



Life Skill Education for Adolescents: Coping with Challenges

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Abstract

Adolescence is the most critical phase of an individual. It denotes the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood marked by conspicuous physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. The inbuilt buffer existing in the society in the form of control and support from the near and dear ones guide the adolescents to grow into a mature adult. However, in the recent years, big changes have taken place in our traditional society owing to industrialization and globalization. The impact is evident in the entire society, with no exception to adolescents. The highly competitive world of today and the absence of traditional norms and support have situations lead to unnecessary stress, anger issues and low self esteem resulting in, low academic performances, and disruptive behaviour in school and at home.

Introduction

According to Wikipedia, life skills are problem solving behaviours used appropriately and responsibly in the management of personal affairs. They are a set of human skills acquired via teaching or direct experiences that are used to handle problems and questions commonly encountered in daily life.

World Health Organization (WHO) in 1993 defined life skills as “the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enables individuals to deal effectively with demands and challenges of everyday life.

Adaptive means being flexible and adjusting to various situations.

Positive behavior refers to a positive outlook even in the most difficult situations or anticipating of a “way out” in the difficult situation.

UNICEF defines life skills as, “a behavior change or behavior development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: Knowledge, attitude and skills”. Thus, life skills are essentially those abilities that help promote mental well being and competence in young people as they face the realities of life. Life skills have been defined as follows: “Personal and social skills required for young people to function confidently and competently with themselves, with other people and with the wider community” (TACADE, UK). Essential life skills include such things as being able to recognize and describe one’s feeling, giving and receiving feedback, recognizing assumptions, setting realistic and attainable goals, and employing problem-solving strategies. In other words Life skills are abilities that facilitate the physical, mental and emotional well-being of an individual and competence in young people as they face the realities of life.

Categories of Core Life Skills

The ten core life skills as laid down by WHO

- **Social Skills**

- ***Self Awareness***: Self awareness includes recognition of ‘self’, our character, our strengths and Weaknesses, desires and dislikes. Developing self-awareness can help to recognize when we are stressed or feel under pressure. It is often a prerequisite to effective communication and interpersonal relations, as well as for developing empathy with others.
- ***Effective Communication***: Effective communication means that we are able to express ourselves, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are appropriate to our cultures and situations. This means being able to express opinions and desires, and also needs and fears. And it may mean being able to ask for advice and help in a time of need.
- ***Interpersonal Relationship***: Interpersonal relationship skills help to relate in positive ways with the people we interact with. This may mean being able to

make and keep friendly relationships, which can be of great importance to our mental and social well-being. It may mean keeping, good relations with family members, which are an important source of social support. It may also mean being able to end relationships constructively.

- **Thinking Skills**

- **Critical thinking:** Critical thinking is an ability to analyze information and experiences in an objective manner. Critical thinking can contribute to health by helping us to recognize and assess the factors that influence attitudes and behavior, such as values, peer pressure and the media.
- **Creative thinking:** Creative thinking is a novel way of seeing or doing things that is characteristic of four components – fluency (generating new ideas), flexibility (shifting perspective easily), originality (conceiving of something new), and elaboration (building on other ideas).
- **Decision making:** Decision making helps to deal constructively with decisions about our lives. This can have consequences for health. It can teach people how to actively make decisions about their actions in relation to healthy assessment of different options and, what effects these different decisions are likely to have.
- **Problem solving:** Problem solving helps to deal constructively with problems in our lives. Significant problems that are left unresolved can cause mental stress and give rise to accompanying physical strain.

- **Emotional Skills**

- **Empathy:** To have a successful relationship with our loved ones and society at large, we need to understand and care about other peoples' needs, desires and feelings. Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Without empathy, our communication with others will amount to one-way traffic. Worst, we will be acting and behaving according to our self-interest and are bound to run into problems. No man is an island, no woman either!

We grow up in relationships with many people – parents, brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts, classmates, friends and neighbours. When we understand ourselves as well as others, we are better prepared to communicate our needs and desires. We will be more equipped to say what we want people to know, present our thoughts and ideas and tackle delicate issues without offending other people. At the same time, we will be able to elicit support from others, and win their understanding. Empathy can help us to accept others, who may be very different from ourselves. This can improve social interactions, especially, in situations of ethnic or cultural diversity.

