

# Needs and Challenges of School Counsellors in Puberty Counselling for Girls

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## Abstract

**Background:** Puberty is an important period that requires proper guidance for a safe transition to the next stage of development. The role of school counselors is crucial in guiding students as they face challenges and complexities during counseling. The present study aimed to assess needs and challenges faced by school counsellors in providing puberty counselling for girls.

**Methods:** A descriptive-analytical cross-sectional design was used in this study. A total number of 132 school counsellors were selected using the convenience sampling method from the girl's high schools of Kerman Province, Iran in 2020. A researcher-designed questionnaire was used to collect data. Mean and standard deviation, non-parametric tests, such as Mann-Whitney, Kruskal-Wallis, and Spearman correlation coefficient tests of SPSS version 22 were used for data analysis.

**Results:** The mean age of the study participants was "43.75±6.94" years. Results showed that most of the counsellors agreed with the "need for specialized education for counsellors on an international level and based on new sciences" "(94.7%)", while most disagreed with "not adhering to professional ethics in counselling" "(69.7%)". Additionally, the highest total mean was attributed to the "inadequate skills in counselling" "(M±SD=24.67±16.78)", indicating high disagreement, and the lowest mean was attributed to "financial and human resources limitations" "(M±SD=4.87±4.2)".

**Conclusions:** The study results showed that there is a necessity to implement strategic measures to enhance the quality of counseling services and elevate the status of school counselors. A thorough understanding of counselors' expertise is essential for them to utilize their skills efficiently and boost their effectiveness. Thus, it is recommended that future research includes interventions aimed at furthering the training of school counselors.

**Keywords:** Counsellor, Counselling, Needs, Puberty, School, Girls

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is one of the most crucial periods in everyone's life, marking the onset of significant physical and psychological changes (1). Puberty, in particular, represents a critical turning point in adolescence, signifying the transition from childhood to adulthood (2). However, some female adolescents lack adequate information about puberty (3), which can lead to physical and psychological issues when relying on uninformed sources for guidance (4). One effective approach to tackle this problem is through fostering the collaboration between teachers and school counsellors (5).

Working with young girls in puberty at school, counsellors face numerous needs and challenges. While previous studies have explored counsellors'

needs in general, only a few studies have specifically addressed the requirements of this age group (6, 7). Based on a literature review, some of these needs and challenges include training to assess behavioural problems, parental support, communication skills with families, creating appropriate job opportunities, understanding administrators' roles, and counsellors' responsibilities (8).

Accordingly, previous studies have highlighted various needs of consultants (9, 10), including the requirement for training and professional development, collaboration with referral networks, skills in assessing behavioural issues, support in engaging with parents, effective communication with families, creating suitable job opportunities, working effectively with school administrators, and enhancing awareness of the role of counsellors (8). challenges such as inadequate education

and experience in higher education, limited understanding of counselling in society (11), lack of support and unrealistic expectations from authorities, difficulty in maintaining students' confidentiality, insufficient job benefits and satisfaction (12), confusion about counselling approaches due to inconsistent practices, and the need for counsellors to update their knowledge and skills have been identified (13).

Additionally, counsellors encounter challenges related to running the counselling process, applying counselling skills (14), handling feelings of shame and embarrassment, addressing knowledge gaps about puberty changes (15), accessing counselling resources such as confidential rooms and reference books, and preparing for special cases like Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and rape, while coping with a high workload (14, 16).

Moreover, previous studies primarily focused on the challenges faced by adolescent girls (17, 18), with limited attention given to counsellors' needs and challenges. This gap highlights the significance of conducting a study specifically aimed at identifying the requirements and difficulties in puberty counselling. Furthermore, in order to develop comprehensive educational content and effectively support girls going through puberty, it is essential to design counselling protocols and guidelines for puberty counselling. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate the needs and challenges faced by Kerman's school counsellors in providing puberty counselling for girls in 2020.

## 2. Methods

This was a descriptive-analytical cross-sectional study. The study population comprised female counsellors working in private and governmental primary and secondary girl's high schools. A total of 132 counsellors were selected through convenience sampling method from two regions in Kerman province, Iran in 2020.

