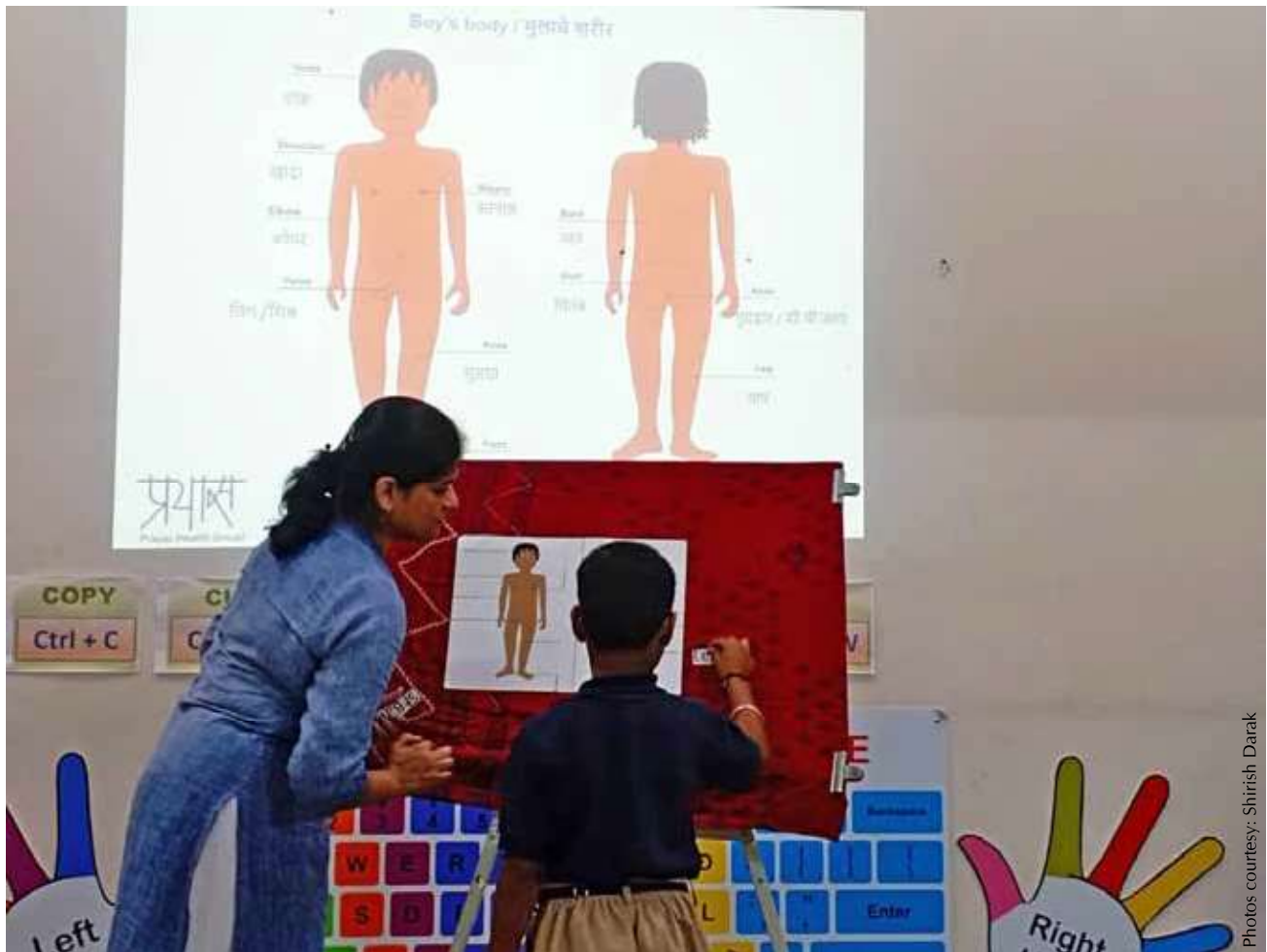


Beyond good touch and

Shirish Darak



Photos courtesy: Shirish Darak

On the same day the tragic Badlapur child sexual abuse case made headlines, we were facilitating a session on personal safety with adolescents, a mixed group of girls and boys. Ironically, the day's topic was child sexual abuse, part of a series of age-appropriate sessions for children and adolescents living in a Pune slum. This program covers topics such as understanding your body, puberty, gender roles, consent, bullying, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and abuse.

