

Strengthening Life Skills Through Education

Dr. Shikha Sharma

Senior Fellow (PDF), I.C.S.S.R.

Research centre : Meerut College, Meerut

ABSTRACT

The World today is developing at a rapid pace. This sometimes results in issues which may be detrimental to health both physical as well as mental. This may particularly have an adverse effect on the life of children. Therefore, Life Skills Education assumes immense importance. Life Skills training is a 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 disturbances arising from daily conflicts, confusing relationships and peer pressure, they are less likely to resort to anti-social or high risk behavior such as alcoholism, drug abuse and sometimes suicidal tendencies. The psychological factors such as the inability to tackle emotional pain, conflicts, frustrations and anxieties about the future are often the driving force for high risk behavior. The life skills programme is a school based programme where Life Skills are imparted in a supportive learning environment and the target group is children which helps them to take control of their emotions and channelize it in positive manner. The paper attempts to highlight the various initiatives at the school level to enhance life skills of the students.

Keywords: Life Skills, mental health, brainstorming, role play.

INTRODUCTION:

The mental health and well being of children requires everyone's immediate attention. According to the W.H.O. papers on mental health (Hendren, Birell and Orley, 1994) "Nearly one in five children will have an emotional /behavioral disorder at some time during their youth regardless of where they live or how well to do they are". Psychological competencies are a person's ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It is a person's ability to maintain a state of mental well being and to demonstrate this in adaptive and positive behavior while interacting with others, his/her culture and environment.

LIFE SKILLS:

'Life Skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life' (World Health Organization, 1997). **Adaptive** means that a person is flexible in approach and is able to adjust in different situations. **Positive Behaviour** means that a person is optimistic and even in difficult situations, can find a ray of hope and opportunities to find solutions.

Skills that classify to be life skills are varied and the nature and definition of these life skills differ across culture and setting. However there are certain skills that are basis of the initiatives for the promotion of the health and the well being of children and adolescents. Essentially, there are two kinds of skills – those related to thinking are called "Thinking skills"; and skills related to dealing with others are called "social skills". While **thinking skills** are at a personal level, **social skills** include interpersonal skills and do not necessarily depend on logical thinking. There is also a third kind of skill **Emotional** which is a skill helpful not only in making rational decisions but also in being able to make others agree to one's point of view.

At the United Nations Inter Agency Meeting held at W.H.O. Geneva (W.H.O., 1999, p.4) life skills education was considered crucial for –

- The promotion of healthy child and adolescent development;
- Primary prevention of some key causes of child and adolescent death, diseases and disability;
- Socialization ;
- Preparing young people for changing conditions;
- Promotion of peace;
- Good citizenship;
- Gender equality

There are ten core skills laid down by W.H.O. and which are further broadly classified in to three main areas. These are –

- (a) Thinking Skills – Self awareness, problem solving, decision making, critical thinking and creativethinking.**
- (b) Social Skills – Interpersonal relations, Empathy, Effective communication.**
- (c) Emotional Skills – Managing emotions, dealing with stress.**

Self awareness- includes recognition of self, one's own character, strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes

Problem solving – helps to deal constructively with problems in our lives because problems that are left unresolved can cause mental stress and give rise to physical strain.

Decision making – helps to deal with making constructive decisions. It can teach people how to actively make decisions about their actions in relation to healthy assessment of different options and, what effects these different decisions are likely to have.

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

Interpersonal relations—these skills help to relate in a positive ways to interact with people. This may mean being able to make and keep friendly relationships, keeping good relations with family members and also being able to end relationships constructively.

Empathy – Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Empathy can help us to accept others, who may be very different from ourselves.

Effective communication – means ability to express oneself, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are appropriate to cultures and situations. This means being able to express opinions and desires, and also needs and fears.

Coping with stress – means recognizing the sources of stress in one's lives, recognizing how this affects , and acts in way that help to control levels of stress, by changing environment or life style and learning how to relax.

Coping with emotions – means recognizing emotions within us and others, being aware of how emotions influence behavior and being able to respond to emotions appropriately.

IMPORTANCE OF LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION:

Teaching Life Skills in relation to everyday life should form the foundation of life skills education for the promotion of mental well being and healthy interaction and behavior. Life Skills enable individuals to translate knowledge, attitude, values and actual abilities i.e. “What to do and how to do it”. Life skills are abilities that enable individuals to behave in healthy ways. There could be many factors that relate to the motivation and ability to behave in positive ways to prevent health problems. These factors include such things as family and social support, cultural and environmental factors.