To calculate the sample size, we used a previous similar study (19) in which the mean and standard deviation of tools and equipment score was reported to be "3.87±0.537" as follows:

$$n = \frac{z^2_{1-\alpha/2} s^2}{d^2}$$

n=sample size

z=level of significance=1.96

α=0.05

s=standard deviation

d=allowable error in estimating prevalence (margin of error)=0.1

The sample size was estimated to be 110, but this number was increased to 130 individuals to account for potential non-responses or delays in questionnaire delivery.

The inclusion criteria were: willingness to participate in the study, working in primary or secondary girls' high schools in Kerman province, counselling activities in the school even with job titles other than counsellor. Those who were unwilling to participate in this study were excluded.

The questionnaire was prepared after obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences (IR.KMU.REC.1398.398). Subsequently, with permission from the Department of Education, the online link to the questionnaire was provided to the counselling officials of each school in Kerman to be completed online.

The required data were collected using a two-section researcher-designed questionnaire titled "The Needs and Challenges of Counsellors in Puberty Counselling". The first section consisted of 19 questions related to demographic information including age, education level, marital status, home address, job title, number of years of working experience, number of schools they worked. The second section consisted of 53 questions aimed at determining counsellors' needs and challenges. These questions were designed based on a five-point Likert scale, including "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The scoring scale for the items ranged from 0 to 4, respectively. The questionnaire covered 53 items, including 48 items related to challenges and 5 items pertaining to needs, categorized into six main dimensions: counsellors' insufficient qualifications (10 items), the need for creating an integrated and written instruction for counselling (12 items), inadequate counselling skills (16 items), the need for

counsellors' and parents' empowerment programs (8 items), the need for understanding professional identity (3 items), and limitations in financial and human resources (4 items).

Face and content validity were used to assess the validity of the questionnaire through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Content validity index (CVI) and content validity ratio (CVR) were calculated for 30 samples using Lawshe's model. Experts rated the statements on a triple Likert scale in terms of necessity. Mean content validity ratio and mean content validity index was "0.94" and "0.98", respectively. This indicates that none of the items were removed due to CVI. Qualitative content validity was also considered, incorporating the opinions and suggestions of 10 experts, as provided to the research team.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using internal consistency, specifically Cronbach's alpha, which resulted in a value of "0.9".

For data analysis, SPSS version 22 and descriptive statistical tests, including mean and standard deviation were used. Non-parametric tests, such as Mann-Whitney, Kruskal-Wallis, and Spearman correlation coefficient were used due to the non-normal distribution of the data, as confirmed by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ( $P$  value < 0.05 for all data).

### 3. Results

The participants were 132 counsellors in primary and secondary high schools in Kerman, Iran. The average age of the participants was "43.75" years.

According to demographic characteristics (Table 1), most of the counsellors "90.2%" were married. More than half of the counsellors held Master's and higher degrees "68.9%". Totally, "88.6%" of schools were governmental, and "83.3%" were permanent employee, "62.9%" with three to five million monthly income, "99.2%" had counselling experience, "74.2%" had non-counselling activities in schools. Table 1 shows the scores of counsellors' opinions on needs and challenges based on demographic information. In this regard, significant differences were observed in education level ( $P=0.024$ ), school type ( $P=0.002$ ) and employment type ( $P=0.015$ ), indicating that these three factors influenced the emergence of needs and challenges. The most significant challenge was observed among counsellors with a bachelor's degree working as contractual employees in government schools. However, no other cases showed any statistically significant differences (Table 1).

