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From School to Home: Malaysian Parents' Perceptions and Readiness for Family-Based Sexuality Education

Dari Sekolah ke Rumah: Persepsi dan Kesediaan Ibu Bapa Malaysia terhadap Pendidikan Seksualiti Berasaskan Keluarga

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality education has been a popular topic of long heated societal debate. The morals behind sexuality education and how they should be portrayed and approached by individuals have been controversial. Nevertheless, evolving trends of global sociocultural norms have resulted a significant shift in the concept of sexuality education. Hence, the way sexuality education is communicated has also changed, from who to where it is taught. Thus, this study explored Malaysian parental perception and experience in delivering family-based sexuality education (FBSE) and examined parental understanding and readiness regarding sexuality education. Data was collected using mixed-method approach. Five families participated in interviews, observational protocols, and document-checking, while 164 families answered an online survey to measure their readiness and understanding regarding FBSE. The results yielded nine main sub-themes: parents' understanding and importance of sexuality education, sexuality education in school, benefits of sexuality education, topics of sexuality education, sexuality education through effective communication and utilisation of tools, sexuality education begins early at home, uneasiness caused by gender difference, beliefs and culture, and sexuality as a taboo. Up to 47.6% of the parents strongly supported the importance of FBSE to adolescent development, 69.5% of parents demonstrated high level of understanding and 64.6% had high readiness to commit. Overall, the parents' perceptions, involvement, and the barriers faced when providing FBSE were revealed, which was in accordance with the three research objectives. This study contributed to the existing body of knowledge on FBSE and suggested practical implications. Hence, more studies could explore the outcomes of FBSE.

Keywords: family-based sexuality education, adolescent, reproductive and social health, understanding and readiness

ABSTRAK

Pendidikan seksualiti telah lama menjadi topik perdebatan masyarakat yang hangat dan berpanjangan. Aspek moral yang mendasari pendidikan seksualiti serta cara pendidikan yang harus digambarkan dan didekati oleh individu telah menimbulkan pelbagai kontroversi. Walau bagaimanapun, perubahan trend norma sosiobudaya global telah membawa kepada peralihan yang ketara dalam konsep pendidikan seksualiti. Seiring dengan itu, pendekatan penyampaian pendidikan seksualiti turut berubah, termasuk pihak yang menyampaikan pendidikan tersebut dan tempat pendidikan ini diberikan. Oleh itu, kajian ini meneroka persepsi dan pengalaman ibu bapa di Malaysia dalam melaksanakan pendidikan seksualiti berasaskan keluarga (Family-Based Sexuality Education, FBSE), serta meneliti tahap kefahaman dan kesediaan ibu bapa terhadap pendidikan seksualiti. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan pendekatan kaedah campuran (mixed-method approach). Seramai lima buah keluarga terlibat dalam temu bual, pemerhatian menggunakan protokol yang ditetapkan dan semakan dokumen, manakala 164 buah keluarga menjawab soal selidik dalam talian bagi mengukur tahap kesediaan dan kefahaman mereka berkaitan FBSE. Dapatan kajian menghasilkan sembilan subtema utama, iaitu kefahaman ibu bapa tentang pendidikan seksualiti dan kepentingannya; pendidikan seksualiti di sekolah; manfaat pendidikan seksualiti; topik-topik pendidikan seksualiti; pendidikan seksualiti melalui komunikasi yang berkesan dan penggunaan alat bantu; pendidikan seksualiti bermula sejak awal di rumah; ketidakselesaan yang timbul akibat perbezaan jantina; kepercayaan dan budaya; serta seksualiti sebagai perkara tabu. Seramai 47.6% ibu bapa menunjukkan sokongan yang sangat kuat terhadap kepentingan FBSE dalam perkembangan remaja, manakala 69.5% ibu bapa menunjukkan tahap kefahaman yang tinggi dan 64.6% mempunyai

tahap kesediaan yang tinggi untuk melaksanakan FBSE. Secara keseluruhannya, kajian ini memperlihatkan persepsi dan penglibatan ibu bapa, serta halangan yang dihadapi oleh mereka dalam melaksanakan FBSE. Dapatan ini selaras dengan ketiga-tiga objektif kajian yang telah ditetapkan. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada perkembangan pengetahuan sedia ada berkaitan FBSE dan mengemukakan implikasi praktikal yang relevan. Oleh itu, kajian lanjutan boleh dijalankan untuk meneroka hasil dan keberkesanan pelaksanaan FBSE.

Kata Kunci: kefahaman dan kesediaan, kesihatan reproduktif dan sosial, pendidikan seksualiti berasaskan keluarga (FBSE), remaja

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century education system continues to grow and evolve to a more globalised level. A quality education is not a privilege but is a right and is paramount. Nevertheless, a good education is well-rounded. Thus, the need for other areas of learning arises as the education system progresses, such as sexuality education. Sexuality education was introduced in the 1970s in Europe (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2010). Sexuality education has been widely discussed in various contexts over time. Notably, sexuality education comprises more than the "birds and the bees" (Ashcraft & Murray, 2017). Sexuality education involves reproductive organ anatomy and the biological aspects of sex and the reproduction system. Furthermore, sexuality education includes the understanding of intimate relationships, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual orientation and gender identity, abstinence, contraception methods, and reproductive rights and responsibilities (Breuner & Mattson, 2016; Wu & Zeng, 2020).

