

ADOLESCENT HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

in nursing and midwifery education



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Adolescent Health and Development in Nursing and Midwifery Education

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Summary

One in five people in the world today are adolescents between 10 and 19 years of age, and 85% of adolescents live in developing countries. Throughout the world, adolescence is considered to be a time of relative health and, as a result, a wide range of adolescent health issues is being neglected. In response to this need, the World Health Organization (WHO) departments of Child and Adolescent Health and Development (CAH) and Human Resources for Health (HRH) embarked on an initiative to focus on adolescent health and development by strengthening the educational preparation of nurses and midwives. Nurses and midwives are in a unique position by virtue of their education, numbers, and diversity of practice arenas to contribute to promoting the highest attainable standard of health among adolescents. Preparing providers to meet adolescents' health needs is a challenge requiring planned educational experiences within the nursing and midwifery curriculum. Integrating adolescent health and development into pre-service nursing and midwifery curricula provides the background for identifying core competencies and for the integration of essential content into curricula. This background paper and accompanying tools provide the foundation for the work of a global partnership of WHO Collaborating Centres to achieve the aims of this vital initiative.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) is committed to global cooperation to achieve health goals. The departments of Child and Adolescent Health and Development (CAH) and Human Resources for Health (HRH) within WHO have initiated a joint venture to focus on adolescent health and development by strengthening the educational preparation of nurses and midwives. “Nursing and nurses have a long history of international collaboration to improve the health of people” (McElmurry, Kim & Al Gasseer, 2000, p. 232). This shared commitment to health and collaboration has underpinned the development of this working document for integrating adolescent health and development into pre-service nursing and midwifery curricula. While this project’s primary focus is on developing tools for integrating adolescent health and development content into nursing and midwifery curricula, the secondary aim is to adapt these tools so that they can be used generically to integrate any content area into the curricula.

Adolescents comprise a significant part of today’s population: one in five persons is an adolescent aged 10–19 years, with 85% of adolescents living in developing countries. In some developing countries, adolescents constitute over half of the population (WHO, 2000c). In all countries, adolescents represent the future of families, communities and nations. As citizens of society they benefit from universal human rights that aim to protect and promote freedom and human dignity, which are pre-requisites for health. In the context of health and human rights, the international community has made a commitment to foster an enabling environment that best secures the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health by all (WHO, 2002).

Throughout the world, adolescence is considered to be a time of relative health and, as such, is not viewed as a priority. “Too often in the past, public policy has either ignored adolescents or focused on them only when they behave in ways that trouble their elders” (PAHO, 1998, p. 4). This problem-oriented perspective has perpetuated a narrow view of adolescent health as a subject that “has until very recently been a neglected segment of human life” (EMRO, 1997). As a result, a wide range of adolescent health issues are being neglected. Of additional concern is the fact that in many countries adolescents are undervalued, are denied resources and opportunities, and suffer from poverty (WHO, 1998). While demographic and country-specific health data provide compelling evidence to support the need to improve adolescent health care with regard to policies, programmes and services, initiatives have been sorely inadequate, never attracting the attention they deserve.

Nurses and midwives are in a unique position by virtue of their education, numbers, and diversity of practice arenas to contribute to the health of adolescents. In most countries, nurses and midwives form the largest number of health providers and have the potential to respond to adolescent health and development matters in individual, family and community practice settings. In some countries, nurses and midwives are the only health providers for certain populations. Mahasneh (2001) urges nurses to “capitalize on their assessment skills . . . and assume a leadership role” in order to promote the highest attainable standard of health. The health of adolescents requires urgent global attention, and the enhancement of the skills of midwives and nurses is an effective strategy (Mapanga, 1997). Preparing nurses and midwives to meet the health needs of adolescents remains a challenging and complex task requiring planned educational experiences throughout the nursing and midwifery curricula.

Under the direction of the departments of the Human Resources for Health (HRH) and Child and Adolescent Health and Development (CAH), a working document of core competencies has been developed for professional nursing and midwifery education worldwide. This working document reflects the contributions of many international nursing and midwifery educators and scientists who share concern about the health status of adolescents and the extent to which nurses and midwives are educated to meet the critical health needs of this population.

Products and project aims

The following products were identified as essential to strengthening the educational preparation of nurses and midwives for effective practice in adolescent health. They serve as project aims.

- List of competencies for nurses and midwives who practise in the area of adolescent health and development; competencies refer to knowledge, attitudes and practice.
- Compilation of the best strategies for integrating adolescent health and development into nursing and midwifery curricula and incorporating core competencies for practice in the area of adolescent health and development.
- Tool to assess the degree to which nursing and midwifery curricula include adolescent health and development in developing and industrialized countries.
- Tool to assess institutional preparedness, including challenges faced when integrating adolescent health and development into nursing and midwifery curricula.
- Toolkit on the process of integrating health issues into nursing and midwifery curricula, using adolescent health and development as an example, including a template for assessing curricula content, a template for assessing institutional capacity, and strategies for integrating other content areas that are required to ensure the competency of nurses and midwives to meet the evolving needs of the population.

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