

FOR ADOLESCENTS
IN SCHOOL

Chapter 4 Discussion

Life Skills
Program

Self-Oriented Skills

A
LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM
FOR ADOLESCENTS
IN SCHOOL

LIFE SKILLS
PROGRAM

"Let us learn to build their skills,

Let us build their skills to learn..." (Seth, 2000, p. 29)

Building Life Skills

Life skills is now a widely known term which is being operationalized to fulfill needs of several focal groups ranging from children to mature and aging adults, irrespective of gender, caste, class, creed and country. Life skills may be used for personal decisions, for others or to bring about healthy changes in the environment. Programs based on life skills are being implemented world wide in different areas of health and the promotion of healthy living.

"Life skills based education" (LBSE), "skills based health education", "livelihood skills" and "quality education" are the recent terms and concepts being used. "LBSE refers to an interactive process of teaching and learning which enables learners to acquire knowledge and to develop attitudes and skills which support the adoption of healthy behaviors" (UNICEF, 2006).

The world over, life skills based education is gaining extreme popularity to empower youth. Voluntary organizations and governments are targeting adolescents who are future citizens of the nation; and who are experiencing a competitive and challenging life style, particularly in urban contexts. They need to build competencies for healthy everyday living and develop a positive attitude towards life.

In every region, social, political and economic problems are affecting prime institutions serving adolescents – the family and the schools. A growing number of youth are "...consuming components of a youth culture that features standard elements of dress, grooming and entertainment" (Brown & Larson, 2002, pp.13).

Greater understanding among parents, families, communities and governments is needed as adolescents are facing ever growing complex situations. Further, adolescents need supportive relationships and institutions that are hopeful and concerned.

Viewing Adolescents as Potential Resources

The involvement of adolescents in social development is a task which goes unattended by many countries. Social changes are inducing an early maturity and acceptance of adolescents as young adults. Adolescence can be neither denied nor seen as “a time between”. Their dreams, their goals, their aspirations, their courage, their opportunities are all meaningful. Unfortunately, they are offered inadequate information, opportunities, resources and support necessary to guide their choices. These gaps need to be fulfilled and there is a need to view adolescents from a positive development framework as suggested by Lerner (2005), of which life skills are an integral component. Adolescence is a time for developing one’s potential to the fullest, expanding relationships and friendships outside the family circle, for establishing greater autonomy and for intensified development of interpersonal and social skills. Adolescents are resilient and resourceful individuals, with their own views and evolving decision-making capacities (UNFPA, 2005). Life skills programs must aim to facilitate the development of such capacities.

Further, viewing participants as resources is an important factor in the success of a program, along with its immaculate conceptualization. Adolescents are budding adults with inherent capacity for better performance, depending on individual competence to learn. A little input focused on enhancing their need based skills and

attempting to understand their way of thinking and acting would enable them to build healthier lives

Life Skills Programs: Issues and Challenges

Life skills programs for adolescents have been developed and practiced the world over. By virtue of the different lived realities, designing and implementing a context specific life skills program is very crucial. Several issues need to be addressed in order to render a life skills program successful.

Life Skills and Behavior Change

A cause of concern while planning and implementing life skills programs is the willingness to explore the possibilities of linking life skills to behavior change (UNICEF, 2005). It is important to address this issue before all others as behavior modification is a vital aim of any life skills program. All life skills programs focus on enhancing abilities of potential participants and inculcating certain skills. The inputs may or may not result in behavior change instantly as behavior change is a slow and time – consuming process. Furthermore, the lack of measures in the field to assess behavior change is another issue to ponder. Consistent follow up evaluation is needed to track behavior modifications. For example, a session on harmful effects of smoking may only act as a piece of information for adolescents. Combining it with peer pressure and decision of whether to smoke or not should not be left for the next session. Instead, the issued should be related and discussed meaningfully for achieving greater impact. Refined skills, enhanced knowledge, and modified behavior will morph adolescents into future citizens ready to face forthcoming challenges of life. In the sharing seminar with parents after the completion of the life skills

program, a mother of one adolescent boy shared, “My son does not get angry so frequently now! He listens to us and obeys us. I hope it is permanent.”

