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Parents' role essential to sex education

THERE has been much talk about sex education — or the lack of it — in Malaysian schools.

The perennial question is whether schoolchildren are ready for it. If yes, what should form the fundamentals of the curriculum, who should teach it and when do students start learning about it?

Currently, Form Three students learn about the sexual functions of their bodies in Biology.

Some educators prefer to label the teaching of sexually-related topics as "sexuality education" to avoid negative links to unfavourable sexual acts or premarital sex.

Under the term "sexuality education", the student would be provided with information such as family planning and reproduction as well as aspects of sexuality, for example, sexual orientation, values and relationships.

It is interesting to note that sexuality education in the United States, United Kingdom and Singapore is similar in some aspects while different in others.

In the US, basically, there are two types of sexuality education classes: the Comprehensive Sexuality Education or the Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programme.

Many states have laws governing what is taught in such classes or allowing parents to opt out.

Some state laws leave curriculum decisions to individual school districts.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a programme that starts as early as kindergarten and continues through secondary school.

It covers age appropriate sexuality topics and a broad spectrum of subjects including safe sex, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), contraceptives, masturbation and body image.

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programmes highlight abstinence from sexual behaviours until marriage and

do not necessarily include information on contraceptives, STDs and masturbation, for example.

In UK, Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in schools is based on the three main elements of attitudes, values, personal and social skills; knowledge; and understanding.

It is a graduated, age appropriate programme.

SRE informs students on topics such as biological changes, sexual health, relationships and emotions.

A school's SRE policy must be made available for parents to inspect under

the Learning and Skills Act 2000. It is compulsory for those aged seven to 16 to study the elements of the Science area of the National Curriculum which include human reproduction, anatomy, puberty, hormonal functions in relation to fertility and health-related viruses.

In Singapore, youngsters between 11 and 18 years old were exposed to lessons on sex and sexuality in schools starting 2001.

For younger children, the content of the programme focuses on puberty and the changes that happen to their bodies.

Teenagers in secondary schools are informed about kissing in public, having sex, getting pregnant, pornography, homosexuality and the dangers of STDs.

Older teens have opportunities to engage in discussions on sexual harassment.

Looking at these three countries for a start, we now have enough examples to determine what is most appropriate for our students.

Most schools fall somewhere within this range of programmes. Some perceive sexuality education as a means to help thwart premarital sex.

However, this is not conclusive if the

results of studies of teenage birth rates in the US are anything to go by.

Supporters of the abstinence-only approach argue that it is the only guarantee against pregnancy, AIDS and STDs.

Then there is the abstinence-plus outlook, a combination of abstinence-only and safer sex approaches which seem to tell teens to abstain from sexual activity until marriage but if they cannot wait then they should know about contraceptives. This may seem like a mixed message to youth.

Whichever the programme, parents' role as a buffer is essential.

They need to know the content of sexuality education, which can be subjective when values and cultures are taken into account.

Therefore, parents need to ensure that the information children receive at school is accurate and complements the values at home.

Only then can parents supply their children with correct answers when they come home with questions.

Unfortunately, more often than not in Asian society, children will turn to their friends or the media for answers.

■ Associate Professor Koh Soo Ling is with the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA. Email her at kohsl@salam.uitm.edu.my

