

Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiative (AYFHI) through Mentoring Programs for Students: Proceedings of a Symposium

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Introduction

Adolescents and youths pose a number of reproductive and sexual health (RSH) challenges. Addressing their needs is a challenge that goes well beyond the role of health services alone. Adolescent friendly health Services (AFHS) should be extended beyond health institutions. Various programs have been implemented at various levels for improving health conditions of adolescents and youths. There is an urgent need of bridging crucial gaps in implementation of reproductive and sexual health (RSH) and other services for adolescents and youths accepting newer challenges. Mentoring programs for students may be helpful in meeting their basic developmental needs, promotion of healthy life style, and improving student-teacher relationship with the long-term goal of improving academic environment and overall well being of young students. Extending Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Services (AYFHS) through mentoring in school or college premises as a step ahead should be considered for easy accessibility. Mentoring relationships may contribute to the health and well being of adolescents and young youths as teachers have the potential to serve as effective mentors. Mentoring is a term generally used to describe a relationship between a less experienced individual, called a mentee, and a more experienced individual known as a mentor. This relationship may be formal or informal/natural with elderly persons such as extended family members, neighbors, teachers, and coaches.

A symposium was organized on 27th and 28th August, 2015 by Department of Community Medicine, Government Medical College, Chandigarh with the following objectives:

1. To provide an opportunity to participants (teachers, students, and adolescent health care providers) to share their respective views on problems and health needs of adolescent and young students and difficulties encountered in delivering adolescent health services.
2. Suggesting an Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiative (AYFHI) with implementation of "mentoring"

at school and college levels based on views of participants and invited experts.

3. To explore potential problems in effective implementation of mentoring in schools and colleges as a step ahead towards Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiative (AYFHI).



Figure 1. Inaugural Lamp lighting ceremony

About Host Institution

Government Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) Chandigarh, is a prestigious medical teaching institution providing an excellent health care, academic and scientific environment under dynamic leadership of our esteemed Director Principal, Professor Atul Sachdev. Mentorship Programs in GMCH were introduced by our esteemed Former Director Principal, Professor Raj Bahadur, presently Vice Chancellor, Baba Farid University of Health Sciences, Faridkot. The symposium was organized by Department of Community Medicine, actively involved in multi-dimensional academic and research endeavors. This Department has undertaken several Research Projects, and has also organized a series of Seminars, Workshops, and Symposiums funded by various National and International Agencies like ICMR, DST, SERB, UGC, CSIR,

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NACO, UNAIDS etc. Present Symposium, a step ahead, was organized to explore possibility of introducing Mentorship Programs in schools as a possible strategy for Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiative.

Participants

Invited participants for this Symposium included nominated teachers, counselors, and student representatives from selected schools and colleges of Chandigarh, nominated faculty members of GMCH and other Medical Institutions, ICMR and SERB/ DST invitees, adolescent health care providers, researchers, social scientists, psychologists, social workers working in the field of adolescent and youth health, and students from different parts of Northern India. There were more than 90 participants representing different groups. They got an opportunity to share their views on Reproductive and Sexual Health (RSH) needs of adolescent and young students, problems encountered in delivering services and effective implementation of mentoring in schools and colleges as a step ahead towards "Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiative" (AYFHI).

Invited Speakers

Experts from various organizations/ institutes including Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi, National Institute of Medical Statistics (NIMS) New Delhi, BHU Varanasi, MLN Medical College Allahabad, National Institute of Health and Family Welfare (NIH& FW) New Delhi, AIIMS Jodhpur, PG College, Sagar (Madhya Pradesh), DMC Ludhiana, Eternal University, Distt Sirmor (Himachal Pradesh) etc. were invited to deliver talks in this Symposium. Besides this, Faculty Members from School of Public Health PGIMER Chandigarh, Punjab University Chandigarh and from various Departments of GMCH Chandigarh also delivered their talks on varied topics concerning health of adolescents and youths.

