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Hide and Seek with the Birds and the Bees

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Hide & Seek with **THE BIRDS** and **THE BEES**

Teenagers today are going behind their parents' back to explore sexuality – an area perceived as taboo by a majority of Asian parents. While the society adopts a secular approach in its forum-like discussions over the Internet, television and newspapers, parents are continually surprised at the behaviour of their teenage children. Farheen Mukri explores the teenage sexuality situation in Singapore and identifies how social service agencies, schools and parents can collectively address the problem.



A counsellor at Nulife Care and Counselling Services in Ang Mo Kio shared in a 2008 newspaper report that children as young as 10 years old nowadays are more aware of their sexual behaviours and tendencies than children of the same age in 2004.¹ While the numbers are still small, the trend appears to be on the rise. Interestingly, the model of sexual involvement has also moved away from the typical 'young-female-with-adult-male' combination. Teenagers are comfortable exploring one another these days, regardless of gender.

As testimony to this, 13-year-old female students in a local girls' secondary school have admitted during counselling sessions to committing sexual acts with same sex peers. They also openly shared that they would use the toilet cubicles in school to 'try out new things'.² Interestingly, these sexual trysts began at a tender age of 11!

While counsellors and social services provide for the teenage mum-to-be, she may be caught unprepared to face the life-long consequences of such sexual experimentation. A large number of social agencies and volunteer welfare groups advocate safe sex for teenagers in the form of promoting abstinence and caution (safe sex).³ Awareness programmes, campaigns and summer camps are frequently conducted with the common objective of raising alarm bells on the consequences of early sexual experimentation.

The increasing number of teens landing in sexual misadventures remains of great concern even after the launch of a sexuality education programme by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in local schools. The programme – known as *Growing Years* – has been conducted by external service providers such as Singapore Planned Parenthood Association (SPPA) and the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). With the recent announcement⁴ on the suspension of all external sexuality education programmes, parents are now taking a more vested interest in the course content of sexual education. With the new announcement, parents now have access to what is being taught in school and can opt their child out of the sex education programme entirely.

Role of Parents

Some parents are uncomfortable with the extent of sexuality education programmes implemented in schools. While the state recognises that 'parents are ultimately responsible for their children',⁵ classroom teachers and external education vendors assume direct responsibility to every child due to close contact

in schools. On top of this, easy access to the Internet enables students to access relevant information and increase their knowledge. Whether sex education is given in schools, students *will* go out there and find out what they are curious about. The question is in the way such information is conveyed; its scope and depth as well as whether an element of societal responsibility exists.

Another report⁶ purports that parents these days may not be the right people to convey information regarding sexuality to their children. This sentiment is shared by Madam Evelyn Khong, a manager and family life educator at Fei Yue Community Services, a centre that conducts sexuality education classes for students. She says parents are uncomfortable talking about sex due to their upbringing by traditional and conservative parents.

A report by Fei Yue Community Services in 2007 showed that 82% of youth feel uncomfortable discussing intimate issues with an adult.⁷ Majority of those who spoke to adults only confided in their parents – with 75 out of 110 youth preferring to speak to their mothers instead of their fathers. With regard to sex education programmes, youth generally prefer to turn to professional organisations compared to teachers or parents.⁸ This is in line with a 2005 report by Imelda Lee which stated that '9 out of 10 youth prefer to talk to their inexperienced (and often ill-informed) peers about sex and sexuality rather than with their parents or teachers.'⁹ In both instances, there was a preference to talk to others other than their parents or teachers. A 2001 study also highlighted that peer-led sex education may be more effective in assisting teenagers develop skills and set their own standards of behaviour compared to adult educators.¹⁰ Although many children and youth homes successfully tap on youth volunteers and mentors, the number of teenagers engaging in early sexual involvement continues to rise.¹¹

Local youth organisations like Pertapis, Care Singapore and BABES (a helpline for teenage mums) find that peer mentorship is more effective in addressing delicate teenage issues than sex education conducted in schools; which is mainly carried out by adult teachers.

Social Influences

Teenagers easily form online affiliations that would eventually lead them to become more experimentative, sexually. This trend is not new but has escalated over the last 15 years. Casual meetings are planned during internet chat sessions where both parties may

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likely lie about their age and arrange for a blind date. Subsequent meetings lead to more sexual involvement. A disturbing trend in these cases is when either party moves on to explore other sexual liaisons in a matter of weeks.

