

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Do mothers talk to their daughters about sexuality?

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ABSTRACT

Background: Online sexual grooming is now widespread, and parents have to monitor and talk to their children about these issues and warn them against it. **Aims and Objectives:** This study was to know whether mothers talk to their young daughters about sex and sexuality to looks at how mothers perceive giving sexual education to children of a younger age. **Materials and Methods:** In this cross-sectional study, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 76 participants who have daughters from 7 to 12 years old. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences V.19. Median score for knowledge, attitude, and practice was compared and correlated with each other. **Results:** More than one-third of mothers had poor knowledge on sexuality and sexual abuse. More than one-third also showed poor practice in giving out sexual education. However, more than 80% showed a good attitude. There was a significant association between knowledge and practice as well as education level and knowledge. Age and knowledge had significant association too. There was no significant association between age, employment status, education level, and financial status with attitude. **Conclusion:** We believe that by increasing mothers' knowledge on sexuality education, more girls in early adolescence will have first-hand exposure to sexual education from their own mothers in a private and more personalized atmosphere rather than in a classroom setting.


KEY WORDS: Adolescence; Environment; Parents; Sexual Abuse and Sexuality Education

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, currently, has a population of about 30 million and about a third of them are children.^[1] Being children, they are unable to communicate effectively and leaves a huge window for a child to be abused.^[2] In a statistics of sexual abuse in Malaysia, 44.5% of cases involved children below the age of 16. Based on the Department of Social Welfare statistics from 2010 to 2013, there were 14,662 child abuse cases.^[3] Royal Malaysian Police data in 2015, reported about 1,619 cases of child sexual abuse.^[2] It is very difficult to ascertain the

real number of victims because children cannot make reports and some parents refuse to believe their children. There were also cases of mothers who retracted their reports because the person who sexually abused the child is a close family member. There were 4,767 cases of incest reported from year 2,000 to early 2015.^[4] According to the National Child Abuse Statistics, victims knew their perpetrator, and 68% were abused by family members.^[5]

Sexual education in Malaysia is only available for secondary school children. Even so, it is only presented as a subject in the science curriculum. There was resistance on behalf of parents to have sexual education taught in schools. For primary school as well as kindergarten, the source of information could only come from the parents and their teachers. There is, however, no national curriculum on sexual education for these young girls.^[6] The case of Richard Huckle, the pedophile who kept over 2,00,000 pornographic images of Malaysian children serves, as a grim reminder of how vulnerable our children

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are, especially those of younger age and coming from a lower socioeconomic background. The modus operandi of these pedophiles is gaining the trust of the family and the targeted victim and also sexual grooming.

Online sexual grooming is widespread and difficult to control. Parents have to be more diligent in monitoring their children's social media activities and who their friends are. Parents should talk to their children about these issues and warn them against it. There should be a family accepted rule that there will be no secrets within family members or with a few trusted family members. The recent bill tabled by the Malaysian Parliament illustrates the severity of the condition. The bill among others proposes to introduce specific offences against child grooming, which relates to the building of an emotional relationship with a child to pave the way for sexual abuse of the child. Those who sexually communicate with a child will face a maximum 3-year jail term, while those who engage in child grooming which covers communication with a child with the intention to commit offences related to child porn or child sexual assault will face a maximum 5 years jail term and whipping. Anyone who meets a child, after child grooming with the intention to sexually assault the child or to commit child porn offences, will be punished with a maximum 10 years jail term and whipping.^[7]

Parents should be the children's earliest teacher for sexuality education, especially when involving very young children. A home environment is best to start the sexuality education. Children should be taught the private areas and taught about safe and unsafe touch. They should be taught on how to express their emotion and to tell a trusted adult if they are being abused. They have to be trained to recognize unacceptable situations even when it was performed by someone close to them as described by Nen *et al.*^[8] It has been noted that adolescents' satisfaction with maternal relationship was predictive of the occurrence of sexual intercourse and pregnancy. The more satisfied adolescents were with their relationship with their mothers, the less likely they were to initiate sexual activity and become pregnant.^[9] Therefore, it is advisable that mothers to young teenage girls develop a healthy relationship in general with their daughters especially in issues involving sexuality. Mothers' perception does play a role in a teenage decision when faced with sexual risk-taking behavior. Sexuality education should be first taught by parents in the privacy of their homes rather than in a classroom.^[10] Therefore, this present study wants to see whether mothers spend the time to talk to their daughters about sexuality and to see what their perception about it is?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a cross-sectional study design by which the data were collected using self-administered questionnaires given to the participating mothers. This study was conducted at

