

Original Research Article

Services provided by the adolescent health friendly clinics in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India: an overview

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescence is a transitional phase of physical and psychological development and is characterized by emotional turmoil, anxiety, increase in risk taking behaviour and seeking comfort in peers rather than parents. Taking into account these factors, government has started certain programmes for welfare of adolescent youth, and here we aim to study various services provided to the adolescents, under adolescent health friendly clinic in Himachal which are started under National adolescent health programme.

Methods: Adolescent data is obtained from public domain about the services and facilities provided to the adolescent girls and boys at various adolescent health friendly clinic established in various districts of Himachal Pradesh. The data is taken from January 2021 to December 2023 for 2 years.

Results: In total of 103 adolescent health friendly clinic, 44% of adolescent received clinical services, 47% of adolescent received counselling services and 9% of the adolescent received referral to other departments to seek specialized care.

Conclusions: During adolescence, individuals have unique health and rights requirements and with access to appropriate experiences and rights, individuals can pave the way for a brighter future and contribute significantly to the strength of their nation.

Keywords: Adolescent health, Counselling, Clinical services, Referral

INTRODUCTION

The stage of life called adolescence, spanning from ages 10 to 19, bridges childhood and adulthood. It holds significant importance in human development, serving as a pivotal time to lay the foundation for enduring health. During adolescence, individuals experience rapid growth across physical, cognitive, and psychological domains, influencing their emotions, thoughts, decision-making, and interactions with the world around them.¹ The transition involving spending increased time with peers

and reduced time with parents, along with a growing sense of autonomy, typically unfolds simultaneously. These shifts in behavior occur within the context of developmental changes influenced by various internal and external environmental factors, which both initiate and reinforce these behaviors.² While the extent of risk-taking behavior may vary across different age groups, adolescents and young adults typically exhibit a higher propensity for engaging in risky behaviors compared to adults. These behaviors may include binge drinking, smoking, involvement in casual sexual encounters,

participation in violent or criminal activities, and susceptibility to catastrophic or fatal accidents.³ During adolescence, the brain areas responsible for impulse control and motivation are still undergoing development. This developmental stage renders adolescents more vulnerable to developing addictions to substances like nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs compared to individuals in other age groups.⁴

For enhancing the health and well-being of the nation's youth population, the Government of India has demonstrated its commitment by bolstering its programs for adolescents. This commitment was initially evidenced through the launch of the Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health Strategy (ARSH) in 2005. Subsequently, in 2014, the government further reinforced its efforts with the introduction of the National Adolescent Health Programme.⁵ The goal was to extend its reach to 253 million adolescents across various demographics, including male and female, rural and urban, married and unmarried, in and out of school, with particular attention given to marginalized and underserved groups. It marks an expansion of the scope of adolescent health programs in India, which previously focused primarily on sexual and reproductive health. Now, the initiative encompasses a broader range of health issues, including non-communicable diseases, mental health, substance abuse, injuries and violence (including gender-based violence), and nutrition.⁶

Approximately 18.6% of Himachal Pradesh's population falls within the age range of 10 to 19 years.⁷ Various programmes and initiatives which are running for the welfare of adolescent under National adolescent health programme are weekly iron and folic supplementation programme, menstrual hygiene programme (MHP), peer Education (Constitution of Adolescent Friendly Club Meetings), AHFC, adolescent Health and Wellness Day (AH&WD), De-Addiction Services and School Health and Wellness Programme.⁶

AHFC provides clinical, counseling, and referral services addressing various health concerns such as mental health issues, substance misuse, injuries, violence, non-communicable diseases, and nutrition across different levels of medical facilities. In total, the State has designated 103 institutions as AHFCs, strategically located in community health centers, district hospitals, zonal hospitals, and medical colleges.

