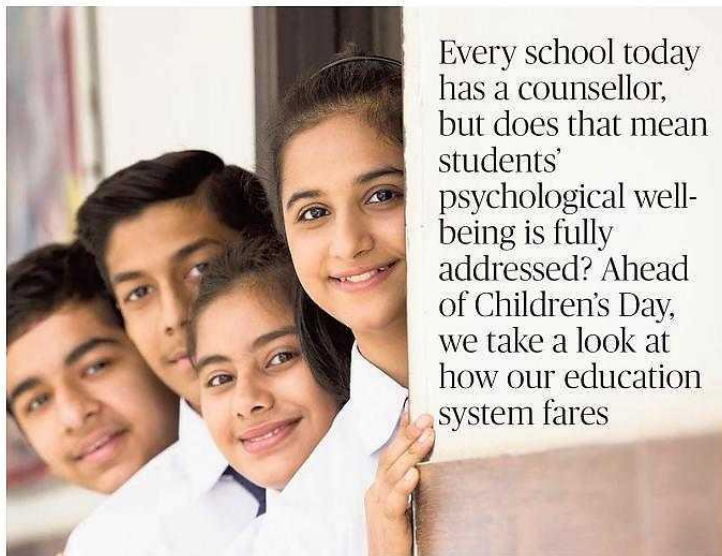


New approach (Below) Some schools offer music therapy along with counselling ■ GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



Every school today has a counsellor, but does that mean students' psychological well-being is fully addressed? Ahead of Children's Day, we take a look at how our education system fares

old Nidhi* from Dehradun, she laughs out loud, dismissing the idea with a "Come on, you know better!"

A one-on-one counselling session has a guarantee of confidentiality, but when it comes to the overall atmosphere of schools, there is a sea of difference between what the curriculum guidelines say and what the management as well as students are open to discussing. Especially, when it comes to sexual relations and orientation.

Even in metros like Delhi and Mumbai, where things are marginally better, says Aachal, "Going up to the parent body, and telling them that their child is not heterosexual... that's not a point that we have reached so far." Strangely enough, parents may be ready to accept someone they know is queer, she points out, but still are not ready to ask their own children.

Sex education has not yet gone beyond teaching about bodily functions to a conversation around the emotional consequences of being sexually active. "Some schools fear that discussing these matters will put 'wrong' ideas into their heads, and believe it is better to not address it at all," says Sneha. "We must answer children's questions, whatever their age. Just explain it in terms they will understand."

Education boards such as CBSE, ICSE, IB and IGCSE have their own guidelines regarding mental health of students for schools affiliated to them; each mandates the presence of a counsellor. Similarly, each State too has its own policy – the Tamil Nadu Government's School Education Department Policy note for 2018-2019, had a special section for guidance and psychological counselling for students. Here, for the first time, they introduced a state-wide helpline (14417) for students. Now, schools can either merely stick to the bare bones of the guidelines, or integrate them into a structured weekly curriculum, for a more holistic education.

"We do have counselling periods occasionally, as substitution if any other teacher is absent. That too is rare because other teachers want to take that period for their subjects," says Nidhi. She and her friends however, use the counselling sessions to catch up on other work. "We find one-on-one counselling very useful, but in a session with the whole class, most students are too proud to admit their vulnerabilities. So we find these sessions boring, they tell us things we know already." But doesn't it help talking about things like exam stress? "Honestly, with board exams around the corner, the best they could do to relieve stress is to give us a free period!" she quips.

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:: SWETA AKUNDI

It is part of Chennai-based psychologist Sneha George's work to conduct workshops in schools, on dealing with exam stress, bullying, interpersonal relationships, among others. In her time doing so, she has been in touch with many teachers and school counsellors. Their unofficial conversations threw up one recurring observation. "I noticed that some schools are not open to even the concept of a teenage student being in a relationship, let alone the fallout from it. The management's attitude was like, if you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist," she says.

Still, the focus we place on our children's mental health has come a long way. From being virtually non-existent in the 1990s, to making a school counsellor available for those who need it in the 2000s, to now regular counselling sessions for the entire class. Recently in Mumbai, 17 schools took part in a two-day inter-school mental health festival, called, 'The Happy Place'. It was organised by Mpower, in collaboration with Aditya Birla World Academy.

So far, so good

Aachal Jain, counsellor at Aditya Birla World Academy, explains how they have weekly interactions with every class to talk about their emotional and mental well-being. "More and more we talk about anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Even topics that we swept under the carpet before, like self harm, are now being discussed openly," she says.

Another subject that crops up a lot is the impact of social media on teenagers. "We have sessions to help the children disengage their actual selves from their social media version." In fact, the

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mechanisms," she says.

Some schools look toward alternative methods of therapies, along with counselling. Veena Murthy, principal of Delhi School of Excellence in Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, explains why her school offers music therapy. "The school counsellor can speak to the children and their parents at length, but in most cases, the therapy that they suggest has to be done outside of school, which we have no way of tracking," she says.

That is how the concept of music therapy emerged, designed by the counsellor and the music teacher. "We ask the students to go to the music room when they need to speak to someone. There, the music teacher plays an instrument, either drums, cymbals, the tabla or the harmonium. The sounds and vibrations created tickle the child's emotions and relax him, so he can speak more freely," she says.

Where we still lack

"Would you be okay talking about your sexual orientation in your school?" When the question is posed to 17-year-

dialogue around mental health has become so prominent that Aachal is worried children will get lost in the social media din. "It becomes all the more important now to provide healthy coping