Johor, Malaysia. Majority of the population in this village were Malay mothers with daughters aged range from 7 to 12 years old. 76 of them were selected based on the inclusion criteria such as those who were agreed for this study and who can communicate in English or Malay language.

Study Variables

Table 1 is the details showing study variables.

Data Collection

This study uses a self-administered questionnaire developed after an extensive literature search. It consists of four components designated to evaluate the sociodemographic characteristics, mothers' knowledge and attitude about sexual abuse and sexuality education as well as the practice of giving out sexuality education to their own daughters.

Data Analysis

Raw data were processed, sorted out and keyed in to Microsoft Excel before it was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, USA). Median score was used as a cutoff point to classify knowledge, attitude as well as practice into good and poor category. The association between knowledge level, attitude level, and practice of giving out sexuality education with various independent variables were determined using Chi-square test with $P < 0.05$ was considered to be statistically significant.

RESULTS

The majority of the respondents were aged 36–45 years old, comprises up to 72.4% followed by mothers who aged 26–35 years old (13.2%), more than 45 years old, (11.8%) and the least was among mothers who aged 18–25 years old, (2.6%). Respondents employed were higher in percentage, (65.8%) while unemployed respondents comprised up to (34.2%). The highest number of respondents had their education level up to tertiary level, (57.9%) and most of the respondents have their monthly family income more than RM4000, (42.1%).

Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice on Sexuality Education

Knowledge and attitude based questions were given in the questionnaire to assess the knowledge and attitude level on sexual abuse and sexuality education among the mothers. Practice questions were also given in the questionnaires to assess whether the mothers apply the correct measures in practicing giving out sexuality education to their daughter. They have been given a "true" and "false" answer options, and the results were shown in Figure 1.

Table 1: Study variables

Variables	Conceptual definition	Operational definition	Measurement
Sociodemographic data			
Age	Respondent completed years	Obtained through questionnaire	Select the category of age Categorical data
Religion	System of beliefs and practices	Obtained through questionnaire	Islam Hindu Categorical data
Race	Physical appearance	Obtained through questionnaire	Malay Indian Categorical data
Employment status	The status of an economically active person with respect her employment	Obtained through questionnaire	Employed Unemployed Categorical data
Education level	Basic education as regards the level of education	Obtained through questionnaire	Primary level (primary school) Secondary level (secondary school) Tertiary (institutes of higher education) Categorical data
Family monthly income	Monthly monetary payment received by both husbands and wives	Obtained through questionnaire	Less than RM1000 RM1000 to RM2000 RM2001 to RM4000 More than RM4000 Categorical data
Knowledge	Classification of respondents' level on understanding sexual abuse and sexual education	Based on the obtained score after answering the questionnaire	Depending on questions
Attitude	Classification of respondents' behavior toward sexual abuse and sexual education	Based on the obtained score after answering the questionnaire	Strongly agree/Agree/Neutral/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Practice	Classification of respondents' own practices toward giving out sexual education to their daughters	Based on the obtained score after answering the questionnaire	Yes/No

Association between Age and Knowledge

Table 2 summarized that most of the respondents who had good knowledge about sexual abuse and sexuality education were in the age category of 36–45 years old which was 50% that showed the association between age and knowledge was statistically significant.

Association between Employment Status and Knowledge

The association between employment status and knowledge was statistically insignificant where only 48.7% respondents were employed and had good knowledge about sexual abuse and sexuality education whereas the remaining 21.1% were unemployed as shown in Table 3.

Association between Education Level and Knowledge

Majority of the respondents with good knowledge about sexual abuse and sexuality education were those who had tertiary level of education which was 48.7%, followed by a secondary and primary level of education level (19.7% and 1.3%), respectively. Therefore, the association between education level and knowledge was statistically significant as shown in Table 4.