Many countries agree and recognise the importance of implementing sexuality education in schools (Federation of Reproductive Health Associations Malaysia-FRHAM, 2019). Currently, over 53 countries have incorporated sexuality education into their education systems and curricula (Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women-ARROW, 2018), and 85% of the 155 countries have policies or laws relating to sexuality education, with considerably more countries reporting policies to mandate delivery at secondary education level than at primary level (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-UNESCO, 2021). The increasing number of counties adopting sexuality education reiterates the importance of sexuality in human development. However, access to accurate sexual health knowledge has become essential the digitalised world today.

The Malaysian education system has incorporated several basic aspects of sexuality education in the current syllabi, such as in the science, biology, moral, and physical education textbooks for primary and secondary government schools under the Reproductive and Social Health Education (PEERS) programme (FRHAM, 2019). The World Data on Education (2011) reported that the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia had introduced PEERS in 1989 to secondary school students and then extended it to primary school students in 1994. Clearly, Malaysian educational stakeholders (schools, schoolteachers, and the MOE) are aware of the significance of sexuality education in Malaysia. The acceptance of sexuality education among Malaysian parents is varied. While many parents acknowledge its significance in aiding children to comprehend reproductive health and safeguard themselves against sexual assault (Rahimah et al, 2023); some remain reluctant owing to the delicacy of sexual subjects, cultural and religious apprehensions, and the fallacy that sexuality education encourages sexual behaviour among youth. (Abdullah et al., 2020; Nesamany & Nesamany, 2023).

Sexuality education does not solely depend on schoolteachers, school counsellors, and authority figures in the governmental setting, but the parents' responsibility. Physically and spiritually healthy society starts from the place of residence and parents are vital in their children's sexuality education (Abdullah et al., 2020; Sham, et al., 2021; Yazid et.al., 2022; Yeo & Lee, 2023). Sexualised behaviours among young children are typical, as it is a part of children's normal psychosexual development (Wan et al., 2021). Crucially, parents should be concerned and careful to not misinform or confuse innocent children's curiosity with peculiarity.

Conversations about sexuality education early and continuing the conversation as children grow is one of the best strategies for parents. Parents with open and honest communication about sexuality education with their children can ensure that their children receive accurate information from the appropriate sources (Romadhona & Ginting, 2023). Thus, sexuality education is indeed an important subject for children as conveyed by their parents.

It is far more advantageous when sexuality education is individually tailored and focused from parents towards each child. A healthy interaction between the parent and child would result in a child who is not intimidated or avoids raising challenging questions about their sexuality to their parents and have also been associated to safer sexual behaviour (Melese, et al., 2024; Widman et al., 2016; Wright & Herbenick, 2024). Even if children first learn about sexuality education in school, parents should have the subsequent habit of reviewing the classroom lessons with their children (Baku et al., 2018). This approach would ensure that clear and accurate information is being taught.

FAMILY-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Many adolescents have numerous and differing issues, ideas, impressions, and expectations when questioned about sexuality (Abedini et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the lack of knowledge and awareness of sexuality education has been linked to many cases of unwanted teenage pregnancies, baby abandonment, STIs, and abortions (Robinson et al., 2017). In Malaysia, on average 18,000 teenagers were pregnant every year, which accounted 50 teenagers per day (Said, 2019). More than 1,010 babies were dumped between 2010 and May 2019, of which 64% of the babies were found dead (Tang, 2019). More appallingly, 115 babies were left in public toilets.

Relatedly, sexual harassment occurs in Malaysia. A survey on 1,002 people by YouGov OmniBus (2019) reported that 36% women and 17% men in Malaysia have experienced sexual harassment. The survey also reported that many victims chose to not report their experience due to embarrassment, followed by feeling helpless regarding the issue. Furthermore, the most common form of sexual harassment was sexual assault, followed by inappropriate sexual comments, and flashing. Nevertheless, official statistics on the prevalence of sexual harassment in Malaysia are lacking (Veena Balulal, 2019).

Sexuality education in Malaysia is crucial as it not only informs children, students, teachers, and the governmental authorities, but parents as well (Abdullah et al., 2020; Nesamany & Nesamany, 2023). This reciprocal learning and sharing enable both parents and children to enhance their knowledge on sexuality education. Additionally, keeping an open mind and exposure to sexuality education can confer awareness to all parties involved to collaborate and improve the Malaysian sexuality education curricula.

Owing to religion and culturally influence, sexuality education has been a taboo topic especially amongst adults in Asian countries, including Malaysia (Indramalar, 2022; Muhammad et al., 2023). Parents immediately feel anxiety and discomfort upon hearing the word "sex", where they typically feel embarrassed and find it awkward to discuss sexuality education with their

children (Zahra, Liow et al., 2018). Furthermore, some parents even choose to instil fear in their children regarding sexuality-related topics. Nonetheless, instilling fear does not scare children away from sex but only leads to uninformed decisions (Amin & Fariduddin, 2023).

Most parents are not aware of the importance of practising and sharing sexuality education at home with their children. Thus, the lack of parents not educating their children on sexuality education may be due to inadequate knowledge on the topic, assuming that they have insufficient information to teach their children about it, or they believe that sexuality education does not align with their respective cultural and religious practices (Maszarry et al., 2021; Salmi et al., 2017).

