



# STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SEX EDUCATION: A STUDY OF SEXUAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR AMONG GIRL STUDENTS IN BANGALORE

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## Abstract

*Human Sexuality is a very important area and deserves to be studied objectively by social and biological scientists for its own sake. Country-specific and culture-specific information is required to support advocacy, and formulation of programmes to aid better adolescent development. In this study, an attempt has been made to study the sexual knowledge, attitudes towards sex education, preferred sources of information and queries on sexuality related issues of adolescent girl students studying in high school, P.U.C. and University college final years. A self-prepared questionnaire was used. The conclusions reached are: Poor knowledge and misconceptions are largely evident among the girl students. Around one half is satisfied with the current sources of information and knowledge regarding sexuality related issues. Mixed attitudes towards sex education are evident. The college students are more willing to attend sex education programmes. Friends, Professional Sex Educators, Parents and Teachers are among the most preferred sources of information regarding sexuality, among students.*

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## Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional stage in human development during which the individual undergoes marked physiological, psychological, and social change in the process of growing from a child into an adult (Richter 1997).

The beginning of sexual development heralds the biological onset of adolescence. Many changes take place when children start "growing up". Changes affecting the physical, emotional and spiritual life of the child, changes that affect relationships and above all that affect one's self-concept as a sexual being.

Growing up is good and normal and therefore all these changes accompanying growth are good and healthy. Yet, teenagers are frequently caught by surprise and apprehension when they occur.

The adolescent boys and girls have to recognize their sexual feelings as normal. Adolescents should be helped and guided to understand the biological, psychological and social aspects of sexuality. They should develop healthy attitude towards the members of opposite sex. They should know socially and culturally acceptable ways of expressing their sexual interests. They should understand the consequences of pre-and or extra marital sexual activities and the importance of 'safe sex'. They have to prepare themselves for healthy sex life. To a vast majority of adolescents in the developing world, very basic information and services are not accessible. Even when there is no restrictive legislation, due to cultural and religious taboos, adolescents are deprived of the most needed information and services related to sexuality. From the study conducted by Devi et al., (1988) it was clear that parents played a negligible role in providing sex knowledge to their adolescent children.

The general assumption is that youth sexual activity is low in India and especially in female adolescents, because of their socialization towards a passive sexual role. Many cultures equate ignorance in women with innocence and sexual purity. Therefore young women frequently lack the information they need to handle sexuality-related issues and hence are at a greater risk for adolescent sexuality related problems. Parental strictures stunt the growth of knowledge in children about their organs. They gather many myths from their equally ignorant friends, and fables spun by servants and nannies, but a little tutoring by the mother can help put at rest the confusion raging within an adolescent girl (Narayanan 1989).

Female sexuality has been the focus of scientific studies very rarely, in spite of the multitude of needs and problems faced by adolescent girls in the area of sexuality.

Sexual development is an important component of adolescent development, which has been often neglected by parents, teachers, researchers etc due to its very sensitive nature.

In this study, an attempt has been made to study the sexual knowledge, attitudes towards sex education, preferred sources of information and queries on sexuality related issues of adolescent girl students studying in high school, P.U.C. and University College final years.

## Objectives

The Objectives of the study were:

1. To understand the knowledge of girl students with regard to human sexuality.
2. To explore the girl student's attitudes towards sex education and willingness to attend sex education programmes.
3. To identify the girl students preferred sources of information on sexuality related issues.
4. To elicit the girl students' queries regarding sexuality related issues.

## Methodology

As a part of the larger study a self-prepared questionnaire comprising 57 items on knowledge regarding human sexuality, attitudes towards sex education, satisfaction with the current sources of information and knowledge of sexuality related issues, preferred sources of information and queries on sexuality related issues, was administered to a group of 150 adolescent girl students studying in tenth, II PUC and final year graduation. All girl students belonged to the same institution and they were contacted in their classrooms. In school the students were contacted after getting the permission from the Headmistress. All willing students were included for the study till the sample reached 50 each in School, Pre-University and University College. The students were briefed regarding the study, its relevance and significance and the willing students also signed an 'informed consent form' before filling the questionnaire.

## Analysis, results and discussion

### ***Knowledge of sexuality-related issues***

In the knowledge inventory the general trend in answering questions was as follows. With regard to the knowledge about puberty majority of the girl students

have given the correct answer except for the item on nocturnal emission where most (74%) of the students have expressed don't know as a response and only 24% knew that nocturnal emissions was a normal part of growing up for boys. 'Don't Know' response for the item on infatuation was as high as 43%.

