

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Adolescent Sexuality: Perceptions, Preferences and Practices

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Adolescence is a transitional stage of physical and mental development between childhood and adulthood. This is a large, heterogeneous and vulnerable group who will be adults tomorrow and drive the economy. Thus adolescents need to be cared for.**Objectives:** To document perceptions, preferences and practices of adolescents related to sexual health. To explore if any difference exists among these adolescents according to their external environment.**Methods:** A cross sectional study. A total of 600 participants were selected purposively; 450 college going (professional and general stream college) and 150 out of college adolescents.**Results:** Majority (43.6% college going and 27.3% out of college) ignored their sexual desires; followed by masturbation (21.5% college students); watching pornography (28.2% out of college students); intercourse (11.8% college going students and 12.7% out of college adolescents). Premarital acceptability was highest for kissing (81.8% college and 63.3% out of college). Premarital coitus was acceptable among 16.9% college going and 13.3% out of college adolescents. Majority of the respondents said that people who had premarital sex, should get married; this attitude was found to be significantly higher ($p=0.0001$) in the professional college students. Homosexuality was not acceptable to majority of the respondents (70.9% college and 76% out of college).**Conclusions:** Acceptance and exposure to premarital sex exposes the vulnerability in this group which is compounded by the absence of formal counselling and friendly treatment services. High level of unacceptability of homosexuality highlights the challenges faced in mainstreaming homosexuality and prevention of discrimination.**Keywords:** adolescents, sexual desire, sexual practices, homosexuality

INTRODUCTION

The word "ADOLESCENC" is derived from the Latin word *adolescere* meaning "to grow up". It is a transitional stage of physical and mental development that occurs between childhood and adulthood.¹ Today 1.2 billion adolescents stand at the crossroads between childhood and the adult world. Around 243 million of them live in India. This accounts for nearly one quarter of the total population². Moreover, Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health (ARSH) has been identified as a key strategy in the Reproductive and Child Health (RCH-II) program under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)³. In the light of the above mentioned scenario and the fact that today's adolescents will be tomorrow's adults comprising the productive group of the community and thus will influence the overall growth of the country, investing in adolescents would be a "demographic dividend", this study is an endeavour to gather some

baseline information about adolescents specially of Surat city which will help in determining their current perceptions, preferences and practices related to sexual health

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The study was conducted with following objectives:

To document perceptions, preferences and practices of adolescents related to sexual health.

To explore if any difference exists among these adolescents according to their external environment.

METHODOLOGY

Study design: It was a Cross-sectional study.

Sampling: Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, a purposive sampling technique was selected to ensure sincere support, participation and compliance from the study participants.

Study setting: The study has two groups – college going and out of college.

College going adolescents were approached from the three purposively selected colleges (one professional college (150 students) and two general stream colleges (300 students)).

The out of college cohort (150 adolescents) was approached through the NGO, NIWCD (National Institute for Women and Children Development) situated at Surat city. This NGO played a key role in recruiting the study participants. These participants were the one enrolled with this NGO.

Inclusion Criteria:

College going cohort: All adolescents belonging to Age group between 17 and 19 years, willing to participate in the study, Studying in one of the three selected colleges

Out of college cohort: Adolescents capable of answering the self-administered questionnaire and currently not studying

Study Tool: A pre-designed and pretested semi structured questionnaire which was self-administered under supervision

Data Collection Methodology: Prior to the filling up of proforma, the adolescents were gathered in small groups (15-20 for out of college and 30-40 for college going) and were briefed about the significance of the study. They were assured about the anonymity of their responses. Then each question was explained to them and then asked to fill them one by one under close monitoring of the investigator. Any query while filling up the questionnaire was solved immediately. Sitting arrangement of the participants was designed so as to ensure privacy during filling up of the questionnaire, to avoid biased answers and ensure confidentiality.

Data Management and Analysis: Data entry was done in Microsoft Excel software and analysis was done by Epi_info version 6.04 software.

Ethical considerations:

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethical committee.

The participants were explained regarding the study and their informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

In this study, majority of the study population were Hindus (91.6% in college and 69.3% in out of college group) followed by Muslim 5.8% and 22% in college going and out of college groups respectively and rest belonged to other religions. A higher proportion of Muslims were seen in the out of college group as this group was selected purposively from the outreach service area covered by the NGO which was approached for this study.

In this study (table: 1), ignoring sexual urges was the commonest response and was documented in 31.3% of out of college students compared to 46.9% among college students. Out of the students who took some active measures to satisfy one's own sexual urges, masturbation (21.5%) was the commonest first preference among the college going students compared to watching pornography (28.2%) among the out of college students. Quite a few (12.8% college going, 14.8% out of college; 11.4% general stream students & 12.6 % professional college students) accepted to indulge in actual physical intercourse as the first thing to satisfy their sexual desire. More of boys (58.6%) in the professional college group and girls (24.6%) in the out of college group considered masturbation as their first option to satisfy sexual desire. Also Professional College boys opted for masturbation in almost double proportion as compared to boys of other General Stream Colleges (58.6% and 19.9% respectively).