When teaching young children about anatomy, some parents choose to not say or teach the correct genital terms. Instead, parents use nicknames such as "pee-pee", "muffin", and "willy" for private parts to mask their discomfort and embarrassment (Mullis et al., 2020). Private parts are not taboo or dirty but are a part of the body and deserve the same respect as the eyes or the knees (Butchelli-Rotter, 2019), therefore it is essential that children know the proper names of their respective body parts. Children must know the correct names of their body parts to be aware of who is touching them and what part of their body is being touched. Parents who do not communicate even the basic human body parts of a child effectively will consequently also be unprepared to discuss sexuality education with their children altogether (Mullis et al., 2020).

Based on the rationales, this study aimed to understand how parents share sexuality knowledge with their children. The main purpose was to explore the delivery of family-based sexuality education (FBSE) among Malaysian. This study explored parents' perceptions of sexuality education and parents' involvement in sexuality education at home, and identified the barriers faced by parents in delivering sexuality education at home. Eventually the findings of this study will aid in addressing social issues regarding sexuality among children and society.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

This study was carried out using the mixed-methods approach. First, quantitative design was used to obtain additional data to report briefly on parents' understanding of sexuality issues and their readiness to implement FBSE. Parents' readiness and knowledge regarding FBSE was measured using an online anonymous survey form distributed through Google Forms. The data were collected through convenience sampling on social media platforms. All Malaysian parents from nuclear families with at least one child between the ages of 7 and 12 years old were invited to participate in the study. The participants were provided with relevant information about the study, including its purpose and personal data confidentiality. The participants were asked to provide their informed consent prior proceed to complete the online survey.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews used to assess the parents' perceptions and experiences with FBSE. The participants were identified through purposive sampling and were parents from a nuclear family. The interviews involved five families from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. During the interview session, the researcher explained the research objectives and confidentiality of the study to the participants. Written consent was obtained from the participants prior to the interview. The interview was voice-recorded after receiving the participants' permission. Data were collected until data saturation was reached to conclude the findings. The present study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaya before data collection.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 164 Malaysian parents participated in the online survey. Participation in the study is restricted to Malaysian fathers or mothers who have at least one child aged between 10 and 19 years throughout the data collecting period and may give permission independently of legal guardian authorisation. Most of the participants were mothers (female, n = 133; 81.1%) rather than fathers (male, n = 31; 18.9%). Up to 72.6% of the participants were from West Malaysia and 27.4% were from East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). The distribution of ethnicity was as follows: 29.9% Chinese, 24.4% Malay, and 20.1% Indian and other Bumiputra groups.

A total of five families participated in the interviews after meeting the inclusion criteria: at least one parent (father or mother) from a nuclear family willing to participate the interview session; have at least one child between the age 7 and 12 years old; and were informed regarding sexuality education and concurrently educating their children at home. The participating parents consisted of two females (mothers) and three males (fathers). The participants were all relatively young parents between the age 35 and 45 years old and had obtained tertiary education. Table 1 presents these parents' demographic information.

TABLE 1. Demographic information for interview session

Participant	Age	Sex	Race	Education Level
Parent 1 (P1)	40	Male	Malay	Bachelor
Parent 2 (P2)	37	Female	Indian	Bachelor
Parent 3 (P3)	45	Male	Chinese	Master
Parent 4 (P4)	39	Male	Indian	Bachelor
Parent 5 (P5)	35	Female	Indian	Bachelor

INSTRUMENTS

For quantitative design, the data were collected using the Parental Understanding and Readiness: Family-Based Sexuality Education Questionnaire (FBSE-PARENTAL) online survey questionnaire (Siaw & Loh, 2023). The questionnaire involves two constructs namely, understanding and readiness. Twenty-five items measured parents' understanding in three dimensions: sexual physiology, interpersonal relationship, and personal protection. Thirty-eight items measured parents' readiness from the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional aspects. The reliability value of the FBSE-PARENTAL has been established and demonstrates good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 and 0.90, respectively. The value indicates satisfactory scale reliability and fulfils the statistical requirement (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). For qualitative design, an interview protocol was designed for parents to share their perspectives and experiences on delivering sexuality education to their children at home. The interview questions were designed to match the research objectives. Three subject matter experts (SMEs) are invited to participate in the validation of the interview protocol to ensure that the questions designed support and align with the research's purpose.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative analysis reported all data were normally distributed. The distribution of the variables was examined through descriptive analysis. A higher score indicates a higher propensity for understanding and readiness, which were classified as low (1.00 – 2.33), medium (2.34 – 3.66), and high (3.67 – 5.00). The level recommended by the instrument was identified through mean

scores. For qualitative data, data were analysed systematically by transcribing, coding, and establishing themes using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative in-depth data analysis method that involves examining the data set, such as interview transcripts or observational notes, and identifying patterns in meaning across the data set. The trustworthiness of the results was achieved through data triangulation, where observational field notes and documents were collected to obtain supporting information to substantiate the parents' responses. The data triangulation results were consistent with the interview responses and the main themes identified in the study. In addition, reflexivity was applied continuously throughout the study to be aware of any biases towards sex education and therefore reduce the effect of these and ensure that the findings were a true reflection of the parents' views.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS: PARENTS' UNDERSTANDING AND READINESS

