

EDITORIAL

Spiritual dimension of health: an ignored aspect of adolescent care and parenting

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Are we not disturbed that more and more adolescents are getting involved in negative lifestyles like drug use, too much of fast foods, very less physical activity leading to poor health outcomes? “22% Rohilkhand teens may become impotent” say a Times of India article dated 11th Jan, 2016. The article says that hormonal imbalance, adulterated food, depression and watching too much porn in formative years are reasons behind this. “Even 9 years old are taking drugs: Report” - another glaring headline in Times of India on 20th Jan, 2015 this article highlights following – 20% of child and adolescent population have mental illnesses; substance use rate of 40% - 88% reported in various studies on street children in different metros. Among students of rural Tamil Nadu, 10% of children were found to be hypertensive (1).

In a study in Dehradun it was found that 24% of unmarried girls had polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) which is also a lifestyle disease (2). Moreover, there were recent headlines in past couple of years showing that children as young as 10-12 years are indulging in serious crimes like shooting/stabbing/raping, etc.

In spite of the growing number of schools (including air conditioned ‘five star’ schools) and growing

emphasis on school education why many of our children are going the wrong way? One of the reasons, for this disturbing trend among our adolescents, according to the author, is neglecting the role of spiritual dimension of health in adolescent care, education and parenting. In spite of the fact that 101st session of WHO (3) had recommended that spiritual dimension of health should be added to the definition of health we have grossly neglected this aspect in all areas of health care including the care of adolescents (3).

Here I would like to discuss a landmark study done by Dr Lisa Miller PhD. The study was done on 676 adolescents aged 15-19 years at Colombia University in New York that was published in a reputed journal in 2000 (4).

The results are quiet interesting and in the words of Dr. Lisa Miller --- “Adolescents who claim to have a personal relationship with the divine are only half as likely to become alcoholics or drug addicts – or for that matter even to try contraband drugs (Marijuana & Cocaine). The findings show that a personal sense of spirituality helps adolescents avoid alcohol and drug use and abuse. Unlike adults, adolescents in this

study were shown not to be helped by a rigid or forced adherence to religion”.

In the concluding remarks Dr. Miller emphasized that “Spirituality whether within or without of religion, is the most central bearing in an adolescent life. It cannot be ignored by parents, or the adolescents will go ‘shopping’ for meaning, communion and transcendence”.

In her ground breaking book **“The Spiritual Child- The New Science on Parenting for health and life (5)**, Dr Lisa Miller, PhD gives very poignant report on role of spirituality on adult care and parenting:-

“The resulting extensive and ground breaking research, advances in our understanding of brain science and the findings of neuro-imaging, lengthy interviews with hundreds of children and parents, case studies, and rich anecdotal material show that:- Spirituality is an untapped resource in our understanding of human development resilience and illness, and health and healing. The absence of support for children’s spiritual growth has contributed to alarming rates of childhood and adolescent emotional suffering and behavior that put them at risk. Knowledge of spiritual development rewrites the contemporary account of spiraling rates of depression, substance abuse, addictive behaviors and other health concerns.

Spiritual development through the early years prepares the adolescent to grapple more successfully with the predictably difficult and potentially dis-orienting existential questions that make adolescence so deeply challenging for teens (and their parents). It also provides a protective health benefit, reducing the risk of depression, substance abuse, aggression, and high-risk behaviors, including physical risk taking and a sexuality devoid of emotional intimacy”.

The observation by Dr Lisa Miller who is well known for her work in adolescent psychology shows that it is high time we in India give due importance to this spiritual aspect of child and adolescent care.

One of the simplest ways of initiating spiritual insight among adolescents is through the practice of meditation. In, their well written book **“Teaching meditation to children” by David Fontana (6)** (a distinguished visiting fellow to the University of Wales and visiting professor to the University of Algarvi, Portugal,) and by **Ingrid Slack**, (Associate fellow of the British psychological society) have shared their experience as follows:

“Constantly bombarded by noise and by flashing images, constantly distracted by text messages, by mobile phone calls, by emails and by the internet, they have less and less time to pause and experience tranquility. Where is the space for rest, for thought for self- exploration, for the creation of harmony between body and mind, and for experiencing real intimacy with loved ones”?

They further go on to stay - “The feedback we have received from parents and teachers who have used this book indicates that many children not only find meditation of great benefit in their emotional and intellectual lives, but they also take readily to it”.

World Health Organization has done a study entitled ‘Broadening the Horizon Balancing Protection and Risk for Adolescents’. This was a multinational study involving about 50 nations around the globe in 2002. The study concluded that having spiritual belief was one of the protective factors among adolescents so that they were less likely to initiate sexual intercourse too early, less likely to get severe depression and less likely to abuse drugs (7).

The evidence generated by Dr Lisa Miller PhD or the response from parents and teachers given to David Fontana and Ingrid Slack on their book ‘Teaching meditation to children’ or the WHO study – all of them point to the same omission- we have neglected the spiritual dimension of health in giving health care and life skill education to our adolescents both at individual level as well as community level. It is better that we correct this mistake before it is too late.

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