

# SEXUALITY EDUCATION PRACTICES AMONG PARENTS OF STUDENTS IN ENUGU EDUCATION ZONE, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to find out the sexuality education practices of parents of young students in Enugu Education Zone. Four research questions guided the study. Data were collected from two hundred and twenty six parents from six secondary schools out of the twenty nine secondary schools in the three local government areas that make up Enugu Education Zone. The data were analysed using frequency and percentages. The study found out among others that most parents are passive, with regard to the sexuality education of their children. Most of them also believe that sexuality education should be taught only to adolescents. One of the major educational implications of this result was that between pre-school age and school age (before adolescence) children would have created their own mythological ideas about human sexuality. And this is a sure recipe for numerous sexual health problems.*

*Keywords: Sexuality education, practices,, parents, young students*

## INTRODUCTION

In most parts of Sub-Sahara Africa, sex is generally considered a taboo subject for discussion within the society and especially within the family. This occurs irrespective of the fact that ever so often, the subject of sexuality education pops in the media, school and among other groups in the society and thus in the collective consciousness (Ojerinde, 1997). Recently the Nigerian Catholic Bishops in a conference meeting called on Nigerian parents to resist the current comprehensive sexuality education guidelines approved by the National Council on Education to be integrated into the school curricula (Catholic Secretariat, 2005). They advocated that sexuality education should be taught at home by parents. The question is - are parents knowledgeable enough to handle sexuality education of their children at home? Even those parents who are knowledgeable, how many of them can muster up the courage to brace up the issues of human sexuality with their children?

Education (in all ramifications) of the Nigerian child requires the co-operation of parents, teachers and other stakeholders in the Education industry. Yes, parents have roles to play in the education of their children. How do we get parents to be caring and serious minded in playing their role and to support the formal teaching of

sexuality education? The role of the teachers and parents is a crucial one - helping children to acquire correct positive sexual health knowledge and attitudes and guide their behaviour even from an early age. The effective involvement of parents as partners in sexuality education will no doubt heighten interest of the children in adopting positive sexual behaviours.

Action Health Incorporated, AHI (2002) observed that as children enter puberty their interests in sex increases. Most of them are unprepared for the situation they face and the society, parents and school do little to clarify the situation. Current norms in the society glamorize negative sexual behaviours in the mass media and internet but reject young people's natural interest in sexuality. However, when the society, parents and the school does not provide for the transition to adulthood with fundamental facts of sexuality, the consequences could be disastrous for young people. In Nigeria today the need for sexuality education has never been so urgent.

Ariba (2000) warned that since the world has become a global village events occurring in other parts of the world that were previously remote are becoming instant influences on patterns of behaviours in other parts. When these influences are negative, their impact on the recipient populations could be catastrophic, unless such populations are well informed and have evolved the appropriate behaviours to cope with such information. Through the media (print and electronic), the internet and direct interaction with foreigners and visitors to other countries, our young population is becoming exposed to previously classified information on sex including "hot pornography". Yet this population has not been well prepared to handle this information. This could lead to sexual health problems as rape, incest, premarital sex, teenage pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV/AIDS, unsafe abortions etc.

Action Health Incorporated (2002) warned that a lot of young people have been misinformed and have involved them in risky behaviour including unprotected sexual intercourse resulting in unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortions, STIs including HIV/AIDS. Others have been involved in other risky sexual related behaviours like psychoactive substances and alcohol abuse. They advocated that parents need to know how to discuss these sensitive issues with their children while the school takes care of formal sexuality education. Wilson (2000) reported that parents in a study carried out in London stated that they would like to take a more active role in talking to their teenage sons and daughters about sex but feel poorly equipped to do. She posited that the more open and honest parents are with their children about issues bothering on sex, the longer young people delay sexual activity.

Ray (2000) on the other hand reported that parents in Sweden want schools to play a major role in carrying out sexuality education. Epstein (2000) commented that it is paradoxical that, while children were dealing with questions about sexuality and relationships everyday in the classroom, their parents, and teacher are anxious about the whole question of whether to teach them sexuality education or not. A study carried out by Tauna (1992) of 10 - 16 year old in a Northern Nigerian city showed that among their sources of information on reproduction, pregnancy, birth control and HIV/AIDS - television ranked 1st, newspaper 2nd, radio 3rd, teachers

4th and parents 5th. This study went on to recommend formal sexuality education in the school since parents do not seem to be up to the task.

In another study by AHI (1990) carried out in Lagos, the result showed that many young people in a focus group discussion said that they learned about sexuality from popular magazines such as Ikebe Superstar, Lolly, Fantasy and Hints. The images prevailing in the entertainment media imply that sex is largely risk free and that everyone is doing it which is wrong. Okafor (1998) also reported on a study of the sources of sexual information of young people in Anambra State and the results showed that books, magazines and newspapers ranked 1st, school ranked 2nd, radio and TV ranked 3rd while parents ranked poor 7th. AHI (2000) insisted that if a child is taught about what changes to expect as he grows older, he will be psychologically prepared to accept those changes as normal and take charge of his/her life. He will be less vulnerable to receiving wrong information that could lead to risky sexual behaviour.