The parents' understanding involved the dimensions of knowledge and understanding of sexual physiology, interpersonal relationship, and personal protection. Generally, the parents reported a high level of understanding (mean [M] = 3.90; standard deviation [SD] 0.75). Among the three dimensions, 70.7% of the parents reported a high level of understanding for interpersonal relationship, followed by the understanding of personal protection (65.2%) and sexual physiology (66.5%). Readiness involved the dimensions of cognitive readiness, behavioural readiness, and emotional readiness. Overall, the parents had a high level of readiness (M= 3.82; SD 0.43). Nevertheless, a medium level of readiness was reported for emotional readiness. Overall, more than 80% of the parents agreed (47.6% strongly agree; 40.9% agree) that FBSE is important and needed among adolescents. Table 2 depicts the participants' frequency and percentage according to the level of understanding and readiness.

TABLE 2. Participants' Mean level of understanding and readiness of family-based sexuality education

	Mean	**SD**	**Level (Total n = 164)**					
			Low		**Medium**		**High**	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Understanding	3.90	0.75	5	3.0%	45	27.4%	**114**	**69.5%**
Sexual Physiology	3.86	0.78	11	6.7%	44	26.8%	**109**	**66.5%**
Interpersonal Relationship	3.94	0.80	6	3.7%	42	25.6%	**116**	**70.0%**
Personal Protection	3.91	0.81	9	5.5%	48	29.3%	**107**	**65.2%**
Readiness	3.81	0.43	1	0.6%	57	34.8%	**106**	**64.6%**
Cognitive Readiness	4.11	0.52	1	0.6%	25	15.2%	**138**	**84.1%**
Behavioural Readiness	3.73	0.58	2	1.2%	78	45.1%	**88**	**53.7%**
Emotional Readiness	3.57	0.41	-	-	**101**	**61.6%**	63	38.4%

Importance of FBSE (n = 164)				
Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)
11 (6.7%)	1 (0.6%)	7 (4.3%)	67 (40.9%)	**78 (47.6%)**

Mean level: low (1.00–2.33); medium (2.34–3.66); and high (3.67–5.00).

INTERVIEW SESSION

This section reports an integrated thematic finding to explore FBSE delivery among Malaysian families. The interviews explored the parents' perception of sexuality education and their involvement in sexuality education at home and identified the barriers faced by parents in the delivery of sexuality education at home. Table 3 presents the themes and sub-themes identified from the interviews.

TABLE 3. Themes and sub-themes from the interviews

Research Objective	Themes	Sub-Themes
(1) Understand parents' perception on sexuality education	Perception of sexuality education	Understanding of the content Role of school Benefits of sexuality education
(2) Explore parents' involvement in sexuality education at home	Implementation of FBSE	Topics covered Effective communication Begin early from home
(3) Identify the barriers faced by parents in the delivery of sexuality education at home	Challenges of FBSE	Gender difference Beliefs and cultural Sexuality as a taboo

PERCEPTION OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION.

Parents' Understanding the Importance of the Content for Sexuality Education. The parents demonstrated their understanding of sexuality effectively to their knowledge by listing down a few sexuality-related topics that came to mind. Some of the topics listed were body anatomy, reproduction, practicing and planning safe sex, and considering the risks of sexual intercourse if not practiced safely. Additionally, the parents believed that sexuality education does not wholly consist of sex. Some parents made the following comments:

> …sexuality education is well, the learning of the body parts especially the reproductive organs and like its functions. Also, on how to practice safe sex and like the planning on safe sex as well as the consequences faced when not practicing safe sex.
>
> (P1)

> …sexuality education is not just about sex. This includes like, body parts, relationships, learning about safe touch, knowing what is safe and not safe, understanding about menstruation and period cycles are all very important topics.
>
> (P2)

More importantly, the participants mentioned that learning simple topics, such as body anatomy, and hygiene, would be a starting point and suffice for young children being introduced to sexuality education. One parent remarked that educating a young child regarding consent is also equally important. For example, who should converse with a child and how, and who can touch, hug, or kiss a child, and how, are all significant topics a child should be taught, as stated by one parent:

> …sex education is important. It's where they learn even very small and basic things. Like body parts and all that. And even hygiene-wise and all that who can talk to you, who can touch you, talking to strangers, hugging people, touching, kissing and every little thing like that.
>
> (P3)

The observation and document-checking of the materials used by the parents proved that they understood the important content of sexuality education for their children. Some of the topics covered by parents with their children were printed school documents.

