



Implementing SAHAJ- Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program in Urja Gurukul School, Ahmednagar

CASE STUDY

2024



Prayas (Health Group)

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Prayas (Initiatives in Health, Energy, Learning and Parenthood) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization based in Pune, India. Prayas Health Group (PHG) is committed to generate evidence-based discourse on emerging issues on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). PHG is actively involved in socio-behavioral and epidemiological research, awareness building, programmatic interventions and provision of clinical and counseling services especially to persons living with HIV and youth.

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THE IMPETUS FOR INITIATING THE PROGRAM

the need

The program's impetus stemmed from the school's commitment to supporting students in gaining knowledge about sexuality safely, respectfully, and scientifically.

In response to a growing trend of children asking questions about sexuality, the school recognized the pressing need for guidance and support in navigating these complex topics. Understanding that these inquiries were natural but often left unanswered or misunderstood, the school sought to address the issue proactively.

Approach

Recognizing the importance of consistency and depth in addressing sexuality education, the school wanted an approach that goes beyond occasional workshops or isolated sessions.

With this background, the school approached Prayas, and the plan for implementing the SAHAJ program was initiated.



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ABOUT SAHAJ PROGRAM

SAHAJ is a school-based comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) program. The SAHAJ program is adopted from the Rights Respect Responsibilities (3Rs) program which is an initiative by Advocates for Youth that aims to promote healthy relationships and responsible behavior among young people. The 3 R curriculum has been widely recognized as an evidence-based approach to comprehensive sexuality education and has been implemented in schools and community-based organizations across the United States and other countries. Building on over three decades of research evidence and experience, the 3Rs program is intended for use with Kindergarten through 12th-grade students. Its lessons are structured and age-appropriate, beginning with basic lessons about friendship and safety and introducing more complex concepts as students age.

Prayas (Health Group) has undertaken the initiative of adapting a program tailored specifically for the Indian educational landscape. Drawing upon our extensive experience conducting sessions across diverse school settings, including urban areas, urban slums, rural regions, and tribal communities, we have meticulously crafted the SAHAJ curriculum.

SAHAJ aligns seamlessly with the core principles of the 3R program. These principles are rooted in the belief that youth have the right to accurate sexual health information, are deserving of respect, and that society bears the responsibility to equip them with the necessary tools to safeguard their sexual health and overall well-being. Underlying this vision is the acknowledgement that young people are also responsible for taking proactive steps to protect themselves.

ABOUT URJA GURUKUL SCHOOL

Urja Gurukul School in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra is an English-medium school that follows the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum. It was started in 2015 by Mrs Kalyani Firodiya. Rooted in the vision of holistic child development, the school prioritizes collaboration over competition, nurtures holistic growth, and fosters inclusive and secular student values. The dedicated team of educators and staff embody these principles with firm commitment and passion.

Founded in 2015



THEMES COVERED IN SAHAJ

- Bullying, taking a stand against it
- Consent
- Dealing with rejection
- Decision making
- Diversity and respect for all
- Friendships
- Gender roles
- Gender identity and sexual orientation
- Gender and abuse
- Healthy relationships
- HIV/STI
- Personal safety
- Reproductive anatomy, puberty, menstruation
- Self-image and self-esteem
- Sexual abuse



IMPLEMENTING SAHAJ : THE WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) implemented as a whole-school approach entails active involvement and collaboration among students, parents, teaching, and non-teaching staff. At its core, this approach recognizes that nurturing a supportive and informed environment requires the collective efforts of all stakeholders.

1

Students

2

Teaching and
non-teaching staff

3

Parents

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Exploration visit –
conversation with teachers
and students

Parents' orientation and
consent to start the
program

Workshop with teachers
(3 days)

Monthly sessions with
students (5 sessions)

Monthly sessions with
parents (5 Sessions)

Follow-up sessions with
teachers (3 Sessions)

The implementation plan was carefully developed in collaboration with the school. The key steps include an initial exploration visit and open discussions with teachers and students, followed by parental briefing and consent to kick-start the program with transparency and cooperation. Workshops with teachers and monthly sessions with children provided crucial age-appropriate information and support. Monthly parent sessions facilitated dialogue and understanding, empowering them to guide their children through growing-up challenges positively.

EXPLORATION VISIT – CONVERSATION WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS



Engaging in conversations with teachers and students proved immensely insightful during our exploration visit. The open-sharing session with the teachers delved into their challenges and perspectives on sex education. As we transitioned to speaking with students, we were introduced as facilitators who would soon address many of their queries about adolescence and growing up.

This introduction was pivotal, as it allowed students the mental preparation needed, ensuring they weren't caught off guard by sudden discussions on such a sensitive topic as sexuality. Students were also encouraged to write their questions on a piece of paper (anonymously if they prefer) and drop them in the question box. There questions were answered in the later visits.