Situated in the northwest Himalayan region, the hilly state of Himachal Pradesh is a constituent of the Union of India. Renowned for its rich biodiversity, the state spans a total area of 55673 km² and is home to a population of 68,56,609. Himachal Pradesh boasts an abundance of fragrant and medicinal plant varieties. Geographically, it shares borders with Punjab to the west, Haryana to the southwest, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh to the south, and the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh to the north. Additionally, it shares an

international border with Tibet, an autonomous region of China.⁸ Heavy inflow of tourist, hard geographical terrain, increased influence of western culture, increased influence of media, unemployment is some of the reasons of increasing issues among the adolescent of Himachal Pradesh.

The current study aimed to throw a light on the functioning of adolescent health friendly clinic and seeks to shed light on key aspects of adolescent well-being, offering insights that can inform effective interventions and policy improvements.

METHODS

This is a descriptive study done in Himachal Pradesh covering all the 12 districts and it aims to study the health issues prevailing among the youth of Himachal Pradesh and services which are being provided to them under adolescent health friendly clinic which is a unique initiative of Himachal Pradesh under National adolescent health programme. The data was maintained yearly from January 2021 to December 2023. All the adolescents who willingly participated (volunteer sampling) in the study were included. Adolescent health data, obtained from public domain is utilized to examine the prevalence of issues among adolescents and evaluate the effectiveness of various services provided to them. The data was maintained in a Microsoft Excel

The data consisted of female and male adolescents, divided in 2 age groups, which are 10-14 years and 15-19 years and number of adolescents in each group receiving services at Adolescent health friendly clinic (AFHCs) like Total no. of clients registered, clients receiving clinical services out of the registered and clients receiving counselling services etc. during the reporting period were captured.

Ethical permission was not needed as the data was identified from public domain.

RESULTS

Number and functioning of AFHCs

Adolescent health friendly clinic was initially started at tertiary and secondary level of healthcare having adequate infrastructure but once these facilities become famous these are to be extended to Health and wellness centers. As of now, there are 103 Adolescent health friendly clinic which are present in the state in different districts, with maximum number at District Kangra and minimum number of AFHCs at District Lahaul Spiti (Figure 1). These are established at medical college, zonal hospital, district hospital and community health center.

Adolescent health friendly clinic is equipped to provide healthcare facilities to the adolescent. There is a team of

medical officer, Counsellor, nurse, lab technician, pharmacist and paramedic staff at the kendra to attend to the patients. IEC material is prepared and kept in the room. There are also training sessions for de-addiction and mental health. Clinical, counselling and referral services are provided here. Online reporting is done for the services. There is also convergence with other departments as education department, NGOs etc. Awareness is also spread through celebrating different days at schools, Anganwadi's and health centers. Adolescent health friendly clinics arrange diverse outreach camps in schools, panchayats, youth clubs, and colleges. These camps encompass activities such as raising awareness and providing counseling on nutrition, puberty-related concerns, pre-marital counseling, sexual health, contraceptive use, substance abuse prevention, promoting healthy lifestyles, addressing reproductive and sexually transmitted infections (RTI/STI/HIV), as well as tackling various mental health issues.

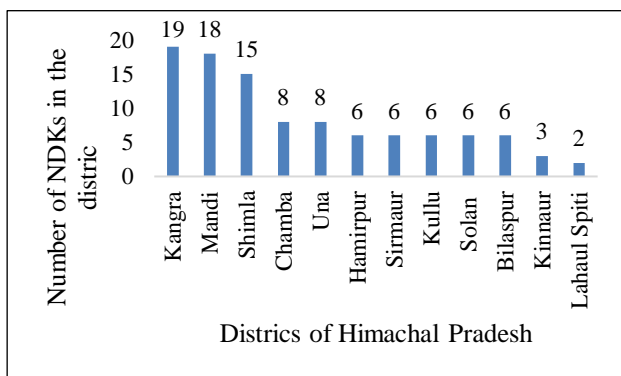


Figure 1: Number of adolescent health friendly clinic in different districts of Himachal Pradesh.

