

Good touch, bad touch

Pooja Taparia's initiative empowers small children to understand sexual abuse and protect themselves

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A STRANGER to the special classes at Nanik English High School's primary section is sure to get befuddled by what the children learn. One can find six-year-old class-1 students listing private body parts of both genders without batting an eyelid and proclaiming in chorus they are bosses of their own bodies.

With the World Health Organization reporting that India has the world's largest number of sexually abused children - one in 10 is sexually abused at some point of time - such assertiveness and awareness at a young age is necessary. Arpan, an organization working to prevent child sexual abuse cases is providing vital education to primary school students through workshops to safeguard them from such heinous acts, and the six-year-olds at Nanik were doing exactly that.

Arpan empowers children between six and 10 years to understand sexual abuse and protect themselves. "Studies show that



sexual abuse of children is mostly reported between ages 10 and 14 but in our experience, we have seen a large number of cases of children between the ages of four and eight getting sexually abused, but the incidents getting reported much later.

help at hand

Children at that age do not have the vocabulary to convey about such incidents," said Pooja Taparia, founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Arpan. "We want to make children aware at a young age and provide them skills to prevent sexual abuse at any age," she said.

These skills are imparted to children from class I to V through the Personal Safety Education (PSE) programme comprising six classroom lessons of around 45



The PSE programme at Nanik High School in Thane

minutes each, followed by sessions with each child separately.

The programme is inspired by a concept shared by Lois Engelbrecht, a social worker with decades of experience in South East Asia and a prolific author on the subject, who came to India to help Arpan with the training.

The core of PSE is about teaching children three basic rules: it is

never right for someone to touch, look or talk about your private body parts or ask you to do the same with theirs, you should say no assertively if someone touches your private parts and should get away from the situation, and it is important to share any incident with a trusted adult.

The groundwork is building self-esteem in children by telling

them each is special and teaching them to appreciate their own bodies. They are taught to recognize and differentiate between emotions like anger, happiness, sadness, confusion and embarrassment through age-appropriate examples and link them to touch. "The idea is that emotions help one decide whether a touch is safe or unsafe. For instance, if your

mother hugs you, you feel happy and so it is a safe touch but if someone hits you in a fight, you get angry so it is an unsafe touch," said Sakshi Raje Shirke, PSE coordinator, primary section, at Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Vidyalaya (DSRV), Borivali. This gives the child the ability to comprehend his or her feelings when faced with a likely sexual abuse, so that the three rules taught can come in handy.

For Taparia, Arpan, 'offering' in Hindi, began as a small activity in 2003 out of her love of community service. In September 2004 she decided to take up the cause of child sexual abuse. "I did not know anything about the trauma of child sexual abuse in adult life until I saw Mahesh Dattani's play '30 Days of September'. I was struck by it. My research showed that few organizations in India work for this cause. I vowed to do something about it," said Taparia.

Two years later, in June 2006, Arpan in its present form was born, starting off with awareness talks, counselling and trauma therapy for adults who had gone through child sexual abuse.

Giving up her career as a graphic designer, Taparia took up Arpan full time, setting it up as a trust in 2008. The same year, they began the PSE programme in schools and have since covered around 8,000 children directly. The aim is to target an additional

5,000 this year. Through schools alone, Arpan has recorded 110 cases of sexual abuse and 100 cases of inappropriate touching.

In some schools like DSRV, Borivali, PSE has become part of the curriculum, and is in its fifth year. "The PSE module started as a pilot project with our school. Initially, there was apprehension among parents. In the first session, parents of only 20 out of around 140 children attended. Many a time, I've kept the curriculum aside and sat down with parents to explain the importance of such education. At the end of the day, it is rewarding to see such awareness among children," said Sulekha Bandhu, headmistress of the DSRV primary section.

Other administrators, like headmistress of RP Mangla Hindi Primary School Jaswinder Matta, are shocked by the kind of cases that have emerged in her school. "Society is very narrow-minded to open children to such learning. Parents and teachers are shy to address these issues. But this education is very important and more awareness and intervention, which modules like this are able to bring, is necessary," she said.

For Taparia, who manages Arpan mostly through funds and grants, the biggest challenge is not money but keeping her team of 28, including seven counsellors and around 14 trainers and coordinators motivated.

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