



Life Skills Education for young people: Coping with Challenges

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Abstract

Adolescence is a challenging transitional period for many young people. They go through many changes in physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of their life. During these developmental changes young people believe that they are unable to communicate what they want with their parents, teachers and adults and often find themselves in the middle of conflicts and arguments. These situations lead to unnecessary stress, anger issues and low self esteem resulting in, low academic performances, and disruptive behaviour in school and at home. Life Skills Education Programme is a series of self building sessions, consisting of basic skills for personal and social development which will help young people in coping with the challenges they face. Through these sessions adolescents learn better ways to communicate with others, develop their self esteem, and learn to take responsibilities for their actions, become more mature and adult – like and make informed choices and decisions. These skills will help them to resist peer pressure as they learn how to accept themselves for who they are.

Introduction

The World Health Organisation considers “adolescence” to be the period between 10 and 19 years of age (World Health Organisation, 1998). For the purpose of this paper adolescents and young people are used interchangeably.

The beginning of adolescence is marked by puberty, an increase in biological events leading to an adult sized body and sexual maturation (Berk, 2007). It is also a

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period of “storm and stress” for many adolescents. Though, biological forces play a significant role in the physical changes that takes place during the transition period from a child to an adult, a combination of biological, psychological and social forces influence an adolescent’s development. It is a time young people drift away and distance from parents. Spending more time with peers and conforming to the ideas and judgments of their peers are common during this period. This transition is so crucial that adolescents face problems in certain areas of life such as parent – child conflicts, risky behaviours and mood changes. If these issues are not resolved the individual suffers role diffusion or negative identity, which results in mismatched abilities and desires, directionless and are unprepared for the psychological challenges of adulthood (Berk, 2007). These internal stresses and social expectations lead to moments of uncertainty, self doubts and disappointment in the adolescent. It is at these situations that the young person takes risks and involves in risk taking behaviours. For these reasons, life skills education is important to help young people cope with challenges that they face in their day to day lives.

What is Life Skills?

World Health Organization (1997) defines Life Skills, as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Moreover, based on this definition a working definition was formed for South East Asia Region (SEAR) countries on Life Skills as “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable them to deal effectively with the demands and challenges within the family, community and cultural context of the SEAR countries (World Health Organisation, 2001).

Life Skills Education is a series of self developmental sessions. Basic skills are taught in these sessions including communication skills, dealing with peer pressure and learning to resist negative peer pressure, assertive skills, understanding the changes that an individual goes through in the stages of development; especially during the adolescence period and being aware of one’s self, feeling good about one’s self, learning to have relationships with others, understanding other people with regard to their cultural values, applying creative thinking to problem solving, handling stress, managing anger and making informed decision in every aspect of their life.

Importance of Life Skills Education

In order to cope with the crucial stages of adolescents development, early intervention of life skills programmes are carried out with basic skill building activities; participative interactions of role plays, group work, team building exercises, discussions, voicing out opinions and presentations, to actively engage young people in their self development process. These basic skills will help young people in coping with difficulties they face in their personal, emotional and social development.

Through these skills adolescents learn to communicate with their parents, teachers, adults and peers. They also learn the importance of saying NO, especially at times of negative peer pressure. They learn to take control of their emotions and make more informed

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decisions, set boundaries for appropriate behaviours, sustain relationships, and learn to be responsible for their actions and adopt healthy life styles.

Challenges faced by Young people: Developmental Challenges

As adolescence is the period of onset puberty to adulthood. During this period children go through physical, cognitive and emotional changes. For this reason it is very important for individuals to understand and be prepared for the phases of adolescence.

During the adolescence stage the individual's body begins to grow rapidly, size and the shape of the body changes, causing some teenagers to feel uncomfortable in their body. In addition to physical growth, teenagers also experience hormone changes and sexual maturation. These changes leave them confused, vulnerable and egocentric. Research reveals that these pubertal changes affect adolescent's self image, mood and interaction with parents and peers (Berk, 2007).