Table 2: Association between age and knowledge

Age category (years old)	Knowledge frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
18–25	0 (0.0)	2 (2.6)	2 (2.6)	0.03
26–35	6 (7.9)	4 (5.3)	10 (13.2)	
36–45	38 (50.0)	17 (22.4)	55 (72.4)	
>45	9 (11.8)	0 (0.0)	9 (11.8)	

Table 3: Association between employment status and knowledge

Employment status	Knowledge frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
Employed	37 (48.7)	13 (17.1)	50 (65.8)	0.262
Unemployed	16 (21.1)	10 (13.2)	26 (34.2)	

Association between Family Monthly Income and Knowledge

Most of the respondents who had good knowledge earned family monthly income of more than RM4000 was 35.5%. It was then

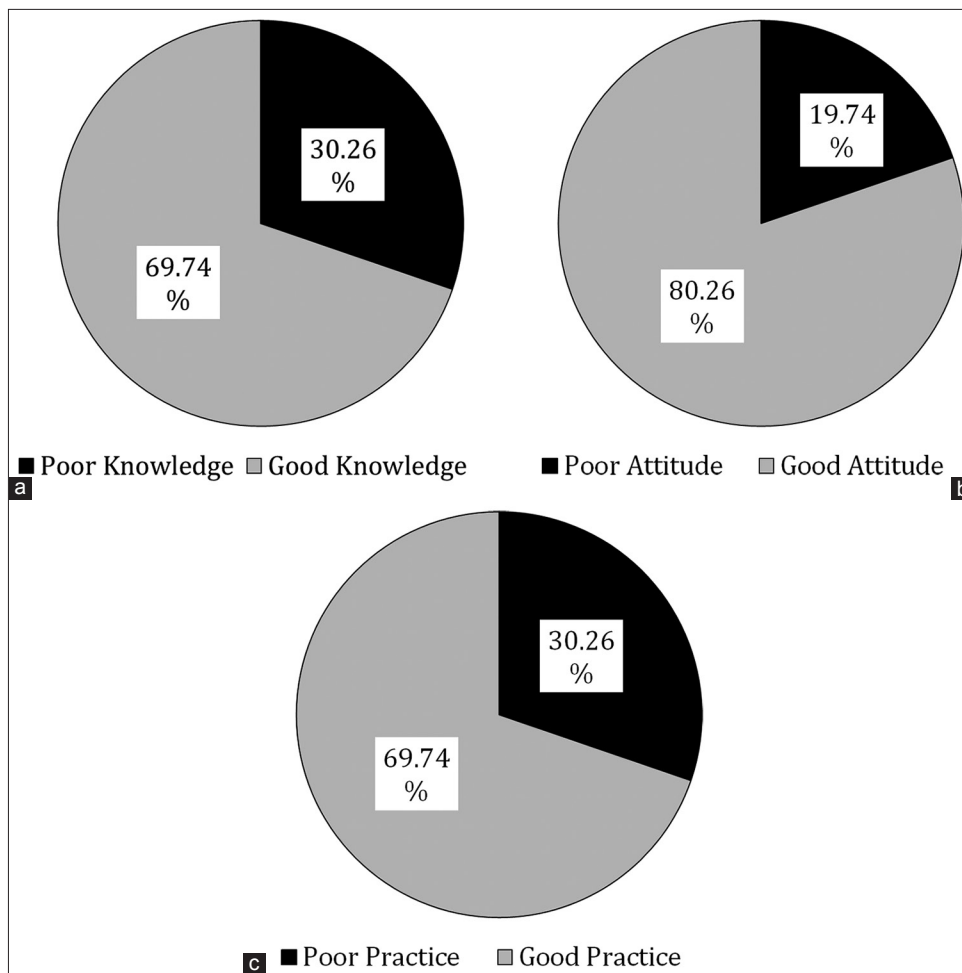


Figure 1: (a-c) Knowledge, attitude, and practice level of respondents in sexuality education

flowed by the family monthly income category of RM2001 to RM4000, RM1000 to RM2000, and <RM1000 with (19.7%, 10.5%, and 3.9%), respectively, as shown in Table 5.

