

# Too much, too young

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**Rising social ills and exposure to sexual imagery are at the forefront of why our students need to be better informed about their bodies. But with demands from all sides, how do we make sex education work?**

ON April 13, around 3.30pm, a 14-year-old girl was alone in her classroom in a secondary school in Rawang, Selangor, during recess. But things went horribly wrong when she became a target of her fellow schoolmates.

Not only was she raped while being watched by others in the empty classroom, she also had a 4cm-long pencil inserted into her vagina which resulted in great pain whenever she urinated.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the victim, who is an orphan, was reportedly said to be not aware of the foreign object in her vagina until it was discovered by doctors one week after the rape during the medical examination.



*Should we be teaching abstinence or safe sex to Malaysian teenagers in schools?*

She was also found to be a month pregnant.

Anger and outrage aside, what else does this case tell you?

It shows that the girl did not seem to know and understand her own body well. Is it due to lack of knowledge or plain naivety?

Whatever it is, no child deserves to be treated like that.

Now, the question is: would this still have happened if sex education or, rather, Pendidikan Kesihatan Reproduktif dan Sosial (PKRS or Reproductive, Social and Health Education) is being taught effectively in schools, as Deputy

Education Minister Dr Mohd Puad Zarkashi said at Dewan Negara recently?

And the closest we have to a definitive answer is: maybe.

Social ills are not necessarily due to the lack of sex education in schools as some individuals may think, as there are many other factors such as the offenders' social economic status, upbringing and exposure to pornography that could have contributed to the horrendous sex crime committed against the girl.



ASSOC PROF DR MARY HUANG

However, it is believed that she would have been more likely to speak up and protect herself from sexual violence had she been taught, for example, about the difference between “good touch” and “bad touch” from young, be it in schools or at the orphanage.

As a mother wrote to *The Star* recently says: “teaching schoolchildren how to protect themselves from sexual violence is also sex education”.

## **Raging hormones**

Many were caught by surprise when Dr Mohd Puad told Dewan Negara on Tuesday that PKRS had, in fact, been taught in schools since two decades ago.

The announcement came weeks after a contentious debate by various groups calling for sex education to be introduced in schools following several cases of abandoned babies.

Dr Mohd Puad, in his reply to Senator Doris Sophia Brodi on Tuesday, said PKRS had been taught in secondary schools since 1989, and since 1994 in primary schools.

He added that PKRS was covered in Biology, Science, Additional Science, Moral Education and Islamic education, among others. As such, he said, it was not necessary to introduce sex education as a specific subject.

If that is indeed the case, why isn't the general public aware of it?

So, here comes the burning question — is what we have in PKRS driving home the message?

“Some girls become sexually active from as young as 10 years old and get pregnant at 13. You will be shocked that some boys who fathered the babies are only 15 or 16,” says Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Centre of General Studies senior lecturer Dr Johari Talib.

“We don't want to admit it (teenage pregnancy) because we are a Muslim country and we have enough religion education. But how effective is the Islamic education or other religion education in schools?” he adds.

In response to that, he calls for a research to be conducted to gauge the effectiveness of the teaching of PKRS in schools.

As he sees it, sex education may not necessarily need to be taught as a specific subject.

More important, he says, is the delivery method.

“Do teachers have skills to “blend” knowledge about sexuality with moral and religion values? Do teachers have ideas of the right or appropriate methods, teaching aids in teaching sexuality? Does the module cover appropriate knowledge on sexuality such as sexual intercourse, contraceptive, private parts, sexual harassment?” Dr Johari asked.

A check by *StarEducation* with school teachers reveals that not many of them are aware of the PKRS module, let alone the school children.

A Science teacher in Klang, who has more than 30 years experience, says she has not seen the PKRS module. Neither has she received any circular or instruction from the headmaster to teach the module.

For Form Two student Cecilia Tan\* of the Klang Valley, the only time she learned about sexuality in primary school was during the “free time” after the UPSR examinations.

“One day after our UPSR exam, my form teacher suddenly asked if we had any questions related to sexuality, period, and so on.

“She said that would be the only opportunity for us to clear any doubts about sex as she said she would not be answering any sex-related questions after that,” she laments.

