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# The Secret Lives of Schoolkids



**Modern lifestyle, flush with accessible technology and heady affluence, is creating a new breed of schoolchildren. Revelling in newfound freedom and sly pursuits their undisciplined lives are a secret from their own parents.**



■ By Shefalee Vasudev

Let me hold you. You got me going crazy. Turn me on, turn me on," crooned reggae singer Kevin Lyttle. So turned on were the 200-odd schoolchildren by the seductive notes that the dense cigarette smoke barely veiled the edgy anticipation on their faces. Inside a posh new pub in Delhi, the partying adolescents had turned up in body glitter, diaphanous stockings, crimped hair, micro-skirts and cleavage-revealing tops. As the music became more frenzied, so did the jiving students.

They sipped fluorescent drinks with adult-like hauteur, remixing morals, manners and mama's instructions.

This was a Conti (continuation) party hosted by Class XI students for the outgoing Class XII batch from a prominent Delhi school. Conti parties are a big trend in Delhi, but schoolchildren partying in a pub? After the infamous MMS incident involving two schoolchildren having oral sex in November last year, wasn't the school worried? After all, the incident had spurred the Kerala authorities to instruct schools and colleges to ban mobile phones, dance and fashion shows, even skirts

for girls. But the Delhi schoolteachers had been kept in the dark. Some students had collected Rs 500 each from their classmates, booked the pub and sold entry passes with the school's name printed on them to fool the parents into thinking that the institution was involved. The parents who refused to allow their children to visit the pub at night were sent a circular signed by the "principal". Little did they know that their own children had printed it and faked the signature. Some went so far as to print an inflated fee of Rs 1,000 on the fake circular and pocketed the additional Rs 500. The organiser—a

foul-mouthed Class XII student—made a neat profit of around Rs 9,000 after the money was paid to the pub.

So what's new? Schoolchildren in every generation break rules, drink, smoke, smooch and hide their activities from parents? Isn't the end of innocence an age-old story? It is. But like every other tale of modern India, it has new, never-before plots. Boys always smoked their first cigarette in their teens, but now schoolgirls are doing it too. That they are having sex doesn't surprise anyone, but the kind of experimentation they are indulging in, the access to pornography and the techno-

logical accessories of fun are making the secret lives of schoolchildren more dangerous. Unmonitored Internet surfing, gangs in schools, availability of speed drugs like Ecstasy and the easy entry into pubs and bars for children's parties trace the lines of change. This is not a naive generation which needs to be sat down and educated on safe sex or warned that the road to drug addiction has no U-turns after a point. They already know this. They are smart, capable, articulate and tough. But at the end of the day, they are just that—children. Overconfident and confused at the same time.

"Don't write our names," say the Conti students, threatening one moment, pleading the next. "Our parents will find out and then we've had it." It is not as if the parents are ignorant, but whether they have the ability to handle sensitive issues involving their children is another story. The MMS scandal is a classic example. A Class XI boy from the Delhi Public School, one of the capital's most prominent, was arrested for allegedly forwarding to his friends a cell phone clip showing his girlfriend having oral sex with him. Within days the sex clip was available on computer screens across the country. But the

boy's parents shielded him and sent him to Nepal, initially refusing to either cooperate with the police or acknowledge their son's fault.

It is a stark illustration of how modern lifestyle has changed the parent-child relationship. Earlier, the biggest intervention by parents in the lives of their children was unquestioned discipline. Now, affluence has led to over-indulgence and discipline has been replaced by blind trust and buying of affection with latest gifts and gadgets. It has resulted in a generation of spoilt, well-to-do children flooded with expensive gadgets and hi-tech computers who are challenging the moral authority of parents like never before. "Children need parental presence, not presents. But what they get is too much freedom, and gifts to compensate for lack of time. They are no longer taught to delay gratification," says Rupa Murghai, counsellor at Delhi's Naval Public School.

