

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gearing up for the future-Life Skills to Address Sexual and Reproductive Health in Young People

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescence and young adulthood is generally a period of uncertainty and anxiety. During this period Youths globally irrespective of their cultural background are faced with various physiological, psychological, social and economic challenges. We hence develop a method for equipping young people with life skills to enable them cope with various challenges, improve their sexual and reproductive health, prepare and plan for the their vocation and to be in charge of their lives.

Methods: Through literature and from practical clinical experience we contrast and compare the existing suggestions of what young people go through adolescence and at what age they need to be imparted with life skills. We argue that life skills that young persons obtain through interaction with their environment will be essential to deal with peer pressure and useful in career Planning and Professional Development. All this put together in turn will affect the Sexual and Reproductive Health of the young person.

Results: A model called the "Life skills intricate in sexual and reproductive health' is proposed and this is guided by the 'ecological model of risk and protective factors' by Bronfenbrenner which assumes that young people function within a complex network of individual, peer, family, school and community environments that affect their capacity to avoid risks. By incorporating the theoretical framework and the proposed model, we are able to foster interactive 'teaching' approach that focuses

on transmitting specific knowledge designed to shape young peoples' skills as well as developing their employability skills.

Conclusion: It is therefore important that teaching of life skills start as early as possible so that as one is growing they are able to to make correct decisions appropriate to their circumstances, resist negative pressure and avoid involving themselves in risky behavior.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses issues affecting young people in terms of planning and preparing themselves for the future and how this is related to their life skills and sexual and reproductive health(SRH).Apart from discussing young people's life skills and their sexual and reproductive health, we will also focus on their ability to plan for a job and how to succeed in it

Globally young people face various physiological, psychological and social and economic challenges. Hence, It is generally agreed that young people need special skills in whatever environment they find themselves in order to cope with their circumstances and face the future. According to the World Health Organisation,¹ 'life skills are abilities for adaptive behaviours that enable individuals to effectively deal with demands and challenges of everyday life'. Therefore, equipping young people with life skills will enable young people to cope with various challenges but also improve their sexual and reproductive health, such as avoiding risky sexual behaviour. In addition to being informed about sexual and reproductive issues, adolescents need skills to be in charge and take control of their lives. Research evidence suggests the need to focus on factors associated with sexual decision of adolescents in order to empower them to make effective decisions concerning sexual and reproductive health.

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The need for life skills in young people's reproductive health:

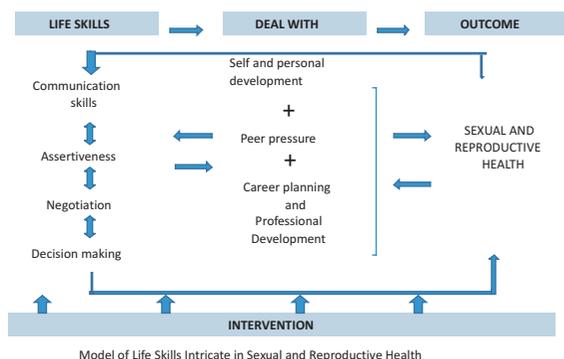
During a study of Adolescent Reproductive Health in Zambia some adolescents defined their age group as “a time between adulthood and childhood: sometimes you are seen as too old for children's things and too young for adult things. A time to learn many things...”³ The in-between situation screams loudly and often the adolescent in terms of behavior oscillates between being adult and being teen, be it in choice of clothes, food, health services and relationships. This results in a vulnerability that leads sometimes to life changing situations with issues of alcohol, drugs, road traffic accidents and reproductive health ills. It is during this time that mistakes can be made while exploring SRH. Sexually transmitted illnesses (STI's), including HIV and AIDS, pregnancy and related consequences become a challenge.

This is also the time when a young person consolidates who they are, in preparation for their future. High on the agenda is self- identity, access to information on SRH, education, career interests, peer influence with which they need to cope simultaneously with all the other changes that are happening in their lives.³

Proposed model

We are proposing a Model of life skills Intricate in Sexual and Reproductive Health (Figure 1) in order to address the issue of life skills and to address sexual and reproductive health issues in young people. This model assumes that life skills are essential to deal with issues of sexual and reproductive health in young people. The life skills considered to be important for this purpose are: Communication, Assertiveness, Negotiation and Decision Making skills; and these skills are considered to be interconnected rather than stand alone.

Figure 1: Model of life skills Intricate in Sexual and Reproductive Health



We argue that the life skills that the young person obtains through interaction with their environment, either informally through peer interaction or formally through training will be essential to deal with peer pressure and useful in career Planning and Professional Development, all this put together in turn will affect the Sexual and Reproductive Health of the young person.

