

UGC SPONSORED MINOR RESEARCH PROJECT

**A study of the
Perceptions of
Adolescents
Regarding
Reproductive and
Sexual Health**

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SUMMARY

The present research was undertaken to study the perception of adolescents regarding reproductive & sexual health of adolescents with the objective to study how modern adolescents perceive the issue of sex and reproduction and how they are dealing with them. The main objective was to study the perception of adolescents regarding the reproductive and sexual health and specific objectives were to find out the differences in the perception of adolescents regarding components like life style, attitude towards social status, perception regarding sexual relations, precautions in sexual relations, physical attraction in relation to the selected variables like Income group, gender, age, nature of college (co-ed/unisex educational institutes), and nature of residence.

The data was collected from 174 adolescents studying in undergraduate and postgraduate courses of different colleges. The data was analyzed statistically by using percentage, mean scores, t test, and ANNOVA.

The background information reveals that 56.9% respondents were females & 43.1% were males. Majority of the respondents (71.2%) were in young age group (18-21). More than 80% of the respondents were undergraduate students. Regarding nature of college 64.4% of the respondents were studying in co-educational Institutes whereas, 35.6% were in Unisex College. The monthly income level indicates that more than half of the respondents (52.9%) belonged to very high income group whereas only 12.6% of the respondents were in very low income group. Majority of the respondents 85.6% were staying at home with parents whereas only 2.9% & 4.0% were staying as paying guests and with relatives respectively.

The component wise and variable wise findings of the study reveal that there is significant association between income level and lifestyle ($P.000^*$). Majority of the adolescents – more than 85% are leading high to moderate level of lifestyle. The mean comparative scores of income groups also showed that the adolescents who belonged to high income group lead a high life style which includes drinking, smoking, going to pubs, parties, eating out in expensive restaurants etc.

The results further reveals that gender and life style is significantly related where the mean score of male is higher than female ($t 8.09^*$), this indicates that male adolescents are leading high life style than female adolescents, this reflects our cultural trend where men are permitted to lead independent life style than women, they are free to visit pubs and parties and allowed to consume drinks and may be this trend begins from youth where male adolescents prefer to

indulge in all such things to prove their masculinity or may be due to many other socio cultural reasons they show inclination towards leading a high life style than female.

Regarding Age groups and life style finding shows that Age is significantly related with life style where the mean score for life style of matured adolescents are higher than other age groups

(P.041*). This indicates that matured adolescents (21+ ages) are leading a high life style compared to other age groups, which reflect that older adolescents are more independent in their decision making, may make choices regarding their life style habits like smoking, drinking, going on dating, visiting pubs etc. Many of them may start earning along with their studies hence their spending capacity may be more than other adolescents, some of them may be living separately from their parents and are free to decide about their lifestyle.

Regarding life style and nature of college the finding show the mean score of co- Ed colleges are higher than unisex colleges, the difference between groups is found significant (t 9.87*). This may be due to the reason that adolescents who are studying in co-Ed colleges are more conscious about their life styles and there is extra peer pressure on them to eat drink and merry. As far as nature of residence is concerned, the mean scores of adolescents staying in hostel & as paying guest are higher than other groups, nature of residence and lifestyle is significantly related (P .000*). The adolescents who are more independent in their decisions and choices may involve in high life style habits like smoking, taking alcohol, drugs, frequently visiting pubs.

The findings regarding attitude towards social status, the mean score of female adolescents are more than male adolescents which reflect a growing trend among girls to gain popularity in their circle of peer by declaring that they have a boyfriend and they are likeable person in opposite sex groups. Many girls now days do not mind making friends on dating sites and other social networking sites just to prove their appeal among peer members as a young woman which, reflects the thinking of modern young women who feel that having a boyfriend necessary or else they would be considered outdated girls. The age variable is significantly related with attitude towards social status (P.004*) where the mean scores of very young adolescents (17-18) & young adolescents (18-21) are more than matured adolescents. This may be due to the fact that young adolescents are highly influenced by outside forces as they consider that they are on the stage and world is watching them, they may be infatuated with any person, may think that they must gain peer approval at any cost, for them, social status is compulsorily to be maintained.

The nature of residence is significantly related to attitude towards social status (P.000*), the mean scores of adolescents who stays with parents are higher than others. This reflect the attitude of adolescents today that they demand many things from parents to gain importance in eyes of peers, acceptance in eyes of friends is very precious to them and they do lot of things to impress them. The adolescents who stay with parents have high social attitude for social status as nowadays parents also feel that their children must get all the high-quality things with social worth and may encourage youngsters to aspire for them.

Gender is significantly related with perception regarding sexual relations (t 6.56*), where the mean score of female adolescents are more than male adolescents. The girls are becoming open minded in sexual relations and they may not hesitate in touching, kissing on dating or watching sex video clips or chatting on social networking sites , this is latest trend among girls until now boys were considered active in all such activities but now days girls have also joined them.