In the past, childhood was an extended phase of life. Now children are growing up faster, reaching virtual adulthood before they are out of their teens, while parents, focused on their own social whirl, travel and symbols of affluence, have lost touch with their children. Many have little idea about what their children do after school hours. Says Subha Garimella, a Chennai school counsellor: "In many cases, parents lead a life alienated from their children's." A Delhi school clerk revealed that of the students who had paid fees to use the school bus in the past academic year, 30 per cent had boarded it only occasionally. The parents realised it only when they were slapped with a Rs 6,000 penalty at the end of the session for breaking the rule. Says Kusam L. Warikoo, principal, Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, Delhi: "There are instances where children host parties for their friends at home but don't allow the parents to enter their rooms."

That distancing from parents is due to judgmental and censorious attitude was the common refrain among students interviewed across the country by INDIA TODAY. "I don't like talking to my father," says Abraham, a Class X student from Mumbai. "All he does is order me about and tell me to study. He never sits down with me to listen to



**E**arlier boys smoked secretly but now school-girls are also doing it, besides trying drugs.

what I have to say." Adds Chandini, a Class IX student from Jaipur: "My mom is always preoccupied. She has no time for me." Chandini's boyfriend called her to his home and forced her to dance in the nude in front of five friends. The incident has left her greatly disturbed but she dare not confide in her parents.

It is surprising that in an age when sex is such a big issue, no real dialogues take place within families. In an Expressions study conducted by VIMHANS in 110 schools of Delhi and neighbouring cities in April-May 2004 among 1,560 boys and 1,040 girls in the 14-17 age group, 100 per cent Class VIII students said sex education was a must. As many as 85 per cent children said that parents must find time for discussion and health-related communication, while 78 per cent said they needed a non-judgmental person to discuss their personal lives. Murghai feels that contrary to the openness that parents boast of, their communication with children often gets locked in moralising and sermonising instead of acceptance. In many cases, says Warikoo, the parents don't know what to do. "They are almost afraid of cor-

recting their children," she says, adding that the school and parents seldom agree on the extent of freedom that should be given to children.

Most parents trust their children unquestioningly without the buffer of day-to-day guidance or discipline. As a result children often lead secret lives—spend on undesired things, bunk school for doubtful reasons, surf for porn at cyber cafes, fake marksheets, manipulate facts to enter adult pubs and furtively change into clothes they would not dare wear at home. "We carry a change and dress up as we want in five-star hotel toilets or wherever we find washrooms," says Ananya, a brazen 16-year-old from Delhi. The forbidden clothes include thongs, padded bras and micro-minis.

The moral nakedness is as revealing as the skimpy outfits. Words like

"normal", "no big deal", "cool" and "hot" come up so often in the context of booze, cigarettes, sex and porn that it is indicative of how morality and values are perceived differently by children as opposed to what most parents assume they have taught. The reinvention of school life may be largely an urban phenomenon, but its glimpses are seen all over India. In Patna, schoolchildren throng cyber cafes which have become notorious as sex cafes. Here, along with hired cabins to surf the Net, children are offered X-rated CDs. Interest in cyber cafes has replaced the keenness to visit science museums, pubs have replaced public gardens, oiled plaits have given way to gelled hair, old fashioned hand-holding has been taken over by unabashed kissing, petting, and in quite a few cases, "some kind of sex". Bata sandals, puri-bhaji in tiffin boxes,

Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh

## a mother at 14

**"It's not the MTV effect, but an extreme case of promiscuity in rural life."**

A 14-year-old government-school girl from a village near Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh is facing charges for attempt to murder. Last month, the Class VIII student was caught trying to kill her newborn baby by hitting his head against a wall. The infant was saved by a hospital employee. The girl's 16-year-old boyfriend was arrested for rape. It was rape only because both are under the legal age for having consensual sex. The fact is that the two had been having a secret affair for a year. "It's not the MTV effect, but an extreme case of promiscuity in rural life," says Kangra police chief Zahoor Zaidi.

