

Should Menstrual Hygiene and Sex Education Be Mandatory in School?

Menstruation and all things relating to sex and sexuality have been by default a taboo subject in our country. In some households, the older sister or mother might explain some things about menstruation to girls, and an older brother might talk to boys about whatever they might know about the subject. That's about it.

In schools, we were all given 'the talk'. Girls and boys are separated and taken to two different classrooms like some embarrassing secret. In my school, we were given the period talk in the sixth grade by some teachers, and that was that. In high school, the biology chapters on reproduction were rushed through mechanically.

Now almost a decade later, the situation has still not improved much.

Some Statistics to Note

A 2008 report published in the United Nations Human Rights Council site states, *"In India, private schools are free to choose whether to include sexuality education in their curricula. Most schools do not have any form of sexuality education in their curricula"*.

Based on a meta-analysis that reviewed 183 papers on menstrual hygiene preparedness in the Indian school system, published in January 2020, more than half the girls included in these studies were unaware of menstruation before menarche; many schools did not have proper disposal systems for menstrual pads. Also, it was observed that most male teachers and boys

were not sensitised about the subject.

Why is this so important? Proper sex education and menstrual hygiene education from reliable sources play an essential role in preventing STIs and overall reproductive health. It is also critical to adolescent mental health. When the youth become aware and sensitised to these issues safely, it brings forth body-positive, confident individuals who form a respectful, considerate and healthy society.

The State of Menstrual Hygiene in India

Menstrual hygiene has widely been recognised as a problem in India. Even in their 20s, most women are not aware of the different options in menstrual products. Public toilets are not equipped for menstrual hygiene management.

To add to these glaring flaws, access to clean water is still an issue in many parts of rural India. Even today, there are households amongst the educated and affluent strata of the society where period isolation, which is traumatising to young girls, is still followed. Dysmenorrhea is considered uniform throughout the menstruating population, and the pain is not validated and is undertreated.

Why is Menstrual Hygiene Education Important?

The seeds of all development in this area begin with good menstrual hygiene education. Girls must first understand that periods are a normal physiological process that all females undergo once a month. They have to be taught what it is, what happens during the time, how to manage it, what is normal and what is not, and about dysmenorrhea.

Educating adolescent girls on menstrual hygiene also provides information on different kinds of menstrual products, their availability, usage and safe disposal, enabling them to choose a product and method that suits their needs and situation individually.

Menstrual hygiene education should be done stepwise, starting as early as primary school. It should not be reserved just for girls; boys have to be sensitised on the subject too. It is not something to be embarrassed about. The days of passing a packet of pads wrapped in a newspaper secretly across the classroom should long be gone.

Sex Education in Schools

Apart from menstrual hygiene, sex education in schools must be stepped up and done by professionals. It is the best way for children and adolescents to obtain unbiased, scientific and factual information in a safe environment from reliable sources. This ensures that they have a healthy perception of sexuality and sex and begin to recognise what is safe and not, which is particularly important in this era of the internet.

Today, while information is readily available, the source often may not be reliable, and in the pursuit of it, children may fall into the hands of sexual predators.

Sex education is a vast topic that goes much beyond the 'period talk' or a puberty talk. It must be introduced in primary school with the concepts of good touch and bad touch. In the upper primary classes, sessions on the typical anatomical differences between boys and girls, the physical and mental changes that one undergoes during puberty, safe web browsing, identification of online sexual grooming and available channels of help and support for sexual abuse victims.

As we move into high school, biology chapters on reproduction

must be taught like every other chapter. This itself will prevent the feeling of secrecy and embarrassment regarding these topics. Discussions must be conducted on sexuality preferences, acceptance of these preferences, consent, safe sex practices and contraception and must include Q and A sessions. Slowly the concept of healthy, respectful, equal relationships (friendships and romantic relations) may also be included in the curriculum.

One way to implement quality sex education in schools is by having a group of experts, including reproductive health experts (gynaecologists or nurses), psychologists and other specifically trained individuals, come to the schools regularly to conduct these sessions.

Key Takeaway!

Menstrual hygiene education in schools helps to improve the overall mental and physical health of women and girls. Similarly, proper inclusive sex education ensures that safe, accurate information is available to children. Moreover, it can contribute to building a more sensitised, respectful society, which may reduce sexual harassment and abuse in homes, schools, workplaces, and public places.

Our government has slowly started to bring up ideas of effective menstrual hygiene and sex education in the school curricula at the central and state levels. Currently, most initiatives in this area are being conducted by NGOs.

Hence, a trained professional's menstrual hygiene and sex education should be a mandatory part of high school education.

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