Effective acquisition and application of life skills can influence the way we feel about ourselves and others and equally will influence the way we are perceived by others. Life skills contribute to our perceptions of self efficacy, self confidence and self esteem. With changes in many cultures and lifestyles, many young people are not sufficiently equipped with life skills to help them deal with the increased demands and stress they experience. They seem to lack the support required to acquire and reinforce life skills(W.H.O., 1999).

LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION:

In life skills education, children are actively involved in a dynamic teaching and learning process. The methods used to promote this active involvement include working in small groups and pairs, brainstorming, role play, games and debates. A life skills lesson may start with an informal talk between the teacher and the students, establishing rapport and revolve around subject like what their ideas or knowledge are about a particular situation in which a life skill can be used. The children may be asked to discuss the issues raised in more detail in small groups or in pairs. They may then engage in short role play or take part in activities that allow them to practice the skills in different situations.

Importance of School for Imparting Life Skills Education:

The life skills programme is a school based programme where life skills are imparted in a supportive learning environment. They are applicable for all ages of children and adolescents in school. However, the age group targeted is mainly 10-18 years.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the child (Article 2a) –

“The education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship among all people”. The Life Skills programme is for promotion of health and well being and targeted group is all children (C.B.S.E., 2011, p.7).

The school is an appropriate place for the introduction of life skills education because of -

- The role of schools in the socialization of young people.
- Access to children and adolescents on a large scale
- Availability of infrastructure
- Experienced teachers
- High credibility with parents and community members.
- Possibility for short and long term evaluation. (W.H.O., 1999)

Not only is the Life Skills Education beneficial for the child's health there may be benefits for the school as an institution as well. For e.g. evaluative studies of the life skills programme suggest that the methods used can help to improve teachers and pupil relationship (Parsons, 1988) and there are indications that life skills lessons are associated with fewer reports of class room behavioral problems. There are also research indications of improved academic performance as a result of teaching life skills (Weissberg, Caplan&Sivo, 1989).

DESIGNING LIFE SKILLS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME -

Life skills learning is facilitated by the use of participatory learning methods and is based on a social learning process which includes : an explanation of the skill in question; observation of the skill (modeling); practice of the skill in selected situation in a supportive learning environment (scaffolding); and feedback about individual performance of skill (Whitehead , 2007).

The principal tasks of life skills development group include :

- Formulation of objectives for life skills education.
- Formulation of strategies for life skills programme development.
- Management of resources for life skills educators.
- The design of life skills programme teaching materials.

- The development of training sessions for life skills trainers and educators/teachers; pilot testing a draft version of the life skills programme
- Making plans for the implementation of the life skills programme.
- Maintenance of the life skills programme once it is in place.(W.H.O., 1999)

Life skills can be imparted in many ways. It involves the process of participatory learning with 4 basic elements:-

1. Practical activities.
2. Feedback and reflection.
3. Consolidation and reinforcement.
4. Practical application to day to day life challenges.

Besides this different methods that can be used to enhance life skills in students –

- Class Discussion
- Brainstorming
- Demonstration and guided practice
- Role plays
- Audio & visual activities e.g. arts, music, theatre, dance,
- Decision mapping or problem trees.
- Educational games or simulations
- Case studies
- Story telling
- Debates

Life skill lessons are both active and experimental. In passive learning, the teacher passes on knowledge and the learner receives the information passively. Active learning, however,

engages the teacher and pupil in a dynamic process of learning by using methods such as brainstorming, group discussion and debates. Experimental learning as based on actual practice and what is being taught e.g. using games and role play. Two methods that are frequently used in life skill lessons are- brainstorming and role-play.

Brainstorming- is a creative technique for generating ideas and suggestions on a particular subject. Any topic can be explored using the brainstorming. A question may be asked or an issue raised and everyone in the group is asked to give suggestions about it in very simple and brief terms. Brainstorming gives an opportunity for everyone's ideas to be valued and accepted without criticism. It is a participatory technique where everyone gets an opportunity to share their ideas.

Role play- is the acting out of a situation or even idea, based on example situation discussed by the teacher or students. In role play, various aspects of the same situation can be tried out & the students involved can be given a chance to try out the life skills they are being taught. Role play is perhaps the most important method in life skills teaching since the students involved can experience for themselves the use of new skills in different situations. Role play can be of considerable value for dealing with sensitive issues that may cause anxiety in real encounters. They get sensitized towards the situation or issue.

Life Skills is based on the COMMANDANT –

I Read, I forget, I discuss, I remember, I Do, I Inculcate

Three basic levels of life skills lesson, which can be taught through a life skills education programme –

- Level -1 – The teaching of basic core life skills practiced in relation to common everyday situations.