PARENTS' ORIENTATION AND CONSENT TO START THE PROGRAM



During the parents' orientation and consent session, which lasted for two hours, the primary goal was to emphasize the significance of incorporating sexuality education into the school curriculum. Parents were briefed on the program's content and structure, and ample opportunity was provided to address any concerns they might have. Initially, parents had concerns regarding

how children would respond to early exposure to sexuality-related information. Yet, they also acknowledged the pressing need to tackle issues such as children's natural curiosity about their bodies, encounters with pornography, and experiences of teasing and bullying. Overall, the response from parents was overwhelmingly supportive, with many expressing the need for such a program.

WORKSHOP WITH TEACHING AND NON-TEACHING STAFF WITH FOLLOW-UP SESSIONS



A comprehensive three-day workshop was meticulously planned for the school's teaching and non-teaching staff, aimed at achieving several key objectives. Participants were introduced to the fundamental concepts of sexuality and gender, fostering a sense of ease and openness in discussing these topics. The workshop further emphasized the vital role of sexuality education within the school setting, highlighting its significance in promoting holistic student development.

Along with learning about the physical, sexual and emotional development of children, participants also learned about other sexual health issues such as HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Non-teaching staff play multifaceted and supportive role within the school community. While they may not be directly involved in classroom instruction, their contributions to creating a nurturing and inclusive student environment are invaluable.

FEEDBACK FROM THE STAFF

“

I started applying concepts I learned in these sessions, such as consent, space, and boundaries, which have helped me a lot. My daughter, who never used to share her feelings, started opening up to me without hesitation. By reflecting on the learnings from these sessions and by acting on wherever is needed, I have realized that my personal life has changed a lot.

We impose many restrictions on girls, such as what clothes they should wear, how they should behave, and whether they can express their opinions. After attending these sessions, I realized the importance of girls and women breaking free from these constraints and expressing themselves. If any coercion or abuse occurs, taking a stand against it is crucial.

I learned a lot of things, such as HIV and same-sex attraction, through these sessions. The most significant change I've noticed is the newfound openness. Previously, I used to feel very shy even discussing menstruation in front of others at home. However, that is no longer the case. I no longer feel shy anymore.

These sessions have helped in realize that everyone including the children have choices. Every individual has a right to express their feelings and to take their own decisions.

MONTHLY SESSIONS WITH STUDENTS



In the academic year 2023-2024, the school had students ranging from 1st to 7th grade. Each grade received an approximately one-hour session facilitated by a Prayas representative. To efficiently manage the sessions, two facilitators conducted classes for all grades on the same day.

The program commenced in August 2023, with a total of five sessions conducted throughout the academic year. The topics covered varied according to grade level. Due to it being the inaugural year of implementation, certain topics were repeated for some grades to ensure a foundational understanding among all students.

TOPICS COVERED

VISIT 1

Grade	Topics
1,2	Diversity in families.
3,4	Diversity in families and friendships.
5,6,7	Friendships, respect and boundary

VISIT 2

Grade	Topics
1,2	Understanding basic anatomy
3,4	Understanding anatomy and reproduction.
5,6,7	Reproductive anatomy and reproduction.

VISIT 3

Grade	Topics
1	Healthy friendships and diversity
2,3,4	Bullying, teasing and harassment
5,6,7	Tackling bullying, and harassment

VISIT 4

Grade	Topics
1	Personal space and boundaries
2,3,4	Personal space, boundaries and personal safety.
5,6,7	Sexual harassment and abuse. Building skills to tackle it

VISIT 5

Grade	Topics
1,2	Gender roles and gender expectations.
3,4	Gender roles, gender stereotypes
5,6,7	Puberty: menstrual health and hygiene

The same issue was also discussed with different level of emphasis in different grades. For example in the 7th grade the session on puberty also included information about pregnancy and reproduction which was not included in the 5th grade

CHANGE OBSERVED BY TEACHERS

“

It has become easier for me to teach science. Now that they know about sex and reproduction, the nature of their questioning has also changed. They are thinking about it more scientifically. Someone asked me what would be the byproduct of human and animal sex. Or if a mosquito sucks my blood, then does my DNA goes into the mosquito? What is the difference between germ cells and normal cells?

Children are more comfortable talking about these issues with the teacher. Now they ask questions and don't keep it to themselves.

In the first standard, when I was teaching about the body parts, I also mentioned the parts they learned in the class (Penis, vulva, anus, nipples), and no one laughed or giggled.

Getting the language and knowing the correct words has also helped. For example, someone asked why it hurts so much when you have a testicle injury. You feel shameful to ask without knowing the words you can use with everyone.

MONTHLY SESSIONS WITH PARENTS



During the monthly sessions with parents, the agenda primarily revolved around elucidating the topics covered with their children on the preceding day, segmented by grade level. This included a detailed overview of the objectives and the anticipated changes in knowledge, attitude, and behavior that the session aimed to achieve. Parents were then guided through potential questions their children might pose based on these sessions, along with strategies on how to address them effectively.