AFHCs services

Out of the total number of adolescents registered during reporting period, 46.8% were boys and 53.2% were girls. Out of the total number of registered clients during reporting period, the total number of clients who received clinical services were 78.59% in which 46.5% were boys and 53.5% were girls. The total number of clients who received counselling services out of total no. of registered clients during reporting period were 83.58% among which 46.7% were boys and 53.3% were girl (Figure 2).

Clinical services in AFHCs

Adolescent health friendly clinics offer a comprehensive array of clinical services aimed at addressing various health concerns among adolescents. These encompass a diverse range of issues, including but not limited to skin diseases, menstrual health management, the diagnosis and treatment of reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), dermatological conditions, and antenatal care (ANC) for expectant mothers (Figure 3).

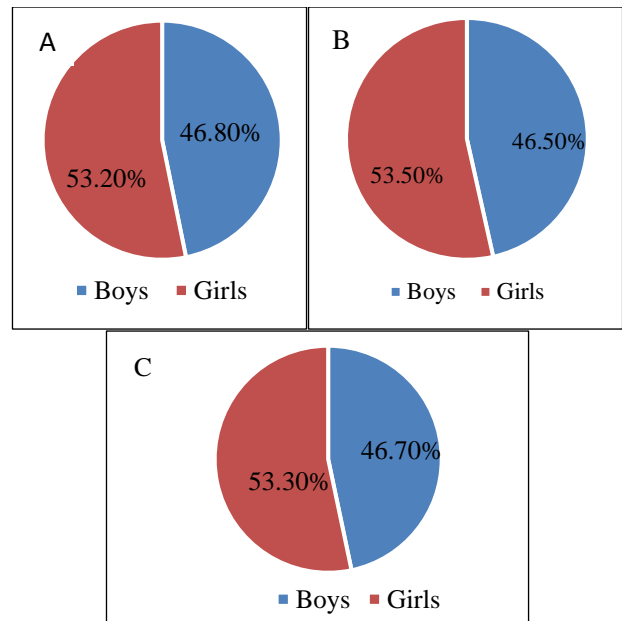


Figure 2: Demographics of the adolescents participating in the study. A) Adolescents registered, B) Adolescents receiving clinical services out of registered, C) Adolescents receiving counselling services out of registered.

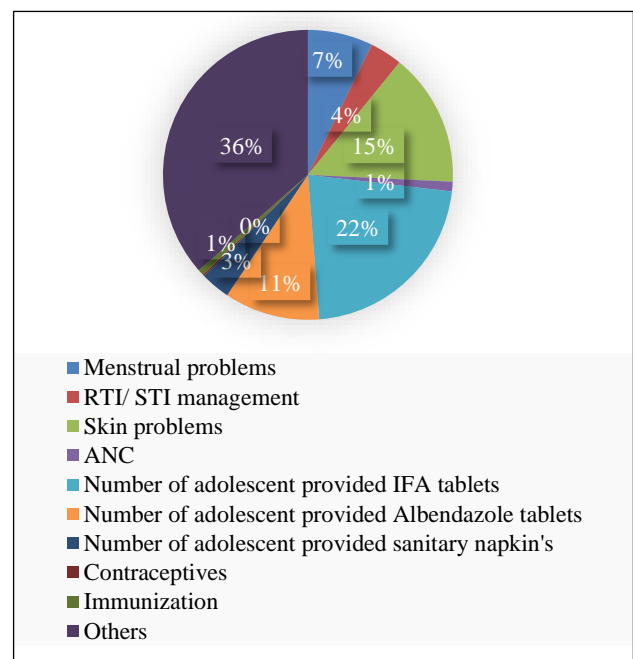


Figure 3: Percentage of different types of clinical services out of total clinical services provided to the adolescents.