According to teenagers aged 15 to 18 years old, 'advice' given is often very top-down, condescending and without empathy for the development of sexual feelings.¹² The Student Health Survey in 2006 revealed that 24% of youth in Secondary 3 and 4 engage in sexual intercourse more than five times in a year.¹³ A majority said 'it just happened' (62%), 57% said they did it because 'it felt good' and 47% reported to have experimented 'out of curiosity'.¹⁴ Youth are also more sexually active at an earlier age due to the media and peer pressure.

A study¹⁵ commissioned by Beyond Social Services carried out by PromiseWorks, recommended how community initiatives at the grassroots level could be strengthened to better protect children at risk of abuse. It is unfortunate that despite our 'safe society', there is still the possibility of teenagers facing sexual risks from predators. The study explored the practice tensions in Singapore's child protection work through in-depth interviews and a roundtable discussion. The study recommended an action plan that aimed to equip children with adequate sex-related choices and information.

Public places frequented by youth such as the foyer outside Orchard Cineleisure, Youth Park, the underground subway crossing Citylink to Suntec City and Marina Park all witness high youth traffic even at night. More teenagers between 13 and 17 years old are staying out till the early hours and have little desire to go home. Besides enjoying their 'hangouts', perhaps our youth are making another point – 'home is not exactly where their heart is'. It is evident that lifestyle

choices of parents impact heavily on the home as a place for teenagers to return to. The lack of family closeness no doubt exacerbates a loss of direction for them.

Sex Education

The importance of sex education is increasing. According to the Department of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Control (DSC), the incidence of STIs among youth rose between 3% to 5% between 2002 and 2007.¹⁶ Besides subjecting themselves to the risk of contracting STIs, more teenage girls are also having a higher number of abortions and unwanted pregnancies. For example, in just two years, the number of abortions increased from 1279 in 2005 to 1391 in 2007.¹⁷ Reported teenage pregnancies, also increased from 731 in 2003 to 838 in 2006 – indicating that more teenagers are having unprotected sex.¹⁸ At about the same time, the number of STIs also increased by 16% (678 in 2005¹⁹ to 787 in 2008²⁰) for youth aged between 10 to 19 years. While social service agencies are providing early intervention in youth sexuality issues, is enough being done?

There are currently several outlets for sex education. Singapore Planned Parenthood Association (SPPA) addresses premarital sex amongst upper secondary school students. Family Life Society takes pro-life and pro-family angles and has framed its programme in 'secular moral philosophy' covering areas like pornography; boy-girl relationships; pregnancy; abortion and the value of abstinence. AWARE's comprehensive sexuality education programme focuses on a 'positive attitude towards sexuality' and the consequences of teenage pregnancy and STDs. It also covers topics on HIV and AIDS, risky sex and explains other STDs that youth may not be aware of. Action for Aids advises youths to draw the line between having good clean fun and getting someone pregnant. Especially working with AIDS patients, volunteer Justin Ng, who volunteers with AIDS patients, cautions: "A teenager who commits a crime can be placed on probation but if you get AIDS, it is really a death sentence."

There are also other programmes run by the Health Promotion Board (HPB), Family Service Centres as well as a list of services for women, available through the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and National Council of Social Service (NCSS)

Helplines of NUR,²¹ BABES,²² Crisis Shelters²³ and the 24-hour service National Pregnancy Helpline

for mums-to-be, collectively provide the necessary emergency contact. Despite all these, there are more and more younger teenagers getting sexually involved. Are we missing a 'disconnect' between our provision of services and the sexual trends set by our youth?

Efforts by social service agencies can achieve only that much if other factors on the ground continue growing in the opposite direction. Justin Ng shares in a 2006 interview²⁴ that while many issues need to be addressed, his target group is the out-of-school youths. He shares that while it is almost impossible to ask 'at-sexual-risk' people especially students in university hostels to abstain from sex, he provides them information on proper condom usage instead.

