



# UNDERSTANDING ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUALITY AMONGST JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Indian youth are being increasingly exposed to various aspects of sexuality. On the other hand they are also constrained by traditional gender biases. The authors carried out a study to gauge their knowledge and attitudes towards sexuality as well as the impact of health and life skills education on their thinking. 454 boys and 595 girls of first year PUC in an English medium college in Bangalore were given a questionnaire. There after an interactive one hour session on sexuality was conducted which included the evolutionary basis of male and female reproductive biology, menstruation, masturbation, and gender issues. After the session a post-test was carried out. The responses were assessed according to the issue as well as the sex of the respondent. It was concluded that there was a significant difference between the genders on many responses both before and after the session. A large number of students were unsure of the answers in the pre test. However after the session there was a definite increase in correct knowledge. Responses based on traditional values did not reflect similar changes. This study demonstrates that there is a place for sexuality education for adolescents in India.

**Key words:** Adolescent sexuality, Sex education, Child sexual abuse, HIV-AIDS, Life skills education

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## Introduction

Indian urban youth are being rapidly engulfed by globalization. They are taking the onslaught of western media and culture in their stride. There is a growing awareness of sexuality amongst children because of their exposure to easily accessible media. "These days films and television serials are made in such a way that they arouse sensual feelings, which leaves an adverse effect on the innocent minds", says Dr Jitendra Nagpal, consultant psychiatrist at the Vidyasagar Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (VIMHANS).

"This whole scenario can be assessed from the fact that during the adolescence years, the young minds have biological ability to experiment with sex but lack the emotional capacity to sustain sexuality and effective relationship. This imbalance leads to unwanted pregnancies and thus increasing rate of teenage abortions in the country", Dr Nagpal (*cited on www.tribuneindia.com, 2004*).

Therefore imparting knowledge would play a vital role in helping the young adolescents to make wiser and safer choices for themselves.

Life skills and Sexuality education has not been made mandatory in schools and colleges in India. Ignorance and sex can be a troubling and sometimes deadly mix for young people. Awareness would bring about a change in the attitude, and address the problems of teenage pregnancies and abortions, HIV, sexual abuse and gender discrimination.

Understanding their attitudes and pre conceived notions would help facilitators' design awareness sessions that would cater to their needs.

## Aim

To study the attitudes on sexuality amongst male and female pre university students in a private English medium urban college and to determine whether sessions on sexuality would impact their attitude.

## Methodology

Enfold conducts sessions on life skills and sexuality in schools and colleges. A pre test was conducted on 454 boys and 595 girls studying in first year PU of an English medium college in Bangalore by giving a questionnaire on sexuality. Then an interactive one hour session on sexuality was conducted discussing the evolutionary

basis of male and female reproductive biology, gender issues in sexuality, menstruation, masturbation. After the session a post-test was carried out.

Questions dealing with information regarding sexuality, gender and cultural value systems were:

1. The sex of the human is determined by the mother's genes.
2. A girl is impure during menstruation.
3. Menstrual blood is a means of expelling dirty blood from the body.
4. Homosexuality is unacceptable. Homosexuals should undergo counseling to cure them of this kind of behavior.
5. An unmarried girl is a burden to her family.
6. If a girl has sex once, she can't become pregnant.
7. If a girl is raped it is her fault.
8. When a girl says no to sex, she actually means yes.
9. Condoms are 100% safe in preventing pregnancy.
10. Vasectomy weakens a man.
11. Length of the penis is important for satisfying a woman.
12. Masturbation makes you infertile.
13. Only boys masturbate.
14. A drop of semen is equal to 40 drops of blood.
15. Indian boys expect their wives to be a virgin at the time of their marriage.
16. A boy is not expected to be virgin at the time of his wedding.
17. Child sexual abuse is common in India

## Result:

The questions were designed to pick up gender bias and differences in attitudes towards sexuality. The pre test showed a significant difference between male and female perceptions. This difference of opinion between the genders stood out in all the questions even after the session.