Therefore, the child deserves to know about sexuality and what changes to expect during puberty period in order to lead a normal, healthy and fulfilled life. AHI (1997) went further to warn that parental attitudes and behaviour poses a serious threat to young people's sexual health education. Parents often admonish their children to live 'moral lives' and preach the value of virginity, especially for girls. Yet many of them fail to set positive examples for their children in their own gender attitudes and sexual behaviour. Herant and Donald (1992) observed that it is often suggested that children should be educated sexually at home. But many parents find the prospect very bewildering. It often entails considerable uncertainty and discomfort for all involved (both parents and children) not to mention the sexual factual knowledge of majority of parents (passing on misinformation to children). They went on to liken it to the case of a blind man attempting to lead the blind.

It is an open secret that most parents know nothing more than how to perform the sex act. Human sexuality covers a far broader field than sexual intercourse. Many parents do not possess the sexual knowledge. Most parents traditionally try to protect their children from sexual information in the false belief that ignorance will encourage chastity. Yet the terrible result of increase in moral laxity, promiscuity, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, STIs, HIV/AIDS among young people has become a cause for concern. WHO (1994) observed that taboos universally associated with sexual behaviour usually make it extremely difficult, if not impossible for parents to discuss sexual activity and the risks associated with it with their growing children. Most parents would rather leave this responsibility to teachers and/or other adults whom they believe to be in a better position to deal with such sensitive issues.

WHO (1992) stated that worldwide parents have always expressed their inadequacy to discuss the explicit issues of sexuality with their children. This inhibition could be attributed to cultural, religious beliefs and practices, lack of communication skills, inadequate knowledge on sexuality. It is important that parents should have a thorough understanding of who we are as human beings, why we manifest certain behaviours at different stages of development and use this knowledge to assist their children go through life successfully. Unfortunately, most

parents in present day Nigeria are yet to live up to this expectation as far as communication on sexual fact is concerned to their children.

Posse and Melgosa (2001) posited that the family's role in sexuality education is irreplaceable. It is unwise to assume that children are capable of discovering correct sexual orientation on their own. There is need to establish the beginning of sexuality education in the family during pre-school years (3-5years). Small children are usually curious about all parts of their bodies and they notice the differences between men and women. They begin to ask "why do I have this or, why don't I have that". Sexuality education begins with the first question related to sex. Parents must understand that answers should be natural, simple and correct enough for children to understand, this will create a healthy attitude towards sexuality.

Walsh, Parker and Cushing (1999) remarked that the benefits of parental involvement in sexuality education extend beyond the contribution it can make to improve ease of communication between parents and their children. If parents are to have an influence on the events that occur in their young adult's lives, they should learn to lay the groundwork of sexuality education early at home. Children start to learn about sexuality well before pre-school age. Although parents are often described as the primary sex educators of their children, many studies have proven other wise. Hence, we have the need for this study to find out the sexuality education practices of parents of young secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone, Enugu State. The purpose of this study is to examine sexuality education practices of parents of young students in Enugu Education Zone, Enugu State. The following questions were formulated to guide the research.

1. What is the role of parent in the sexuality education of their children?
2. What obstacles limit parents' involvement in the sexuality education of their children?
3. What situations enhance parents' involvement in the sexuality education of their children?
4. What are these parents' perception of sexuality education?

## **METHODOLOGY**

A survey of secondary school students' parents in Enugu Education Zone was carried out using the questionnaire to find out their sexuality education practices. A total of two hundred and forty parents were selected randomly when they attended the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) meeting of the selected six secondary schools in Enugu Education Zone. Enugu Education Zone is made up of three Local Government Areas (LGAs). There are twenty nine secondary schools in these three LGAs. Six secondary schools were selected using balloting without replacement technique. Eventually, forty parents were randomly selected from each of the six secondary schools.

The main instrument for data collection was the questionnaire with just one section made up of eight items only. Two hundred and forty questionnaire were distributed but two hundred and twenty six were retrieved and used for analysis. Data were analyzed using frequency and percentages.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results on table 1 showed that the parents have been passive towards their role in the sexuality education of their children; they have played an active role in educating their children on human sexuality. An insignificant number of the respondents said that they have neither been active nor passive in educating their children on human sexuality.

Table 2 showed that some of the parents felt embarrassed as well as lack the courage discussing sexuality education with their children. Though a smaller fraction of the respondents claimed that giving sexuality education to their children is a sin, yet the smallest proportion of the respondents agreed that they are ignorant of what sexuality education was all about.

One quarter of the respondents stated that whenever they see their children reading romance novels or books, they usually seize that opportunity to speak to their children about human sexuality and relationships while less than a quarter talk to their children whenever they got them watching romance films or movies also using the opportunity to ask them questions on human sexuality or body parts. On the other hand, more than a quarter of the respondents stated that they have never used any of the above stated opportunities to speak to their children about sexuality and relationship. (This was as revealed on table 3).

