

Urgent need for sex education

As a campaign to address issues of unplanned pregnancies is launched, PRASANNA RAMAN learns from experts why sexual and reproductive health education is pertinent

SEATED in the gynaecologist's clinic and sticking out like a sore thumb, is a 13-year-old girl. As many expectant mothers there break into little conversations with other soon-to-be-mothers, the young teen sits sullen, with an older woman, who seems to have accompanied her there. They sit there, incommunicado, each adrift in their own thoughts. Once in a while, the girl tugs at her blouse to reveal the outline of a little blooming tummy. Still a child herself, shockingly, this girl is pregnant.

Even for Professor Jamiyah Hassan, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at the University Malaya Medical Centre, who has counselled a number of underage pregnant girls over the past few years, this girl's age comes as a shocker.

Sadly, she tells me, the young girl's predicament is not a result of rape, but of consensual sex.

"Most of the time when I get such young patients, it's already too late to do anything. Had this girl known about sexual and reproductive health and been armed with the right knowledge, she could have avoided this unwanted pregnancy," says Jamiyah who has, in the past 10 years, been actively educating both health care providers and the public on the need for sexual and reproductive

health to be discussed openly.

The 13-year-old is just one of the hundreds of teens in the country who're sexually active and perhaps pregnant.

The Cabinet was recently informed that there were 21 recorded cases of students who got pregnant out of wedlock between 2006 and now. Statistics from the Welfare Department found that this year alone, from January to April, 111 young girls were pregnant. The figure, however, is just the tip of the iceberg as many cases go unreported and pregnancies terminated.

A two-year survey done by the National Family Planning Development Board by end 1996 showed that more and more teens were having sex at a younger age.

With no help from the family, and no means to support oneself and the baby financially, baby dumping becomes an easy option out of fear of admonishment from family and the

emotional and physical responsibilities that come with raising a child.

"When young adolescents are empowered with the knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, they stand a better chance of making the right decisions when faced with passion-fuelled situations," adds Jamiyah, who is also a council member of the Asia Pacific Council of Contraception.

She believes that it's imperative that sexual and reproductive health education be taught at home first, before continuing it in schools and colleges. So how should parents go about discussing a topic that turns many a face scarlet red?

"Start them young. When they're five or six, they learn that boys and girls' private parts are different. This is when parents should tell boys that they cannot touch a girl's private part and girls be told that they shouldn't

touch the boys' too. That's all you need to tell them at that age," she says.

When the child starts school, and learns a little bit more about his body, he may be curious about where babies come from. It is then, she adds, that parents should talk about reproductive organs, and their differences between boys and girls. But there is no need to go into details about the birds and the bees.

Children at this age, agree psychologists and authors of parenting books, need not be given in-depth details as they take in only the information they are capable of processing.

"It's when they reach puberty, when their hormones make them feel more feminine or masculine and they develop sensual feelings and attraction for the opposite sex that a discussion about what's right and what's not should be had," says Jamiyah, who's

also a faculty member in Universiti Malaya. She adds they should be told about health issues too, such as sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), sexually transmitted-diseases (STDs), and HIV/AIDS.

Most teenagers, she adds, don't need lessons on sexual intercourse per se as they would have heard about it from friends, seen enough of it on TV, in movies and music videos as well as from all the graphic details available freely on the Internet.

Datuk Nor Ashikin Mokhtar, a senior obstetrician and gynaecologist, and founder of PrimaNora Medical Centre, can't agree more.

"Research shows that today's teenager is exposed to some 20,000 sex scenes annually. Even flashing lights, as one would see in music videos, or in pubs and discos, for example, can turn on the hormones," she says, adding that with all these stimuli, it may seem impossible to keep teens away from sex.

She recalls a recent incident when a caring teacher brought in a pregnant schoolgirl who was at a loss of what to do about her unwanted pregnancy.

"Without an option of what to do with her baby, and the emotional support, she would have just hidden the pregnancy. Eventually, it would be one more abandoned baby making the headlines in newspapers."

Jamiyah and Nor Ashikin

know that education on sexual and reproductive health can help deter unwanted pregnancies among teens.

What's most important, they say, is to teach abstinence.

"Most girls are fooled into thinking that the only way they can prove their love for a boy is to sleep with him. That's not love. Love is when you are mature enough, financially independent and have found the right partner to enter the sacred institution of marriage and start a family. So until you satisfy these conditions, abstinence is the way to go," adds Jamiyah.

Contraceptive methods are not the solution as teenagers should be taught the consequences of their actions and the responsibilities that come with pregnancy.

Welfare Department figures show that since 2005, there have been 407 abandoned babies in the country.

All parties — from parents, teachers and healthcare providers to society at large — will need to eventually, openly discuss sexual health and reproduction. The subject of an unwanted pregnancy is not just someone's skeleton in the closet.

"It costs taxpayers. In the United States, for example, the teen pregnancy crisis costs taxpayers an estimated US\$6.9 billion (RM21.7 billion) in lost tax revenues