

TEACH THEM YOUNG

Lakshmi Kumar, the visionary director of The Orchid School, Pune, believes we need to teach our young ones the value of respect in a relationship to ensure an equal society.

As told to Ritu Goyal Harish



While we celebrate womanhood, motherhood and worship all forms of life in our civilisation, we have ritualised it and forgotten the real messages. Our national pride is increasingly expressed more in the rhetoric and less in action.

We, as adults, need to examine the way we bring up our daughters and sons. Abusive behaviour has no class, caste or regional borders. It starts from home. Our children watch our attitude and behaviour as we perpetuate biases. They get confusing signals from our homes (can't have sex before marriage), the media (the ideal woman is a sexual object before marriage and a wife, mother after) and films (when girls say No they actually mean Yes).

We help children question the sexualisation of women in ads, and make them understand that in reality, girls won't swoon over you if you wear VIP underwear.

We want our girls to "zip up" their blouses and "pull down" their skirts and make no effort to teach our boys to control what happens between their ears and between their thighs. It is very easy to be dragged into polarised discussions of boys versus girls. But, if we want real change, we have to adopt a holistic, humanistic approach.

My school begins the process of sensitisation in Class 8 with our Media Literacy programme; how the media objectifies and sexualises a woman's body and uses it in advertisements. We help children question this and understand that in reality, girls won't

swoon over you if you wear VIP underwear.

The second session deals with teaching our young minds to say 'No' – to drugs and alcohol to start with. In India, break-ups are always nasty, be it a relationship or marriage. We victimise, demonise, and castigate the other, because we have not been taught to respect.

How about teaching both boys and girls the idea of respect in a relationship?

In the 9th, with the Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program, we speak about gender stereotypes; safety, risk, respect and responsibility to partners in relationships;

abuse, conflicts, ownership in relationships and more. This session is followed with a visit to SOFOSH (an adoption centre) where children understand that girls (some as young as 13 or 14 years old) from educated families also abandon their unwanted babies. SOFOSH personnel speak to them about the aftermath of being irresponsible sexually.

We talk openly and freely but don't make it clinical or pornographic. We encourage children to go home and talk to their parents. Families need to discard the silence around topics of relationship and intimacy. A few parents expressed shock that we are teaching matters not very necessary for this age group. However, I fear that no one will talk to them after they leave school. We must educate them to tread the right path at an age when they are still willing to emulate. ■