On table 4, substantial quantity of the respondents felt that children should learn about sexuality education at home, while few felt that they should learn it in their respective schools. It was the opinion of the respondents that children should get to adolescent age before learning about sexuality and relationships. Only a negligible number of the respondents felt they should start learning about sexuality from pre-school age. Some parents however felt that teaching children about sexuality is a difficult and dangerous process. Though other parents agreed that sexuality education may threaten the child's "innocence", yet some disagreed. Few of the respondents felt it was appropriate to use correct language for sexual body parts and behaviours when teaching sexuality education to children. Contrary to this, a significant proportion of the respondents condemned the notion.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Harbor-Peters (1999) stated that education is designed to help transfer and modify the culture (in relation to this work, modify the culture of sexual fear and ignorance) the experience, skills and knowledge of a particular people from one generation to another as stated in the National policy of Education section 1, sub-sections 5 namely the inculcation of the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society. One of the educational implications of this study is how amazing it is that parents and indeed the society educate their children about almost everything in life but feel hesitant about giving them sexuality education. Sexuality is a natural in-born phenomenon like eating food and young children need to be given scientific and factual information to help them develop positive sexual attitudes and responsible healthy behaviours.

Majority of the parents felt that sexuality education should be given during adolescent age, but Sexual Education Forum (1999) posited that the educational implication of such ideas is that in the absence of adequate progressive sex education at all levels of the child's development stage, children tend to invent their own mythologies about human sexuality which when reinforced by active social pressure (such as hot pornography in the internet, media, romance magazines and novels), their own natural sexual feelings plus their reproductive needs spells sexual health disastrous problems. All the stakeholders in the Nigerian education industry must take the Guideline for comprehensive sexuality education with every amount of seriousness. They should see to its successful implementation into the school curricular. This Guideline for comprehensive Sexuality Education focuses on the importance of children's and young people's health, right to knowledge on how to promote and protect good health. Maduewesi (2005) reminded the society that the education of children does not begin and end with formal school education which implied that parents will have to collaborate with the school system on the issue of sexuality education.

Conclusively, sexuality education is imperative for homes and schools. The public is appallingly ignorant of the sexual nature of human beings, having little or no knowledge of its biological and psychological significance in the living of a healthy and happy life. It is a well known fact that the unknown and the mysterious create fear in words and fear thrives on ignorance. A well uniformed national programme (like the Guideline for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Nigeria) of a practical, prudent and realistic nature that conforms to the natural laws of human sexuality should be implemented at all school levels. Universities and Colleges of Education should start offering courses and degrees in sexology and produce specially trained teachers and social workers for public schools. Once these avenues of sexuality education have been established, it will go a long way to argument for the short falls of the education of sexuality provided by parents to children at home.

**Table 1:** Frequency and percentages on the role of parents in the sexuality education of their young school children

<b>Question:</b> What would you say has been your role in the sexuality education of your children?		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
*	Passive	117	51.8
*	Active	102	45.1
*	Neither of the above	7	3.1

Source: Survey 2009

**Table 2:** Frequency and percentages of the obstacles that limit parents' involvement in the sexuality education of their children

<b>Question:</b> What obstacles have limited your involvement in teaching sexuality education to your children?		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
*	Ignorance of what sexuality Education is all about?	12	5.3
*	Embarrassment	84	37.2
*	Lack of courage to broach up the subject with my children	91	40.3
*	Lack of closeness with my children		
*	It is sinful to talk about sex with young children	31	13.07

Source: Survey 2009

**Table 3:** Frequency and percentages of situations that enhances parents' involvement in the sexuality education of their children

<b>Question:</b> What has made it easier for you to talk to your children about sexuality and relationships?		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
*	When the child asks questions about sexuality or body parts.	33	14.6
*	When you see the child reading romance novel or books	59	26.1
*	When the children are watching romance films/movies.	43	19.0
*	Whenever you feel it is necessary.	30	13.3
*	None of the above.	61	27.0

Source: Survey 2009

**Table 4:** Frequency and Percentages of parents' perception about Sexuality Education of their young school children

<b>Question:</b> Where do you think young children should learn about sexuality?		<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
*	Home	121	53.5
*	School	97	42.9
*	Anywhere	8	3.5
When do you think children should learn about sexuality and relationships?			
*	Pre-school age	36	15.9
*	School age	67	29.6
*	Adolescent age	12.3	54.4
Providing sexuality education for children is a difficult and dangerous process?			
*	Yes	143	63.3
*	No	83	36.7
Providing sexuality education to children may threaten the child's "innocence".			
*	Yes	155	68.6
*	No	71	31.4
Using correct language for sexual body parts and behaviours is appropriate for young children.			
*	Yes	181	80.1
*	No	45	19.9

Source: Survey 2009

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