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# Rethinking sex education

HAVING schools offer sex education is a disturbing thought. But, the consequences of having teenagers grow into men and women with poor body knowledge could be worse.

If parents and educators were more open-minded, it could help young people be more aware of their own bodies and equip them to deal with the emotional struggles stemming from sexual issues.

One of the biggest problems which Dr Hera Lukman noticed in schools here is that people tend to equate sex education with biology, when in fact, there's a lot more to the subject.

"In Canada, biology class is much like how it is here. You learn about structure and human anatomy, but it's all taught in a very detached manner. The difference is, the students are a lot more open. They make jokes and won't hesitate to ask questions. And, all that helps towards understanding the difference between male and female," says Dr Hera, a chartered psychologist and expert in body image.

The mode of delivery in the Malaysian education system is the chief stumbling block as students are usually not encouraged to ask questions. What little sex education there is here starts too late, and things are made worse as the body is seen as a taboo subject.

"Things (in Western countries) are more open and not done in secret or offered in parallels, for example, when you talk about the birds and bees. There is more interactive learning.

"The issues are the same so it's not really about Asians being more closed up about the subject, it's about the culture of openness. I'm sure there are parents in Asia who are comfortable talking about sex with their children," adds Dr Hera, who hails from Canada and has been teaching in Malaysia for six years.

"You can't implement sex education at a click of a button. You have to tackle the myths as well, and the educators need to be comfortable and more savvy in teaching the subject. It's also very hard to change perception. People often feel there's something perverse if you want to find out more about the body," she adds.

Of course, if you can't get information from adults or friends these days, the next quickest source of information is the Internet. The top searched word, by the way, is sex.

"Parents may have a password protected computer at home but then, anybody can access the Internet at cyber cafes. However, the right information is hard to come by. There are lots of issues associated with a lack of understanding of one's body which affect behaviour.

"From a very young age, women have been given the message of what being pretty is about. You are the way you look and your asset is your body, and it has to be a certain shape and look. So, before kids can really understand their bodies, they've already been told how they're supposed to eat, look and move with their bodies. It's objectification from a young age."

Despite being aware that Asians are far more reserved when it came to sexual matters, Dr Hera was still surprised by the results of *The Kotex BodyLife IQ Study Of Young Women in South Asia* and the extent of lack of body knowledge.

"Clearly, this is evidence that the 'what' (part of biology) is being taught at schools but not the 'why'. I'm afraid if we carry on this way, we're inadvertently rewarding women for their ignorance. By saying, 'I'm a lady, I don't ask such things (about sex), women are doing themselves and society a disservice.

"Even in Canada sex education is not taught as a separate module, but talking about relationships is important," Dr Hera explains.

It's certainly a pertinent point as it is because of relationships that there are sexual issues. Teaching children how to protect themselves from

sexual violence is also viewed as sex education.

"When we went to the schools and held talks, the girls were very open and asked all sorts of questions like 'when should I have sex with a boy' and 'why do I get periods.' And you wonder, as you would think all these are already taught in biology class," says Haniza Tahir, who is a marketing manager at Kimberly-Clark (distributor of Kotex sanitary pads).

(Under the Kotex school programme, health and body knowledge talks and forums are organised regularly nationwide for female students.)

"Many were unaware of how one can get sexually transmitted diseases or even HIV. Some girls still believe stories that pineapple juice can induce abortion and wearing a bra can cause cancer. If you look at it as a whole, all of Asia displayed a general lack of knowledge of the female body," adds Haniza.

The survey involved women from various parts of Malaysia including the east coast and the northern states.

"Surprisingly, both urban and suburban girls displayed the same ignorance although the urban folk asked more sophisticated questions.

"How then do you teach a young girl something basic like how to examine her breasts for cancer?"

Dr Hera says that it's important to also educate boys to understand girls, as they are regarded as reference points as girls want to please them.

"Essentially, the message is much more than understanding biology. It's about empowering women, being healthy, and viewing success and achievement that's not necessarily linked to the body," she concludes. —

**By Patsy Kam**



Dr Hera Lukman



Haniza Tahir