According to Table 2 the mean values for age of counsellors (43.75), number of working experiences (227.15) month, number of schools they worked in (10.02), working hours in day

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of b the counselors

Variable		N	%	Kruskal Wallis & U	P value
Marital status	Single	13	9.8	Z=-1.3	0.17
	Married	119	90.2		
Education level	Diploma	0	0	7.46	0.024
	Associate's degree	3	2.3		
	Bachelor's degree	38	28.8		
	Master's degree and higher	91	68.9		
School type	Governmental	117	88.6	Z=-0.03	0.002
	Private	15	11.4		
Employment type	Permanent	110	83.3	10.51	0.015
	Contractual	8	6.1		
	Temporary-to-permanent	10	7.6		
	Other	4	3.0		
Income in millions	Less than one	6	4.5	5.03	0.17
	One to Three	31	23.5		
	Three to Five	83	62.9		
	More than five	12	9.1		
Counselling experience	Yes	131	99.2	Z=-0.02	0.979
	No	1	0.8		
Non-counselling activities in schools	Yes	98	74.2	Z=-1.8	0.067
	No	34	25.8		

**Table 2:** The Distribution of personal characteristics

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Spearman's rank correlation coefficient	P value
Age	43.75	6.94	0.254	0.003
Number of Working experience years (month)	227.15	97.18	0.203	0.020
Number of schools they worked in so far	10.02	7.45	0.191	0.028
Working hours in day	4.46	3.12	-0.018	0.840
Number of counselling courses attended	80.53	116.67	0.213	0.014
Number of students covered by the counsellor	275.99	211.98	0.143	0.102
The counselling time dedicated to each student (min)	25.25	15.55	-0.113	0.195
Total number of school students	375.87	232.26	0.019	0.829

**Table 3:** The Frequency distribution and percentage of answers

Statement	Agree and Completely Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Disagree and Completely Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Need for creating an integrated and written instruction for counselling						
1. Lack of a specific and integrated instruction for puberty education in schools	103	78	12	9.1	17	12.9
2. Inadequate use of team-based methods for counselling	96	72.7	17	12.9	19	14.4
3. Lack of a communication network between counsellors and mental health experts outside schools for referral purposes	82	62.1	13	9.8	37	28
The total mean of the dimension (20.4±12.7)						
Counsellors' insufficient qualification						
4. Need for a correct internalization of sexual and gender identity by the counsellor (Counsellor's puberty conditions, sexual-cultural taboos, ...)	84	63.9	23	17.4	25	18.9
The total mean of the dimension (20.85±10.7)						
Inadequate skills in counselling						
5. Students' insufficient and inaccurate information on physical, mental, and social issues of puberty	113	85.7	8	6.1	11	8.4
6. Inadequate agreement between parents and school staff on the proper time for beginning the education and dealing with puberty	102	77.3	10	7.6	20	15.1
7. Organizational limitations in providing individual, family, sexual, ... counselling	92	69.7	18	13.6	22	16.7
The total mean of the dimension (24.67±16.78)						
Need for counsellors and parents empowerment programs						
8. Need for specialized education for counsellors on an international level and based on new sciences	125	94.7	6	4.5	1	0.8
9. Need for initial and on-the-job training courses for counsellors	124	93.9	6	4.5	2	1.5
10. Parents' inadequate attention to puberty needs	123	93.1	6	4.5	3	2.3
The total mean of the dimension 6.14±5.88						
Need for knowing professional identity						
11. Lack of proper culture of familiarizing the society with the professional role and identity of counsellors	100	75.7	13	9.8	19	14.4
The total mean of the dimension (5.19±3.4)						
Financial and human resources limitations						
12. Limited financial resources for organizing counselling workshops and programs for counsellors and students	112	84.9	8	6.1	12	9.1
13. Inadequate opportunities for providing puberty counselling to students due to high workloads and lack of balance between the number of students and counsellors	109	82.6	9	6.8	14	10.6
14. Insufficient facilities and space for providing counselling	88	66.6	9	6.8	35	26.5
The total mean of the dimension (4.87±4.2)						



(4.46), number of counselling courses attended (80.53), number of students covered by the counsellor (275.99), counselling time dedicated to each student is (25.25) minutes, and total number of school students (375.87). Additionally, this table presents the mean and standard deviation of demographic information and counsellors' opinions on challenges and needs. A weak but significant relationship was observed between the scores of challenges and needs with age ( $P=0.003$ ), working experience ( $P=0.020$ ), number of schools ( $P=0.028$ ) and number of courses ( $P=0.014$ ). Furthermore, since the correlation coefficient (age=0.254, working experience=0.203, number of schools=0.191, number of course=0.213) was positive for these four cases, the relationship was

considered to be direct. In other words, an increase or decrease in challenges and needs would lead to an increase or decrease in these four factors, respectively. No significant relationship was found in the other factors (Table 2).

