



Photo: Mr and Mrs Stanley Belliston

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## Kids, let's talk about sex

by Lin Weijian

Being a virgin is not cool. And the sooner you lose your virginity, the better. That seems to be the notion some teenagers in Singapore subscribe to, if the latest statistics on teenage sex are anything to go by.

Last year, there were 83 reported cases of statutory rape - defined by the law as girls under the age of 14 having sex, regardless of whether the act is consensual and if they knew their partners. In 2004, there were only nine such cases.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the perpetrators in most of these cases are teenage boys aged 13 to 19, many of whom are known to their 'victims'.

Although the number of teenage births - those involving girls under 19 - here has held steady, averaging 800 to 850 cases a year between 2004 and 2008, counsellors that LifeStyle spoke to are concerned.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services at the Singapore Children's Society, says: "Five years ago, the teenagers I saw at my centres who engaged in some form of sexual act were usually 15 or 16 years old, but now I'm seeing more who are 13 or 14." She adds that these acts include heavy petting and sexual intercourse.

Another fact: It is not always the boys who initiate the sex. She recounts a case she handled three years ago when a 15-year-old girl wrote to her wanting to know how she could ask her boyfriend to have sex with her as all her friends in school had already experienced it.

The president of the Singapore Planned Parenthood Association, Mr Edward Ong, shares her observations. He says: "We are concerned that more youths are engaging in sexual activities that could lead to an increase in unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections."

He says that in the last few years, he has also seen teenage boys who told him that it was their girlfriends who wanted to have sex. His association is compiling numbers on teenage sexual activity, the results of which will be ready later this year.

The president of Focus On The Family, which aims to improve family life, Mrs Joanna Koh-Hoe, lists 'increased exposure to sex and at a younger age due to accessibility to the media' as among the reasons more teenagers are engaging in sexual activities.

She adds: "This is not helped by the fact that we have more dual-income households where parental supervision is limited."

The legal age for sexual intercourse in Singapore is 16. As for getting hitched, anyone below 18 who wishes to get married must obtain parental consent and, along with mum and dad, attend an interview and counselling session by the Registry of Marriages before a special marriage licence may be granted.

With youths these days experimenting with sex at an earlier age, Dr Balhetchet suggests that parents should discuss the topic 'before their children start wanting to have a girlfriend or boyfriend'.

She advises that any conversations on sex should take place in a less formal environment where their children feel comfortable. "Don't make it a lecture and allow them to ask any question they want. Let them voice their views, and from there, parents can give the necessary advice."

Focus On The Family, meanwhile, advocates the three As of sex education: Approach,

Age-appropriate and Affirming.

Mrs Koh-Hoe says: "Approach the subject casually and naturally while being intentional, and capitalise on teachable moments."

Her organisation has come up with a programme that advises parents on when to say what to children of various age groups. For example, topics such as gender identity and the privacy of genital areas can be taught to children aged three to nine, while things such as physical changes, value of relationships and dangers of sexual experimentation are suitable topics for those reaching or undergoing puberty.

"Dating and emotional and physical boundaries can be shared with children in their adolescent years of 14 to 18," Mrs Koh-Hoe adds.

Mr Ong agrees: "Some parents tend to dismiss any question on sex that their children ask, when that is actually an opportunity to start giving them information."

With Singapore society still largely conservative, parents are divided on whether to leave sex education to the schools.

Executive assistant Serena Ho, 44, is happy to let her son, 19, and daughter, 17, pick up the necessary knowledge from their teachers. "They are already learning about things such as the human body during science classes, so I don't really have to talk to them about sex at home."

Her views are in contrast to those of Mrs Susan Belliston, 46, who has three children - two boys and a girl - aged eight to 10. She is a Singaporean married to an American.

"The teachers in school serve as educators of the biological and physiological aspects of the reproductive process, but the home is the best place to talk about sex from the standpoint of it being an act between two people who love and respect each other," she says.

The general manager at a publishing firm adds that "the teaching of love versus lust, and sex as an act of love instead of just being a physical act, is our responsibility as parents".

She started talking to her children about sex when they "learnt about the birds and the bees in kindergarten and came home to ask questions such as where do babies come from".

Her husband, Stanley, 46, who is selfemployed, says: "They know the proper terms for private parts and we explained the two functions - to pee and to make a baby - but did not go into the details about the second because their reaction told us they were not ready then."

The couple, who usually talk to their children at their daily "dining table discussions" have recently started talking about puberty as their daughter, Cameron, eight, is showing signs of bodily change.

"At their age now, we have a simple rule: Private parts are private and are not to be shared with, shown to or touched by anyone else," Mr Belliston says.

While the Bellistons rely mostly on their own knowledge when they talk to their children, Mrs Maggie Tay bought a book to show her then 10-year-old son "the details of sexual intercourse, how a baby develops as a result and even how a baby is delivered, all in pleasant pictures". He is now 17.

Her reason? "To educate him on the moral aspects of sex and talk about the importance of respecting his body and those of others," says the 44-year-old who also has a daughter aged 20.

As much as she emphasises the importance of not having premarital sex, she also tells her children about contraception. "It is knowledge for them," she says.

Madam Norhazah Wati, 39, on the other hand, prefers to tell her children not to have any physical contact should they have a boyfriend or girlfriend. The pre-school teacher, whose daughter and son are 13 and 12, encourages her children to ask her any questions they have about sex.

"It is a good way to find out what's happening in their lives, so we can detect any signs of unhealthy behaviour sooner. We also build good parent-child bonds when we respect their thoughts and listen to their views," she says.

Although some people feel that teaching teenagers about contraception is indirectly condoning their behaviour, experts believe there is more to gain from doing so.

"We should be talking to teenagers about the use of contraception, including how useful or foolproof they really are and what their intended use is," says Mrs Koh-Hoe.

"Our children need as much knowledge as possible but we need to ensure that they are also equipped with the right values to make sound decisions."

Mr Ong cites a report on how some schools in the United States that teach sex education, including the use of contraception, reported a lower rate of pregnancy among students than schools that did not.

Teenagers also face the danger of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) from unprotected sex.

Dr Wee Horng Yen, 40, consultant and director of the Women's Wellness Centre at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, warns that STIs can "scar people for life".

He explains: "Some STIs such as gonorrhoea and chlamydia can lead to blocked fallopian tubes that may result in infertility, if untreated. Some patients may also suffer prolonged or chronic pelvic pain for the rest of their lives."

He notes that teenage girls tend to have partners that are older than them. "Consequently, these partners are sexually more experienced and tend to have had more sexual partners," he says.

The Ministry of Education offers the Sexuality Education Programme to students at all government primary and secondary schools and junior colleges.

There are also two co-curricular packages. The main one, Growing Years, addresses the intellectual, emotional, social, physical and ethical aspects of sexuality and teaches students the importance of building healthy relationships and making responsible decisions. It is introduced at upper primary to post-secondary levels.

The second programme, Breaking Down Barriers, focuses on imparting skills such as decision-making, assertiveness and knowing how to say no to sexual advances.

This package is taught to Secondary 3 and first-year students in the 17 junior colleges and one centralised institute here.

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