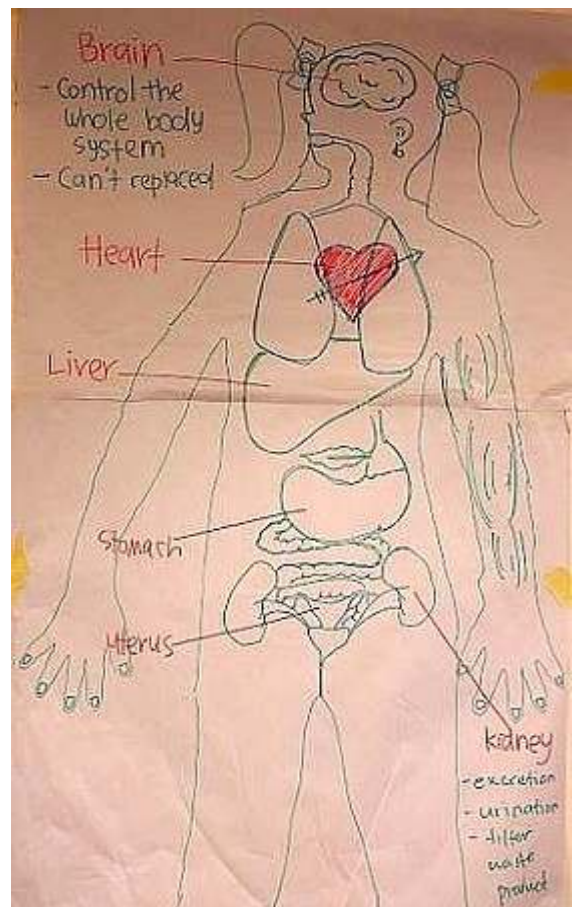
Commenting on that, Universiti Putra Malaysia Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Assoc Prof Dr Mary Huang says the Education Ministry must take the necessary steps to ensure that the module is being used in schools.

“We were told at a meeting that the period was usually taken up by more ‘important’ examination subjects. The minister must assure us that he will do something to ensure that schools use the periods for what they were assigned for,” she says.

### **Safe sex vs abstinence**

Abstinence, without a doubt, is what most Malaysian parents and religious groups would encourage the young people to practise.

But just switch on the radio to any station, and you’ll find most – if not all – the hits are rife with innuendoes at best, and downright obscenities at worst. Lyrics such as Nelly Furtado’s *Promiscuous* could even be considered “mild” by today’s standards.



*The curriculum for sex education has to be age appropriate*

*Promiscuous boy, you already know that I'm all yours. What you waiting for?*

*Promiscuous girl, you're teasing me, you know what I want, and I got what you need.*

With constant exposure to sexual imagery — be it in pop culture, on television, the Internet or even mobile phone applications — is it realistic to expect teenagers with raging hormones to stay abstinent?

Currently, questions are also being raised about whether the PKRS module reflects the current situation in Malaysian society — that our teenagers are becoming sexually active at a younger age, compared to their peers from decades past.

In view of that, it has been suggested that safe sex be taught in schools — which has raised a few eyebrows.

“For those who call for contraception to be taken off the shelves at 7-Eleven, please think twice about it,” says Dr Huang.

“I would love to teach abstinence to young people, but in reality you can't have it,” she says in an interview.

As she sees it, it is wrong to deprive the child's right to information.

“My stance is that young people should be given all the knowledge. Then based on whatever their religious beliefs, they make a choice. When they make a choice, it must be an informed choice.

“If they want to get involved in sex, they must be aware of what they are getting themselves into. They must also be aware that they can say 'no'.

“That's a woman's right. It's her body that she doesn't have to bow to the pressure of males,” she says.

PT Foundation Pink Triangle (MSM) programme acting executive director and programme director Raymond Tai says research has shown that where sex education is properly conducted, the young people tend to delay sexual experimentation.

According to studies conducted by Collins et al., 2005, and Kirby et al., 2006, comprehensive sex education successfully delayed sexual intercourse, reduced sexual behaviors and increased condom and contraceptive use among sexually active adolescents.

“Children should be taught all about sex from an early age. Knowledge is neutral and should never be censored.

“How the knowledge is applied depends on the person's values and upbringing. Hence the role of parents and religion is important in enabling children to apply the knowledge according to their own values,” he says.

Although most people are for the teaching of sex education in schools, there are some individuals who are of the view that teens would become promiscuous if they are taught about safe sex.

Unfortunately, says Dr Huang, the dividing voice is due to a lack of understanding.

“That’s because they don’t understand what sex education is about.

“The people who protest are so afraid that we are going to teach the young people the positions of sex and how to enjoy sex,” she says.

While safe sex is being promoted more aggressively in the media, there are, however, groups which advocate that abstinence is still the best approach when it comes to educating the young people about sexuality.

Just ask Focus on the Family (FOF) Malaysia general manager Benny Kong who strongly believes in No Apologies, a character-based sexuality programme that promotes abstinence from pre-marital sex.

“We don’t go around and preach that sex is bad.

“What we are saying is that the couple should wait until marriage,” he says.

“Abstinence should be given equal emphasis as safe sex as it (abstinence) is the best approach to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections or diseases,” he says.

*\*Name has been changed.*

**Source:** *The Sunday Star, 2 May 2010*