

# The importance of life skills for adolescents

Adolescents require a combination of cognitive and social skills to tackle their problems, and prepare for future challenges

*Dr Garima Srivastava*

Adolescence, a vital stage of growth and development, marks the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is characterized by rapid physiological changes and psychosocial maturation.

Adolescence is also the stage when young people extend their relationships beyond parents and family; they are intensely influenced by their peers and the outside world in general.

As adolescents mature cognitively, their mental process becomes more analytical. They are now capable of abstract thinking, better articulation and of developing an independent thought process.

These are truly the years of creativity, idealism, buoyancy and a spirit of adventure. But these are also the years of experimentation and risk taking, of giving in to negative peer pressure, of taking uninformed decisions on crucial issues, especially those relating to their bodies and their sexuality.

Adolescence is thus a turning point in one's life, a period of increased potential and at the same time, one of greater vulnerability.

Some key issues and concerns observed among adolescents include those relating to forming a self-image, managing emotions, building relationships, strengthening social skills, and dealing with or resisting peer pressure. Adolescents at this stage are more prone and vulnerable to high risk situations and may easily succumb to it.

It has been seen that many adolescents are able to deal effectively with these challenges, while some struggle more than the others. How well an adolescent deal with these issues is decided by a host of factors that include their personality, psychosocial support from the environment (that includes parents, teachers and peers), and the life skills that they possess.

Life skills are understood to be an efficacious tool for empowering the youth to act responsibly, take initiative and take control. It is based on the assumption that when young people are able to rise above emotional impasses arising from daily conflicts, entangled relationships and peer pressure, they are less likely to resort to antisocial or high-risk behaviors.

Life skills have been defined as “the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO). ‘Adaptive’ means that a person is flexible in their approach and are able to adjust in different circumstances. ‘Positive behavior’ implies that a person is forward looking and even in difficult situations, can find a ray of hope and opportunities to find solutions.



Life skills include psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

### **Thinking skills and social skills**

Essentially, there are two kinds of skills - those related to thinking are termed thinking skills; and skills related to dealing with others are known as social skills. Thinking skills relate to certain strengths with regard to cognitive abilities at an individual level. Social skills are those interpersonal skills that come to fore when a person interacts and communicates with those around them. A combination of these two types of skills is necessary for achieving assertive behaviour and negotiating effectively.

"Emotional skills" can be perceived as a skill not only in making rational decisions but also in being able to make others agree to one's point of view. To do that, it is important to teach adolescents to be able to identify and manage their own internal conflicts and feelings, emotions, stress and enable them to resist peer and family pressure. Young people need both thinking and social skills for a healthy development process.

### **The ten core life skills laid down by the WHO are:**

**Self-awareness:** Includes recognition of self, our character, our strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes. Creating self-awareness can help adolescents recognize when they are under stress or feel pressured. Self-awareness is often a prerequisite to effective communication and interpersonal relations, as well as for developing empathy with others.

**Empathy:** To have a successful relationship with our loved ones and society at large, it is important that we, during our adolescent years, learn to understand and care about other peoples' needs, desires and feelings. Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Without empathy, the communication that adolescents have with others will not amount to a two-way process. When an adolescent is able to understand themselves, they will be better prepared to communicate and at the same time, they will be able to elicit support from others, and win their understanding. Empathy can help adolescents accept others who may be very different from them. This can improve their social interactions; not just in peer group interactions in classroom settings but also later in life, in situations of ethnic or cultural diversity.

**Critical thinking** is an ability to analyze information and experiences in an objective manner. Critical thinking can contribute by helping the adolescent to recognize and assess the factors that influence attitudes and behavior, such as values, peer pressure and the media.

**Creative thinking** is a novel way of seeing or doing things that is characteristic of four components – fluency (generating new ideas), flexibility (shifting perspective easily), originality (conceiving of something new), and elaboration (building on other ideas).



**Decision making** is a skill that can help an adolescent deal constructively with decisions about their lives. Young adults can learn to assess the different options available to them, and consider what effects these different decisions are likely to have.

**Problem solving** helps in empowering the adolescent to look at a problem objectively vis-à-vis the different options for solutions and would help them come to a solution after weighing the pros and cons of the different options available.

**Interpersonal relationship skills** help the adolescents relate in positive ways with people they interact with in their everyday lives. This may entail being able to make and keep friendly relationships (which can be of great importance to our mental and social well-being); maintaining good relations with family members (which are an important source of social support) and also being able to end relationships constructively.

**Effective communication** means helping the adolescents express themselves, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are appropriate to cultures and situations. This means being able to express opinions, desires, needs and fears and also includes the ability of being able to ask for advice and help in a time of need.

**Coping with stress** as a life skill means recognizing the sources of stress in their lives, recognizing how this affects them, and acting in ways that help them control their levels of stress; learning positive coping styles and replacing passive with active coping mechanisms - this may include changing their environment or lifestyle, and learning how to relax.

**Coping with emotions** includes recognizing emotions within themselves and others, being aware of how emotions influence behavior, and being able to respond to emotions appropriately. A important aspect of this skill is learning to manage intense emotions like anger or sadness that can have negative effects on our health if we do not respond appropriately.

*Dr Garima Srivastava is a Delhi-based clinical psychologist with a PhD from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.*

