

ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH: ENRICHING THEIR LIFE SKILLS

Dr. Jitendra Nagpal

"Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself... progressive and experiential"

John Dewey

The word 'education' means different things to different people. It could mean upgrading one's skills in the context of performance, strengthening oneself with various qualities, enabling oneself for better decision making and handling conflicts and investing authority through empowering oneself.

So "Education is a creation of choices, making people aware about those choices and enabling them to make use of those choices."

As education systems expand to empower youth, every nation, society and community has to work towards promoting a well being atmosphere. When adolescents acquire knowledge, attitudes, values and life skills, they benefit in a variety of ways. Life skills help adolescents to make informed



decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Such knowledge and skills can lead to behaviours that prevent disease and injury, foster healthy relationships and enable young people to play leadership roles.

Moreover, the knowledge and life skills education imparted to young ones are likely to be passed on to their own children, thus influencing future gener-

ations. We therefore need to effectively address a wide spectrum of issues related to adolescence and youth in a rapidly changing world.

Why is there a need for Life Skills Enrichment?

The host of factors that promote high risk behaviours such as alcoholism, drug abuse aggression, irresponsible sexual behaviours are boredom, rebellion, disorientation, peer pressure and curiosity. The psychological push factors such as the inability to tackle emotional pain, conflicts, frustrations and anxieties about the future are often the driving force for high risk behaviour.

Life skills training is an efficacious tool for empowering the youth to act responsibly, take initiative and take control.

It is based on the assumption that when young people are able to rise

above emotional impasses arising from daily conflicts, entangled relationships and peer pressure, they are less likely to resort to anti social or high risk behaviours and grow up to be Aware, Responsible and empowered individuals and harmonized citizens of a developing nation.

Alvin Toffler in "The Third Wave" stated, "The illiterates of 21st century will not be those who can not read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn".

Definitions of Life Skills - the beginning of wisdom

What are life skills? Several definitions are compiled here from UNICEF and WHO to provide a wide-ranging perspective of the concept. Life skills have been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life".

UNICEF defines life skills-based education as basically being a behaviour change or behaviour development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills. The UNICEF definition is based on research evidence that shifts in risk behaviour are unlikely if knowledge, attitudinal and skills based competence is not addressed.

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 can be utilized in many areas, issues, topics or subjects such as in prevention of drug abuse, sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS/ STD prevention, suicide prevention, etc. UNICEF extends its use further into consumer education, environmental education, peace education or education for development, livelihood and income generation, among others. In short, it empowers young people to take positive action to protect themselves and to promote health and positive social relationships.

Components of Life Skills

WHO categorizes a core set of life skills into the following three components:

a) **Thinking skills** - include self-awareness, social awareness, goal setting, problem solving and decision-making. To be able to think critically, information should be provided in order to make informed decisions and choices. The skills to think critically can also be developed if the teenagers are given the opportunity to look at different perspectives of an issue, the pros and the cons of making one decision over the other and making them realize the negative consequences of making hasty, unplanned decisions.

b) **Social skills** - include appreciating/ validating others, working with others and understanding their roles, building positive relationships with friends and family, listening and communicating effectively, taking responsibility and coping with stress. Social skills enable the adolescents to be accepted in society and to accept social norms, which provide foundation for adult social behaviour.

c) **Negotiation skills** - It means not only negotiating with others but with oneself as well. For effectively negotiating with others, one needs to know what one wants in life, is firm on one's values and beliefs and can therefore say "no" to harmful behaviour and risky temptations.

A cascade strategy for disseminating the training is used in many countries. This is to say that people who take part in training sessions then go on to train others using the same, or a similar, training schedule. This model is advocated in so far as trained trainers can go on to train other teacher trainers, and so increase the availability of training resources. Teachers/ life skills educators should go through training sessions with a trained trainer. Care has to be taken however, to maintain the quality of the training at all levels.

Described in this way, skills that can be said to be life skills are innumerable,

and the nature and definition of life skills are likely to differ across cultures and settings. However, analysis of the life skills field suggests that there is a core set of skills that are at the heart of skills-based initiatives for the promotion of the health and well-being of adolescents & youth.

These are listed below:

Decision-Making helps us 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 enables us 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.

Creative Thinking contributes to both decision making and problem solving by enabling us to explore the available alternatives and various consequences of our actions or non-action. It helps us to look beyond our direct experience, and even if no problem is identified, or no decision is to be made, creative thinking can help us to respond adaptively and with flexibility to the situations of our daily lives.

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 behaviour, such as values, peer pressure, and the media.

Effective Communication means that we are able to express ourselves, both verbally and non-verbally, in a way that is appropriate to our cultures and situations. This means being able to express opinions and desires, but also needs and fears. And it may mean being able to ask for advice and help in a time of need.

Interpersonal Relationship skills help us 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.

Self-Awareness includes our recognition of ourselves, of our character, of our strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes. Developing self-awareness can help us to recognize when we are stressed or feel under pressure. It is also often a prerequisite to effective communication and interpersonal relations, as well as for developing empathy for others.

Empathy is the ability to understand what life is like for another person, even in a situation that we may not be familiar with. 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. Empathy can also help to encourage nurturing behaviour towards people in need of care and assistance, or tolerance, as is the case with AIDS sufferers, or people with mental disorders, who may be stigmatized and ostracized by the very people they depend upon for support.

Coping with Stress is about recognizing the sources of stress in our lives, recognizing how this affects us, and acting in ways that help to control our levels of stress. This may mean that we take action to reduce the sources of stress, for example, by making changes to our physical environment or lifestyle. Or it may mean learning how to relax, so that tensions created by unavoidable stress do not give rise to health problems.

Life Skills

- Enable adolescents & Youth to behave in healthy ways.
- Adolescents & youth are actively involved in a dynamic teaching and learning process.
- Methods used include working in small groups and pairs, brainstorming, role play, games and debates and youth leadership camp.

(The author is noted psychiatrist and life skill expert. He can be reached at email: jnagpal10@gmail.com)

