

# How the Community Table Tennis Program empowered Preetimayee to navigate through the challenges of adolescence

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Adolescents frequently experience challenges in navigating the intricacies and complexities of life. They are at a developmental stage where they might struggle with issues relating to their bodies, values, worldviews, hobbies, and long-term goals. As they grapple with identity formation, it becomes crucial for adolescents to engage in self-reflection.

Moreover, educating adolescents about the potential struggles of teenage life, including bodily changes, peer pressure, gender dynamics, and societal norms, is equally crucial as these factors can have a significant impact on their personal development. Adults can help them deal with the challenges of adolescence with more self-assurance and resilience by offering support, mentoring, and encouragement.

[Pro Sport Development](#)'s [Community Table Tennis \(CTT\)](#) program uses sport to not just aid in their holistic development but to create a safe and open environment for learning. It is within this atmosphere that participants, often burdened by societal expectations and doubts, find themselves willing to engage, learn and challenge preconceived notions.

Preetimayee Sahoo, a class 9 student at Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandir, in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, joined the CTT program in 2021. The CTT program provided her with an avenue to learn about the changes experienced during adolescence, allowing her to understand herself better. Her participation in the CTT also set the tone for a transformative experience of growth and development through sports.



Preetimayee Sahoo

## Understanding the phase of adolescence

One critical area that the CTT program focuses on is teaching children and young people about gender and promoting gender equality. The program attempts to educate participants on the concept of gender, challenge stereotypes, and promote inclusivity and equality. As part of the sessions on gender, the program also tries to build awareness on the physical, emotional and mental changes experienced during adolescence. After attending these sessions, Preetimayee has been able to broaden her perspective on being an adolescent, as these have helped her address the misconceptions

around this phase of life.

For instance, the onset of menstruation during teenage years is often shrouded in stigma and shame in society. Teenage girls bear the brunt of this societal taboo, facing unnecessary embarrassment and isolation. However, after participating in the CTT sessions, Preetimayee understood that menstruation is a natural process that should not be relegated to silence or excluded from conversations, as she explains:

*“Earlier, I used to be in a lot of tension due to the fear of dealing with changes during my teenage years. I did not know anything about being a teenager (and the physical changes that I would experience as a teenager). However, through my participation in the CTT sessions, I got to know that at this age, our body goes through a lot of changes. I got to know after participating in these sessions that what I was*

*hearing from people at home or from people around was wrong. After becoming a part of the CTT program, I got a lot more comfortable with my body.”*

### **Navigating a troubled tradition**

While building awareness is an effective method to help adolescents deal with their problems, it is equally important to provide them with a robust support system to further guide them through their challenges. Since young people’s lives are significantly shaped by their parents, they have an important



*Preetimayee during one of the CTT program sessions*

role to play in mentoring and imparting life lessons to young people as they navigate the difficulties of adolescence.

Indian culture places a strong emphasis on traditional values and societal expectations, which can inadvertently influence parenting styles. This pressure to conform to societal norms can lead to negative role modeling, such as prioritizing external validation, enforcing strict discipline, or imposing unrealistic expectations on children and young people.

The same issue still exists for Preetimayee's parents, as she mentioned that her parents are not comfortable with her participation in sport-based activities that include boys. She talked about a time when her mother did not allow her

to participate in a netball tournament because her team included some "naughty" boys. Her parents refused to let her go, despite her persistent pleadings.

Preetimayee shared that she was never reclusive towards boys, even in her younger years, but after attending the gender sessions part of the CTT program, she was able to reaffirm her views regarding gender and maintaining friendships with boys:

*“Whatever our parents tell us, they tell us for our own good. But not being allowed to play with boys is not good. We will have to teach our parents and other family members that if a boy is my friend, we can help one another - be it at work or at school. So, parents should not say that it is not good to talk to boys. For example, my brother is also a boy. So, will I stop talking to him in the future?”*

Furthermore, the gender-focused program sessions have enabled Preetimayee to discern the prevailing prejudice within her household, including the discrepancy in freedom between her and her brother. It's a common practice in many households for parents to often withhold permission for their daughters to go out, and even when they do, they are typically accompanied by certain restrictions. Preetimayee said it was unfair for her parents to make separate house rules for their daughter and their son, as she expressed:

*“Boys and girls should be treated equally and given the same level of freedom, in my opinion. When we get good things to eat in our home, my brother receives the majority of the food – my parents offer him 75% while I always get less than half.”*

Despite the enduring presence of gender prejudices in her family, she has been able to build her confidence and deepen her understanding of gender with the help of the CTT program. This newfound strength has further emboldened her to take on the challenge of addressing these biases. PSD’s Community Sports Trainer, Pragatee Sethy, has observed a transformation in Preetimayee. She has noted Preetimayee’s remarkable resilience in dealing with obstacles she faces on a daily basis - be it at home, school, or society:

*“After Preetimayee joined our CTT program, we have seen her communication skills improve, she is more outspoken and takes active participation during our sessions. She has had problems at home but that did not prevent her from attending the table tennis sessions. When she finished as the runner-up in our first table tennis tournament, she told me that her parents were finally happy with her decision to join our program.”*

## Empowering the future generation

In the realm of challenging conventional gender stereotypes that dictate behaviors and activities based on one's gender, young people emerge as catalysts of change. They demonstrate a natural inclination to explore their interests and express themselves authentically, regardless of societal expectations.

Similarly, Preetimayee's example highlights her courageous defiance of parental constraints that she deems unreasonable. She recalls the hurdles she faced in joining the Community Table Tennis program due to her mother's objections to sports. In the year 2021, when the table tennis tournament was held, Preetimayee had to engage in persuasive discussions with her parents to seek permission for her participation. After the first tournament, her mother expressed concerns about her studies taking a back seat. Preetimayee, however, offered a counterpoint, reminding her mother that sports involvement is widespread and success is not the sole measure of participation.

As Preetimayee continues to assert her views both at home and in school, she elaborates on advocating for the need to support women and girls in their journey towards equality:

*“Now days, girls are allowed to study and obtain an education but they don't have the permission to do many other things so I just want to say that it's important to support both boys and girls and only then the nation will progress.”*

Preetimayee's story provides a poignant narrative of a teenager's journey through struggles, enlightenment, and empowerment. It reinforces the need for holistic education that addresses not only academic growth but also the emotional, social, and gender-centric aspects of adolescence. As society progresses, it is crucial to continue investing in programs that cultivate empathy, equality, and self-confidence, ensuring that adolescents emerge from this phase stronger, more self-assured, and ready to contribute positively to their communities and the world at large.

*The Community Table Tennis program is a collective effort between [Pro Sport Development \(PSD\)](#) and the [ITTF Foundation](#), to increase access to sport for young people and utilize table tennis as a tool to promote gender equality by supporting boys and girls from marginalized sections in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. The two year program, which took place from 2021-23, was supported by the ITTF Foundation.*