



## **A Call to Action: Defend Young People's Rights!**

We at TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) applaud the Indian government's renewed efforts to re-instate a sexuality education curriculum (now called Life Skills Education) in India's schools for 10 to 19 year olds<sup>1</sup>. Recognition of the importance of educating youth in these matters is a large step towards a healthier and happier population. However, after careful review of the material covered in this new curriculum (see full review on [www.tarshi.net](http://www.tarshi.net)), we believe that it lacks components essential to comprehensive sexuality education and to the efforts this curriculum intends to make in HIV/AIDS prevention. Since 1996, TARSHI has hosted a confidential telephone helpline service providing information, counselling, and referrals on sexuality and reproductive health issues. Our critique of this new curriculum stems from what we have learned from the 60,000+ calls we have responded to from people of all ages.

In taking a conservative approach after last year's backlash, the curriculum leaves out critical information. The lesson on conception, while addressing internal biological mechanisms, omits any description of intercourse. Sexual intercourse is shrouded in the euphemism of 'intimate physical relationships', insulting the intelligence of young people who know there is more to the story. It also puts those who don't know in danger, for example, an 18-year-old girl called the helpline to ask if kissing causes conception. Without the knowledge of what *does* cause conception, as the curriculum would leave her, this young woman is at risk for unwanted pregnancy and possibly infection. There is no mention of the function of the vagina and penis in sex in the description of these organs. Young people need to be told not only that the vagina is where menstrual blood as well as the baby comes out from, but where sperm get in to fertilize the egg and cause conception. To omit this information is to put young people at risk for the teen pregnancy that the curriculum authors are trying so hard to prevent through demanding abstinence – a tactic which has been proven not to work. Additionally, not talking about sex intensifies the taboo around the subject rather than alleviating it. As calls from the TARSHI helpline demonstrate, the inability to talk about matters of sexuality can hinder relationships and even lead to serious health consequences. For example, a young man, age 18 years, called the helpline with a concern that he couldn't talk to his parents about – a lump in his testes. His inability to confide in his own parents about a problem simply because it had to do with sexual anatomy could have had serious consequences.

Most notably, the way HIV prevention is addressed in the Teacher's Workbook is highly inadequate. Despite citing the fact that 86% of cases of HIV infection are sexually transmitted, the curriculum provides scant information on how sexual transmission occurs and how to protect oneself from it. Of course, it is very difficult to explain how HIV is transmitted sexually if one doesn't explain sex in the first place. The guide even states that 'young people have limited knowledge about HIV because they are not comfortable talking about it, as sexual mode of transmission is the major route...'. It would seem obvious that the way to make young people comfortable talking about the sexual mode of transmission would be to talk about it; instead the curriculum leaves young people in the dark, solely mentioning that HIV is transmitted sexually, and leaving out the hows, whys, and information on safer sex. There is no information on *how* to use condoms correctly, or why they should be used. Many calls to the helpline betray the confusion and uncertainty surrounding HIV. Callers ask whether activities like kissing, eating lunch, or sucking

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<sup>1</sup> The revised Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) module developed by the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Development.

nipples can cause HIV demonstrating that despite awareness of HIV, they have no idea how to protect themselves. This incomplete knowledge is hardly helpful – people who avoid kissing for fear of getting HIV but have sex with many partners without a condom put themselves and others in danger, mistakenly thinking they are safe. While the curriculum comprehensively informs youth how HIV is *not* transmitted, the lack of information on sexual transmission and safer sex make it useless in its goal of checking the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Young people need and deserve this information. They appreciate honest and accurate facts to back up instructions given to them– to not provide complete information is not only unfair and unkind, but dangerous to their health and well-being.

Overall, the curriculum seriously underestimates the ability of young people to make their own decisions about their lives. Despite devoting a large portion of lesson time to developing ‘life skills’, the writers of the curriculum unabashedly command young people to follow their prescribed value system, including mandating a so-called ‘expected standard of human sexual activity’ in the form of abstinence until marriage. Considering that one of the qualities of a good facilitator of sexuality education as listed in the guide is having the ‘ability to provide unbiased/balanced view on sensitive issues’, this is hypocritical.

The IPPF Charter on Rights is included as a factsheet in the HIV Prevention and Life Skills section of the curriculum manual. Two of these rights are being trampled upon by the very manual in which they are printed – the right to know, and the right to protect yourself and be protected. By intentionally withholding crucial information, the proposed curriculum violates both these rights.

The revised module is open for public scrutiny and debate. This is the time for all civil society actors, including young people themselves, to demand comprehensive sexuality education.

We urge NACO and all other relevant authorities to affirm young people’s rights to information, to the highest attainable standards of health, and ultimately, their right to life itself.

To give NACO feedback go to:

[http://www.nacoonline.org/NACO\\_Action/NACO\\_Events/\\_Consultation\\_on\\_AEP\\_with\\_Directors\\_of\\_State\\_Departments\\_of\\_Education\\_and\\_SACS\\_-\\_Scheduled\\_for\\_Tuesday\\_29th\\_July\\_2008\\_at\\_India\\_Habitat\\_Center\\_New\\_Delhi](http://www.nacoonline.org/NACO_Action/NACO_Events/_Consultation_on_AEP_with_Directors_of_State_Departments_of_Education_and_SACS_-_Scheduled_for_Tuesday_29th_July_2008_at_India_Habitat_Center_New_Delhi)

(Copy and paste this link into the web browser)

The page has all the components of the revised Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) downloadable. It also has a downloadable Word File with the format in which feedback is to be sent.

Feedback is to be sent by **September 30, 2008** to:

Joint Director (IEC), NACO, ([mayanknaco@gmail.com](mailto:mayanknaco@gmail.com))

Under Secretary (IEC), NACO, ([soninaco@gmail.com](mailto:soninaco@gmail.com))