Case study

Lucy, a 13 year old girl falls pregnant following an encounter with John, an older boy aged 17 years at her school. He stopped her just as she was approaching her home after school. He told her how beautiful she was and that he would very much like to be her friend. She protested a little, saying she did not know if it was possible for her to be his friend.

He persisted saying he lived nearby and knew her brother. She let her guard down, agreeing that it should be okay for them to be friends. At first he was nice to her to gain her confidence. Within a few weeks he began asking her for sex. She at first refused. The boy then told her she possibly did not love him. She said she did. He replied that she needed to prove it by going all the way with the affection. Eventually she allowed him to undress her and go all the way.

When she fell pregnant she did not know what the disappearance of her periods meant, nor the morning illness she felt each day. She was also too afraid to ask her mother what this meant. So the pregnancy began to grow until she could no longer hide it.

The case study demonstrates breakdown in the issues itemized in the proposed model of the life skills intricate in SRH. These are:

Communication skills – a 13 year old girl will have limited knowledge of SRH. Communicating with a 17 year old boy might be intimidating for her both from a cultural and age point of view. For example while she was saying she did not want to have sex with the boy, her body language may have been indicating the opposite.

Assertiveness – again a girl of 13 may not have been exposed to assertiveness skills training which would help her to stand up firmly for what she believes.

Negotiation – would have helped Lucy to maneuver herself away from having sex with John. However linked

to the poor communication and lack of assertiveness she yielded to the boy.

Decision making – although both John and Lucy made poor decisions, Lucy was hit worse than John. She ends up with a pregnancy and all its consequences in a thirteen year old which include how to face the parents, the burden of a baby, loss of school, anxiety during pregnancy and many other challenges. This poor decision making impacts her SRH negatively.

This case exemplifies the Model of Life skills intricate in SRH. The skills help adolescents to deal with their environment, *visa-viz* peer pressure, self and personal development, career and professional development, all the time allowing for healthy sexual and reproductive health.

Therein lies the validity the model of risk and protective factors has in this instance. Our suggested theoretical model encourages intervention before the adolescent years and at varied intervals during the acquisition of life skills. The model also notes the intricacy between life skills and issues adolescents must deal with while developing their sexual and reproductive health to its fullness in their lives.

Identity and Self- awareness and life skills

Hormones kick into force accelerating physical, physiological and psychological changes during puberty, which requires reacquaintance with themselves. The self-awareness and identity in this case means being able to find oneself, in changing circumstances or how one thinks and views oneself and , who to relate or identify with. For sexual and reproductive health it may be all or none, with the young person who is either well-grounded or completely unable to negotiate themselves out of an awkward or abusive situation.

We believe that the young person needs a holistic approach to SRH. Early intervention before life skills are needed and should be encouraged. Dialogue with prepubescent children is essential, answering their questions and helping them to feel appreciated and comfortable with their identity and self- awareness.

Knowing oneself puts one in an empowering position. This may depend on a strong inner person but is also amplified by knowledge and understanding that comes

from reading or peers and other sources. The young person also needs to know and understand the changes occurring in their own body without fear, guilt or intimidation. The process of living the adolescent years means the young person has to bring into his or her life all the information around, select some all the while being conscious of others such as peers, family, community, school, church and others that will in some way influence him or her. How well this happens will result in a healthy acceptable individual or a “damaged” young person whose body, mind and person may have been catapulted forward several years ahead of their peers by negative experiences.

To navigate life and reproductive health the young person requires life skills according to our theoretical model entitled Model of Life Skills Intricate in Sexual and Reproductive Health. They also need adequate information on services available to them. The services that are emerging are generally termed “Youth friendly health services”. The Youth friendly health service comprises of a place dedicated for young persons at a specific time with specially trained health providers who give advice with respect to, privacy and confidentiality and also work with peer counsellors and other young persons. In Lusaka, Zambia the Rachel Lumpa clinic is an example of an International Planned Parenthood Federation supported youth friendly service. Young persons can access information comfortably and exhibit healthy reproductive health, they in turn appreciate this service.³

Life skills are generally offered informally in schools and tertiary education settings. These life skills outlined in our theoretical framework are: ability to communicate, negotiate, exercise assertiveness and decision making. The case of the thirteen year old who fell pregnant underscores the challenge of inadequate life skills. The complexity of human relations, the need to tune into the environment, the effect of culture, gender imbalances, role of the community and the need for young persons to make responsible decisions all seem to point towards the need for integrated life skills

