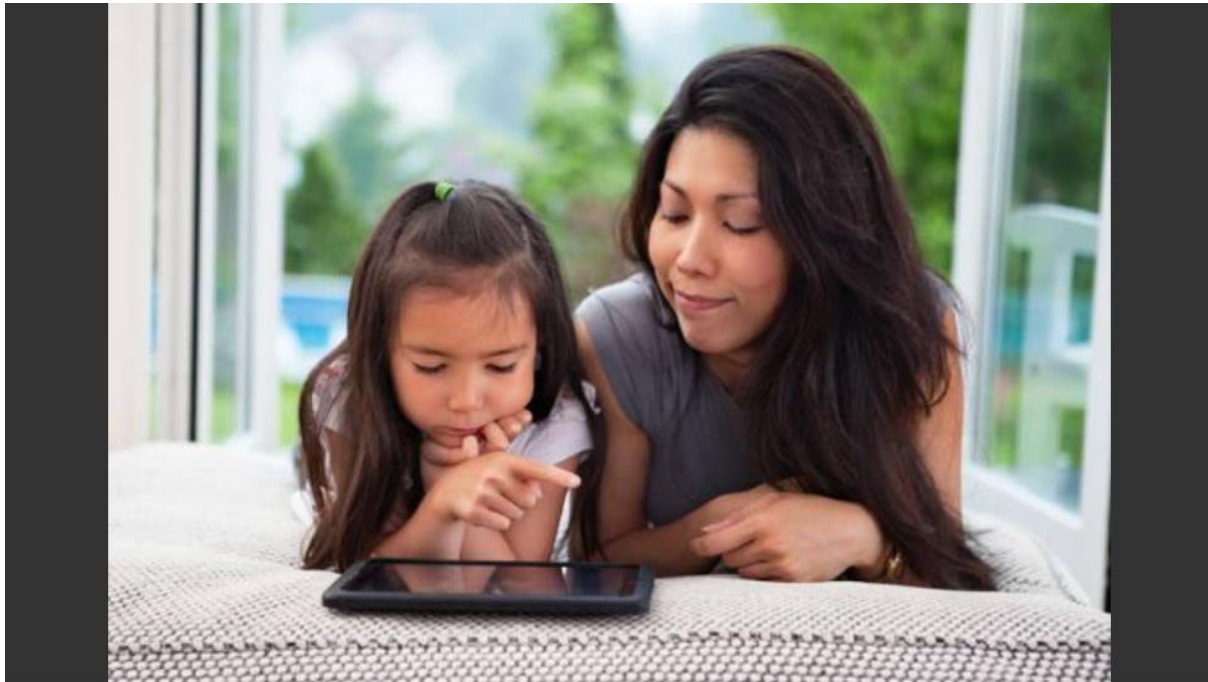


[OPINION] My body belongs to me: Empowering children through comprehensive sexuality education

Dr Abdul Motalib Embong, Dr Noor Azimah Abd Aziz
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Parents can overcome their discomfort by seeking resources and guidance on how to approach their children when it comes to sex education. -Filepix

BETWEEN 2018 and 2023, PDRM records show approximately 19,000 children were victims of sexual crimes in Malaysia.

AI Brief

- *High Rates of Child Sexual Abuse: Between 2018 and 2023, around 19,000 children in Malaysia were reported victims of sexual crimes, with many cases going unreported due to societal normalization and fear among caregivers. Additionally, an estimated 100,000 children may experience online sexual exploitation annually, highlighting the urgent need for awareness and reporting mechanisms.*
- *Challenges in Sexuality Education: The Malaysian Ministry of Education's PEERS program aims to improve sexuality education but faces challenges such as teacher reluctance due to inadequate training and cultural sensitivities. Parents also struggle to discuss these topics with their children, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and ill-equipped to recognize harmful situations.*
- *Need for Collaborative Solutions: A comprehensive approach involving educators, parents, healthcare providers, and media is essential for effective sexuality education. This includes revamping the curriculum with input from experts, enhancing teacher training, and fostering open communication between parents and children to empower them in making informed decisions about their sexual health.*

Most of the cases fell under the top three categories: either rape, physical sexual assault and incest. A separate 2022 report by ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF also revealed disturbing statistics.

It is estimated that 4% of internet users in the country are involved in online sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

Scaled to the population, this suggests that potentially 100,000 children may have experienced such harms annually.

It means that young children are easily the targets or victims of sexual exploitation, including blackmail and the non-consensual sharing of their sexual images.

Even though these acts are crimes, there is still the failure to lodge reports, when the crimes have become "normalised" or are viewed as "normal" by the victims.

Worse still, many caregivers don't report child sexual abuse that occurs because they are afraid of the consequences which might take place.

