

February 22, 2010

The wonder years



There was a time when adolescence was filled with heady and angst-ridden days, when parents seemed a source of embarrassment, and when enduring

friendships could unravel in a minute. Today, the cheerful and miserable chaos called teenage is no longer just about how a pimple can ruin your life. The psychological transition has assumed critical proportions, and precarious physical experimentation has led to dropping out of schools, premature sex, substance abuse and battles of mind and body. In these years of flux, many adolescents in India walk the razor's edge between falling along the way and surviving into adulthood. We speak to doctors and psychologists on how adolescents can make the most of these wonder years.

Diet and exercise

During adolescence, a lot of physiological changes occur, leaving youngsters baffled. Many children today suffer from psycho-social and psychosomatic disorders. These children usually come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, from families that have failed to prop them up during the growing-up years. Hyper-activity and behavioural problems abound in boys while girls suffer from malnutrition, anaemia and poly-cystic ovaries. Of late, obesity is seen in children from the lower middle-classes too. I recommend a wholesome diet and plenty of exercise for every teenager. It helps them cope with school, and hormonal stress. Regular screening for ailments is a must. The establishment of an adolescent clinic at the Government General Hospital is a step in the right direction.

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Holistic approach

The incidence of Type 2 diabetes among adolescents is on the rise. If not addressed adequately, this will lead to major health challenges in the country. Lifestyle interventions focussing on weight management and increasing physical activities in adolescent children should be promoted. Families should be encouraged to eat healthy. Children should avoid a high-calorie diet, and a sedentary lifestyle. Primary prevention of diabetes in adolescents is possible if health professionals, schools and the community at large are involved. I recommend that organisations hold screening camps for early detection of diabetes, especially among children and young adults.

Dr. ASHALATA SRINIVASAN

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Dr. V. Seshiah Diabetes Research Institute and Dr. Balaji Diabetes Care Centre

Creating awareness

Adolescents with AIDS have access to Integrated Counselling and Testing Centres in Government hospitals. Education of the girl child has helped bring down by three to five per cent the number of girls married before the age of 18 (National Family Health Survey III). Nutritional anaemia is a common problem in adolescents. Adolescent pregnancy constitutes up to 19 per cent of the total fertility rate in India. I wish for more media awareness and health care providers so that teenage pregnancies can be brought down. The State has many health improvement programmes for girls and women, but not for adolescent boys. The implementation of adolescent-friendly health services in all Government-run hospitals and dispensaries would bring about a major change.

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Building trust

Parents often seek our help in order to fix their teen's 'attitude problem', help them study and 'score better marks', or disengage them from an 'unhealthy relationship'. Helping parents build trust/respect to understand and communicate with adolescents, and engaging them to discover their identity and potential to lead meaningful, productive lives is a challenge. Let's not wait for suicide rates to rise, and stress to contribute to health hazards. A nation-wide taskforce on recognising, treating and preventing mental health problems in adolescents, especially among girls, is essential.

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