Role of School in Sexuality Education. Most of the parents indicated that the schools were doing a good job in teaching children about sexuality. Nonetheless, some parents mentioned that they were not sure or that the sexuality syllabus being taught in school was not thorough. One parent expressed their concern of not having sufficient information for children in the school textbooks. Furthermore, the parent mentioned that while sexuality is taught in school, the topics were not covered extensively. This approach resulted in children coming home to clear their doubts regarding sexuality with their parents instead. For example, some parents made the following comments:

> …I ask her if the teacher doesn't cover it in school, she says that they do but not in-depth. Although textbooks and teachers cover sexuality education in school, I don't think the information is about enough.
>
> (P2)

> …I'm not very sure about the school syllabus. I'm not too worried because me and my wife teach our kids at home.
>
> (P3)

Two parents stated that they were not excessively concerned about what the school covered as both parents tended to adequately educate their children on sexuality at home. The parents believed that the current sexuality syllabus in governmental schools was of the standard required by its students. The parents' comments were as follows:

> …As long as I look onto the books and all those things, they're all par with the expectations.
>
> (P4)

> ...I've seen their textbooks, so it's quite clear and it's very open. Currently yes, the Malaysian syllabus is quite okay.
>
> (P5)

In document-checking, the researchers noted that the sexuality syllabus covered in school was more general. Nevertheless, the syllabus was designed according to the ages and stages of individual growth and development.

Benefits of Sexuality Education. The parents perceived sexuality education as beneficial and advantageous for both parents and children. Sharing ideas, thoughts, and knowledge about sexuality amongst parents raises awareness of sexuality education in Malaysia overall. One parent made the following statement:

> …parents also can gain all this extra knowledge on sexuality and share it with other potential parents who needs it.
>
> (P2)

Parents P4 and P5 attained and felt some form of ease when imparting sexuality knowledge to their children. This ease manifested as relief, security, and reassurance that parents gain from educating their children on sexuality, as described by two parents:

> ...benefit to the parents, like, it gives a sense of relief when the kids have been educated on what is good and what is bad.
>
> (P4)

> …my kid know about it, you know I get some confidence and a sense of security, relief that she's aware.
>
> (P5)

Apart from the parents, the children also benefited directly when taught sexuality education by their parents. The parents indicated that it was important to prepare children with the correct information on sexuality for them to experience the world independently as an adult. Children with the correct knowledge on sexuality will be able to make daily choices reliably. Some of the parents made the following statements:

> …they're going to grow as bright and knowledgeable adults. They're going to be equipped with the right information from reliable sources like their parents and teacher. It's going to help them grow into better adults and will benefit them in the long run.
>
> (P3)

> …In future I think it will be quite useful for them, definitely they will grow with the value.
>
> (P5)

> …It has a huge benefit. When you look onto the children's perspective, they must know about life, what is going to happen. That is part and parcel of life.
>
> (P4)

IMPLEMENTATION OF FAMILY-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Topics of Sexuality Education Covered with Children. While the parents demonstrated a good grasp of sexuality knowledge, knowing the topics of sexuality education covered with their children is also important. One parent indicated that they discussed various sexuality topics with their children at home as follows:

> …at the top of my head, body parts, reproductive organs, relationships, abuse, trauma, violence and more. Whatever question my daughter comes with to me on sex education, I'm ready to answer quite frankly.
>
> (P2)

The parent also disclosed that they were also prepared to answer any sexuality-related queries from their children. This statement demonstrated that the parent was well-equipped to converse on sexuality topics with their children at home, which would be helpful. Parent P4 stated that the main topic discussed regarding sexuality at home focused on safety. For example, the parent would address anything concerning children's safety, whether it was consent, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment as follows:

> …it is basically on safety. Don't be victimised. That's it. Simple.
>
> (P4)

The researcher confirmed the parents' responses by fact-checking the books collected from the time spent with the families. The parents had various reference books and learning materials related to sexuality and social health education at home for discussion with their children.

Sexuality Education Through Effective Communication and Utilisation of Tools. The parents clearly demonstrated that they were the primary source and educators regarding sexuality for their children at home. The parents possessed the knowledge, understood the importance, and essentially provided sexuality education at home to their children. The parents also used diverse tools to communicate regarding sexuality, such as newspapers, articles, books, magazines, and posters. Some of the parents made the following statements:

> …I used to have a poster of the body parts, and all that. We used to visit the MPPJ library in PJ, we used to borrow some books on sex education that I know she can read on and is suitable for her. She also has some books on period.
>
> (P2)

> …Yes, we have some books on it. They're in Chinese language. We use books like that are visual for them.
>
> (P3)

> …Whenever I see certain things in the newspaper or whatsoever, I'll just take a photograph of that and share it to the family group, me and my daughters and everybody will see.
>
> (P4)

> …we go through reliable health magazines like for example, reader's digest, that book is so insightful and informative. We even read on like articles of sexuality education that is being practiced in like western countries.
>
> (P1)

The observation notes revealed that the parents communicated openly with their children about sexuality issues or problems most of the time. Social media, newspapers, and related guidebooks were important materials to ensure effective sexuality communication among family members. This approach demonstrated the parents' initiative, and that sexuality education is not limited to one age group, but benefits society in different ways.

Sexuality Education Begins Early at Home. Other than using tools and materials to teach and learn about sexuality, some parents also stated their opinions on starting sexuality education ahead of time as follows:

> …I think children of all age groups should be able to at least know one or two things about sexuality education. The younger the better.
>
> (P2)

> …at any age, I think maybe the younger ones can know about their body differences, the parts. Once they grow older, other more important topics will come into place.
>
> (P3)

> …It must be educated and it has to be instilled right from the young age.
>
> (P4)

Parents P2, P3, and P4 emphasised beginning sexuality education beginning for their early-year children. Specifically, even learning and understanding one or two basic things on sexuality would make a difference in their children's lives. Thus, the parents unanimously agreed on imparting sexuality knowledge to children early to enhance both parents' and children's lives.