In addition to these vital services, Adolescent health friendly clinic also prioritize the provision of essential healthcare interventions for adolescents, such as the distribution of iron and folic acid (IFA) tablets to support optimal nutritional status and the administration of albendazole tablets to combat parasitic infections. These

initiatives contribute significantly to the holistic well-being of adolescents and women, ensuring they receive the necessary medical attention and support to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. Through these multifaceted clinical services, Adolescent health friendly clinic play a crucial role in promoting community health and empowering individuals to take charge of their reproductive and general health.

Counselling services

At adolescent health friendly clinic, counseling services are integral components of the holistic healthcare approach offered to individuals, particularly focusing on adolescents and women. These counseling sessions cover a wide spectrum of topics essential for maintaining overall well-being and promoting healthy lifestyles.

Nutritional counseling sessions are conducted to educate individuals about the importance of balanced diets and proper nutritional intake, fostering habits that support optimal health and growth. Furthermore, specialized counseling is available for addressing skin concerns, offering guidance on skincare routines and management strategies for various dermatological issues. When it comes to sexual health, counselors play a crucial role in offering invaluable support and information about contraceptive choices, enabling individuals to make well-informed decisions about their reproductive health. Additionally, they provide guidance on preventing, diagnosing, and managing reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), fostering a culture of sexual health awareness and accountability. Counselling sessions at Adolescent health friendly clinic also tackle substance abuse issues, offering support and interventions to individuals struggling with addiction.

Moreover, mental health counseling services are provided, addressing concerns such as stress, anxiety, depression, and other psychological challenges, thereby promoting emotional well-being and resilience. Specifically tailored counselling sessions are offered to adolescent girls, focusing on addressing unique needs and challenges they may face. These sessions cover topics such as menstrual health management, providing essential information and support to navigate this crucial aspect of reproductive health. Additionally, counseling is available regarding pre-marital concerns and abortion, ensuring access to non-judgmental guidance and support during critical life decisions.

Through comprehensive counseling services, Adolescent health friendly clinic play a pivotal role in empowering individuals to take control of their health and well-being, fostering healthier communities and promoting informed decision-making regarding various aspects of personal and reproductive health. Figure 4 highlights the various counselling services provided to the adolescents. Highest counselling is provided regarding the nutrition followed

by counselling regarding skin diseases and then menstrual problems followed by the rest.

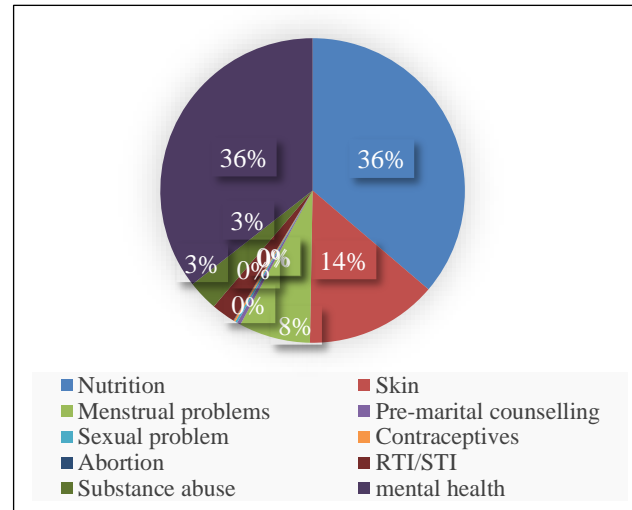


Figure 4: Percentage of different types of counselling services out of total counselling services provided to the adolescents.

