

Headline	Sex education may help		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	22 Oct 2012	Color	Black/white
Section	Letters	Circulation	136,530
Page No	19	Readership	330,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	440 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 7,148
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 21,444



Sex education may help

TWO news items this week are a cause for concern. First, the reply to a question in Dewan Rakyat, stating that 6,820 girls aged below 16 had given birth out of wedlock since 2000.

While this figure is based on National Registration Department records, it is likely that unreported teen births could swell that number to a higher figure.

The other news item of concern was the furore about the Malaysian law student in Singapore who had posted sexually explicit pictures of him and his girlfriend on their blog.

National agencies, in particular the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry are working on tackling the problem of teens becoming mothers, one effort being the ministry's programme, *Keselamatan Keluarga Tanggungjawab Kita*, in collaboration with 150 non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Other NGO-sponsored programmes and plans to incorporate sex education in schools can address this problem.

While these efforts to disseminate information and advice to the young on knowledge, attitude and practice regarding sexuality and sex are useful, it again brings to the fore the vital importance and urgency of implementing a comprehensive programme of sex education in schools and communities.

The sources of information and advice on sex and sexuality are widely acknowledged to be within the home and family, in particular parents; the community, particularly the role of leaders and public campaigns; and formal school programmes, or sex education.

Also, societal traditions, values and practices, and peer pressure play an important part in what and how the sexuality of the young is influenced.

Whether it is teens indulging in sexual activities, unplanned teen pregnancies and the plight of ba-

bies born out of wedlock, or the motivation for young people to exhibit sexually explicit images of themselves or, worse, sexual violence, it comes down to the knowledge and attitudes they have acquired and developed.

For sex education to be meaningful and have the desired results, it is essential for the public to be informed as to what sex education is since there are many misconceptions of the subject.

Sex education is information and instruction on issues relating to human sexuality, including human reproductive anatomy, conception and contraception, reproductive health, emotional relations, reproductive rights and responsibilities and other aspects of human sexual behaviour.

Human sexuality has biological, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects. Sexuality is an important aspect of life and almost all people, including children, want to know about it.

Sex education is, therefore, an important element in the development of a family based on accepted ethical ideas. As part of efforts to help and motivate right and responsible sexual behaviour, reduce teen pregnancies, curb sexual violence and to promote responsible parenthood, sex education had been instituted in several developed and developing countries.

Successful sex education consists of well-defined, planned, comprehensive courses of action, in schools and communities, calculated to bring about socially desirable attitudes, practices and personal conduct on the part of children and adults, that will protect the individual as a human and the family as a social institution.

Though seemingly irrelevant to stress, it is necessary to make clear that sex education is not merely informing and teaching, and never

to encourage, children and young people on how to engage in sexual

activities.

Sex education may be conveyed informally, such as when someone receives information from a conversation with a parent, friend, religious leader or through the media.

It may also be delivered through writings by authors, magazine columnists or through authorised websites.

Sex education teaches students what they should know for their personal conduct and relationship with others.

Also, it is necessary to prepare the young for the task ahead.

Sex education may be taught as a subject within the curriculum.

The experience in several developing countries is that it is most effective when included as part of the health, science, home economics, civics or physical education curricula.

Elements are included in mathematics, discussions, debates, drama, essay writing and art.

The increase in the number of AIDS cases has given a new sense of urgency to sex education.

Knowledge, attitude and practice studies in developed and developing countries, conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by several United Nations bodies in the Asia-Pacific region, confirmed parents' belief that sex education in school made it easier for them to talk to their adolescent children about sex.

Equally, teenagers responded that they felt more comfortable talking with their parents about sex when they had sex education in school.

Clearly, there is a need for a sex education programme to address the issue of teen pregnancies, sexual behaviour and violence.

Such a programme should be supported by national agencies and NGOs, and disseminated by trained personnel, with the support of the media.

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***Sex education** can address the issue of teen pregnancies.*