CHALLENGES OF FAMILY-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Uneasiness Caused by Gender Difference. All parents seemed to agree on was the delivery of sexuality education to children of the same gender as the parent. Specifically, mothers would teach sexuality to their daughters, and fathers to their sons. One parent made the following statement:

> …I feel that boys, like they are much more comfortable with their dads and vice versa for mothers and daughters. Is not that the parent is incapable of teaching the child of the opposite sex, but more towards the comfort and shyness of the child.
>
> (P1)

Parent P1 stated that they believed sexuality education should be delivered by parents of the same sex as the child. When queried further, the parents seemed convinced that this would avoid discomfort and shyness for both the parent and the opposite gender child. Specifically, parents P2 and P4 remarked on how shyness was a recurring theme when discussing sexuality with children of the opposite gender. Parent P2 suggested that a daughter would feel more open when talking about sexuality issues her mother. For parent P4, gender differences were a barrier to direct and easy communication between the two parties due to nervousness and shyness in both. The parents made the following comments:

> …father can talk to the sons about any questions they have regarding sex. And the girl with the mothers. I think that way, the child will feel less shy and will be more open to talk about it with parents of the same sex.
>
> (P2)

> …It depends upon the gender. If it was females, my perception it is the mother. And if it is the male, it is the father. There is a bit of barrier. I've seen that, I too shy, and they too shy.
>
> (P4)

Parent P3 mentioned that their daughter would seek her mother if she had questions on sexuality. The parent stated that the reason was how they were taught in their own families. Hence, it was the norm for daughters to seek their mothers, and sons to seek their fathers to assuage doubts and share sexuality information. The parent made the following statement:

> …and I would assume my daughter will go to my wife when she has questions about her body or when she gets her period and to clear any doubts regarding that. Because I grew up with five siblings, four whom were my sisters. And yes, my sisters went to my mom for things like these. I don't think they have or will ever go to my dad.
>
> (P3)

Beliefs and Cultural. Parental beliefs determine if parents pass on specific sexuality beliefs or moral values that they uphold to their children. This approach includes religious beliefs and personal values. In this study, the parents stated that they had instilled positive values in their child, such as open-mindedness, honesty, gender equality, being respectful in relationships, and mutual

consent between two parties. Nonetheless, some parental beliefs, such as religious and cultural beliefs, that were barriers to providing and discussing specific sexuality elements with children at home.

Some parents, such as parent P4, revealed that they felt uncomfortable when talking about sexuality to children of the opposite gender. Further probing revealed that the approach was not practised in the parents' culture or upbringing. Hence, it had become the norm and belief for a father and mother to teach their son and daughter about sexuality, respectively. Parent P4 made the following statement:

> …In our ethnic group, it's very difficult for fathers to go and talk about these kinds of things to the daughters. But it's quite easy for the fathers to go and talk to the son.
>
> (P4)

Parent P5 revealed on their culture restricted them from discussing sexuality with their parents. Hence, sexuality was a disapproved or shunned discussion topic. Parent P5 made the following comment:

> …some topics, we didn't have a chance, and we were very shy to speak. Especially our culture, we were not allowed to do that.
>
> (P5)

Parent P2 noted that their daughter found it challenging to be open with them solely because of how shy she in speaking up. Furthermore, parent P2 stated that shyness is normal in their culture, which indicated that some sexuality topics remained uneasy family conversation topics. Hence, discomfort and disregard regarding sexuality persist even among children due to cultural upbringing.

Parent P3 shared that a close friend had revealed that it had been awkward when his son had approached him to discuss an issue on sexuality. The friend felt stunned and shocked as he had not discussed anything regarding sexuality with his parents throughout his upbringing. Thus, the friend was less educated on the topic as it was not openly discussed in his community and cultural upbringing. This story proved that certain sexuality topics involve culture. Some parents commented as follows:

> …the main one would be getting them to open about it. Like my daughter, is so shy already. And then when it comes to this topic, she's even more not interested to talk about it. In the culture, this is normal.
>
> (P2)

> …but then he told me he never discussed like this with his own parents or in his community itself, all also wife only handles. So, he a bit shocked to receive that kind of question from his own son. He said that he did not equip with the right or correct knowledge on the said topic also.
>
> (P3)

Sexuality as a Taboo. Sexuality education has been taboo since its introduction, especially in Asian communities (Zahra, Liow et al., 2018). Similarly, the parents in this study expressed the same sentiment. Parent P5 did not directly mention that sexuality is a taboo topic. Nevertheless, they implied that they were not too open to discuss deeper sexuality topics with their children, or anyone per se, thus clearly indicating that sexuality is a taboo topic. Undoubtedly, parents require more

time to understand and become familiar with some sexuality topics. Parent P5 made the following comment:

> …of course I'm shy. I feel uncomfortable. I'm not a very open person to talk about all this.
>
> (P5)

Parents P1, P2, P3, and P4 stated that sexuality is a taboo topic in the Asian context, especially the Malaysian household. Clearly, sexuality was considered a difficult topic to approach as it involves mostly sensitive subject matter and may result in public disagreement, although it might not always be the case. The parents made the following statements:

> ...we all from an Asian community, like in Malaysia, and this kind of topics are not something like we discuss on a regular basis.
>
> (P1)

> ...it is a hard and sensitive and controversial topic in a country like Malaysia.
>
> (P2)

> …Many Asian households, I think, make it a shy topic. A taboo.
>
> (P3)

> ...it has become a social taboo when a father talks about sexuality education because as such we look onto the Malaysian society, it is a very conservative society.
>
> (P4)

Generally, the parents indicated that the Malaysian community can be conventional when discussing sexuality, which is not a typical conversation topic. Therefore, FBSE presents a challenge in the current time and society as it has not broken the social taboo of free discussion by parents. Hence, this challenge must be resolved to enrich children's lives in terms of sexuality knowledge.