The findings also reveals that age is significantly related with perception towards sexual relation the mean score of young adolescents (17-18) is higher than other groups, this may be due to the fact that young adolescents are more curious to know about sex and are interested in experimenting, they may involve sexually with their partners without considering the risk factors, and many of them may have peer pressure for losing their virginity or to at least have some experience about sex.

There is significant difference in the perception of adolescents according to nature of residence (P.007*), the adolescents who are with family members may be facing restriction as Indian society is conventional where talking about sex is still not considered good, the adolescents who stays in such controlled environment may develop unusual interest in sexual relations and may involve more in such activities, as high restriction creates high level of curiosity about sex in adolescents.

About taking precaution in sexual relations the high-income level is significantly related with the variable (P.007). High income group adolescents are more open in taking precautions during sexual relationship like using condoms, contraceptive pills which reflect that modern day's adolescents are more aware about sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy problem and may wish to feel relaxed during sexual relations without thinking of these issues hence they prefer to use precautions while having sex. Gender is significantly related with precaution in sexual relation (-3.46*) an interesting finding shows that male adolescents are more concern than female adolescents, boys are more aware about taking precaution while indulging in sexual relations than girls, this finding reflects that may be the free availability

of contraceptives and less hesitation among boys nowadays in buying condoms and may be because of social problems associated with teenage pregnancy they are using contraceptive while indulging in sexual relations, apart from this , today's youth is aware about sexually transmitted diseases due credit must be given to social advertising on media about spreading awareness regarding HIV /AIDS , STDs , they feel it necessary to use precaution in sexual relations.

The adolescents staying as paying guest is more conscious than other groups about taking precautions in sexual relations, which reflect a healthy trend among adolescents who are staying alone, they are living unsupervised life and if they are engage in sexual relation are mindful to use precautions. This is a quite encouraging finding that adolescents aware not to contract any contagious sexually transmitted disease.

The study reveals the finding regarding perception about physical attraction, that the adolescents are highly influenced by TV /movie stars and celebrities for having shapely body and may feel compelled to use cosmetics and diet food to gain popularity among peers and as many adolescents think that they would not get partners if they are overweight or dark skinned or if they look unattractive. Female adolescents are more aware and conscious than male adolescents and there is significant difference ($t = 6.01^*$), which reveals that contemporary girls are more conscious about looking sexually and physically attractive among peer and are following TV and movie stars , are mindful in eating and exercising and are aware to enhance their sexual appeal by gaining attractive figure, to some extent this is a healthy sign among girls but there is a downside of this aspect also, where they suffer from may eating disorders like bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa just to look like some model, where their whole self is related to how they look and other positive characteristics of personality are totally ignored. The adolescents who are studying in unisex colleges are more aware about physical attraction than their counterparts ($t = 3.88^*$). This reflects the growing trend among adolescents to look beautiful and sexually attractive by adopting all solutions. The adolescents may use different creams and lotions and may follow diet schedules to look attractive, thin and beautiful like models and film stars.

Regarding perception about physical attraction, the findings show that mean score of adolescents staying with parents is significantly higher than others ($P < 0.001^*$). This show that nowadays parents themselves may be motivating youth to look attractive, parents are quite conscious what their children are eating and how they look. Parents are aware that in time of globalization and market value and fear that their children may not left behind in competitions.

Conclusion:

Despite 35 percent of the population being in the 10-24 age groups, the health needs of adolescents have neither been researched nor addressed adequately; particularly their reproductive health needs are often misunderstood, unrecognized or underestimated. Limited research shows that adolescents are indulging in premarital sex more frequently at an early age, the incidence of pregnancies among them is rising and most of them face the risk of induced abortions under unsafe conditions, and contracting sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Initiative must be taken to create a supportive environment that would positively influence knowledge, attitude, perceptions, skills and behaviour of adolescents and also help in increasing access and use of sexual and reproductive health services. The strategies to attain the objectives include effective counselling skills, development and promoting safe and healthy behaviour supported by providing quality services and increasing linkages among various institutions.

Recommendations:

On the basis of the findings of the study following recommendations are made for healthy reproductive and sexual health of adolescents

For Parents:

1. Parents must understand that sexuality is the vital part of growing up- during adolescence; young people learn to deal with sexual feelings, experiences and sexual fantasies and perhaps enjoy sexual relationship. Healthy sexual development is not simply a matter of sex but involves a young person's ability to manage intimate and reproductive behaviour responsibly and without guilt, fear and shame.
2. Parents should develop closeness with adolescents and try to establish an environment in which young people can feel comfortable talking and discussing something about sex and relationships.
3. Early adolescents must be prepared about the impending bodily changes and sexual feelings.
4. Older adolescents must be guided and educated about the things that promote healthy sexual development. Any adult can be source of accurate information regarding sex which helps in developing healthy sexual behaviour. If adolescents do not get information from adults, they rely on friends and the media, especially internet to satisfy their queries on sex.

