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Getting rubbed the wrong way

A 28-year-old book shows that sex education is still very much a powder keg issue in our society.



MOST of us probably have never heard of Peter Mayle, let alone his innocuous sounding book, "Where did I come from?" until this week.

The book, meant for children between four and eight years old, has apparently been in bookstores for close to three decades but it was only on Tuesday that it was banned.

Curious about what the fuss was all about, a friend googled the author and his book on his tablet PC. Pointing to a snapshot of a page in the book of a cartoon of a naked couple in bed with "instructions" about love-making, he exclaimed: "It's *kamasutra* for kids."

Now I have not read the book and I must admit I don't know much about *kamasutra*, but if that one snapshot is anything to go by, it might not be something to read to your kids in bed.

The book was first brought to light by Umno Youth Community Complaints Bureau chief Datuk Muhd Khairun Aseh.

Describing the content as "obscene", he took to task the Home Ministry's officers who are supposed to screen foreign books entering the country.

"The person to blame here is not so much the writer because his writing and products may be accepted in his country, but this country (Malaysia) has a different set of values.

"To talk about the sensational feeling of making love and the rubbing of genitals - how's that (suitable) for children? If we fail to enforce (the law), our children will be exposed to bad influences through such reading materials," he said.

After Khairun raised the issue, Home Ministry officials stopped the sale of the book to study its contents

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and banned it the next day. Now anyone caught circulating or distributing it will be in for a hefty fine and/or jail time.

The ministry's decision has not sat well with some people.

The Sarawak Women for Women Society (SWWS), in particular, felt that once again the Home Ministry was stifling access to constructive information on sex education. They did not see how the book could compare with the pornography that children could access via the Internet nowadays.

"Each time we hear about child sexual abuse, or the risk of HIV, or unwanted pregnancies, there are calls to teach youngsters about the facts of life. But each time it is attempted, some throw up their hands in horror and say it is against our culture and thwart the introduction of courses in school or as has now happened, cutting access to educational materials," they said.

They also argued that it was best to teach children about sex before they reached puberty because they would be less embarrassed to talk about it and they would grow up feeling more comfortable to ask trusted adults about it.

On top of that, they said that par-

ents should be the judge of what books were suitable for their children and they should be comfortable explaining to their children where babies come from.

Both Khairun and SWWS have valid points for their convictions but the debate about sex education is really far from over.

I do agree with some academicians who say that sex education should not just be about what goes on behind closed doors but also of the commitment and responsibility between couples – and of safe sex, of course.

However, there are those who feel strongly that sex education should be the responsibility of schools and teachers.

This is where I tend to disagree.

I remember my lesson on sex education in school and, frankly, it would not have made much difference if I had missed class that day.

It was the last chapter of our Biology lesson in Form Five, and boys being boys and in an all-boys school at that, my classmates and I were eager for our lady teacher to educate us about the human reproductive system. But all she said when the day finally arrived was: "Now, you go read this yourself." What an

anti-climax!

I actually think my first "lesson" about sex was from an "offensive" magazine smuggled into school by a classmate while I was probably in Primary Three. Such goings-on were not unusual back then but today, I bet it doesn't happen in my school any more – what with the Internet and all?

Yes, it does seem quite a contradiction that for a country that embraces information technology and access to the Internet like we do, we still get worked up by pornography in other materials.

But then again, that's the way the cookie crumbles.

Anyway, I strongly agree with SWWS on one point, and that is parents should be the judge of what books they buy for their children. Indeed, parents should be the ones on whom the burden of sex education should really be. After all, they have the necessary "qualifications".

So perhaps the ones that really need to be taught about sex education is not the children but the parents, who should in turn take it as their responsibility to talk about the birds and the bees with their kids.

Now if only Mr Mayle could write a book for parents for whom no illustrations are necessary.