- Level -2 – The application of life skills to areas that are connected to various health and social problems.
- Level – 3 – The application of skill in relation to specific risk situations that can give rise to health and social problems. (W.H.O.,1999)

According to W.H.O. – Different types of life skills intervention were suggested which could be used to reach out of school children and adolescents:-

- **Life Skills in Action** – Modelling of life skills using methods such as video films, puppet shows and cartoons like UNICEF's SARA and MEENA projects.

SARA project was developed for Eastern and Southern African Countries.

MEENA project was developed for South Asia.

Both these projects are multimedia communication initiatives which seek to promote the status of girls. In each case, a young female character has been created to model the application of life skills in different situations.

- **Life Skill training workshops** – Training can be carried out with children and adolescent .
- **Life Skills for vulnerable children and adolescent** – In this case there is need for life skill intervention to reach vulnerable children such as street children, sexually exploited, orphans etc.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION:

Life Skills Education is a very sensitive and specialized programme therefore it needs special attention while implementing. It requires training as well as motivation of the stakeholders involved. Implementing of life skills programme will require the introduction of teaching methods and techniques which may be new to teachers and the success of the programme will depend very much on the availability of training. This may involve training in

participatory learning methods in teacher training colleges. As life skill education is a dynamic process it cannot be learned on the basis of information or discussion only. It must also include experiential learning. Experiential learning involves a “direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something about it”.(Bozark, 1981). It also involves peer training approach which involves one teacher and 3-4 student representatives from each school (forming the core life skills team) getting the training. They may learn these skills through active learning and participation in an inter school training workshop programme. They can then further train their peers at school in these skills through the same process. They follow up with the main resource team for feedback, discussion, training materials etc.

CONCLUSION:

Life skills training is a tool for empowering the youth to act responsibly, take initiative and control. It is based on the assumption that when young people are able to rise above emotional barriers arising from daily conflicts, peer pressure and strained relationships, they are less likely to resort to anti-social or high risk behavior.

Thus, we can say children learn life skills from parents, teachers and significant others who act as their role models. They gradually learn to use a particular skill effectively in diverse situations to cope with the challenges of life. Their importance in life is being felt. The future of any civilization is its children and it is our duty to give them an environment which promotes their physical and mental health. The all round development of the children can be enhanced by giving them Life Skills Education so that are ready to face the challenges of life effectively and efficiently. For this the teachers, parents and society have to act as role models and impart life skills in everyday situations. Schools have to design their curriculum keeping in mind not only the scholastic needs of the children but also emotional and social.

References

- Bozark, L. (1981). *Field study: A source book for experiential learning*. Sage Publications.
- Delors, J. (1996). *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, Paris, UNESCO Publishing Press.
- Hendren, Robert, Birrell Weisen, Rona, Orley, John H & World Health Organization. Division of Mental Health. (1994). *Mental health programmes in schools*. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/62308>
- Life Skills Education and CCE (2011). *Teacher's Manual*. Central Board of Secondary Education, New Delhi.
- Ouane, A. (2002). *Key competencies In Lifelong Learning. Institutionalising lifelong learning: Creating Conducive Environments for Adult Learning in the Asian Context*, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg.
- Parsons, C., Hunter, D. & Warne, Y. (1988). *Skills for Adolescence: An Analysis of Project Material, Training & Implementation*, Christ Church College, Evaluation Unit, Canterbury, UK.
- UNESCO and the Indian National Commission for Co-operation with UNESCO (2001). *Life Skills in Non-formal Education: A Review*.
- UNESCO Education Sector (2003). *Strengthening the links between EFA and Skills Development for Employability and Effective Citizenship. The Skills Development Dimension of the Dakar Framework on Education for All*.
- UNESCO (2005). *Draft Life Skills. The Bridge to Human capabilities*. Paris UNESCO

- Weissberg, R.P., Caplan, M.Z. &Sivo, P.J.(1989). *A new Conceptual framework for establishing school based social competence promotion programs*. Primary prevention and promotion in schools. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Whitehead, J. (2007). *Generating Educational Theories That Can Explain Educational Influences* In Learning: living logics, units of appraisal, standards of judgment. A presentation in the Symposium on Generating Educational Theories That Can Explain Educational Influences In Learning, at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Institute of Education, University of London, 5-8 September 2007.
- WHO/GPA. (1994). *School Health Education to prevent AIDS andSTD: A resource Package for Curricular Manner*. World Health Organisation/Global Program on AIDS, Geneva.
- W.H.O. (1999). *Partners in Life Skills Education. Conclusions from a United Nations Inter-agency Meeting*. Geneva, WHO, 1999 (WHO/MNH/MHP/99).
- World Education Forum (2000).*Education for All - The Dakar Framework for Action*. UNESCO, Paris.
- WHO (2004). *Skills for health: An important entry-point for health promoting/child-friendly schools*, Geneva.