5. Parents must make clear rules about dating and most importantly must communicate to adolescents in a negotiable manner so that the rules seem fair to young people. Unnecessary restrictions on mixing with opposite sex may perhaps create excessive curiosity in adolescents which may not be good for safe and healthy sexual development.
6. Adolescents must be helped to differentiate truth from hype about sex for instance, the young person must be counselled that it's all right if you don't have boyfriend or girlfriend.
7. Parents must help young people to recognize all aspects of sexual and reproductive development and encourage them to make informed and healthy decisions about sexual matters.
8. Young people must be counselled about contraceptives and help must be given to develop understanding about the right time and proper use of them.
9. Parents must discuss with adolescents about sexual behaviour and risks, relationship, emotions and sexual urges. This kind of respectful, in depth talk can positively affect adolescents' sexual development.

Guidelines for successful parent teen conversation about sex include the following:

- Engage children in open, honest discussions regarding appropriate dating behaviour, emotional and sexual intimacy, sexual identity, and emotional commitments.
- Discuss responsibilities regarding commitment and intimacy in romantic relationships.
- Discuss responsibilities regarding avoiding pregnancy, STIs, HIV/AIDS.
- Teach teens not to exploit other people socially, emotionally, or sexually. This is impossible to teach if it is not also modelled. Similarly teach teens how to recognize abusive and exploitive relationships.
- Since teens may be embarrassed to talk with their parents about sex and relationships, try to provide access to other trusted adults (church members, counsellors, relatives etc)
- Be open to questions and value expressed by teen.

(Source: Beeler, N, Patrick, B, Pedon, S. Sexuality of children: Healthy Sexual behaviour and behaviour which cause concern, Handbook 3-1)

For Educational Institutes:

In India education about sex and reproduction is not much common in school and colleges, a small percentage of adolescents are getting essential information about contraception, sexual safety, reproductive health and other matters. Many schools have started running sex education classes but still not much have been done on this area. In this regards following

measures can be taken to help adolescents to make right choices and decisions regarding sexual and reproductive health.

- Educators offer age-appropriate sex education sessions in schools. Provide Question-and-answer sessions to older adolescents in classroom settings
- Teachers are trained to deliver health curriculums, including education on puberty and menstruation; gender and sexuality; HIV prevention; and age-appropriate life skills such as identifying values and understanding consequences of behaviours (for young adolescents) and negotiating relationships and condom use (for older adolescents)
- Teachers can provide sexual and reproductive orientation sessions for adolescents, using such methods as the letter box approach, sms, emails etc. Train teachers to identify high-risk adolescents and develop a system linking them with reproductive health services.
- Teachers act as community distributors of sanitary materials for menstrual hygiene.
- Organize drama, skits or music events in colleges to disseminate accurate reproductive health information, including information about services available. Performances at community events can also be organized.
- Invite counsellors to provide reproductive health information sessions for participants before each adolescent sporting, cultural or any event.
- Train sports coaches to provide and incorporate reproductive health information into coaching sessions.
- Ask group leaders to offer HIV/STDs counselling at adolescent program activities, schedule health and reproductive clinics during adolescent activities and gatherings.
- Communities should be prepared for youth education about sex through awareness raising and education; particular attention should be paid to myths that may circulate among communities about boys and girls which can lead to stigma or discrimination
- Provide sexual and reproductive health, life skills training for boys and girls.
- Support adolescents to develop and publish a newsletter or newspaper that addresses sex and reproductive topics.
- Teachers, coaches and any other persons interacting with adolescents should be trained in and abide by a Code of Conduct, which regulates their interactions. All

adults interacting with adolescents should be monitored, and adolescents should be allowed to provide feedback on their interactions.

- Those adolescents, who express non-heterosexual sexual feelings or gender identities, keep confidentiality. Assure the adolescent that these feelings are natural. Adolescents, who feel uncomfortable or anxious by their feelings or sexuality, refer for mental health and psychosocial support. Discuss issues of safety and depression.
- Some adolescents, who express wish of becoming sexually active, do not be judgmental! Explore the reasons why they want to become sexually active, discuss prevention of pregnancy, HIV and STIs.
- Refer for medical evaluation and mental health and psychosocial support, if necessary.

The present study was undertaken to know the perception of adolescents regarding reproductive and sexual health and during the discussion some regular arguments have emerged which shows that, more research is needed on the sexual and reproductive health topics outlined above through national sampling as well as in-depth work. The adolescents need to have access to reliable information on reproductive and sexual health, sexuality. Interviews and sessions with young people show, that they have a high level of demand for accurate information. At the policy level, relevant ministries need to introduce adolescent reproductive health information and services into existing education, health, population, and media programs. The nongovernmental sector can also have programs in operation, but more support is needed to expand their outreach in order to have an impact at the national level.

In conclusion, the present study reveals that modern day youth are not passive in sexual activities, they are aware about their sexuality and consider sex as part of growing up, many of them do not hesitate in engaging in relationship with opposite sex members, but the healthy sign is that most of them are aware of hazards of unsafe sex and are taking protection. The adolescents are distinct segment of India's population, with specific developmental needs, that cannot be overlooked. Adolescents need to enjoy the space they want as well they need proper guidance and protection in order to function as adults with a full capacity for independent decision making later, then certainly the task of making positive reproductive and sexual health a reality for adult men and women in India will be possible.
