

## Questions and answers to OUTLOOK MAGAZINE

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Q1. Do schools have to confront teenage sex, teenage pregnancies, gross misinformation and myths?

Confront no! Understand and move, definitely, yes. While it may not be a serious issue on school campuses yet, the winds are clearly blowing in that direction thanks to the media and changing family structures. Children need to have relevant information on the consequences of sexual exploration. Many myths have to be deconstructed and some advice may not be out of place, impersonal and concerned advice, without pressure and sensitively delivered..

Q2. Do schools use special counsellors for free- wheeling talks with students?

Free- wheeling talks with students, conversations which are not merely banal, are most important between teachers and students. At the Krishnamurti schools we have conversation classes scheduled on the time table to permit interaction and investigation of issues not found in the subjects. Problems, questions are taken up for conversation in a non judgemental manner to permit a fearless expression of what individuals experience and to question the assumption that each of us holds.

Many schools have counsellors. The role of the counsellor has to be clearly defined- Their role has to be clearly linked to student well being - to provide a space where students can talk frankly and be listened to empathetically. Confidentiality is of utmost importance unless the safety of the child is at stake. They should not land up being the ears of the management.

Sensitive and informed teachers and doctors can also anchor these conversations other than the counsellors.

Q3. How are these topics to be brought to children or is it unnecessary at the school level?

Sex education classes and age appropriate discussions around gender and sexuality and family seem useful. It is very important to build a concept of safe and unsafe touch.. There is one school of thought that suggests that such education must be left entirely to the family. While this seems right and reasonable, the reality is that there is little conversation around such matters in most homes. If the school and home defaults, children gather information from the friends, internet, from pornographic sites and books, often with little or no perspective

Q4. Which classes are such instructions meant for and how do school authorities decide when to start on the same?

Class V is a good starting point and classes can be held regularly every year until the student leaves school. By around age 10 the child is in a position to comprehend the reasonably communication with regard to sexual matters and by that time the curiosity is also aroused. Safety education (physical safety, safe and unsafe touch) can start at kindergarten.

Q5. What is the form and content of such instruction and how do you know it has the right impact?

Over five or six years, the content includes information on on menstruation, on the sexual act, on contraception, on the consequences of a sexual involvement, how to prevent sexual abuse etc. The process includes discussions which take into account the age group of the students. Some of the topics covered are - role of the media, attraction, gender stereotypes, masturbation, so called dirty words, sex and marriage, petting, to name a few.

We know it has the right impact only by listening to the response of the students. If students open up and talk and interact then you know that the content and process have been age appropriate. Children listen and interact when they find a relevance to their lives.

Notwithstanding the above, there are many questions that are extremely difficult for adults to handle. These are questions regarding morality, ethics, normalcy etc. The content of the conversations is as important as the tone. It is not easy to feel that one has handled the situation perfectly. At the same time it is not possible to leave these matters merely to chance.

Q6. Do you involve parents in such counselling?

We have meetings with parents around the themes relevant to the children and their ages. Special programmes also involve parents. Some of these meetings focus on safety and prevention of abuse.

Q7. Are these issues difficult to address in co-ed schools?

Not particularly- on the other hand, it may actually enrich the discussions once the initial communication barrier of shyness has been crossed.

Q8. Why do you think such issues need to be addressed in the early years these days?

We must define 'early years'. Usually this term refers to the age 3 to 8 or 9. Today children spend increasing number of hours in the passive mode watching TV or before the computer. The influence of this medium is not direct but often quite subliminal, thanks to the tremendous research that goes behind advertisements and other visuals. Adults often lack clarity about the influence of the media and are unable to make clear decisions with regard to boundaries. Some avenues have to be found to balance the influences that the child receives. And school is a good venue for such inputs since it is possible to speak to the children together and thereby free the topics of the awkwardness.

Dr. Suchitra Ramkumar (MBBS)

The School KFI, Chennai