The results are tabulated below. All figures are in percentages:

	Boys						Girls					
	Agree		Disagree		Not sure		Agree		Disagree		Not sure	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1. The sex of the human is determined by the mother's gene	10.9	5.7	68.2	90.8	20.9	3.3	9.2	1.6	75.7	97.4	15.1	0.8
2. A girl is impure during menstruation	15.1	3.9	58.1	92.6	26.1	3.3	8.0	2.0	82.9	97.4	9	0.5
3. Menstrual blood is a means of expelling dirty blood from the body	32.4	11.7	46.3	84.9	21.3	3.3	32.2	8.3	60	91.0	7.8	0.6
4. Homosexuality is unacceptable. Homosexuals should undergo counseling to cure them of this kind of behavior	65.3	40	21.9	56.1	12.8	3.7	47.9	22.9	28.0	71.4	24.0	5.5
5. An unmarried girl is burden to her family	11.6	6.2	80.6	91.5	7.8	2.2	3.6	0.6	92.9	98.9	3.6	0.3
6. If a girl has sex once, she can't become pregnant	12.2	11.2	75.7	85.3	12.2	3.3	12.4	8.3	65.5	87.4	24.1	4.2
7. If a girl is raped it is her fault	8.4	8.4	82.1	86.5	9.5	5.0	1.7	1.8	91.8	97.3	6.6	0.8
8. When a girl says no to sex, she actually means yes	20.6	12.7	44.1	70.4	35.3	16.7	5.4	3.0	74.5	91.7	20.2	5.3
9. Condoms are 100% safe in preventing pregnancy	16.7	5.7	72	90.5	12.1	3.7	9	3.2	69.5	94.2	21.5	2.5
10. Vasectomy weakens a man	15.3	9.5	46.8	82.1	37.9	8.2	10.2	4.1	43.4	87.3	46.5	8.4
11. Length of the penis is important for satisfying a woman	43.8	16	35.1	80	21.1	4	13.7	6.5	38.8	87.4	47.4	8.4

12. Masturbation makes you infertile	9.1	5.0	70.1	92.6	20.8	2.2	7.4	2.9	54.4	93.6	38.8	3.4
13. Only boys masturbate	6.7	3.5	78.9	91.0	14.4	5.3	6.0	1.4	60.3	94.5	33.7	4.0
14. A drop of semen is equal to 40 drops of blood	18.7	14.2	19.2	73.5	62.1	12.1	8.5	4.1	10.2	80.5	81.3	15.2
15. Indian boys expect their wives to be virgin at the time of their marriage	78.9	51.0	12.8	32.1	8.3	5.6	82.4	88.4	7.2	9.4	10.3	2.0
16. A boy is not expected to be virgin at the time of his wedding	28.7	28.4	54.5	65.0	16.8	6.5	15.0	19.4	72.8	77.6	12.2	6.5
17. Child sexual abuse is common in India	68.9	71.3	11.2	18.3	19.9	10.2	73.8	88.6	9.2	8.3	17.0	3.0

## Discussion

**Sex of the human is determined by the mother's gene** – 20.9% of the boys and 15.1% of the girls were not sure about it in the pre test. After the session the 'not sure' dropped to 3.3 amongst the boys and 0.8 amongst the girls. The number of students (10.9% boys and 9.2% girls) who wrongly thought that the mother decides the sex of the child dropped down to 5.7% boys and 1.6% girls. This reflects the social trend of blaming the mother for the sex of the child, which also contributes to the mistreatment of women in our country.

**Homosexuality is unacceptable. Homosexuals should undergo counseling to cure them of this kind of behavior.** Here the number of boys who agreed with this was 65.3% whereas girls were 47.9%. Even after the session the difference of opinion remained almost the same at 40% boys and 22.9% girls who still felt the same. The 'not sure' declined from 12.8 to 3.7 amongst boys and 24% to 5.5% in girls. There was a significant change in their response to this question after the session.