Referral services

At Adolescent health friendly clinic, a robust system of referral services is in place to ensure individuals receive comprehensive and specialized care. These referral services encompass a wide range of medical specialties and facilities, facilitating access to high-quality healthcare resources within the community and beyond. Integrated Counseling and Testing Centers (ICTCs) are pivotal referral destinations for individuals seeking HIV testing and counseling services, providing confidential and supportive environments for HIV/AIDS screening and management. Suraksha/RTI/STI clinics play a crucial role in addressing reproductive health concerns, offering diagnosis, treatment, and counseling for reproductive tract infections (RTI) and sexually transmitted infections (STI), thereby promoting sexual health and preventing the spread of communicable diseases. Besides this, Skin OPD is for individuals seeking specialized care for dermatological conditions, offering expert diagnosis and treatment for various skin ailments and Obstetrics and Gynecology department for management of gynecological conditions. Facilities for Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) are available to ensure safe and legal termination of pregnancies when indicated, with access to counseling and appropriate medical procedures. Psychiatric services are offered to address mental health concerns, providing assessment, counseling, and psychiatric interventions to support individuals facing psychological challenges. Additionally, Adolescent health friendly clinic facilitate referrals to other specialty departments as needed, ensuring access to a wide spectrum of medical services to meet diverse healthcare needs effectively.

Figure 5 shows percentage of adolescents who are referred to other departments to seek treatment, thus availing referral services. Excluding others, maximum cases were referred to the skin OPD and the ICTC (Integrated counselling and testing Centre) where counselling regarding HIV is provided and also provides testing facilities. Through these referral services, Adolescent health friendly clinic play a pivotal role in coordinating care, promoting timely access to specialized medical expertise, and facilitating comprehensive healthcare delivery within the community.

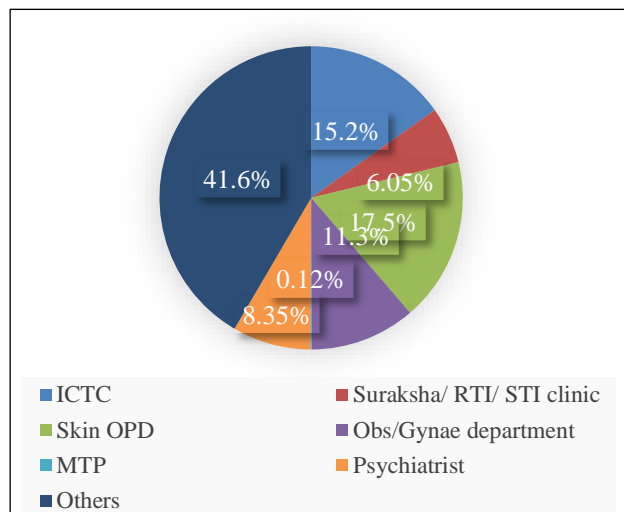


Figure 5: Percentage of adolescents out of total referred adolescents who were referred to particular departments (2021-2023).

DISCUSSION

Nourishing minds: empowering adolescents through AFHC

Adolescent health friendly clinics are definitely a very successful way to address the issues prevalent among the adolescents. These are known by different names like Nayi Disha Kendras in Himachal Pradesh, Maitri clinics in Maharashtra etc. The main issues of adolescents are various mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal thoughts, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, issues related to sexual health including unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unhealthy eating habits, such as excessive dieting, overeating, or engaging in restrictive behaviors which can lead to eating disorders like anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, or binge-eating disorder, obesity, violence and injury including bullying, dating violence, and physical fights, sexual and gender identity which can lead to discrimination, stigma, and mental health challenges, peer pressure and risky behavior such as smoking, substance use, and unsafe sexual practices due to peer pressure, bullying and cyberbullying.⁹

Addressing adolescent nutritional disparities

In the least developed countries, the prevalence of adolescent underweight is 22 percent.¹⁰ According to adolescent factsheet by NHM Himachal and NFHS 5, approximately 53.2% of girls are anemic, 39.7% girls are thin, 4.9% girls are obese in contrast to boys in which 22.1% of boys are anemic, 33.6% boys are thin and 6.4% boys are obese.⁷ In the current study, nutritional counselling is provided to 36% of adolescents out of total counselling services in these kendras by a qualified medical practitioner as well as during outreach sessions which are organized in schools, colleges, anganwadis and other places. By offering nutritional counseling both within the centers and through outreach sessions, a comprehensive approach to addressing nutritional issues and promoting wellness would be achieved, thereby contributing to better health outcomes for individuals and communities.