Conceptualizing Contextually and Culturally Sensitive Interventions

Adolescence is defined in different cultures and societies as per the social norms. The needs of adolescents and expectations from them change with the slightest change in variables such as a class or caste or geographical location whether urban or rural. The culture and context play an imperative role in constructing the meaning and behavioral expectations of the adolescent stage. An intervention should be planned as per the needs assessment in a defined context.

A life skills program may fail to equip adolescents with required skills and competencies if relevant issues like gender, reproductive health, laws and rights are not addressed sensitively and holistically. A framework for dealing with reproductive and sexual health issues should be developed in a socially acceptable manner. In the present study, in consultation with the school principal and the parents’ request, the session on ‘personal hygiene’ was conducted separately for girls and boys. An apparently trivial matter such as naming the session as ‘reproductive or sexual health’ sounded offending, hence a subtle term ‘personal hygiene’ was used. Further, the parents and principal did not agree to conduct a session related to reproductive health, which mainly involved describing the names and functions of the male and female reproductive systems. They considered their children to be “too young” to understand these concepts. This has implications for parent and teacher education.

Interestingly, the session ‘Agony Aunt’ which involved stating individual queries on a chit of paper without mentioning one’s name and dropping into a sealed box which

was to be opened later only by the investigator, did not have queries related to any of the reproductive health topics.

Life Skills Program: The Content, the Learner, and the Process

The essence of the life skills concept lies in adapting programs with variation in content depending on the context. Some strategies that made the life skills program successful in the present study are as follows:

Variety in Content: Spice of a Life Skills Program

The focus on the content of the program is very necessary as it is directly proportional to its success. As mentioned earlier, the needs based assessment and designing the sessions based on the same forms the crux of any program design. Parents and teachers, who are in contact with adolescents on daily basis, may serve as valuable sources of information. The content of a life skills program should have a balance between the theoretical and practical knowledge. A heavily loaded theoretical program may result in disinterest among adolescents and at the same time it leaves very little scope for improving attitudes and skills or inducing behavior change. For example, the importance of a well – balanced diet can be supplemented by giving an example of a diet regime for an adolescent girl and a boy for a full day along with some physical exercises, which can be discussed during the warm – up exercise for the session on “Health and Nutrition”.

A variety of methods were used to relieve the participants from monotony and increase their interest and participation such as role – plays, dramas, songs, brainstorming, group exercises, and making charts. For example, a ‘heavy’ session such as managing anger and stress could be supplemented by exercises such as “the

laughing club”, wherein the participants form a big circle and laugh out loud with the purpose to reduce stress. Care should be taken to avoid repeating similar methods and exercises at close intervals.

The first module of the life skills program began with imparting self – oriented skills which included sessions on realizing one’s strengths and weaknesses, and a group activity with brainstorming. The next session was on developing effective self - study techniques emphasizing inculcation of skills for improving concentration and study methods through sharing individual routines for studying, thereby adopting a peer - to - peer approach. The last session was on developing gender sensitive attitudes among girls and boys as groups and generating discussion on gender stereotypes. Thus, a variety of methods (e.g., brainstorming, discussions) and content (e.g., thinking on one’s own, sharing personal experiences among peers) was utilized in this module. Likewise, variety was interwoven throughout the program to hold and enhance the interest and participation of the adolescents.

Concentrate on the Needs of the Learner

Life skills programs are based on needs assessment and are mostly learner centric and context specific. The program objectives, teaching methods and resources are in accordance with the learner’s age, religion, class, caste, gender and culture. A life skills educator must understand the capabilities of the learners in term of their knowledge, feelings and behaviors prior to the implementation of the program. Identification of the types of life skills to be prioritized, designing them in the mode that the learner will understand, and maximizing the comprehensibility of the session are of prime importance. A need based program should not overlook the interest of

the learner. One should not forget that the interest of the learner is as important as the needs, and an integration of the two will enhance participation in the program.

Flexible Planning is a Quintessential Element

Flexibility in planning and implementation of the program is a very critical feature of a life skills program. Designing the sessions in term of sequencing and continuity, employing a range of participatory teaching and learning methods, including changes as per the context and need, training of educators or teachers, inviting guest trainers or professionals such as counselors and doctors for specific sessions, involving parents, and continuity of life skills program are some planning issues that need attention.