DISCUSSION

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

The importance of sexuality education has increasingly gained recognition both globally and within Malaysia (Shukor & Supaat, 2017). In this study, the parents demonstrated their understanding of sexuality by referencing key areas, such as body anatomy, safety, and consent. These discussions frequently began at home, where children felt most comfortable, and expanded as children grew and became more curious. The parents also recognised the importance of addressing sexuality education in a safe and supportive environment, such as the home (Yeo & Lee, 2023). This result is aligned with Achille et al. (2015), who determined that parents view themselves as their children's primary educators of sexuality. Children frequently model their parents' behaviour, which renders parents pivotal role models in this learning process (Zhang & Yuan, 2023). Nonetheless, this perspective contrasted with Al-Yamani's (2021) results, where parents avoided discussing sexuality due to fear. The study claimed many parents believed their children were too young to receive such knowledge or feared that they might misuse it.

The parents in this study also expressed uncertainty about how much their children learned at school and emphasised the need for continued guidance at home. These concerns mirrored study reported by Salmi et al. (2017), which revealed that Malaysian schools frequently focus on basic topics (reproduction), while neglecting critical aspects, such as consent and the consequences of sexual activity. Teachers' discomfort at discussing sexuality and the lack of comprehensive modules further contribute to this inadequacy. This condition raises the question of whether the current school-based sexuality education is sufficient or if it leaves children with unanswered questions. Children may seek information from unreliable sources if neither parents nor teachers address these topics.

While some parents in the study felt confident that their family-based teachings were sufficient, others suggested a collaborative approach between parents and schools. This idea was supported by Ram et al. (2020) and Robinson et al. (2017), who emphasised the importance of joint efforts in providing comprehensive sexuality education. This concept was reinforced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1994), particularly the mesosystem level, which highlights the importance of collaboration between schools and families. The children benefit from a well-rounded education when both parties cooperate and equip them to make informed decisions about sexuality. Parents and children both benefit from sexuality education. Bronfenbrenner's microsystem level states that parents are the closest influencers in a child's life and are critical in shaping their development. Parents who fulfil this responsibility ensure a positive and meaningful influence on their children's lives.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN FAMILY-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

While communication at home is central, tools and resources also significantly influence the effectiveness of this education. Parents must first familiarise themselves with the various aspects of sexuality, body part functions, hygiene, reproductive organs, consent, and protection against sexual harassment, abuse, and violence to educate their children. These themes emphasise safety, particularly for children aged 7–12 years old, which renders them age-appropriate and foundational.

Effective communication between parents and children is essential for delivering accurate information (Romadhona & Ginting, 2023). Parents frequently use language that their children are most comfortable with, which ensures that the message is received clearly. Nevertheless, Leung et al. (2019) determined that communication barriers exist in some Asian contexts, where parents feel unprepared to discuss sexuality, resulting in limited or no dialogue on the topic. Many parents incorporate additional resources, such as books, posters, and online articles, to resolve this barrier. Gossart (2015) noted that teachable moments can occur anywhere, and creative approaches frequently aid children in absorbing unfamiliar topics, such as sexuality, more comfortably.

The parents in this study also educated themselves using magazines, non-fiction books, and articles on sexual health. This dual benefit enriched parents' and children's understanding of sexuality and demonstrated the parents' dedication to providing accurate and age-appropriate information. The approach aligned with Bandura's social learning theory (1971), which emphasises the role of observation and modelling in learning. Parents are primary role models who teach children about healthy sexual behaviours through example and direct communication (Romadhona & Ginting, 2023). For example, modelling gender equality in the household can instil essential values in children and equip them to navigate relationships responsibly.

Teaching sexuality at a young age has long-term benefits, especially in the current world, where children are increasingly vulnerable to risks. The parents in this study emphasised the importance of teaching children to identify and name body parts accurately, which included private parts, to ensure their safety. Butchelli-Rotter (2019) stated that normalising discussions about private body parts would aid children in understanding boundaries and prevent the use of euphemisms, which can hinder children's ability to report inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, sexuality education can progressively address more complex topics, such as intimacy, sexual abuse, and relationships, as children grow. Grossman et al. (2018) determined that younger children were more receptive to learning about sexuality than teenagers, who frequently feel awkward initiating such conversations. Similarly, Ram et al. (2020) emphasised starting sexuality education in preschool with age-appropriate topics and gradually introducing more complex concepts as children mature.