Following this structured discussion, an open question-answer session allowed parents to share any new experiences or queries they encountered at home. Moreover, to foster personalized support, some time was allotted for one-on-one interactions at the end of the session.

On an average these sessions were attended by around 15-20 parents. Involving more number of parents in these sessions has been a challenge.

SOME QUESTIONS ASKED BY PARENTS

- What if our children say something (for example, name a body part- penis, nipples etc.) in front of others? We know that it is not wrong to say this, but it may not create a good impression of our children in front of others. How should we handle such a situation?
- How do we maintain age-appropriate content when children of different ages are present together?
- How can I manage the potential scenario where answering one question leads to more questions from my child, leaving me unsure how to respond?
- Should parents and schools align their messaging regarding sexuality education for consistency?
- How do we address the importance of answering our child's questions in a joint family setting where opinions may differ?
- Is it beneficial to provide sexuality education to both boys and girls together in a joint session?
- How should we handle situations in which others in the house advise children to limit their interactions with peers of the opposite gender?
- Is it common for boys to explore their private parts, and how should parents approach this behavior?
- What guidance should parents offer their children regarding appropriate behaviors and boundaries concerning their private parts?

PARENTS' FEEDBACK

This is a 'SAHAJ' (easy) and beautiful way!

As parents, we learned a lot too. I personally feel that a take-home message for parents from this program is 'first connect then correct' our kids. The program has age-appropriate topics. We came to know that sexuality education is not just about sex but more about how to behave while living in a society.

The SAHAJ program should be included in the curriculum.

This program is very important. We had never imagined how important it is to have this conversation with our children. We came to know about it through this program. This program should be implemented not just for this year or next year but rather should be taught as an important subject as a part of the curriculum.

My child is speaking more openly!

I could see a clear difference in my child after these sessions started. Initially, he used to speak only with me. Now he doesn't shy away from speaking with his father, his friend who is a girl... He got appropriate information about body parts and many things... actually, these things parents cannot openly tell their children (most of the time, they also don't know).

This program is helping us bond better with our children

After these sessions, we can bond better with our children. It is more friendlier now where we can openly talk about things. They also feel at ease while expressing themselves. Also, I wanted to share...my son has a dark complexion. He was being teased in school because of that, which bothered him a lot. Because of the SAHAJ sessions, he is now able to accept this fact (and that it is not a sign of inferiority), so it doesn't bother him anymore.



"The individual-level impact of sexuality education programs for teachers and staff is often undervalued. Most teachers are women, and for them, as well as for men, these programs are transformative. They enhance self-comfort and confidence, allowing teachers to communicate openly in mixed-gender situations without shame about basic biological processes like menstruation. These programs normalize such processes and reduce stigma, helping female educators to feel at ease both personally and professionally. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of self-care and self-pleasure, reinforcing that prioritizing one's own well-being is not only acceptable but essential. I have observed these changes firsthand in my staff. They are now more comfortable interacting with both students and other staff members. This holistic approach benefits the teachers themselves while also creating a supportive and informed environment for their students, breaking down societal taboos and fostering a culture of openness and acceptance within the school community."

~ Kalyani Firodiya



OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATIONS

- The case study essentially demonstrates that it is possible to implement an age-graded comprehensive sexuality education program in a school starting from the first standard. This is a work in progress, and the implementation of SAHAJ program will continue in the coming academic years.
- It also highlights the importance of collaborative efforts. Implementing comprehensive sexuality education as a whole-school approach, involving students, parents, teachers, and non-teaching staff, is important in creating supportive environment where students feel comfortable engaging in discussions about sensitive topics and where parents are equipped to reinforce educational messages at home.
- Building comfort and confidence among teachers is important even when they are not directly conducting the sessions: Sexuality being such an integral part of life, it is reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of teachers irrespective of the subject they are teaching. Therefore, all teachers must develop a common perspective on addressing the issues. Developing this perspective and comfort needs sustained engagement, a tailor-made approach, and interactive activities to break down barriers and foster a culture of openness.

OBSERVATIONS

- The experience also underscores the importance of ongoing education and support for parents. Parents play a crucial role as their children's first educators, and providing them with ongoing education and support is essential. Monthly sessions with parents not only facilitated open discussions about sexuality but also equipped parents with strategies to address their children's questions and concerns effectively.
- Overall, the implementation of the SAHAJ program at Urja Gurukul School demonstrates that comprehensive sexuality education can be seen as a program that can go beyond health outcomes

The comprehensive sexuality education program holds immense transformative potential within the school. However, the success of such initiatives hinges on the involvement of parents and teachers who are often products of the same societal norms that discourage open discussions about sexuality. To truly unlock the effectiveness of these programs, it is essential for individuals to first become comfortable with the subject matter themselves. This necessitates ongoing engagement and dialogue with various stakeholders, fostering an environment where discussions around sexuality are normalized and embraced. Only through such collective efforts can comprehensive sexuality education programs authentically fulfill their role in shaping informed, empowered, and respectful individuals.



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