The frequency distribution and percentage of counsellors' responses to the statements of the six dimensions in the questionnaire are reported in Table 3. The total number of responses to the questions was 132, with a corresponding percentage of 100.

Data analysis of the results showed that most counsellors agreed with the "need for specialized education for counsellors on an international

**Table 4:** Challenges and needs of counsellors

Dimensions	Statements
Counsellors' insufficient qualification	1. Need for a correct internalization of sexual and gender identity by the counsellor (Counsellor's puberty conditions, sexual-cultural taboos)
Need for creating an integrated and written instruction for counselling	1. Lack of a communication network between counsellors and mental health experts outside schools for referral purposes 2. Conventional methods and limited use of new educational methods in counselling 3. Lack of a specific pathway for communicating counsellors' critiques and suggestions to higher authorities 4. Lack of a specific and integrated instruction for puberty education in schools 5. Lack of a specific instruction for counselling in especial cases (anger, anxiety, depression, and other high-risk behaviours) 6. Inadequate use of the results of previous studies on puberty 7. Insufficient attention to preventive programs based on individual traits 8. Insufficient use of team-based methods for counselling
Inadequate skills in counselling	1. Counsellors' perplexity and insufficient authority in providing their services and other staff's intervention in their affairs 2. Organizational limitations in providing individual, family, sexual counselling 3. Lack of age-appropriate counselling programs 4. Insufficient continuous and organized monitoring and assessment of counsellors' performance 5. Inadequate agreement between parents and school staff on the proper time for beginning the education and dealing with puberty 6. Counsellors' inadequate skill in adopting different counselling methods and approaches 7. Inadequate skill in using and interpreting counselling tests 8. Students' insufficient attention to counsellors' recommendation 9. Students' insufficient information on the professional role and identity 10. Students' insufficient and inaccurate information on physical, mental, and social issues of puberty 11. Students' lack of trust in counsellors for solving problems 12. Insufficient support from authorities and school staff for facilitating counselling services
Need for counsellors and parents empowerment programs	1. Need for initial and on-the-job training courses for counsellors 2. Need for specialized education for counsellors on an international level and based on new sciences 3. Not dividing counsellors based on their expertise (educational, mental, puberty) 4. Parents' inadequate attention to puberty needs 5. Lack of an organized plan for counsellors needs assessment regarding puberty education 6. Parents' attention to educational counselling rather than physical, mental, and social counselling in puberty 7. Need for a friendly and threat-free relationship among school staff, parents, and students in counselling 8. Need for inter-organizational cooperation in dealing with traumas in schools
Need for knowing professional identity	1. Lack of a proper culture of familiarizing the society with the professional role and identity of counsellors
Financial and human resources limitations	1. Inadequate opportunities for providing puberty counselling to students due to high workloads and lack of balance between the number of students and counsellors 2. Insufficient facilities and space for providing counselling 3. Limited financial resources for organizing counselling workshops and programs for counsellors and students 4. Parents' tendency to visit counselling centers outside the school

level and based on new sciences” (94.7%), while most disagreed with “not adhering to professional ethics in counselling (confidentiality and privacy) “(69.7%)”. Additionally, concerning different sections of dimensions, the highest total mean was attributed to the dimension of “inadequate skills in counselling,” indicating the most disagreement “ $M\pm SD=24.67\pm 16.78$ ” and the lowest mean to the dimension of “financial and human resources limitations, representing high agreement ( $M\pm SD=4.87\pm 4.2$ ) (Table 3).

A total of 34 items in six dimensions received over 50% agreement from the consultants and were chosen as the challenges and needs of the consultants (Table 4).