As is evident from the table:2, kissing was the most acceptable premarital sexual relationship followed by fondling, although the acceptability sharply drops to 40% for fondling as compared to 80% for kissing. Changing times is reflected when we see that premarital coitus is acceptable among 16.9% college going and 13.3% out of college adolescents. Majority, still believed that people who indulged in premarital sexual relations should marry. On the contrary, a sizeable number (36% college going and 28.7% out of college) also believed that it was okay, if people who had premarital relationship did not get married. However, when intra-college analysis was done, this acceptability is significantly higher ($p=0.0001$) in the professional college students.

Acceptability of almost all the variables pertaining to premarital sexual relations was found to be the highest in the male respondents of the professional college except for coitus which was found to be highest (26.3%) in the male students of the general stream college. The general stream students (78.5%) were more traditional as compared to professional college students (32.9%) while responding that when there is a premarital sexual relationship, then the consenting adults should get married. This difference in the attitude was significant ($p=.0001$)

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of study population according to their first preference to satisfy own sexual desires

	College			Out of College		
	Male (%) n = 211	Female (%) n = 208	Total (%) n = 419	Male (%) n = 68	Female (%) n = 61	Total (%) n = 129
Masturbation	75(35.5)	17(8.1)	89(21.5)	18(26.5)	15(24.6)	33(25.7)
Actual Sexual Intercourse	36(17.1)	17(8.1)	53(12.8)	10(14.7)	9(14.7)	19(14.8)
Pornography	41 (19.5)	37 (17.9)	78 (18.8)	25 (36.7)	11 (18.1)	36 (28.2)
Ignore (p value: 0.02; df=2)	59(27.9)	137(65.9)	196(46.9)	15(22.1)	26(42.6)	41(31.3)

Table 2: Distribution of the study population according to their perception of premarital sexual relations

	College			Out of College		
	Male (%) n = 226	Female (%) n = 224	Total (%) n = 450	Male (%) n = 73	Female (%) n = 77	Total (%) n = 150
Perception of premarital sexual relation						
Kissing Acceptable*	186(82.3)	182(81.3)	368(81.8)	61(83.6)	34(44.2)	95(63.3)
Fondling Acceptable	123(54.4)	60(26.8)	183(40.7)	47(64.4)	14(18.2)	61(40.7)
Coitus Acceptable	58(25.7)	18(8.0)	76(16.9)	11(15.1)	9(11.7)	20(13.3)
Perception of need to get married in case of premarital sexual relation						
Should get married	144(63.7)	144(64.3)	288(64.0)	54(74.0)	53(68.8)	107(71.3)
No need to get married	82(36.3)	80(35.7)	162(36.0)	19(26.0)	24(31.3)	43(28.7)

*p value : 0.0001; df:1

Table 3: Practices of the study population about sexual issues

	College			Out of College		
	Male (%) n = 226	Female (%) n = 224	Total (%) n = 450	Male (%) n = 73	Female (%) n = 77	Total (%) n = 150
Knows anyone of same age with sexual experience						
Knows	138 (61.1)	115 (51.3)	253 (56.2)	42 (57.5)	34 (44.2)	76 (50.7)
Doesn't know	88 (38.9)	109 (48.7)	197 (43.8)	31 (42.5)	43 (55.8)	74 (49.3)
Own sexual experience						
Kissing (p value: 0.0001; df=2)						
Yes	55 (24.3)	60 (26.8)	115 (25.6)	45 (61.6)	22 (28.6)	67 (44.7)
No	171 (75.7)	164 (73.2)	335 (74.4)	28 (38.4)	55 (71.4)	83 (55.3)
Fondling						
Yes	34 (15.0)	24 (10.7)	58 (12.9)	27 (37.0)	6 (7.8)	33 (22.0)
No	192 (85.0)	200 (89.3)	392 (87.1)	46 (63.0)	71 (92.2)	117 (78.0)
Coitus (p value: 0.0001; df=1)						
Yes	13 (5.8)	11 (4.9)	24 (5.3)	22 (30.1)	9 (11.7)	31 (20.7)
No	213 (94.2)	213 (95.1)	426 (94.7)	51 (69.9)	68 (88.3)	119 (79.3)

Table 4: Perception of the study population about homosexuality

	College v/s out of college			Inter college		
	College	Out of college	Total	General Stream	Professional college	Total
Acceptable	131 (29.1)	36 (24.0)	167 (27.8)	96 (31.3)	35 (24.5)	131 (29.1)
Not acceptable	319 (70.9)	114 (76.0)	433 (72.2)	211 (68.7)	108 (75.5)	319 (70.9)

When asked as a proxy question of their own sexual practices(as described in table 3), if they knew of anyone of their age group who had sexual experience, majority (61% males & 51% females in college and 57.7% males & 44.2% females in out of college) responded affirmatively. But when asked about their own sexual practices, this number came down drastically - 25.6% college & 44.7% out of college for kiss-

ing, 12.9% college & 22% out of college for fondling, 5.3% college & 20.7% out of college for coitus). The point to note that even in the first interaction 5.3% of college going and 20.7% of out of college going adolescents accepted being sexually active which reiterates the urgent need for adolescent friendly health services in India. It was interesting to note that the overall self reporting of sexual practices was more

commonly seen among the out of college adolescents. However, there was a significant difference in this declaration, with girls reporting drastically less numbers than boys in the out of college group.