- ***Coping with Stress:*** Coping with stress means recognizing the sources of stress in our lives, recognizing how this affects us, and acting in ways that help us control our levels of stress, by changing our environment or lifestyle and learning how to relax.
- ***Coping with emotions:*** means involving recognizing emotions within us and others, being aware of how emotions influence behaviour and being able to respond to emotions appropriately. Intense emotions like anger or sadness can have negative effects on our health if we do not respond appropriately.

Life Skill Education

I read, I forget, I discuss, I remember, I do, I inculcate.

Life Skills Education is a series of self developmental sessions. Basic skills are taught in these sessions including communication skills, dealing with peer pressure and learning to resist negative peer pressure, assertive skills, understanding the changes that an individual goes through in the stages of development; especially during the adolescence period and being aware of one's self, feeling good about one's self, learning to have relationships with others, understanding other people with regard to their cultural values, applying creative thinking to problem solving, handling stress, managing anger and making informed decision in every aspect of their life. These skills help them to resist peer pressure as they learn how to accept themselves for who they are.

Importance of Life Skills Education

In order to cope with the crucial stages of adolescents development, early intervention of life skills programmes are carried out with basic skill building activities; participative interactions of role plays, group work, team building exercises, discussions, voicing out opinions and presentations, to actively engage young people in their self development process. These basic skills will help young people in coping with difficulties they face in their personal, emotional and social development. Through these skills adolescents learn to communicate with their parents, teachers, adults and peers. They also learn the importance of saying NO, especially at times of negative peer pressure. They learn to take control of their emotions and make more informed.

Challenges faced by Adolescents:

- **Developmental Challenges**

As adolescence is the period of onset puberty to adulthood. During this period children go through physical, cognitive and emotional changes. For this reason it is very important for individuals to understand and be prepared for the phases of adolescence. During the adolescence stage the individual's body begins to grow rapidly, size and the shape of the body changes, causing some teenagers to feel uncomfortable in their body. In addition to physical growth, teenagers also experience hormone changes and sexual maturation. These changes leave them confused, vulnerable and egocentric. Research reveals that these pubertal changes affect adolescent's self image, mood and interaction with parents and peers (Berk, 2007). However, if the adolescent is informed in advance about these changes, their psychological reactions are known to differ from those that have no prior knowledge about these pubertal changes. For girls who have not been informed about menarche the reactions could be shocking, frightening and disturbing. Similarly for boys who have not been informed about spermarche the reactions could cause mixed feelings. Moreover, information on these changes could help the young person to develop a more positive body image.

On the other hand, when teens have a poor body image, self esteem is low, relationships gets rocky. Conversations with friends shift to dieting and exercise, focus gears to how they look than on what they want to accomplish in life. In the worst cases, eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and other unhealthy

behaviours develop. The media complicates this condition by placing standards for how girls and boys should look defining what is beautiful in our culture and society. Accepting and being satisfied with

the way the body is transforming will have a positive impact on the self image of an individual. According to Ohannessian, McCauley, Lerner, Lerner and von Eye (as cited in Atwater & Duffy, 1999) young people who had high levels of self worth are able to cope well with the challenges they face, than the adolescents who had poor family adjustments.

Adolescence is a time for excitement, growth and change. Sometimes adolescents divert their energy into more experimental activities such as smoking, drugs, fighting and breaking rules. Often parents, teachers and care givers are concerned about these changes and believe that this is due to raging hormones. Buchanan, Eccles, and Becker (as cited in

Price, 2007) stated that the advancement in developmental psychology and neuroscience explained this phenomenon as the result of complex interplay of body chemistry, brain development and cognitive growth. Nevertheless, these changes that the adolescents experience take place in the context of multiple systems, such as individual relationship, family, school and community that support and influence the change. Neuroscientists believe that by the time the young child reaches puberty, youth had undergone the crucial transformations in the brain development (Price, 2007). The ability to distinguish theory from evidence and to use logic to examine complex relationships and multivariable situations improves in adolescence and adulthood (Berk, 2007). This capacity to think about possibilities expands the mental horizon of the young person causing them to voice out their opinions in family matters, religion, political and moral system. These differences in opinion lead them to explore their boundaries in the quest of finding their identity and thus, involves in risky behaviours.