However, if the adolescent is informed in advance about these changes, their psychological reactions are known to differ from those that have no prior knowledge about these pubertal changes. For girls who have not been informed about menarche the reactions could be shocking, frightening and disturbing. Similarly for boys who have not been informed about spermarche the reactions could cause mixed feelings. Moreover, information on these changes could help the young person to develop a more positive body image.

On the other hand, when teens have a poor body image, self esteem is low, relationships gets rocky. Conversations with friends shift to dieting and exercise, focus gears to how they look than on what they want to accomplish in life. In the worst cases, eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and other unhealthy behaviours develop. The media complicates this condition by placing standards for how girls and boys should look defining what is beautiful in our culture and society. Accepting and being satisfied with the way the body is transforming will have a positive impact on the self image of an individual. According to Ohannessian, McCauley, Lerner, Lerner and von Eye (as cited in Atwater & Duffy, 1999) young people who had high levels of self worth are able to cope well with the challenges they face, than the adolescents who had poor family adjustments.

Adolescence is a time for excitement, growth and change. Sometimes adolescents divert their energy into more experimental activities such as smoking, drugs, fighting and breaking rules. Often parents, teachers and care givers are concerned about these changes and believe that this is due to raging hormones. Buchanan, Eccles, and Becker (as cited in Price, 2007) stated that the advancement in developmental psychology and neuroscience explained this phenomenon as the result of complex interplay of body chemistry, brain development and cognitive growth. Nevertheless, these changes that the adolescents experience take place in the context of multiple systems, such as individual relationship, family, school and community that support and influence the change. Neuroscientists believe that by the time the young child reaches puberty, youth had undergone the crucial

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transformations in the brain development (Price, 2007). The ability to distinguish theory from evidence and to use logic to examine complex relationships and multivariable situations improves in adolescence and adulthood (Berk, 2007). This capacity to think about possibilities expands the mental horizon of the young person causing them to voice out their opinions in family matters, religion, political and moral system. These differences in opinion lead them to explore their boundaries in the quest of finding their identity and thus, involves in risky behaviours.

Environmental Challenges

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (as cited in McWhirter, McWhirter, Mcwhirter, & McWhirter, 2007) individual human development takes place within multiple ecological systems. The Microsystem consists of people with whom the individual comes into direct contact, including family, school – classmates, teachers and staff.

The family Microsystem has a major influence on individual development because within this system the individual learns values and attitudes, which will have a long term impact in the future. Hence, the stability of the family, the parenting style, types of family problems and conflicts in a family will determine the type of stresses, conflicts and psychological effects on the individual particularly on adolescents. These ups and downs in the family cause parent-child conflicts, risky behaviours and mood changes in the adolescent's life (Lahey, 2007). These situations lead to unnecessary stress, anger issues and low self esteem resulting in, low academic performances, and disruptive behavior in school and at home.

Challenges faced by Maldivian young people

Apart from the biological, cognitive, and emotional changes, adolescents in Maldives go through a challenging phase of change in schooling environment too. Students are transferred to different secondary schools once they complete primary schooling. Usually this transition is the most difficult time for Maldivian young people. Due to the geographical distribution of the islands in the country, some of the young adolescents are forced to move to a different island to complete their secondary education.

In addition to change in school environment, they are also faced with a new curriculum, new teachers, forced to make new friends and adjust to the new school environment. The desire for sense of belongingness to the school is so high these young adolescents misplace their sense of direction to unacceptable behaviours in school such as; bullying, fighting, shop lifting, act of vandalism and even become sexually active. According to Goodenow and Grady (as cited in Ma, 2007) sense of belongingness is defined as the extent to which individual feels personally accepted, respected, included and supported in the school environment. According to Maslow hierarchy of needs theory, lower needs must be fulfilled before other needs can be fulfilled (Butler-Bowdon, 2007). Therefore, the need for sense of belongingness in school for adolescents is vital to enhance performance and develop positive emotions. According to Finn (as cited in Ma, 2007) identification-participation model indicates that unless individuals identify well with

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school environment; feel welcomed, respected, and valued, their education participation would be limited.

When and how is life skills taught to young people?

