stress	49 (8.5)
6. Have you taken alcohol? When?		(v) depression	6 (1)
(i) yes	56 (6.5)	(vi) no answer	14 (2.5)
		5. Is it unhealthy for a girl to swim or bath during menstrual period?	
		(i) yes	181 (30.5)
		(ii) no	397 (67.5)
		(iii) no answer	11 (2)