Technical Sessions and Activities

Sr Rubinderjit Singh Brar, Director Public Instructions (Schools), was the Chief Guest in Inaugural Function of the Symposium and Prof Madhulekha Bhattacharya, Ex Director, Dean and Head, Community Health Administration, NIH&FW, New Delhi, and Prof (Col.) Gyanendra Singh, Former Head Community Medicine, MLN Medical College Allahabad (UP) were Guests of Honor. Dr RJ Yadav, Scientist "G", Director Grade Scientist NIMS, ICMR had also graced the occasion.

Prof Atul Sachdev, Director Principal Government Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), Chandigarh delivered his welcome address and also highlighted the theme of the

Symposium as one of the important academic events organized in this institute which connect adolescents and youths who are facing lot of health related problems mainly due to their rapidly changing life style, ignorance, peer pressure, academic pressures, misconceptions, and inability to cope with adverse situations.

Prof Naveen K Goel, Head of Community Medicine, Government Medical College and Hospital Chandigarh introduced the theme of the symposium and its expected outcomes based on the experience gained from the ICMR Projects on Mentoring in schools of Chandigarh. Prof Madhulekha Bhattacharya highlighted the need of counseling and results of avoiding misconceptions of students and pointed out that it was the need of the hour to evaluate whether counseling could attain desired outcomes. She also mentioned health needs of adolescent girls and potential roles of mentors. Mentoring may be more feasible and acceptable solutions for problems of students as teachers have potentials to be effective mentors. Prof (Col) Gyanendra Singh emphasized the health needs of adolescents and youths particularly girls in rural areas and also of those who are not attending schools/ colleges or who drop-out from studies due to varied problems. He mentioned the need of understanding problems of rural and urban youths and availability of health infrastructures in rural and urban areas. He suggested giving a thought on extending the suggested adolescent health programs further to cover those youths also.

In his speech, Shri Barar motivated all teachers and students to come forward with their problems during symposium and to suggest some feasible solutions of problems. He assured to take all possible measures to solve the problems and to introduce Mentorship Program in schools of Chandigarh. He also expressed the needs of collaboration of different sectors for improving health conditions of adolescents and youths.

Apart from scientific sessions on varied topics, there were two group presentations and also Panel Discussion. Groups were assigned two topics and they had to present their main findings on the selected topics. On the basis of presentation by participants, various factors responsible for increasing stress among students were brought to notice. At the end of scientific sessions of symposium, a Panel Discussion was conducted.

Following topics were discussed in the symposium:

- Overview of Adolescent Health Status in India
- Need for Position of Counselors for Adolescents in Schools

- Challenges in Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiatives
- Spirituality and Yoga Among Youths
- Family Life Education in Schools: Right or Wrong
- How to Address Reproductive Health Issues of Girls in Gynecology OPDs?: Some Experiences from PGIMER Chandigarh
- Common Adolescent Health Problems in India: Some Experiences from AFHC
- Challenges in Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Clinics : Some ICMR Experiences
- Need of Value Education for Adolescents and Youths
- Substance Abuse among Adolescents and Youths
- Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI): What Youths should Know
- Fast Food Culture & Health Consequences Among Young Youths
- Common Menstrual Problems and Menstrual Hygiene Practices
- Concept and Process of Mentoring
- Counseling Vs Mentoring with impacts on Psychosexual Health Conditions of Adolescents and Youths
- Mentoring in Indian Set-up
- Impact of Mentoring on Adolescent Health: Some Survey Experiences

Group Discussions

- Group -I: Increasing Stress among Students: Probable Causes and Solutions
- Group -II: Problems/ Challenges in Implementation of Mentoring in Schools and Colleges
 - a) Teachers' point of view
 - b) Students' point of view
 - c) Other Representatives' view

Panel Discussion

- Formulation of "Mentorship Program as an effective Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Initiative."

Experts were also of opinion that structured format of mentoring should be followed in terms of time, frequency, contents and choice of selection of mentors by mentees. A formal framework for mentorship program should be formed, noting the details of the mentors, setting an appropriate mentor-mentee ratio and providing proper training to the mentors.