On items pertaining to knowledge about menstruation most of the girl students have chosen the correct answer except for the item "missing a menstrual period is the most reliable early symptom of pregnancy" for which the 'Don't Know' response rate is 39%. For the item regarding the possibility of becoming pregnant as a result of sexual intercourse during menstrual period, the 'Don't Know' response is 52%.

The responses to the items on knowledge about birth control reveal that the rates of 'Don't Know' response are higher. 65 % of the respondents are not aware of the safe period and more than one half of the college and P.U.C. students are unaware of the family planning devices and methods.

On items pertaining to knowledge of abortion the 'Don't Know' response rates were high. A majority of girl students are aware of the fact that frequent abortions cause health risks to the mother (71%) and that it is illegal for a girl below 18 years to undergo an abortion without her parent's consent (75%).

The items pertaining to knowledge about masturbation and homosexuality were removed from the questionnaire given to the school students, as per the school administrator's request.

On items pertaining to knowledge of masturbation, administered only to P.U.C. and University college students, the 'Don't Know' responses are predominant ranging from 79% to 53 % on various items. 38% feel that excessive masturbation can lead to mental dullness and fatigue and 31% feel that it can lead to problems of impotence in men and frigidity in women.

On items pertaining to knowledge of homosexuality, 'Don't Know' response rates are as high as 75% to 41% on various items. 36% consider homosexuality as an illness and 33% feel that there is a good chance of changing homosexual persons into heterosexual men and women.

Responses to items pertaining to knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases reveal that a majority (77%) are not aware that syphilis, gonorrhoea and herpes simplex are sexually transmitted diseases and 35% think that there is no effective treatment available for sexually transmitted diseases. 20% feel that it is possible to get sexually transmitted diseases from infected clothes, bed sheets and similar objects.

The responses to items pertaining to knowledge of AIDS reveal that the 37% of the girl students think that coming in contact with saliva, tears, sweat or urine of a HIV infected person can result in HIV infection and 30% believe that kissing someone who has AIDS on the mouth can infect the other person and 86 % believe that one can get infected with AIDS by giving blood. Whether one would get infected with AIDS or not, by masturbating by oneself (31 %), by using a swimming pool used by some one with AIDS (20%), by kissing someone on the mouth who has AIDS (12%), by coming in contact with saliva, tears, sweat or urine of a HIV infected person (31%), by eating in a restaurant where a worker has AIDS (15%), by having unprotected sex with some one who has AIDS (17%), by shaking hands with someone who has AIDS (2%), and by sharing a needle with a drug user who has AIDS (3%), is not known to the given percentage of girl students. 13 % of the students believe that one can prevent getting AIDS by showering or washing one's genitals or private parts after sex, 21% believe that one can prevent getting AIDS by being a homosexual and 13% believe that by eating healthy food one can prevent getting AIDS. 33% of the students do not know whether one can prevent getting AIDS by using a condom during sexual activity.

33% of the students feel that there is no problem in an AIDS infected person donating body organs and semen and 28% have given a 'don't know' response for the same item. 12% of the students feel that teenagers are safe from HIV infection even if they have unprotected sex or inject drugs and 11% don't know that a virus called HIV causes AIDS. A large majority (61%) believes that HIV and AIDS are the same.

### ***Student's satisfaction with current sources of information and knowledge of sexuality related issues***

**Table No. 1**

Distribution of Girl Students based on their Satisfaction with Source of information and Knowledge of Sexuality Related Issues and Willingness to Attend Sex Education Programmes

<b>Items</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>College</b>	<b>P.U.C.</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math> &amp; Sig.</b>
How satisfied are you with the sources of information from which you came to know about sex?	Satisfied	28	30	23	81 (54)	2.093
	Not satisfied	22	20	27	69 (46)	0.351
How satisfied are you with your current knowledge about things having to do with sex?	Satisfied	24	29	27	80 (53)	1.018
	Not satisfied	26	21	23	70 (47)	0.601

Are you willing to attend a sex education programme if I conduct it in your institution?	Willing	35	17	22	74 (49)	13.816 0.001**
	Not willing	15	33	28	76 (51)	

Table No. 1 shows that there were no major differences between the percentages of students who were satisfied and those who were not satisfied with their sources of information and current knowledge with regard to sexuality related issues.

With regard to the willingness to attend sex education programme, if conducted by the researcher in the student's institution, 49 percentage of the students were willing and 51% were un willing to attend the programme. Chi square tests reveal that there is significant association between the level of education and willingness to attend sex education programmes. The college students were more willing to attend sex education programmes and the college group was more knowledgeable than the other two groups with regard to sexuality related issues.

School and P.U.C. students' reluctance or unwillingness can be inferred as due to the belief that sex education is for grownups and for people who are at a marriageable age. Or it can also be due to the reluctance to ask for information and the hesitation to express their willingness to attend such programmes.