While the girl is out on bail, her baby having died two weeks later, the boy is lodged in the juvenile home at Una. But with a legal battle and social stigma to deal with, the two are faced with an uncertain future. The parents and panchayat are not sure how to deal with the case, while the state's conservative people are tight-lipped with shock, viewing it as a downside of co-education. "If she had not tried to kill the infant and the media had not reported it, the village elders would have given the case a quiet burial by marrying the teenagers," says Zaidi.

—by Ramesh Vinayak



antaksharis and outdoor picnics are passe. It is all about dating, downloading, SMSing, swinging and spending.

That is what peer pressure is all about. Dating now begins as early as Class VII. "You are considered uncool if you don't have a boyfriend," says 15-year-old Jigisha from a suburban Mumbai school. But what does one do with a boyfriend in Class VII? "Hang out, go to parties, whatever. It is important to have one," is a common answer. "Petting and kissing is very usual, but I don't know how many have *poora* (full) sex," says Devyani, a 14-year-old Delhi schoolgirl who doesn't understand why people have a problem with children having sex.

Booze was always a big attraction for schoolchildren but now liquor parties are organised in bars and discos raking in a whole lot of other liberties. Parents usually find out only if someone gets sick or goes home reeking of alcohol. "Usually children feign ignorance when they are caught, alleging that someone might have spiked their drink," says Mumbai-based school counsellor Husna Vanjara. Dr S. Virudagirinadhan, a clinical neuro-psy-

**P**ubs, bars and discos, regarded as adult haunts, are being rented by students for parties.

chologist in Chennai, says that many students who come to him suffer from serious alcohol addiction. Prasad, a Class X student of a posh school in Adyar, Chennai, talks of six students who came drunk to school and misbehaved with girls. Safwa, a Class IX student from another school, says it is normal for the authorities to check students' bags for liquor bottles.

It is, however, the change in the choices of girls that are causing many tremors on Planet Childhood. In Mumbai, counsellors are getting used to 14-15-year-old girls who smoke.



guest column | Dr Jitendra Nagpal

# reclaiming the lost childhood

It is the parents who need to help children interpret their own lives and value others'



Children are the same but childhood has changed dramatically in India. It is over-hyped and marketed hugely but lacks the sure-footed guidance by adults, wherein parents need to help children interpret their lives in this world of excess. The latch-key adolescence syndrome, where children return to empty homes and have long periods of unattended free time, has led to more implications than we think. Busy, working mothers, breakdown of open and honest communication with parents, and the absence of sensible, real role models have led to a lot of unaddressed curiosity among children. But who sits down to give them the right answers? Parents must accept their share of the responsibility. They need to update themselves on what is happening in their children's lives instead of staying disconnected because of personal reasons.

Education is a holistic process and literacy is just one of its aspects. We must teach the children self-reliance, confidence and ability to plan for oneself and others. High-risk behaviours have seeped into their lives because they don't know what to do to define their self-esteem. Depression is common among them because we only extend self-worth if they score good marks. About 12 per cent children in this country suffer from some mental problem. There are no unstructured, skill-based programmes in schools to offer alternatives to academic achievements and to explore self-esteem beyond exam grades.

Morality must change in accordance with social and cultural changes. I am not saying we must regress, but there is a great need to adapt. One of them is to introduce sex education in schools. Not just the discussion on sex but helping children become comfortable with their bodies and teaching them the value of relationships. The media has been projecting the narcissistic, self-centred aspect of sex—as only a flesh experience. Children need help to understand that sex is also about building relationships and that it is relationships formed on the basis of shared sexuality that become important milestones in life.

Dropping out of school or repeating classes is increasing despite the children having become more capable and competitive. The fact is that they are living boiler-room lives. There is pressure from peers, society and the media but little help to interpret the information overload. As a 13-year-old asked me, "Adults have created 75 channels for me. So why are you calling me spoilt?" It is time sensitive parents and teachers intervened and started working towards provoking positive wellbeing in children instead of rapping them with disciplinary rods of disapproval every time they err.

