

Teen pregnancies and blame game

PARENTAL CARE:

While sexual reproductive health knowledge is being taught in schools now, parents have a role to play, too

THE *New Straits Times* recently reported a terribly worrying trend, at least if you are a parent. This is especially so if you are the parent of a young girl.

Statistics gleaned from the Health Department's *Teen Pregnancy Statistics Manual 2012* showed that in that year and the one before, there were more than 18,000 teen pregnancies.

This was a marked increase from the 5,962 teen pregnancies recorded in 2010. Of the 18,000-plus teen pregnancies, both in 2011 and 2012, more than 4,000 in each year were unmarried teens.

The NST only managed to get statistics for the first three months of last year, but if the average was maintained, last year would have seen roughly the same number of

teen pregnancies, or perhaps even more.

To put it in a more manageable way, a smaller number is called for. The national average for Malaysia translates to 12 teens getting pregnant each day.

Even more worrying, there were five deaths among pregnant teens in the first quarter of last year, compared with 17 for the whole of 2012.

People, of course, will focus more on the unmarried pregnant teens. But what of the married ones? It's not difficult to imagine that many of them were married because they had gotten pregnant.

But the numbers likely don't tell the entire story. These statistics were taken from the number of teens who sought antenatal care at hospitals.

What about those who chose to seek the services of midwives or other non-medical services? What about those who visited clinics for illegal abortions, which would, of course, never be reported to the authorities?

So the numbers, all-round, are worrying, to say the least.

Are these rising numbers the sign of an increasingly sexually active or promiscuous society? A sign of the influence of television shows and movies which are "liberal"? Due to

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the easy access to pornography on the Internet? Perhaps.

Family Health Development division assistant deputy director Dr Nik Rubiah Nik Abdul Rashid was quoted in the same article as saying that while there were many factors that contributed to unwanted teen pregnancies, the lack of parental guidance was the root of the problem.

"Parents are too busy working

and fail to supervise their children's social activities. As children grow older, parents let their guard down and assume that their kids are independent enough."

Dr Nik Rubiah said communication among family members was crucial and parents should engage their children more to steer them on the right path.

"Parents should pay attention to children's activities; who their friends are and what they do with them."

Other factors the good doctor identified were the lack of IT knowledge among parents, leading to the inability to monitor their children's online activities; poor knowledge of reproductive health among teens; and, the lack of recreational spaces for teens to channel their energy.

The lack of sexual reproductive health knowledge factor, it must be said, is being tackled right now for future generations. Such topics are included in the school syllabus, beginning at Year Four. Today's teens, however, were not particularly well-educated in this aspect when they were younger.

It is not clear, however, whether the lack of recreational space for teens to channel their energy is a very big factor. There may be fewer football fields in the country these

days, but there are a lot more activities now for teens than there were when our generation was growing up.

As for the roles parents play, one has to agree that parents need to be more involved. Dr Nik Rubiah's assertion that parents are too busy working and fail to supervise their children's social activities, however, is somewhat unfair.

While there may be some truth to it, many parents also have a tough time making ends meet. In this day and age, with the rising cost of living and the demands of work mean parents have to work long hours in order to ensure their children live comfortably or even just to make ends meet.

What is more important, perhaps, is for parents to ensure that their children are made aware of the consequences of their actions so that they can make intelligent choices.

Quality time with children, not the amount of time you spend with them or on checking up on them, can help in this regard.

Lastly, these rules do not just apply to parents of girls. If you have a boy, make sure that he, too, knows about the consequences.

After all, it takes two hands to clap.