In Maldives, Life Skills Sessions are conducted to young children as they enter their teens. These sessions are carried out in groups. The fundamental goal of this programme is to help young children, entering teen deal with the transitional period with confidence so that a solid foundation is laid in the process of building a more responsible youth group who will be capable to lead the nation in the future. These sessions are incorporated into primary and secondary school curriculum so that young people will have the opportunity to actively observe and participate in the learning process.

How Life Skills is taught in Maldives

The first and foremost skill that is taught is communication and interpersonal skills. Often, young people complain about not knowing how to communicate their needs and emotions to others. Through communication and interpersonal skills teens learn the difference between good communication and poor communication, non verbal, verbal, active listening, expressing feelings, giving feedback without blaming and accepting feedback from others positively. They also learn assertive and negotiation skills. Develop empathy and understanding towards other people's situations and work in teams.

Often adolescents find it difficult to express how they feel in different situations. Life Skills teaches them the importance of understanding emotions. Without emotional understanding, behaviours would be misleading. Research conducted by Mehrabian (as cited in Elksnin & Elksnin, 2007) indicates that ninety three percent of emotional meaning is conveyed nonverbally. Fifty five percent through facial expression, body posture and gestures, thirty eight percent through tone of the voice. Therefore, proper use of appropriate facial expressions, gestures, and body language are taught to help them express their emotions more effectively.

Development of a good self esteem is very vital for teenage adjustment because research indicates that low self esteem is related to a number of psychological difficulties and personal problems, including depression, loneliness, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, low academic performance and criminal behaviour (Leary, 2005). To develop self esteem the approach taken in the life skills sessions is through activities that build social skill and self management skills. Activities such as appreciating one another, finding something positive to say about the peers , setting realistic and achievable goals to accomplish tasks.

To help young people maintain a positive self image that is so often mirrored by the ideal self, life skills sessions teaches how young people are influenced by media. The different types of advertisement techniques that are used by media to capture the audience are discussed in detail. The main aim of teaching teens about how the media works is to help young people understand that what they see is not the real picture but rather a make believe idealistic world, created by graphics, images and make up.

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In order for a young person to exercise personal control, decision making is vital. The basic day to day decisions such as when to get up, what to wear, what to eat does not require high effort thinking, rather these activities have become so routine that most of the time the individual is not aware that s/he made a decision. However, when faced with problems in choosing a career or what subjects to study in the secondary school, one is aware that it requires a lot of thinking and analyzing. Most often when these situations arise, the teenager procrastinates on the issues for so long that s/he feels pressured to make a choice at the last minute and ends up making the wrong decision.

Life Skills Education programmes teaches young people how to make decisions based on the THREE C Model, which helps them to identify the challenge, available choices that the individual have and the consequences that are likely to happen if taken a particular choice. This way they can evaluate whenever they need to make a decision. The THREE C Model will also facilitate young people to make more informed choices and provide them opportunities to be ready to handle difficult situation as they will be more aware of their own decision. Decision making is a goal oriented sequence of affective and cognitive operations that leads to behavioural responses. Lack of competence in decisions making skills is clearly linked to at risk behaviour (McWhirter, McWhirter, Mcwhirter, & McWhirter, 2007).

Reasons why life skills sessions are conducted in groups include; providing opportunities for young people, to share ideas and learn from peers who have come from different backgrounds, social values, cultures and socio-economic status. Workings in groups facilitate them to accept, respect and value each other regardless of the back ground, ethnic group or religion. These sessions also place high emphasis on teaching unconditional positive regard for each other. In doing so it also provides a basic foundation for young people to accept themselves for who they are, which will result in them adapting healthy life styles.

Conclusion

Life Skills Education results in bridging up communication barriers with parents and other adults. It enables young people to handle stressful situations effectively without losing one's temper or becoming moody, learning to disagree politely with use of appropriate "I" messages, and assertive skills are important for development of self esteem, positive attitudes, making a firm stand on values, beliefs and cultural differences. When an individual learns all the basic skills to cope with challenges individuals will feel more confident, motivated, and develop a positive attitude towards life, thus, make more mature and adult like decision, starts taking responsibilities for their actions and in turn refrain from risk taking and risky behaviours and become more useful people for the next generation.

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