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Becoming an 'adult' too early is hard

CHILDREN who have reached puberty may be physically able to engage in sexual intercourse, but having sex and getting pregnant at such an early age has risks for the child's emotional and physical health, said Malaysian Medical Association president Dr David Quek.

"There have been medical reports which show that young-age mothers suffer more pregnancy complications, have smaller babies, and suffer from psychological and mental stresses which many cannot cope with.

"They are also young and have much growing up to do mentally, especially psychologically. Unfortunately, with a pregnancy so early, these young people are forced into becoming adults when they are not yet prepared.

"Most haven't got over their temper tantrums and child-like behaviour, and are much less able to actually cope with mothering and fathering."

Because they have yet to develop adult-coping mechanisms, there was also the question of whether these children could impart proper values to their children.

"Many of these children are not yet competent, not educated sufficiently or had their education prematurely terminated.

"Bearing children generally means the progression from childhood to adulthood for most. Be-

cause many are also not yet mature enough, they become poor parents, have poor skills, and may breed children who are also psychologically defective or incapable of coping in this increasingly complex world."

Instead of a gradual progression from childhood through youth and then into adulthood, marriage at such an early age puts a lot of stress on a child because it pushes the person from childhood straight into adulthood.

"For males, marriage marks full adult independence and its associated responsibilities. Many boys cannot assume strenuous or full manual jobs early in their adolescence, and few, if any, can earn enough to support a family until

their early to mid-20s.

"This combination of biological, social and economic factors limit pregnancy and parenthood for most teens.

"So, childhood marriages unfairly forces these young people into a situation with which they can hardly cope or, worse, which they cannot cope with at all.

"The MMA believes child marriages should be discouraged and frowned upon.

"Child marriages disempower the young people involved, and prevent their full intellectual and educational development. They would suffer from too early a thrust into adulthood and all its responsibilities and duties.

"Education and other healthy fun childhood pursuits for the female or male child are also prematurely disrupted."

Dr Quek said most doctors were quiet on the issue of child marriages and especially if a child went for premarital HIV screening because "in our society, the Muslim majority clearly have a greater in-

fluence on the matter of marriage-ability of young people".

He said the acceptable age of marriage was culturally and religiously defined and was not based on health and medical concerns.

However, he added, most medical authorities frowned upon any form of sexual practice below the age of 15 years, or before some degree of mental maturity.

"As a medical profession, the MMA feels other aspects of such practices should also be debated and discussed, putting the rights of the child above the rights of personal or religious interpretations.

"It is perhaps time for enlightened doctors, lawyers and other social activists to speak out and help protect the sanctity and developmental happiness and experience, and ensure the minimal educational development of the child.

"Becoming an 'adult' too early is too hard, too premature and not good," said Dr Quek.

"It is also not an enlightened symbol for a progressive Malaysia."



Malaysian Medical Association president Dr David Quek says the MMA believes child marriages should be discouraged