In the present research, there were various instances where the investigator had to incorporate flexibility during the program implementation:

- The investigator planned to conduct the session on *Agony Aunt* herself. But the queries that were brought up were primarily related to career and nutrition. Thus, the investigator decided to invite a career counselor and a dietician for assisting her in these sessions. The school authorities needed to be informed about the changes in the content of the program in advance.
- In the course of the program the investigator got to know that the school principal was a certified Yoga instructor, so her inputs were interwoven in the session on stress, specifically in relation to teaching stress relieving breathing exercises and other *Aasanas* such as *Pranayam* and *Kapaal-bhanti*.
- During group sessions, one needs a lot of space to conduct activities. The classroom allotted for the program was very small. The investigator carried

out the group activities on the terrace which had a shed and a big open terrace.

- As mentioned earlier, a two full day teachers' training schedule was reduced to one day due to time constraint of the teachers.

Awareness of Own Limitations

It is necessary for the facilitator to be aware of one's own capacities for conducting a life skills program. Realizing one's limitations in terms of knowledge and skills while imparting the program is necessary. If an educator is uncomfortable with a particular session such as adolescent nutrition and reproductive health, she/he should invite a professional nutritionist or dietician to conduct the session. For the present program, an activity of *Agony Aunt* was conducted. There were numerous nutrition and career related queries encountered. Thus, the investigator decided to invite a professional career counselor, a nutritionist and dietician in consultation with the school principal. The students were very pleased at having their queries satisfactorily addressed by a professional as well as the school principal who joined in for the session. The educator may also take advantage of the session to increase one's own knowledge.

Learning from Others

Life skills programs, which are designed world over, share one common thread - the adolescents. Though adolescents form a heterogeneous group, yet they are similar in many ways. An investigator should be able to glean the teaching methods, content and ideas relevant to their context and those that proved successful in past programs. Such an approach would prevent one from

committing the same mistakes and thereby decrease the chances of failure. For example, if the tool needs to be self-administered as there is a large group of adolescents, then the techniques used for designing a self-administered tool must be traced from the past tools developed in the field, at the same time bearing in mind that it is irrelevant to adapt a self-administered tool for rural adolescents who may have difficulty in reading and writing. Furthermore, activities or exercises should be suited to the adolescents' ways of thinking that are relevant to the context (e.g., vignettes that project situations/events that the rural adolescents experience).

Life Skills Program in Schools: Grass is not so Green on This Side...

The school settings, especially during the adolescent years, provide opportunities for building skills and positive habits. Schools form a second home to adolescents resulting in developing firm bonds with friends and teachers. The school environment, due to its organizational structure, stable funding resources, safe learning environment, and qualified teachers catering to the needs of a large student population, forms the most suitable site for life skills program sustainability (UNICEF, 2005). The main aspects involved in implementing a life skills program in the school context are discussed below.

Feasibility of the Life Skills Program

All schools may not be ready to incorporate a life skills program in their curriculum. The schools have their set yearly academic calendars which might not have provision for accommodating the life skills program in their regular schedule. Moreover, with due importance given to academics, the life skills program is treated as an "extra

curricular activity” and the administration needs to be thoroughly convinced of the motives and intentions behind imparting the program. The program may not be feasible with the school timings. Every school cannot arrange for a timeslot for the program.

The infrastructure of the school may not allow for a separate classroom or large space for conducting the program. The life skills program has a range of activities from physical to mental and individual to group.

Life Skills Program: Integrated or Separated?

Past experiences have shown that an integrated life skills program has a limited success rate as compared to separate ones (UNICEF, 2005; WHO & UNICEF, 2006).

The reason is that the life skills program content gets ignored over the academic program and is not properly disseminated. The school may not be able to provide a separate time slot for the program. The present life skills program was organized during the “zero period”, that is, the time before first period or prayer time for regular students. This may be in fact the best time slot as students are fresh in the early morning and they enjoy a “different” kind of activity over their regular prayer or physical activity period.