Association between Age and Attitude

Respondents who had good attitude toward sexuality education, were 36–45 years old (59.2%), more than 45 years old (10.5%), followed by age category of 26–35 years old (7.9%), and 18–25 years old (2.6%), respectively. The association between age and attitude was not statistically significant as shown in Table 6.

Association between Employment Status and Attitude

Among the respondents who had good attitude toward sexuality education, 51.3% of them were employed whereas 28.9% were unemployed. Hence, the association between employment status and attitude was not statistically significant as shown in Table 7.

Association between Education Level and Attitude

Most respondents who had good attitude toward sexuality education were those who had a tertiary level of education

Table 4: Association between education level and knowledge

Education level	Knowledge frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
Primary	1 (1.3)	3 (3.9)	4 (5.3)	0.003
Secondary	15 (19.7)	13 (17.1)	28 (36.8)	
Tertiary	37 (48.7)	7 (9.2)	44 (57.9)	

Table 5: Association between family monthly income and knowledge

Family monthly income	Knowledge frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
<RM1000	3 (3.9)	4 (5.3)	7 (9.2)	0.018
RM1000-RM2000	8 (10.5)	9 (11.8)	17 (22.4)	
RM2001-RM4000	15 (19.7)	5 (6.6)	20 (26.3)	
>RM4000	27 (35.5)	5 (6.6)	27 (35.5)	

background (44.7%), followed with the secondary and primary level of education (30.3% and 5.3%), respectively, as shown in Table 8.

Association between Family Monthly Income and Attitude

The association between family monthly income and attitude was statistically insignificant with 32.9% earned family monthly income of more than RM4000 had good attitude toward sexuality education whereas 21.1%, 19.7%, and 6.6% respondents with good attitude toward sexuality education earned family monthly income of RM2001 to RM4000, RM1000 to RM2000, and <RM1000, respectively, as shown in Table 9.

Association between Age and Practice

Respondents of about 50% with good practice of giving out sexuality education were from the age category of 36–45 years old. No respondents from aged between 18 and 25 years old had a good practice on sexual education,

Table 6: Association between age and attitude

Age category (years old)	Attitude frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
18–25	2 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	2 (2.6)	0.309
26–35	6 (7.9)	4 (5.3)	10 (13.2)	
36–45	45 (59.2)	10 (13.2)	55 (72.4)	
>45	8 (10.5)	1 (1.3)	9 (11.8)	

Table 7: Association between employment status and attitude

Employment status	Attitude frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
Employed	39 (51.3)	11 (14.5)	50 (65.8)	0.492
Unemployed	22 (28.9)	4 (5.3)	26 (34.2)	

Table 8: Association between education and attitude

Education level	Attitude frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
Primary	4 (5.3)	0 (0.0)	4 (5.3)	0.523
Secondary	23 (30.3)	5 (6.6)	28 (36.8)	
Tertiary	34 (44.7)	10 (13.2)	44 (57.9)	

Table 9: Association between family monthly income and attitude

Family monthly income	Attitude frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
<RM1000	5 (6.6)	2 (2.6)	7 (9.2)	0.772
RM1000-RM2000	15 (19.7)	2 (2.6)	17 (22.4)	
RM2001-RM4000	16 (21.1)	4 (5.3)	20 (26.3)	
>RM4000	25 (32.9)	7 (9.2)	32 (42.1)	

and thus the association between these two factors was not statistically significant as shown in Table 10.

Association between Employment Status and Practice

Employed respondents had good practice about giving out sexuality education (46.1%) while 23.7% who also had good practice about sexuality education were unemployed. Hence, the association between employment status and practice was not statistically significant as shown in Table 11.

Association between Education Level and Practice

Many respondents who were classified into the group of those who had good practice in giving out sexuality education had a tertiary level of education background, which was 44.7% and the association between education level and practice was statistically significant as shown in Table 12.

Association between Family Monthly Income and Practice

The association between family monthly income and practice was statistically insignificant with 32.9% respondents have family income greater than RM4000 had a good practice on sexuality education followed by respondents with family income RM2001 to RM4000 (17.1%) as shown in Table 13.