*The writer is a psychiatrist specialising in child mental health at VIMHANS, Delhi.*



Photo illustration by ANJAN DAS

## IN THE OPINION OF...



**ANJALI SHAH**  
parent

"Behind every cell phone given to a child is a parent who gives in. If you give children the freedom they can't handle, then you must be ready to face the consequences," says the Mumbai-based mother of two.



**S. VIRUDAGIRINADHAN**  
neuro-psychologist

"Often parents are at a loss to deal with children. When a Class IX student became an alcohol addict and began demanding drinks at home, his mother had to concede to calm him down," says the practitioner from Chennai.



**SUBHA GARIMELLA**  
counsellor

"In most cases of adolescent alcoholism, the experiments start at home. But parents are in denial and schools brush off the incident like an aberration or ask the child to leave," says the public school educator from Chennai.



**KUSAM L. WARIKOO**  
school principal,

"Parents are constantly trying to be friends to their children. But children need parents, not friends. After all the sermonising if parents say, 'It's your life, do what you like', it confuses the children," says the Delhi school principal.



**MEENU BHARGAVA**  
counsellor

"In government schools, teachers rebuke or insult children for misbehaviour which leads to excessive rebellion and their poor socio-economic background leads to low self-esteem," says the government school counsellor from Delhi.



**SAIBAL GUPTA**  
social scientist

"Cyber cafes, which should ideally be used for educational purposes, are being grossly misused by children because of a dearth of socially acceptable meeting places for the adolescents," says Patna-based Gupta.

Doing hard drugs like cocaine or heroin may be restricted to a minority, but getting stoned with EraseX, the ink-erasing whitener, gets more nods. "Some pour the liquid on their sleeves and sniff it in school going all glazed-eyed," laughs 16-year-old Tarun from Gurgaon.

The twin realities of overconfidence on the outside and scary confusion on the inside define many schoolchildren. It is something society can no longer ignore as the malaise of spoilt, public schoolchildren. Government school students may not have access to fancy gizmos or camera phones but they have their own ways of testing boundaries. A few weeks ago, two Class VII children from a government school in Ghaziabad were caught coercing a Class II girl into oral sex. Meenu Bhargava, a senior government school counsellor at Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya, Delhi, agrees that the causes may be different but drug addiction, alcoholism, rebellion and sexual affairs are common among children in government schools too.

Studies validate these trends. A 2004 national survey on drug abuse in

# the most frequently offered excuses

“I didn’t even touch her. I only held her hand, that too after she asked me to.”

“I was not driving, only trying out someone’s new scooter.”

“I was surfing the Net for references for my science chapter when these nude pictures opened up.”

“OF COURSE I DIDN’T DRINK. SOMEONE MUST HAVE SPIKED IT WHEN I WAS NOT LOOKING.”

“I haven’t lost my mobile, just loaned it to a friend.”

“It’s not a drug. It’s a free pouch given to everyone with tickets for the disco.”

“A full body massage is not a waste of money. My cricket coach says it helps improve the game.”



**C** **yber cafes in Patna hire cabins for children to surf the Net for porn and also offer X-rated CDs.**

India by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) found that 9 per cent of alcohol users were introduced to it before 15 years of age, and 28 per cent between 16 and 20 years. Similarly, 11 per cent of the patients at drug treatment centres had been using cannabis before they were 15 years old as were 9-12 per cent who were introduced to opium and heroin. Chennai-based psychiatrist Dr M. Suresh Kumar, coordinator of UNESCO’s Rapid Assessment Survey on Drug Use in 2002 conducted among established drug users in 14 cities, says that the number of referrals of children below 18 years on drugs has increased significantly in the past five years.

Parents and teachers may shrug it off as media’s “habit” of selling bad news but Mumbai’s Anjali Shah, mother of two, says that behind every cell phone given to a child is a parent who gives in. “If you give children the freedom that they can’t handle, you

have to deal with the consequences,” she says. Adds Annie Koshi, principal of St Mary’s School, Delhi: “Children are reflecting the society. Before we create a big fuss about what children do secretly, why don’t adults ask this question of themselves?”