Starting these discussions early ensures that children become comfortable discussing sexuality with their parents over time. This gradual approach fosters openness, reduces embarrassment, and ensures that children grow up with a comprehensive understanding of sexuality. Ultimately, parents' proactive involvement ensures that their children are well-informed, safe, and equipped to make responsible decisions.

BARRIERS FACED BY PARENTS IN DELIVERING FAMILY-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Delivering sexuality education to children aged 7–12 years old presents unique challenges, as the topic is frequently unfamiliar and sensitive. The parents in this study preferred gender-matching when educating their children about sexuality. This arrangement stemmed from discomfort in discussing sexuality with opposite-gender children and the belief that same-gender parents are more knowledgeable about specific topics, such as menstruation (mothers) and puberty-related changes (fathers). This aligned with the results by Abedini et al. (2016), where mothers primarily educated their daughters, following traditional practices.

Cultural and religious values frequently present significant barriers to sexuality education. For example, many parents noted societal taboos against fathers discussing sexuality with daughters or mothers with sons. These restrictions are rooted in cultural upbringing and perpetuate discomfort and avoidance of certain topics. The parents also reported challenges with more complex or sensitive subjects, such as self-pleasure, safe sex practices, and body grooming. These topics are frequently considered taboo and rarely addressed in the parents' upbringing, which resulted in hesitancy in conveying this knowledge to their children. Furthermore, many parents in this study adopted an abstinence-only approach, where they believed that it preserves their children's purity (Salmi et al., 2017; Zahra et al., 2018). Nonetheless, these generational beliefs reinforce a cycle of limited sexuality education. Contrastingly, Martinez and Orpinas (2016) reported that Latino parents overcame discomfort by sharing personal experiences and consequences, which fostered open communication. This approach could serve as a model for breaking taboos and encouraging honest discussions.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study provided significant insights into Malaysian parents' perceptions and readiness for family-based sexuality education (FBSE) and the role of parents in supporting their children's sexuality education. Quantitative findings indicated that many parents had a high level of knowledge and readiness regarding sexuality education, while qualitative findings provided more insight into parents' perceptions and attitudes toward sexuality issues within the family context. Findings imply that parents are mostly open to sexuality education but their expectations on its contents and approach may be shaped by their cultural, religious and family values.

Sexuality education initiatives should take a culturally and religiously sensitive approach rather than taking a one-size-fits-all sexuality education for all families. When developing interventions, program developers should take into account the existing knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and readiness of parents. Rather than imposing a specific model, future programs could involve parents, teachers, educational authorities and other relevant stakeholders in the co-design and co-adoption of sexuality education content and strategies. This collaboration may enhance the acceptability, relevance and sustainability of future interventions. Differences in knowledge and confidence of parents could affect the way in which sexuality topics are engaged with in the home. Therefore, parent-oriented educational initiatives, workshops, teacher-parent meetings, forums, and discussion groups could be considered to improve parents' knowledge and confidence to provide age-appropriate and credible guidance. Such initiatives should equip parents with relevant information and communication strategies while respecting the cultural and religious values that shape family practices.

At the school level, teachers should also be well trained to deliver sexuality education that is accurate, age-appropriate, culturally relevant and in line with relevant educational policies. Teacher training should personalise. It should enable teachers to be able to communicate sensitive issues appropriately and to work in partnership with parents. This may help to create more continuity between sex education provided in school and discussions that occur within the family.

To sum, there is a need to have a better alignment between the evidence, parental preparedness, cultural and religious values and the realities of family life in sexuality education in Malaysia. The findings indicate the significance of a collaborative and culturally sensitive approach that views parents not only as recipients of sexuality education but also as key partners in its development and implementation. Therefore, future research should explore how culturally appropriate FBSE interventions can be co-designed with parents and other stakeholders, and then evaluated for their acceptability, feasibility and effectiveness. Such an approach might be a more contextually relevant way to strengthen sexuality education from school to home.

CONCLUSION

This study explored parental perceptions and experiences in delivering sexuality education to children at home in Selangor. Unlike previous research that primarily focused on teachers, this study highlighted the pivotal role of parents in shaping their children's understanding of sexuality. The study indicated that many parents demonstrated high levels of knowledge and readiness regarding sexuality education, findings provided deeper insights into parents' perceptions and attitudes towards sexuality-related issues within the family context. By addressing research gaps,

the results contributed valuable insights to the literature and underscored the importance of parental involvement in this domain.

In Malaysia, sexuality education remains a sensitive and stigmatised subject that is frequently considered unnecessary or inappropriate due to the strong influence of cultural and religious values. Resistance to sexuality education implementation stems from traditional beliefs, with parents frequently placing minimal importance on their children's sexuality education. These barriers significantly hinder progress in fostering a more informed and open society. Open dialogue, cultural acceptance, and collaboration among parents, educators, and policymakers are needed to address these challenges. Bridging cultural divides and dispelling misconceptions are critical steps toward establishing comprehensive sexuality education. While progress in this area remains slow, it is vital for creating a safer and more informed society.

Future studies should further examine the challenges surrounding sexuality education in Malaysia, with particular attention to cultural and societal barriers that may influence its implementation. Such research could provide actionable insights into developing culturally responsive approaches and strengthening collaboration among key stakeholders. Greater understanding and collaboration may facilitate towards effective, contextually appropriate, and sustainable sexuality education in Malaysia.

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