#### 4. Discussion

Today, improving physical and mental health during childhood and younger ages prevents numerous societal problems. Prevention is considered as primary health care with lasting effects. Therefore, it is essential to take effective steps to enhance puberty counselling as well as counsellors’ position by understanding their needs and challenges. Thus, the present study aimed to explore needs and challenges of school counsellors. The results indicated that various needs and challenges affect the quality of puberty counselling from the perspective of school counsellors.

Improving physical and mental health during childhood and younger ages prevents numerous societal problems. Prevention is considered primary health care with lasting effects. Therefore, it is essential to take effective steps to improve puberty counselling as well as counsellors’ position by understanding their needs and challenges. The results indicated that various needs and challenges affect the quality of puberty counselling from the perspective of school counsellors.

There is an evident need for specialized education for counsellors (20). They need to constantly update their knowledge, skills, and competencies to meet the demands and needs related to puberty counselling. These include the emotional, mental, and behavioural health, which in turn contribute to academic excellence (21). Most counsellors in the present study did not agree with their weaknesses in professional ethics awareness. This shows the observance of professional ethics

by the majority of counsellors because ethical characteristics have been identified as the strongest factor in the efficiency of counsellors and gaining the trust of students (22). Training workshops can enhance competition in practice and education strategy (23). These training workshops should be designed based on the specific needs of adolescents and puberty (24). However, this finding did not align with the research of Ebrahimi and colleagues, which reported that personal factors, lack of motivation, and reluctance of counsellors towards their job were the most important obstacles to efficacy of school counsellors (25). Alliance and trust of the adolescents and creation of appropriate relationships with the counsellors help to a comfortable stream of counselling sessions with more probability of success and solving the problems (26).

A comparison of mean values showed that challenges are more significant in the case of governmental schools and contractual counsellors, which was not in line with study of Alavi and colleagues in which tools and equipment were identified as the most significant challenge (19). Moreover, in research by Foon and colleagues, training based on new sciences was considered as the most important need (20). Counsellor’s job satisfaction is influenced by counselling room facilities and clients’ positive changes (21). It is clear that job satisfaction improves their quality of counselling. Service organizations allow sufficient flexibility for therapists to ensure individualized treatment that meets the needs of adolescent clients (27).

Furthermore, older and more experienced counsellors faced more problems, which is consistent with the findings of Foon and colleagues in terms of age but not work experience (20). It can be related to limited knowledge on community and generation changes and needs such as generation Z in the recent years. This generation encounters with social media and different kinds of information, as well as life and nurturing styles are some of the barriers make the counselling inconvenient for school counsellors in middle schools (28, 29). Tight collaboration of counsellors with community and parents is an important factor for success of puberty counselling (23).

##### 4.1. Limitations

The present study faced certain limitations

including: responses were influenced by insufficient concentration or even providing unreal responses due to school rules in puberty counselling, individual mental status, and workload during the corona pandemic.

## 5. Conclusions

Adolescence is a period of identity formation, and uncontrolled mood and personality changes can lead to depression, anxiety, and other disorders during the puberty phase. The findings of the present study revealed that several factors affect the quality of puberty counselling in adolescent girls' schools, and the existence of one factor can even have a negative effect on the other. Therefore, there is a need to take effective coordinated steps to improve counselling and the position of counsellors in schools by deeply understanding the needs and challenges of counsellors. Having a profound and accurate knowledge of counsellors' needs and challenges will help them use their knowledge effectively and enhance their competency in various aspects of counselling in schools. Future researchers are suggested to consider some interventions for training counsellors.

## Ethical Approval

Before entering the main page of the questionnaire, an online consent form was completed after explaining the purpose of the study and ensuring counsellors of confidentiality. This project was approved by the ethics committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences with the code of IR.KMU.REC.1398.398.

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## Authors' Contribution

Laleh Tajadiny: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work, reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. Zohreh Khoshnood: Contribution to the design of the work, drafting

the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. Masoumeh Ghazanfarpour: Acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work, reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. Atefeh Ahmadi: Contribution to the design of the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such as the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

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