Some issues were raised by teachers and students towards problems in initiating mentoring as:

- There is a lack of awareness regarding mentoring among teachers and students. They are not clear about concept of mentoring and right age of student for initiating his/ her mentoring etc.
- There are confusions/ misconceptions among students and teachers regarding counseling, mentoring and role modeling.
- Mentors in schools are not trained to work as mentors.
- Teachers as mentors do not understand the psychology of the mentee.
- Teachers don't feel that they are fit to be mentors.
- Teachers have a very busy schedule.
- Teachers are not willing to take added responsibility.
- Teachers are not aware of health problems and health needs of students.
- There is no linkage/ referral system between schools and health facilities.
- The essence of perfectly implementing a mentoring program in schools and colleges lies in understanding the meaning of mentoring and how it is different from counseling.
- The time for mentoring and academics should be properly divided to avoid excessive pressure on the mentors. Mentors should be respected and given incentives like certificates as a form of recognition for their hard work.



Figure 2. Chandigarh Symposium

Key Observations

Based on present symposium, following points may be summarized and suggestions may be given for addressing needs of adolescent and young students:

Problems of Adolescents and Youths

- Adolescents and youths are facing lot of health related problems mainly due to their rapidly changing life style, ignorance, peer pressure, academic pressures, misconceptions, and inability to cope with adverse situations.
- Adolescents and youths are also facing *Reproductive and Sexual health problems* like involvement in risky sexual behavior, sexual offences, victimizations of sexual assaults/ harassments, internet use for illicit purposes, involvement in anti-social activities and other risk behavior, anxieties regarding menarche, menstrual problems, worries or questions about body growth and development, sex related queries, lack of reproductive health awareness, lack of access to health facilities etc.
- *Psycho-social and other problems* like worries related with career, academic pressures in coaching and schools, parental pressures, high expectations of parents, substance abuse, violent behavior, nervousness, depression, jealousy, feelings of shyness, guilt, failure in friendship with opposite gender, other relationship issues, peer pressure, feeling ashamed, neglected, siblings rivalry, scared or frightened, sleeplessness, helplessness, over protected, inferiority, insecurity, despair, anxiety, lack of self belief, suicidal tendencies, stressful environment, uncomfortable environment, loneliness/ nuclear families/ parental conflicts, attitude of parents/ lack of attention being paid, etc. dissatisfaction in problems sharing, lack of easy availability of counselors, nobody to share personal problems etc.

Recommendations

Following recommendations were suggested:

- It is recommended to tackle problems of adolescents and youths in a holistic manner, through counseling as well as mentoring.
- It is the need of the hour to appoint counselor in each school. Also, introduction of mentoring programs in schools may be a step forward for strengthening Adolescent and Youth Friendly Health Services (AYFHS).

- There is possibility of incorporating “mentoring” at school levels as teachers have potential to serve as effective mentors. Mentorship programs should also be introduced under parental consents.
- Students should be encouraged for adopting healthy life style, physical activities, yoga, meditation and it may also be promoted through mentors. Value education may also be promoted through mentors.
- Spirituality has scientifically proven positive impact on health and well-being, and efforts should be made to ensure that adolescents practice to be spiritual and to protect values.
- Teachers, students and their parents should be motivated for mentorship programs. There is an urgent need of conducting Workshops/ Seminars/ Symposiums sessions in schools and colleges to create awareness among them regarding mentoring.
- Mentors should follow a proper curriculum and maintain a balance between their involvement in the mentee’s academic and personal life.
- Mentors should be from the field of interest of the mentee so as to provide proper and consistent motivation as well as career guidance.
- Mentors should also be imparted training on general health problems and health care of adolescents and youths. Mentors in schools should also be trained to play role of mentors, so that they understand the psychology of the mentees.
- Mentors should be given incentives like certificates/ recognition/ appreciation in some other forms for performing roles of mentors.
- Family life education/ sex education should be given to adolescents and youths by medical experts only with caution and with parental consents. They must be provided with age appropriate information.
- There is a need of Inter-sartorial co-ordination, particularly synergy between Medical and Education Departments.
- There should be linkage/ referral system between schools and health facilities. There should be regular interactions between doctors, mentors and students.
- Adolescent and youth services should be made friendly in terms of desired characteristics of availability, accessibility and affordability.
- Services should be made available on priority for adolescents and youths at affordable costs, preferably free of cost.
- Health services should be available after school hours and special clinics should be operational in hospitals giving priority for students. There should be separate special clinics for adolescents and youths ensuring confidentiality of clients.