Training of the Life Skills Educator

Teachers and other educators should ideally receive training before imparting training sessions to adolescents (WHO & UNICEF, 2006). Training must incorporate active teaching and learning methods, foster sensitivity to deliver talks on sensitive topics, and result in development of attitudes and skills individually. The content and context must be stressed as the core components of the training.

A critical issue in this regard is whether we are overburdening teachers with an added task because of which the life skills training and implementation may be neglected. A special position for a life skills educator may be introduced to serve the purpose. Schools may also request the regular school counselor to get a life skills training and implement the program for some classes. This would prevent the regular class teachers from being overburdened and at the same the trained life skills educator would be able to implement and sustain the program with ease and quality.

Parents and Teachers: Key Stakeholders in Adolescents' Lives

Parents and teachers should be well informed beforehand about the life skills program and its content. Consent should be taken from the adolescent as well as their parents for participation in the program. This brings benefits to the program as parents' participation and support help educators to carry out program activities well. The involvement of parents in life skills programs would also contribute towards bringing about consensus between parents' and adolescents' aspirations and expectations. It is interesting to note that often the aspirations and expectations that parents set for their adolescents may not match well with those of the adolescents. Yet, many adolescents are striving to fulfill the expectations of the family and the school. For example, during a focus group discussion a father stated, "I want my son to become a software engineer but he is not good in studies. I don't know what to do." When asked of the boy, he said, "I want to be like SRK – Shah Rukh Khan! He has a charisma! He is making good money too!" The class teacher says, "I am not very sure about him if he can be an engineer. He is poor in academics. But he is a good dancer and sings well. He wins almost all competitions. He might make a good dancer or choreographer."

Realistic goals set in consensus with adolescents and parents may be the best way to achieve a balance between the adolescents' and parents' expectations. Involvement of significant stakeholders in life skills programs would thus also facilitate harmonious in close relationships.

Sustaining the Life Skills Program

Life skills programs are developed and implemented for a limited time period. Although the program meets with success and is in demand, yet the sustenance of the program remains a major problem. Sometimes the educator trains the teachers for program implementation but the school does not follow up (e.g., no time for life skills in school curriculum, teachers are overloaded with work). There are no policies at the national level which prescribes the life skills program as a required component of the curriculum. Moreover, the resources and funds for carrying out the programs are also inadequate. In school settings, the selection of the classes is necessary, which in turn may "leave out" certain age groups.

Implications for Future Research, Policies and Programs

Based on the present research experiences, the following recommendations are made for future programs and policies:

- ✓ Involvement of major stakeholders is a must at all the stages of the life skills program and the development of policies (WHO & UNICEF, 2006).
- ✓ All life skills programs should have a holistic approach. The program should begin with needs assessment; it should be implemented in a contextually sensitive manner; and evaluated very vigilantly.

- ✓ Future programs should build on past ones to avoid repeating mistakes and conserving inputs for the success of the program.
- ✓ Government policies should make life skills programs mandatory in schools.
- ✓ Increasing utilization of the peer educator model for life skills programs in school may ensure greater continuity of such programs in the school context.

For A Happy and Healthy Beginning

– Memorable Notings of My Experiences

A shy girl giving a nod for greeting instead of approaching and wishing Good morning, a rowdy boy screeching a bike entering the school compound, an ardent girl artist sketching a portrait of mine in her copy, a nervous boy fearing presenting his group's viewpoint, a confident girl leading her classmates to the life skills classroom, an inhibited boy hiding his poetry from friends, an arrogant girl discussing reproductive health issues full of myths and misconceptions, a modest boy seeking permission to talk to me in private...

Although I was able to spend limited with the adolescents, the variation in their personalities that I observed was impressive. Despite the fact that the adolescents are rich in potential, yet a lacuna was observed in relation to choosing between the 'rights' and 'wrongs' in life. This is where I felt the need to pitch in to guide them to select the 'right' option. An element of life skills incorporated in their weekly routine just for an hour may bring about far-reaching positive changes in their personalities, as observed during my program. The adolescents can enhance their self-esteem, improve decision-making skills, set their goals realistically, manage their emotions and relationships and realize the importance of themselves as growing individuals and function as active contributing members of the society.

A life skills program may end, but the skills that the adolescents develop will continue to guide them throughout their lives ...**for a Happy and Healthy Beginning...**