- **Environmental Challenges**

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (as cited in McWhirter, McWhirter, Mcwhirter, & McWhirter, 2007) individual human development takes place within multiple ecological systems. The Microsystem consists of people with whom the individual comes into direct contact, including family, school – classmates, teachers

and staff. The family Microsystem has a major influence on individual development because within this system the individual learns values and attitudes, which will have a long term impact in the future. Hence, the stability of the family, the parenting style, types of family problems and conflicts in a family will determine the type of stresses, conflicts and psychological effects on the individual particularly on adolescents. These ups and downs in the family cause parent-child conflicts, risky behaviours and mood changes in the adolescent's life (Lahey, 2007). These situations lead to unnecessary stress, anger issues and low self esteem resulting in, low academic performances, and disruptive behavior in school and at home.

How does it help Adolescents?

1. Life skills help adolescents to transit successfully from childhood to adulthood by healthy development of social and emotional skills.
2. It helps in the development of social competence and problem solving skills, which in turn help adolescents to form their own identity.
3. It helps to weigh pros and cons of the situation, hence, act as a mediator to problem behaviour.
4. It promotes positive social norms that impact the adolescent health services, schools and family.
5. It helps adolescents to differentiate between hearing and listening and thus, ensuring less development misconceptions or miscommunications regarding issues such as drugs, alcoholism etc.
6. It delays the onset of the abuse of tobacco, alcohol etc.
7. It promotes the development of positive self-esteem and teaches anger control

Life Skill Education in India

Life skill- education is a very important and integral part of educational system worldwide. In Indian schools however, life skills education is yet to be fully initiated and recognized as an integral part of the curriculum. Shiela Ramakrishnan, in her article in Teacher Plus, says that, in most schools, value education is confused with life skills education. According to her, most schools have value education as part of the curriculum as it is one of the requirements of the NCF, though there is not much emphasis on life skills education.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) asserts that life skills education has been introduced in class 6th in 2003-4, in class 7th in 2004-5 and subsequently in classes 8th, 9th and 10th. CBSE after eight years research introduced “Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation” at IX & X class during 2010 with grading system. The CCE is school based evaluation of students that covers all aspects of student’s development. The evaluation and assessment is based on various areas as describe in three parts (CBSE Teacher’s Manual page No. 20 & 21), where part-2 consists of Co-scholastic Area in two parts-

A-Life Skills (Thinking Skills, Social Skills and Emotional Skills) &
B- Attitudes and values (towards Teacher, School mates, School Activities, Environment & Value system).

The CBSE has presently introduced (in 2012) life skills training programme as part of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation targeted at the adolescent students between 10-18 years of age. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) has under its agenda life skills training for the upper primary girls along with providing quality elementary education.

Adolescence Education Programme

Adolescence Education Programme is a joint initiative by ministry of Human Resource development and NACO, Gov. of India, to equip every adolescent with scientific information, knowledge and life–skills to protect them from HIV infection and manage their concerns pertaining to reproductive and sexual health. The approach that is being followed in the Manuals is to provide an accurate, objective and scientific knowledge keeping in mind that the content should be age –appropriate and directed towards the sensitive age of adolescents. The process of transfer is made simpler through the KAVELS approach given below:

Knowledge Attitude Values Enhanced Life Skills

A positive attitude is essential to cope with the rapid changes which happen in the life of a young adolescent in the areas of body, mind and soul. Values need to be experienced at different levels and internalized. Social skills are needed to use values throughout the day. The young people need to use, think about them, reflect on them and carry them into their personal and social lives. They need to be able to see the effect of their behaviour and choices and develop socially conscious decision making skills. The teacher, facilitator or counsellor

may like to develop reflection points for value enhanced Life Skills such as **‘Everyone in the world has the right to live with dignity and respect’** including myself. (Values – Respect – Life Skills – Critical Thinking – Decision Making). **‘Tolerance is being open and receptive to the beauty of differences’**. (Value – Tolerance – Life Skills – Interpersonal Skills – Communicative Skills).

Conclusion

In India, Now a day adolescent are exposed to more information and cultural alternatives than in earlier periods. This provides the adolescents with culturally diverse choices, which cannot be easily exercised due to economic dependence on parents and significant others. The adolescent has to prepare for a global successful adult life of competition and independent functioning which is possible only through enhancing their psychological competencies through life skill education which results in bridging up communication barriers with parents , teachers and others and enables adolescents to handle stressful situations effectively.

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