Table 10: Association between age and practice

Age (years old)	Practice frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
18–25	0 (0.0)	2 (2.6)	2 (2.6)	0.103
26–35	7 (9.2)	3 (3.9)	10 (13.2)	
36–45	38 (50.0)	17 (22.4)	55 (72.4)	
>45	8 (10.5)	1 (1.3)	9 (11.8)	

Table 11: Association between employment status and practice

Employment status	Practice frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
Employed	35 (46.1)	15 (19.7)	50 (65.8)	0.945
Unemployed	18 (23.7)	8 (10.5)	26 (34.2)	

Table 12: Association between education level and practice

Education level	Practice frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
Primary	0 (0.0)	4 (5.3)	4 (5.3)	0.005
Secondary	19 (25.0)	9 (11.8)	28 (36.8)	
Tertiary	34 (44.7)	10 (13.2)	44 (57.9)	

Table 13: Association between family monthly income and practice

Family monthly income	Practice frequency (%)		Total (%)	P (0.05)
	Good	Poor		
<RM1000	4 (5.3)	3 (3.9)	7 (9.2)	0.570
RM1000-RM2000	11 (14.5)	6 (7.9)	17 (22.4)	
RM2001-RM4000	13 (17.1)	7 (9.2)	20 (26.3)	
>RM4000	25 (32.9)	7 (9.2)	32 (42.1)	

DISCUSSION

The results showed that about one-third of mothers had poor knowledge on sexual education. Out of this, from the questionnaire given, 36.8% have not heard about pedophilia, and 14.5% were not aware that their daughter is vulnerable for sexual abuse. More worrying is the attitude of more than one-third of mothers who felt that sexual education should only be taught when the children are ready for marriage. Almost a quarter felt it was too embarrassing to talk about sexuality to their children especially on talking about human reproduction.

With the rising numbers of child sexual abuse and incest, it is of utmost importance that mothers should equip themselves with enough knowledge of possible harm that could befall their children.^[11] Parents especially mothers to daughters should also have the skills to convey about sexuality and sexual education to their children. Their children should be taught to identify their body parts especially their genital areas and areas that are not supposed to be touched. The “safe and unsafe” touch area should be emphasized.^[12]

Mothers should be taught these skills and should undergo some kind of training or parenting skills until they feel confident to talk about sexuality to their children and not feel embarrassed.^[13] This study is conducted among mothers with daughters whose age ranged between 7 years and 12 years old. These are the sensitive age group when children start their formal primary schooling and being “released” into the wide world.^[14] Going to school means they are now exposed to outside environment such as waiting for school bus, meeting many people, staying back for cocurricular activities, and going for field trips etcetera. Being “street smart” in terms of being aware and knowing how to respond when the possibility of sexual abuse arises will reduce the risk of these children being sexually abused or being victims of sexual grooming.^[15] In this study, mothers are chosen to be the respondents in view of the strong relationship of mothers to daughters. Mothers are supposed to prepare their daughters for puberty changes and menstruation, and this is a good opportunity to discuss further sexual education. Studies have shown that teenagers who have a good relationship with their mothers tend to delay sexual initiation. Teenagers’ perception of their mothers’ acceptance to sexual intercourse also influences their sexual

risk-taking behavior.^[16] Therefore, it is very important for mothers to start talking to their daughters, to foster good relationship and to have an open communication regarding sexual reproductive health.^[17] Age and education level have been shown to be statistically significant with knowledge. Older age group mothers between 36 and 45 years old were noted to have better knowledge on sexual education. Respondents within this age group also showed good attitude with a frequency of 59.2% although the association was not significant. Age, education level, employment status, and family income were not significantly associated with attitude. However, education level was statistically significant with practice of giving out sexual education.

CONCLUSION

From this study, we note that mothers with better education level have better knowledge and practice in giving out sexual education to their daughters. Therefore, it is important for the government to start educating all mothers to increase their knowledge on how to talk to their children about sexual education. This could be done by having short seminars, practical workshop, books, or manual on how to handle sexual education to children and also use social media to spread its importance.

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