- There is a need of implementation of restrictions and limitations on use of social media and a check should be kept on time devoted by adolescents to social media.
- School Health Programs may be used with existing mechanisms taking initiatives like distribution of sanitary napkins for girls through vending machines as experimented in one school of Lucknow recently.
- Three levels of reduction of stress of students was suggested:

1. **At Individual Level:** Students should adopt healthy life style and fast food consumption should also be reduced. They should understand the benefits of a regular sleep-wake cycle, physical activity/ yoga/ meditation and avoidance of substance abuse. They should understand importance of value education and should respect elders, parents and teachers. They should learn to cope up with situations. They should learn how to deal with the fear of their futures, peer pressure, increasing competition, management of time etc. They should be engaged in physical activities/ yoga/ meditation.

2. **At Family Level:** Adolescents in this phase of life have to face a lot of issues such as hormonal changes, language problems, maladjustment in the society/ school/ college, etc. Parents should understand the plight of their children and should help them in such situations. The fascination of adolescents with romantic relationships, western lifestyle, fast food, technology, social media and their physical appearance should be handled with compassion, and the issues related to the same should be explained to them with love and care. The benefits of a regular sleep-wake cycle, physical activity/ yoga/ meditation & avoidance of substance abuse should be explained to them. Parents and teachers should guide these children on how to deal with the fear of their futures, peer pressure, increasing competition for better education & career, mismanagement of time and issues related to gender bias at schools and at home. Efforts need to be made by parents in order to spend more time with their children. It will help to eliminate any communication gap and differences in opinions and needs of both, the parents and the children. Parents should not be over-ambitious regarding their children and should stop comparing them to their friends' children. They should not force them to choose those career fields which do not match with their caliber. With the help of their friends and relatives, parents can guide their children to adopt better life style. Parents/ care givers should engage young people in extra-curricular activities such as

music, theater, painting, sports etc.

3. **At School Level:** The school authorities should be empathetic towards the students & measures should be taken to reduce the huge load of syllabus & courses in the curriculum. They should avoid inclusion of irrelevant topics/ syllabus in the educational program so that students may focus on the more important aspects of the subjects. Career counseling and value education should be part of school curriculum. Students should be encouraged for adopting healthy life style, physical activities/ yoga/ meditation. Counselors should be appointed in each school.

Conclusion

- Mentoring can be very effective in school set-up as teachers have potential to serve as mentors for betterment of overall well being of adolescents.
- Mentoring has some positive impacts on adolescent health related outcomes. Mentoring Program among students may be helpful in meeting basic developmental needs of students, promotion of healthy life style, and improving student-teacher relationship with the long-term goal of improving academic environment and overall well being of young students.
- Through mentoring, we can improve outcomes in terms of improved school attendance; academic performance/ school performance; reduced drop-out rate; reduced risk behaviors, improved relationships with family; improved relationships with peers; social and cultural enrichment. It may be helpful in promotion of healthy life style by encouraging students for physical exercises, yoga, meditation and improving dietary behavior etc.
- Mentoring during adolescence may strengthen the Adolescent Health Programs like AFHS and ARSH providing not only desired health related outcomes but also economic and other benefits.

Funding Agencies

- 1) Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi
- 2) Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB), Department of Science & Technology (DST), Govt. of India

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