In this study, when asked how many people with preference for same sex partners were known to them, half (51.3%) responded as none, 35.3% did not know, 8.9% respondents knew 1 to 10 such people & rest 4.4% respondents knew more than 10 such people in the college group. While in the out of college group, 45.3% did not know followed by 42.7% respondents knew none, 9.3% knowing 1 to 10 such persons & rest 2.7% knowing more than 10 such persons. Similar pattern was seen within the two colleges. Almost half in both the colleges (50.2% in General Stream College, 53.8% in Professional College) did not know anyone who preferred same sex partners. But more 13.6% general stream and 12.6% professional college students knew someone with preference for same sex.

Among those who knew at least one such person, boys outnumbered girls (19.5% boys in college going and 20.5% in out of college group as compared to 7.1% and 3.9% girls in both the groups respectively ; 19.2% and 20% boys and 8% and 5.5% girls in general stream and professional stream colleges respectively.)

Maximum number of adolescents from the professional college (7.7%) revealed about knowing more than 10 persons with preference for same sex compared to 2.9% in general stream and 2.7% in the out of college adolescents.

Further as described in table 4, on asking, how they perceived homosexual relations, majority in all the groups answered that it was unacceptable (70.9% in college & 76% in out of college group, 68.7% in General Stream College and 75.5% in Professional College).

DISCUSSION

It was observed in this study that for majority of the adolescents (31.3% of out of college students compared to 46.9% among college) ignoring sexual urges was the commonest response and was documented in students. This was closely followed by indulging in masturbation for 21.5% college going and 28.2% out of college adolescents. In their study, S Ramadugu et al reported that 45.9% boys and 12.7% girls indulged in masturbation.⁴

Majority in our study still believed that people who indulged in premarital sexual relations should marry. At the same time, quite a few (36% college going and 28.7% out of college) were of the opinion that it was okay, if people who had premarital relationship did not get married. These results were quite higher

compared to the results reported by Jaya et al in their study which said that only 4.4% of adolescents were okay with the idea of sexual relationship not followed by marriage.⁵

When asked as a proxy question of their own sexual practices if they knew of anyone of their age group who had sexual experience, majority (61% males & 51% females in college and 57.7% males & 44.2% females in out of college) responded affirmatively. These numbers fell dramatically when asked about their own sexual practices (25.6% college & 44.7% out of college for kissing, 12.9% college & 22% out of college for fondling, 5.3% college & 20.7% out of college for coitus) and this self-reporting of sexual practices was more commonly seen among the out of college adolescents. It was also observed that girls reported drastically less numbers than boys in the out of college group. Similar findings were reported by P Patel et al where only 25 % of boys admitted that they had watched pornography. Around 42 % boys and 38 % girls had girl/boyfriends and 24 % and 12 %, respectively had experienced vaginal intercourse first with a neighbour or relative of same age.⁶ Similar premarital sexual experiences have been reported by Leena Abraham - 12.6% for girls and 49.3% for boys⁷; Sathe and Sathe - 22% of boys and less than 5% girls⁸; NFHS 3 - 4% of young women and 15% young men⁹; Kumar et al - 21.7% males and 4.6% females.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Although majority of the adolescents across all the groups ignored their sexual urges quite a few did accept actual intercourse as their most preferred method of dealing with their sexual desires. This exposes the vulnerability in the group in the absence of formal counseling and friendly treatment services. Sizable number of adolescents used pornography (which includes MMS) as their preferred mode to gratify their sexual desires was worrisome as it might result in victimization. More than half the respondents in both groups accepted to knowing some one of their age who was sexually experienced. In contrast to this, very few adolescents revealed their own sexual experience and different studies have reiterated the existence of premarital sexual experiences from different parts of the country, which reaffirms the need for formal information sharing in relation to sexual health in this age group and the absence of adolescent friendly health services makes this group vulnerable. Homosexuality was not acceptable to majority of the respondents. This reflects the challenges faced in mainstreaming homosexuality and prevention of discrimination.

LIMITATIONS

Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, purposive sampling technique was used to conduct the interviews. Thus the findings cannot be extrapolated to the general population.

Limitation of time did not allow for more in depth research.

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