**Vasectomy weakens a man** – 37.9% boys and 46.5% girls weren't sure. But only 46.8% boys and 43.4% girls felt vasectomy had no adverse effects. This increased to 82% for boys and 87% for girls after the session. And the 'not sure' reduced to 8.2% amongst boys and 8.4% amongst girls.

***Length of the penis is important for satisfying a woman*** – 43.8% boys and 13.7% girls were of the opinion that the length of the penis is important to satisfy a woman. This reduced to 16% boys and 6.5% girls after the session. And the 'not sure' dropped down from 21.1% to 4% in boys and 47.4% to 8.4% in girls.

***Masturbation makes you infertile*** – 9.1% boys and 7.4% girls thought masturbation leads to infertility. This reduced to 5% in boys and 2.9% in girls in the post test. The number of 'not sure' reduced remarkably from 21.1% to 4% in boys and 38.8% to 3.4% in girls after the session.

***A drop of semen is equal to 40 drops of blood*** – the number of boys who disagreed increased from 19.2% to 73.5% and among girls increased from 10.2% to 80.5%. The 'not sure' also reduced drastically from 62.1% to 12.1% in boys and 81.3% to 15.2% in girls.

***Only boys masturbate*** – 79% boys and 60.3% girls disagreed, which increased to 90% in boys and 94.5% in girls. The number of 'not sure' reduced from 14.4% to 3.5% in boys and 33.7% to 4% in girls.

The above figures show a remarkable change in the percentage of 'not sure' both in girls as well as boys. This shows that there is considerable confusion amongst the youth with regard to human sexuality. The change in response in the post test also indicates that lack of knowledge and information can lead to the development of certain attitudes and beliefs. However the one hour session was not enough to completely clear the students doubts.

***A girl is impure during menstruation*** – 26.1% boys and 9% girls weren't sure. After the session this figure altered to 3.3% of the boys and only 0.5 percent of the girls as 'not sure'. The percentage of boy who disagreed increased to 92.6% from 58.1% and girls increased to 97.4% from 82.9%.

Lack of knowledge often leads to holding on to orthodox traditional beliefs that contributes to attitude towards women. It is not only the men who believe females are 'impure' or 'unclean' during menstruation, but also the women who therefore restrict their own activities and as a result constrain their growth.

***An unmarried girl is a burden to her family*** – 7.8% boys and 3.6% girls said they were not sure if an unmarried girl was a burden to the family. This changed to only 2.2% boys and 0.3% girls being unsure about this after the session. The number of boys who had agreed to this in the pre test was 11.6% which reduced to 6.2% after the session, whereas for girls the percentage who agreed in the pre test was 3.6% which reduced to 0.6%.

This gives us a rough picture about the attitude of young educated individuals who are still holding on to traditional beliefs of girls being a burden to the family. This could contribute to the increasing number of female infanticides in our country. According to census statistics, "From 972 females for every 1,000 males in 1901 ... the gender imbalance has tilted to 929 females per 1,000 males.

By avoiding a girl, a family will avoid paying a large dowry on her marriage. According to UNICEF, the problem is getting worse as scientific methods of detecting the sex of a baby and of performing abortions are improving (cited on [www.indianchild.com/abortion\\_infanticide\\_foeticide\\_india.htm](http://www.indianchild.com/abortion_infanticide_foeticide_india.htm))

Perceiving girls as a burden has made marriage the ultimate and the most important thing in a girl's life. No matter how well educated and successful a girl might be in her career she is still expected to consider marriage her priority. This can be supported by Dr. Mehrotra's views about the plight of educated women who are so frustrated because despite their qualifications, they are ultimately expected to fall into the traditional mould of wife, mother and homemaker

***If a girl is raped it is her fault*** – 9.5% boys and 6.6% girls weren't sure. After the session this reduced to 5.0% amongst the boys and 0.8% amongst the girls. 8.4% of the boys in the pre as well as the post test and 1.7% girls in pre and 1.8% in the post test agreed it is the girls fault if she is raped.