### **Attitudes towards sex education**

**Table No. 2**

Girl students' attitudes towards sex education

Sl. No.	Items	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
1	Sex education should not be taught in the schools	49 (33)	78 (52)	23 (15)
2	Sex education should be as common a school subject as Maths or English	40 (27)	90 (60)	20 (13)
3	Sex education will increase sexual activity among students	52 (35)	55 (37)	43 (29)
4	Sex education should be given only when people are ready for marriage	64 (43)	64 (43)	22 (14)
5	Sex education should be restricted to the home	37 (25)	66 (44)	47 (31)

Table no. 2 indicates that a little more than half of the respondents (52%) were for sex education in schools and a little less than one half of the respondents (44%) felt that sex education should not be restricted to the home. More than one fourth of the respondents (35%) believed that sex education would increase sexual activity among students and around the same number (33%) opined that sex education should not be taught in schools and exactly the same no of students (43%) agreed and disagreed to the item "Sex education should be given only when people are ready for marriage."

No separate item was added to identify exactly why some students did not prefer sex education in schools (33%) or outside home (25%). One inference that can be made from the existing information is that the misconception that sex education would increase sexual activity might have made the students arrive at such conclusions.

### ***Issues on which girl students sought information from the researcher***

Apart from the doubts related to specific questions given in the questionnaire with regard to their correct answers, the students entered various questions and statements in the space provided for entering queries.

The school students' questions were only on AIDS except for one student who wanted to know about the sexual behaviour between men and women. Many (76% of school students) had left the space provided for entering questions empty and some of them had written that they did not know what to ask. One student had asked the question as to why they have to know about sexuality when they are in 10th itself. This shows that even some of the students perceive sexuality as something related to marriage and adults and not adolescents.

The P.U.C. students' questions were related to menstruation, handling difficulties during menstruation, hymen, necessity of information on sex, about love and infatuation, problems related to discussion of issues on sexuality with boys, appropriateness of premarital sex, masturbation and homosexuality. 64% of the P.U.C. students had left the space provided for asking questions blank

The college students' questions were related to STD, AIDS, masturbation, homosexuality, oral sex, heterosexual activity, abortion and its health consequences, social consequences of rape and premarital sex and its relation to interpersonal-relationship between couples. 76% of the college students had left the space provided to write questions blank.

With the increase in age the girl students questions have attained transition from disease related aspects to more of social aspects of sexuality.

### **Preferred sources of information**

The students were given a set of sexuality related issues and were asked to indicate their most preferred source of information for each topic. The options for the source of information were: No one special, Friend, Young people, Teachers, Physicians, Nurses, Physicians and Nurses, Parents, Professional sex educators, Counsellor, Priest, Mother and Others. Table No. 3 shows the most preferred sources of information for each of the topic. The most preferred source were identified based on the percentage of students who choose that particular option.

**Table no. 3**

Girl students' preferred source of information on sexuality related issues

Subject	Preferred source of information
On birth control	Parents (20%), physicians (19%), professional sex educators (14%)
On sexual matters	Friends (32%), professional sex educators (29%), parents (13%)
On recognizing and preventing sexually transmitted diseases	Physicians and nurses (44%), Professional sex educators (22%) and physicians (9%)
On moral and ethical issues related to sex	Priest (17%), teachers (15%), parents (15%), professional sex educators (13%) and friends (13%)
On interpersonal relations and sexuality	Friends (28%), No one special (23%) and parents (12%)

"Friends" were chosen as the most preferred source of information on sexual matters and on interpersonal relations and sexuality, which indicates the suitability of peer tutoring even in our culture. "Professional sex educators" were one among the most preferred source of information for most of the topics, which indicates the acceptability of formal sex education programmes amongst students.

"Teachers" and "Parents" were also one among the most preferred sources of information. The student's preference indicates the need for preparing the teachers and parents to accept their role as providers of information on sexuality and to better equip them for the same.



## Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate inadequacy in, in-depth knowledge, understanding and practical implications of the knowledge acquired. Satisfaction with the limited knowledge and unwillingness to know further is also evident from the study, which would turn out to be a major barrier in improving the current state. Misconceptions regarding sex education among students are also identified. Hence the sex education programmes need to be equipped to handle these hurdles before targeting the adolescents knowledge development.

The most preferred sources of information on sexuality related issues highlights the feasibility of peer tutoring and formal sex education programmes in our setting. It also highlights the need for equipping teacher and parents with the information, attitudes and skills to fulfil the adolescents' need for information and guidance, thus enabling the adolescents to pass through the transitional period successfully, establishing their identity and becoming responsible adults in all aspects of physical, social, psychological, moral and cultural spheres.

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