Tackling the mental health burden of the state

The global burden of adolescent psychiatric issues is significant, with an estimated 10-20% affected by mental health conditions. However, these issues often go underdiagnosed and undertreated. Various factors contribute to this, including limited awareness or understanding of mental health among healthcare providers and the stigma associated with seeking help, which can lead to signs of poor mental health being overlooked.¹¹ In a study conducted to assess the awareness regarding mental illnesses among adolescents in selected school of Shimla district (2018), Manta et al stated that 2.2% adolescents had good knowledge, 41.1% adolescents had average knowledge and 56.7% adolescents had poor awareness regarding mental illness.¹² Also, in a report on adolescent and youth health survey in Himachal Pradesh, it was emphasized that the current prevalence of depression among children and adolescents in community-based studies stands at 6.94%.¹³ In our study, 36% of adolescents were provided with mental health counselling out of total counselling services and 8.35% of adolescents were referred to psychiatry departments out of total referrals. Counsellors play a vital role in listening to adolescents, understanding their challenges, and providing appropriate solutions or interventions to help them cope with their problems effectively. Furthermore, during outreach visits to schools, colleges, Anganwadi's, and other community settings, raising awareness about mental health is essential. Educating adolescents about mental health issues, destigmatizing seeking help for mental health concerns, and providing information about available support services can encourage early intervention and promote mental well-being among adolescents. By integrating mental health support services into these centres and outreach programs, adolescents can access the necessary support and resources to address their mental health concerns, ultimately fostering healthier and more resilient communities.

Promoting awareness and education on menstrual hygiene

A descriptive study by Mahajan et al to assess the knowledge and practice regarding menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls of Government School of Shimla, in Himachal Pradesh, it was determined that 71% of girls had insufficient knowledge about menstrual hygiene, while only 29% possessed adequate knowledge on the subject.¹⁴ In a study conducted by Panda et al on impact of information, education and communication on adolescent reproductive health, teenagers are not well informed about many facets of reproductive health and essential life processes.¹⁵ Teenage females have a great desire for frank information that can allay their worries and anxieties and Adolescent health friendly clinic are providing a platform for them to talk openly about their concerns regarding reproductive health, menstrual issues, STI/RTI and other concerns that they hesitate to talk to about with anyone else. In the current study, 3% girls were provided counselling regarding menstrual hygiene out of the total counselling services and 11.3% of referrals were to gynaecology department out of total referrals.

Banandur et al in a study focusing on health-related behaviours and morbidity, with implications for adolescent and youth health programs in India, it was found that the top five health-related issues among young people in HP (Himachal Pradesh) were underweight (44.39%), anxiety (15.54%), unintentional accidents (14.72%), violence (8.19%), and the risk of mobile phone addiction (19.62%).¹⁶ These results are inconsistent with our data findings which shows that maximum counselling is done for nutrition cases followed by mental health issues. Addressing these concerns, solutions such as nutrition education, the implementation of mental health awareness campaigns, and the establishment of school-based counselling services to support adolescents experiencing anxiety are proposed. Additionally, training healthcare providers to identify and address mental health issues in young individuals, educating on conflict resolution and gender equality, and offering counselling services for individuals dealing with mobile phone addiction are recommended strategies. These solutions are facilitated through the services provided by adolescent health friendly clinic.

Empowering adolescents to kick the habit of smoking and substance use

Adolescents frequently engage in the consumption of cannabis, alcohol, and tobacco.¹⁷ Globally, approximately 13.8 million youths, equivalent to 5.6% of school-going adolescents, have reported using cannabis.¹⁸ On average, adolescents consume about six liters of pure alcohol per year, indicating significant levels of alcohol intake.¹⁹ According to a report by Department of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2019 there were total 2331 cases registered under various drugs as opium, cannabis,

heroin etc in 2015-16, 3417 cases in 2017-18 and 3533 cases in 2018-19. To counter this the deaddiction centres under AFHCs are opened offering specialized support and treatment for adolescents struggling with substance abuse.