We began the session with a common question, "How many of you have ever attended a school

session on 'good touch and bad touch'?" Half of the 20 children raised their hands. Next, we asked, "What do you think 'good touch' and 'bad touch' mean?" The responses were revealing. One child demonstrated a light pat on the back and said, "This is a good touch. But if you hit hard, it's a bad touch." Another boy from the sixth grade added, "A touch you like is good, and a touch you don't like is bad." A third child claimed, "A stranger's touch is bad, but a known person's touch is good." Clearly, the concept was not fully understood. The terms 'good' and 'bad' can be too vague and ambiguous for children.

bad touch

While the "good touch, bad touch" framework is a well-intentioned starting point, and even probably the most minimum one needs to do; it may not fully equip children with the understanding they need. A touch from someone familiar and liked can be perceived as 'good' and still be unsafe, and a child's body might respond in confusing ways to a harmful touch. The adjectives 'good' and 'bad' may not convey 'safe' and 'unsafe' touch. Another reason for confusion could also be the fact that such sessions are conducted only once. Many schools deliver personal safety and sexuality education through workshops – intensive, short sessions of few hours a day or two days. While these workshops provide basic information, they lack the depth, continuity, and reflection needed for true learning.

So, what's the solution? To truly enhance children's understanding of personal safety, relationships, and sexuality, we need to move beyond sporadic workshops and adopt a curriculum integrated throughout the school year. This continuous approach provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their learning, apply it in real-life situations, and benefit from ongoing support from trained facilitators. Such a sustained and reflective model fosters deeper personal growth and resilience – outcomes that short-term interventions simply can't achieve.

Sexuality education can be interpreted in various ways, making it essential to clearly define what content should be delivered, at what age, by whom, and – most critically – what the ultimate goal of this education should be. In this article, we will explore these questions, drawing on our extensive experience implementing a comprehensive sexuality education program.

Our program, named SAHAJ (Sanman, Hakka, Jababdari – Respect, Rights, Responsibility), engages students from grades 1 through 10 in eight sessions spread across each academic year (total 80 sessions). SAHAJ is a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) program adapted from the Rights Respect Responsibilities (3Rs) initiative by Advocates

for Youth. This program aims to promote healthy relationships and responsible behaviour among young people. The 3Rs curriculum is recognized as an evidence-based approach to CSE, built on over three decades of research and experience. Prayas (Health Group) has tailored this program specifically for the Indian educational context. Drawing from our extensive experience in diverse school environments – urban areas, urban slums, rural regions, and tribal communities – we have carefully developed the SAHAJ curriculum. This curriculum aligns closely with the core principles of the 3Rs program, which emphasize that youth have the right to accurate sexual health information, deserve respect, and that society has a responsibility to provide them with the tools necessary to protect their sexual health and overall wellbeing.

The curriculum is tailored to the developmental needs and cognitive capacities of the children, much like how languages or science are taught: starting with foundational concepts and gradually building upon them. Critical topics include standing up to bullying, understanding consent, dealing with rejection, embracing diversity, fostering respect, making informed decisions, addressing gender issues and abuse, ensuring personal safety, and cultivating self-awareness, self-esteem, and knowledge about sexual abuse. The topics and their learning objectives are derived from an evidence based framework proposed by International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (2018).

Our first year of implementation has been encouraging with children responding positively to reflective, non-didactic learning that they can apply to their everyday lives. Creating lasting change, though, requires the active involvement of adults – teachers, parents, and caregivers – who can model the behaviours and values we aim to instill in children. To support this, the SAHAJ program includes regular sessions for teachers and parents, helping them understand the curriculum and effectively support their children's development.

Currently, SAHAJ is being piloted in just one school, but we are developing lesson plans to make the curriculum widely accessible. As more schools across the country consider adopting comprehensive sexuality education, the goal should be to build resilience in children, empower them to make informed decisions, teach them respect for themselves and others, and help them navigate adolescence with confidence and understanding.



Some topics in the SAHAJ program, such as gender roles and personal safety, are already part of the CBSE curriculum. However, the existing curriculum needs to be made more rigorous to be truly comprehensive. This demands building educators' capacity to effectively deliver these sensitive topics – a daunting challenge given the lack of proper training and the stigma around discussing sexuality and abuse. Without substantial political will and investment in children's wellbeing, we cannot adequately protect them or support their growth. Educator training, curriculum reform, and sustained commitment are vital if we want to empower children to navigate the complexities of life with knowledge and confidence.

As we protest and demand justice, we must not limit our calls to stricter law enforcement alone. We should also push for schools to adopt a more

comprehensive approach. Comprehensive sexuality education is not merely about preventing abuse; it's about fostering a culture of respect, self-worth, and informed decision-making. By doing so, we empower our children to grow into confident, responsible adults capable of navigating life's complexities with dignity and resilience.

The author is a senior research fellow at Prayas (Health Group), a Pune-based NGO. He holds a medical degree and a PhD in Demography from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. With over 20 years of experience in the fields of HIV/AIDS, gender, and sexuality, he has authored more than 35 scientific peer-reviewed research papers and many reports. He has conducted numerous workshops for teachers, counsellors, parents, and young people across Maharashtra. He can be reached at <shirish@prayaspune.org>.