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this paper is the 'ecological' model of risk and protective factors by

Bronfenbrenner. This framework recognises that young people function reciprocally within a complex network of individual, peer, family, school and community environments that affect their capacity to avoid risk.⁴ *Each of these networks affect their capacity to avoid risk or discourage their positive behaviour to avoid risk. Therefore empowering adolescents with life skills would influence their ability to interact effectively within their social network in a beneficial way.*

When applying this model to sexual and reproductive health, in the various environments that young people function in such as family, school, social situations; risk factors are identified as those which increase the likelihood of negative behaviours that could lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections or which discourage positive behaviours that might prevent such outcomes. Conversely, protective behaviours are defined as those which discourage negative behaviours or which encourage positive ones that might prevent pregnancy or STIs, such as using contraception.

Life Skills for young people

Research has shown that approaches utilizing life skills have been very effective in educating young persons in health related issues such as alcohol and drug use, pregnancy prevention and prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It has also been shown that the life skills approach lays foundation for skills demanded in today's labor market and helps young people in their professional and career choice and planning.⁵

Life skills approach utilizes an interactive 'teaching' approach that focuses on transmitting specific knowledge designed to shape young peoples' skills as well as developing their interpersonal skills. The main goal of this approach is to impart skills to enable young people to make correct decisions appropriate to their circumstances, resist negative pressure and avoid involving themselves in risky behaviors. The methodologies typically involve group work, role playing, brainstorming and discussions.⁶

Young people even before they reach the legal age to hold formal employment need skills to help them find a job. This job maybe a formal job or informal self employed work which may require entrepreneurial skills.⁷In a

formal job market setting, young people require what are known as 'employability skills'. Employability skills are skills necessary for finding a job, keeping the job and becoming successful in it.

These employability skills are those that enable one to get along with colleagues in the work place, make informed decisions, provide solutions and add to productivity in the organization. Employability skills are also known as 'soft skills' and are a good foundation for one's career so young people need these skills in order to face their future with confidence and purpose. The employability or 'soft' skills include: (i) interpersonal skills,(ii) communication skills,(iii) critical thinking skills, and(iv) personal development.⁷

The employability skills are briefly considered below:

(i) Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills are the skills an individual uses to interact with other people. Good interpersonal skills allows one to effectively participate in team discussions and activities, to satisfy customers expectations, to negotiate, to make decisions, to manage time, to take responsibility of one's action and to work effectively in a team set up.⁷

(ii) Communication Skills

Good communication skills involve both verbal and written skilled interaction. This skill is absolutely vital in looking for a job because most jobs involve an oral interview. In order to convince would be employers that you have the necessary skills to do the job you normally have to do it verbally although good writing skills are also considered. Good communication entails eye contact, tailoring one's language to the audience and being able to put one's message across effectively.

Good communication also requires active listening skills and as one progresses in his/her career the importance of communication skills also increase because the ability to write with clarity and speak with authority is an essential.⁷

(iii) Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills involve decision making and problem solving that requires gathering of information and analyzing it. Critical thinking also involves effective planning and organizing. Faced with a wide array of

information and alternatives critical thinking will entail good planning and organizational ability in order to make effective decisions as well as solve the problems in the given situation. Innovation is also important as it is the ability to devise new ways of doing things or solving problems.⁷

(iv) Personal Development

Personal development is a life long process and requires that an individual is constantly learning and consciously attempting to better him/herself. An individual who is open to learning and who readily embraces change will succeed more than an individual who is closed and resistant to change. Most job situations involve change and to solve problems in such situations require that one is adaptable and flexible in their approach to finding solutions. An individual has to respond to change positively in order to be relevant in a changing world and personal development is essential in order to keep pace with a changing world. This is more so especially for a young person who will discover that almost everything is new when s/he enters a work place for the first time.

Self-motivation is an important ingredient of personal development. Successful individuals have a self-drive and an appetite to work beyond the assigned task. They motivate themselves and find intrinsic enjoyment in the tasks they do when they accomplish them. Personal development will help a young person to avoid negative emotions such as anger and stress as they improve by developing assertiveness and effective negotiating skills when dealing with their peers as well as the general environment around them.⁷

CONCLUSION

Life skills improve the capacity of young people to avoid risky sexual behaviour. Therefore empowering adolescents with life skills influences their ability to interact effectively with their environment. Life skills education offers a wide and rich set of prospects for young people, and suggests a philosophy and a practice which are more sensitively geared to young people's personal needs and more potentially responsive to their demands.

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