

SCHOOLS STILL COY ABOUT SEX EDUCATION

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YESTERDAY, *Bangalore Times* reported on the trauma of a teenage pregnancy. Experts all agree that focused sex education at the right age could go a long way in preventing such situations. But a random survey reveals that sex education varies hugely across the city. The age it is introduced ranges from standard 5 to 10. Nor are the subjects covered homogeneous across the city. Some progressive schools heed expert advice, covering all relevant topics. Most are not so enlightened choosing only 'comfortable' subjects such as AIDS prevention and instilling traditional moral values.

Reality calls for a different approach. For teenagers in urban India face many of the same pressures as in the West. Everywhere, they are exposed to sex, be it on TV, off the Internet, or on the billboards. It is confusing for those struggling with hormones. In the West, especially Holland and Germany, sex education begins as young as 10. It covers a wide range of subjects from the biological realities and AIDS prevention to comprehensive family planning advice, and emotional advice relevant to their society.

According to Meera Ravi, a child counsellor, "Sex education should start as early as possible, and it should start at home." But parents find some subjects hard to

discuss, armed only with their own experience. Schools must fill the gap.

However, few schools seem real-

START YOUNG

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ly keen to tackle the issue. At St Joseph's, sex education is not offered until standard 10. Pupils said they appreciated that the advice will be "good to know for the future," because "no one tells you what happens." But this

advice would be better given at the start of puberty rather than half way through.

Starting earlier, however, is no guarantee of comprehensive sex education. At Baldwin's, the principal, Dr Edward, outlined a syllabus that covered the biological realities, and the threat of HIV/AIDS for students as young as 13. However, the advice offered on the emotional side of sexual issues seemed out of tune with today. The discussion of family planning was discouraged for fear of promiscuity and girls are told to 'get involved in hobbies' to avoid sex. Avoidance of sexual issues is unrealistic today, given that TV watching is the major hobby of most teens.

But even given these drawbacks, it is encouraging that schools are making a start and trying to accommodate the unique nature of sex issues in India. Even in government schools there are sex education programmes — with a focus on AIDS prevention, and the consent of parents.

One school that has made remarkable progress in this direction is the Indus International School. Here, the principal, Pritam Benjamin sees sex education as "an integrated part of students' development in a co-ed school." Sex education here begins from standard 5 and is provided by trained outsiders to ease the embarrassment factor; the school also hopes to include parents.