So while studies point to the fact that parents may not be the best educators, and despite several social service provisions being made to address the issue, everyone is awaiting for a 'solution' to surface. Maybe then sex education is perceived as 'good-to-have' and whether it achieves any intended result is dependent on societal trends. Parents, the media and schools all impact teenagers in diverse ways that cannot be quantified.

Conclusion

There is no simple solution to deal with the factors accounting for teenagers who are dabbling in sexual activities. The social service sector and schools weave a support network of sorts to educate youth and ameliorate the consequences of wanton behaviour. We might be missing deeper and more fundamental issues, particularly those relative to family pathology or incompetent parenting as a root cause. Perhaps it is time to review the total strategy in dealing with teenage sexuality issues, with greater focus on supporting families as whole units rather than focusing primarily on teenagers. ❖

¹ *The Malaysian Insider*, "More Singapore children having sex at earlier age," December 14, 2008 <www.themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/world/14187-moresingapore-children-having-sex-at-earlier-age>

² Interview with School Counsellor of a CHIJ School, May 16, 2009

³ Organisations like *Focus on the Family*, Family Service Centres (FSCs) and faith based groups.

⁴ *The Straits Times*, "Education Ministry spells out approach to sex education," May 10, 2009, A6

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Straits Times*, "Sex education: Experts identify 2 'weak links'," May 23, 2009

⁷ Yow Lin, A, "Sexual Involvement in Youth: Factors and Needs" (Singapore: Fei Yue Community Services, 2007)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Imelda Lee, "Clueless or Plain Naïve," *SALT Magazine*, September - October 2005

¹⁰ A.R. Mellanby, R.G. Newcombe, J. Rees and J.H. Tripp, "A comparative study of peer-led and adult-led school sex education," in *Health Education Research: Theory and Practice*, Vol. 16 No. 4 (2001): 481-492

¹¹ Talkback, "More children having sex at earlier age," 2006 Lifestyle survey by Associate Professor Munidasa Winslow from Raffles Hospital <<http://talkback.stomp.com.sg/forums/showthread.php?t=54696>> (accessed June 30, 2009)

¹² Based on an informal interview with eight students from a local secondary school, conducted in June 2009.

¹³ Health Promotion Board (HPB), Student Health Survey 2006, <www.hpb.gov.sg/hpb/default.asp?pg_id=3308> (accessed June 13, 2009)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Beyond Social Services, "Enhancing Community Collaboration in Child Protection: Report to Beyond Social Services, PromiseWorks," (June 2006) <http://www.beyondresearch.sg/STUDIES-Enhancing_Community_Collaboration.pdf> (accessed June 14, 2009)

¹⁶ The DSC Clinic is a public operated clinic for the diagnosis, treatment and control of sexually transmitted infections (STI) in Singapore. Funded by the Ministry of Health, it provides services at a nominal fee that is affordable to foreign workers and locals alike. The DSC website provides information about STIs, common infections, safer sex, sexual health screening, etc.

¹⁷ *The Straits Times*, "Ministry of Health Report," July 25, 2007, H6

¹⁸ AsiaOne Health, "Teen sex infections likely to hit new high," April 8, 2008 <<http://www.asiaone.com/Health/News/Story/A1Story20080407-58557.html>>

¹⁹ Singapore's 2nd Periodic Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006

²⁰ *The Straits Times*, "Sex education needed to counter worrying trends," May 22, 2009, A6

²¹ Integrated Programme for Troubled Teenagers, NUR provides an integrated service for Malay speaking youth below 21 years of age who require counselling. The NUR helpline (Tel: 97777 687) which assists callers to work through their problems, is managed by PPIS Jurong Family Service Centre (FSC). Referrals are made to any one of the five NUR drop-in centres if the youth require more intervention.

²² Set up essentially for teens with children; helpline 1800-TEENMOM and 1800-833 6666 as well as SMS line: 8111 3535 serves to help teenagers who are stuck with the burden of pregnancy and unable to seek help and support from their family.

²³ Crisis Shelters provide temporary abodes to individuals and families in times of crisis. It provides protection, practical assistance, and emotional support to victims of family violence and their family members to help them recover from their trauma. They can be reached through a FSC (1800-838 0100) or the Police.

²⁴ Anne Ng, "Aid For Aids," Interview in *LIME Magazine* on Youth.sg website, March 6, 2006



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