Also when asked ***if the girl says no for sex she usually means yes*** 35.3% boys and 20.2 % girls said they were not sure. After the session this figure reduced to 16.7 amongst boys and 5.3% amongst girls. This clearly shows the miscommunication and misinterpretation between the two genders, which is fed by popular media movies. These usually show heroines disliking hero's advances initially but subsequently succumbing to their presumably unwanted attentions.

***Indian boys expect their wives to be a virgin at the time of their marriage*** – 8.3% boys and 10.3% girls said they were not sure. 78.9% boys and 82.4% girls agreed to this. After the session this reduced to 5.6% boys and 2% girls being unsure and 54.5% boys and 88.4% agreed. When asked whether a ***boy is expected to be a virgin at the time of his wedding*** 28% boys did not feel it was so. Amongst the girls only 15% felt that it was not necessary. Amongst boys 54% felt the bridegroom was expected to be a virgin which increased to 65% after the session. A strong 72% of the girls felt a boy is expected to be a virgin which increased to 77% in the post test.

***Condoms are 100% safe in preventing pregnancy*** – 12.1% boys and 21.5% girls said they were not sure. This altered to 3.7% amongst boys and 2.5%

amongst girls after the session. The 16.7% boys and 9% girls who wrongly thought that condoms were 100% safe reduced to 5.7% boys and 3.2% girls.

***If a girl has sex once, she can't become pregnant*** – 12.2% boys and 24.1% girls were not sure. This dropped to 3.3% amongst boys and 4.2% girls after the session.

There is increasing sexual experimentation amongst adolescents. This, combined with ignorance of contraception, has resulted in an alarming rise in teenage pregnancies. "Contrary to general perception more and more young girls between the age group of 12 and 15 years are increasingly visiting abortion clinics", says Dr Q. A. Bhattacharya, a leading gynaecologist. "This whole scenario can be assessed from the fact that during the adolescent years, the young minds have biological ability to experiment with sex but lack the emotional capacity to sustain sexuality and effective relationship. This imbalance leads to unwanted pregnancies and thus increasing rate of teenage abortions in the country", Dr Nagpal explains (cited on [www.tribuneindia.com](http://www.tribuneindia.com), 2004)

***Child sexual abuse is common in India.*** Among boys around 70% both before and after the session felt that child sexual abuse is common in India while the number of girls who felt this way rose to 88.6% after the session from 73.8% in the pre test.

## Conclusion:

This study has shown that there was a change in opinion where knowledge based questions were concerned but it was also found that attitude based issues like virginity at the time of marriage, and rape were colored with cultural and traditional values and beliefs that are deeply entrenched. Knowledge and information can lead to the formation of new beliefs and attitudes and help avoid unfavorable behavior. This also serves as a possible reason for the existence of gender inequality and sexual violence in our country.

The lack of understanding about sexual issues amongst the youth increases the risk and exposure to unwanted pregnancies, abortions and STDs. Sex education along with awareness on sexual abuse would act as a prevention program for young students as well as help adult survivors to deal with the consequences of childhood abuse.

The educational system has missed out on informing its children that the moment an abuse has taken place something wrong has taken place. Most civilized nations



use the educational system as a crucial means to inform children about what amounts to a sexual assault or crime against a minor, and about the various victim support systems. Sensitive issues such as incest cannot be dealt in a set-up, which does not even believe in sex education in schools (Parul Sharma, 2005).

A survey of 35 sex education projects conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1993) showed that sex education in schools did not encourage young people to have sex at an earlier age or more frequently. Rather importantly, the survey showed that early sex education delays the start of sexual activity, reduces sexual activity among young people and encourages those already sexually active to have safer sex.

Therefore it can be said that these crucial issues can be addressed by means of imparting knowledge and awareness on human sexuality.