They might worry about getting in trouble, hurting the child, or facing the social stigma. Some simply don't believe reporting will help the victims or make things worse.

Another challenge is due to the young age, the child victims may also not understand what amounts to a sexual crime happening to them, or they may not know how to describe what had happened to them.

Despite the implementation of various measures by the government to combat child sexual abuse, alarmingly, cases involving child victims continue to persist.

This underscores the complex nature of the issue and the need for a multifaceted approach that goes beyond existing efforts.

To address the critical issue of sex abuse among children, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) has been implementing the PEERS program since 1989, encompassing students across all levels, from preschool to secondary school.

A core objective of this program is to enhance the effectiveness of sexuality education within the curriculum.

However, studies consistently indicate that many teachers experience reluctance towards teaching this subject.

It stems from various factors, including inadequate knowledge and skills in the area of sexuality education, as well as a lack of proper training to effectively deliver such sensitive content within the classroom setting.

The lack of solid knowledge related to the sexuality topic and embarrassment among teachers to discuss sex related matters is another obstacle to sexuality education.

Consequently, the teacher's delivery of the subject matter may be ambiguous, leading to pupil confusion and lack of understanding.

This can significantly hinder the effectiveness of the teaching and ultimately leave children ill-equipped to recognize and protect themselves from sexual abuse.

Back home, sex education remains a sensitive topic for many Malaysian families, with parents often feeling uncomfortable to discuss sexuality with their children due to various reasons, including cultural norms, religious sensitivities, personal beliefs, and lack of experience in their conversations.

This lack of open communication leaves children vulnerable and prey to sexual abuse as they are so naive to recognize and protect themselves from harmful situations.

While the discomfort of discussing sex with children is understandable, the potential benefits of open communication are significant.

Parents can overcome their discomfort by seeking resources and guidance on how to approach their children when it comes to sex education.

With readily available information from various sources, there is no excuse for parents to remain uninformed on the topic of sex.

Studies also have shown that children who receive comprehensive sex education from their parents are more likely to make informed decisions about their sexual health and relationships.

They are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as unprotected sex and early sexual activity.

Additionally, open communication about sex can help build trust and strengthen the parent-child relationship, making it easier for children to discuss sensitive topics in the future.

Teachers, like parents, also need solid knowledge to help them deliver this topic effectively using proper techniques and language that facilitate children to understand it.

It is vital for a teacher to possess relevant knowledge in ensuring the readiness and effectiveness in teaching this topic.

It is timely then for the Ministry of Education to revamp the current sex education topics in the curriculum.

Educationists and other stakeholders who are well versed in this area must be given their thoughts expanding the sufficient theoretical and practical training which can help teachers in the delivery of sexuality education topic.

Given the challenges identified, it is imperative that the Ministry of Education (MOE) to undertake a comprehensive review and revamp of the current sexuality education curriculum.

This process should actively involve input from educationists, psychologists, and other relevant stakeholders with expertise in child development, sexual health, and cultural sensitivity.

A crucial component of this reform should be the expansion of teacher training programs.

These programs must provide teachers with robust theoretical foundations in sexuality education, equip them with practical skills for effective classroom delivery, and address their concerns and anxieties related to teaching this sensitive subject.

This comprehensive approach will empower teachers to confidently and effectively deliver age-appropriate and culturally sensitive sexuality education, ultimately enhancing student learning and well-being.

Another pertinent idea to ensure children's healthy sexual development is that cooperation among all parties should be established and not limited to teachers and parents only.

Media, especially digital media, has a great influence on the sexual development of children and can have negative and positive effects depending on the discretion of the user.

To shape the morals of the children, mass media can be used as an effective tool to motivate them.

Preaching via the media can be performed through messages in their contents by channeling elements of reminder, admonition, advice and reflection.

In fact, it is easier for the children in particular to participate and understand the morality behind the material displayed compared to conventional preaching methods.

Given Malaysia's diverse multi-racial society with varying religious beliefs, cultural norms, and socioeconomic backgrounds, a successful sexuality education program must be culturally sensitive and integrate the socio-cultural values of all communities.

Healthcare providers can offer medical advice, screenings, and treatment for sexual health issues. The community can provide safe spaces for children to discuss sexuality and offer support services.

By working together, these different parties can create a more extensive and effective approach to sexual education and support, ultimately helping young children make informed decisions about sexuality, develop healthy relationships, and make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being.

This collaborative approach will empower children to navigate the complexities of sexuality, finally contributing to a healthier and caring society.

More importantly, it will save them from being easy prey as they know how to protect their body at any cost.

Dr Abdul Mutalib Embong is an English Lecturer at PPAL, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu.

Dr Noor Azimah Abd Aziz is a medical practitioner, Klinik Ikram, Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu and an active member of Mothers Against Pornography (MAP).

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