Ensuring accessibility, privacy and information dissemination: features of AFHCs for adolescent health and well-being

To raise awareness about the available services within the community and making it easier for individuals to access healthcare resources, there are signboards which are installed outside the AFHCs which mentions list of services as well as ensures that privacy is maintained in the center. Privacy is maintained by availability of a separate room and in case of non-availability, room has been sub-divided to create space for AFHC. A separate waiting area is also available in some facilities and there is availability of clean drinking water and toilets in the centre. Curtains are also available to ensure proper privacy of the adolescent. IEC material on adolescent health, anemia, deaddiction, menstrual hygiene, antenatal care is also present in the clinics. Besides this, instruments like weighing machine, BP apparatus, stethoscope, thermometer etc. are also there. Package of services include BMI screening, hemoglobin testing, pregnancy testing kits etc. Registers are also maintained for record keeping. A study on the challenges and opportunities of National adolescent health programme in districts of Marathwada, it was found that adolescents cannot utilize the public health facility/AFHC because they have fear of breach of confidentiality.²⁰ Most of them are not aware about their illness and where to go for treatment. Most of the adolescents are interested in getting information about their health and concerns. This problem is solved in this new initiative of Himachal Pradesh where privacy to the adolescent is maintained and board outside the facility where AFHCs is located and also a board with list of services is displayed.

This study has few limitations. This initiative represents a positive stride toward creating a more supportive environment for adolescents. However, significant obstacles hinder its progress, including the absence of dedicated spaces, insufficient infrastructure, unavailability of separate rooms or curtains, and a shortage of personnel. In certain areas, adolescents may feel reluctant to utilize the facility, particularly if it lacks privacy or is not discreetly located. Moreover, some adolescents may feel uncomfortable seeking assistance from counsellors of the opposite gender. Additionally, the lack of parental support acts as a deterrent for adolescents seeking medical care and counselling services. Furthermore, conversations about mental health continue to be stigmatized, contributing to the challenges faced in addressing adolescent well-being.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent age comes with a lot of challenges in terms of physical, mental, and social dimensions. By addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by adolescents, we can not only improve their immediate well-being but also set the stage for healthier and more productive adult lives. From promoting healthy lifestyles to ensuring access to comprehensive healthcare services and rights, there are numerous avenues for intervention and advocacy. Furthermore, it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of various factors influencing adolescent health, including socioeconomic status, education, family dynamics, and cultural norms. By prioritizing adolescent health research and policy initiatives, we can create a brighter and healthier future for them.

Recommendations

To further enhance the effectiveness of Adolescent health friendly clinic in addressing adolescent health needs, several additional measures can be implemented. Firstly, where dedicated spaces are lacking, establishing private counselling rooms within facilities ensures trust and confidentiality for adolescents seeking support. Introducing gender-sensitive approaches to service delivery and recruiting personnel from diverse backgrounds can better cater to the needs of all genders. Separate counselling sessions for male and female adolescents can address concerns about privacy and comfort. Engaging parents, guardians, and community leaders in discussions about the benefits of AHFCs and encouraging their support for adolescents seeking medical care and counselling services is crucial. Implementing stigma reduction strategies to promote open dialogue and acceptance of mental health issues within the community is also necessary. Developing virtual counselling platforms accessible via smartphones or computers allows adolescents to seek confidential support remotely. Additionally, introducing mobile health units equipped with facilities tailored to adolescent needs, such as comfortable seating areas and privacy partitions for counselling sessions, can improve access to services in remote areas. Adolescent feedback form might be included to gather valuable insights directly from adolescents themselves, enabling tailored interventions and improvements in various programs and services aimed at youth.

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