She also points out that children being treated on the basis of their marks is a matter of concern. “Behavioural liberty is accepted if the child is doing well academically, as if morality was a separate issue,” she says. Koshi’s remark may explain why the girl in the MMS clip initially defended herself saying she was a scholar and what she did in her “private life” was not the school’s business. Packed into the “what’s cool is hot” school life is fecklessness. More concerning than sex in the MMS case was the boy’s frivolous attitude towards his girlfriend. False intimacies and friendships for favours are the big worries.

Experts attribute the sexual stimulation to excessive exposure. Easy access to pornography hasn’t given children the maturity to cope with the emotional fluctuations that it may lead to. Two months ago, Ludhiana-based clinical psychologist Rajiv Gupta dealt with an 11-year-old patient who suffered from poor concentration despite a good academic record. His mother revealed that she had caught him and his 14-year-old brother watching a blue film at home.

What is seen as independence by children is mired in vulnerability and



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**lashing of wrists and depression are on the rise among children, say evaluations in schools.**

natural one, schools are grappling with extreme disciplinary measures. So much so that a Delhi school has even started alerting parents if children hug each other. "It is important to point out the difference between good touch and bad touch," says Warikoo defending the move. Koshi suggests that schools must help children deal with the dichotomy in society and parental attitudes through regular, value-based education.

Despite the disbelief and denial shrouding this story, most parents and teachers agree that the buck must stop somewhere. No longer can India duck under the tired excuses of "western influence". Almost everyone thinks that sex education must be made compulsory in schools. The Karnataka Association for Psychiatric Disabilities has launched a value education and mood management programme for 600 adolescents in rural and urban schools through five NGOs. VIMHANS in Delhi and NIMHANS in Bangalore have been conducting life-skills education programmes where teachers are trained to counsel students on psycho-social issues.

But the real outcome of these measures depends on whether adults can meet children half way instead of expecting them to obey unquestioningly. The growing up of parents and the education of teachers may become a part of the new order of things.

—with Ramesh Vinayak, Kimi Dangor, Radhika Giri, Stephen David, Sanjay Kumar Jha and Ryan Bradley

*The names of students have been changed to protect their identities and models have been used in the photo-illustrations.*

## Parents' Guide

Experts' advice on handling children

### DOs

- Before moralising, listen to what your children have to say. Always give them reasons for what you expect.
- Talk about sex like any other normal subject. Draw them out, address their curiosities and concerns.
- Tell them how high-risk behaviours can also bring the not so obvious risks of blackmail and bullying.
- Keep your eyes open for what they may not be telling you. Read more into body language and mood swings.

### DON'Ts

- Don't tell them not to have sex. Instead tell them that relationships need emotional and physical maturity.
- Don't pardon their misbehaviour if they get good marks. Intelligence is not a substitute for morality.
- Don't give in to their demands for gadgets, gizmos or clothes to cover up for your absence or lack of time.
- Don't trust them blindly every time. Consciously enable them to believe that trust springs from truth.

head-on collision between desires and reality. Which is why, says Delhi psychologist Arpita Anand, it is important to introduce a dialogue on the MMS incident. "It will force the people to move away from denial," she says. Otherwise one form of high-risk behaviour may lead to another. Teenage pregnancies and abortions are one of the attendant risks of premature intimacy (see box). According to WHO, 10 per cent of all abortions in India every year, or about five million a year, are among girls between 15 and 19 years of age. "At least half the women seeking abortions are adolescents and a disturbing number are below 15 years of age," writes development specialist Anita Anand, in an abortion assessment by Mumbai's Cehat organisation.

On the other hand, instances of depression, slashing of wrists and other self-destructive behaviours are climbing the charts in life skills evaluations in schools. "The stress tolerance quotient among children is getting lower by the day," says a Chandigarh psychologist. "The parents are oblivious to training the kids to deal with negative emotions," adds Gupta.

While people are realising that parenting is an acquired skill, not a