

SEX EDUCATION

Specially for Normal stream

» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

constantly upgrade and improve programmes targeted at youth."

Several groups, which work closely with youth, support this pro-active approach. In fact, one group even suggested that the HPB design a similarly targeted prevention programme for younger children, extending to those in primary school.

Ms Hema Gurnani, the programme director at Wings Counselling Centre, which offers medical and psychiatric consultation to youth here, said that the rising number of Singaporean youth contracting HIV show that current prevention programmes clearly "are not as effective as they should have been".

STIs among teenagers are rising on average by 3 to 5 per cent annually, with more than 800 infected last year, according to the Department of STI Control.

"The high-risk group are the normal students. I can identify that," said Ms Sheena Jebal, the chief executive and founder of

NuLife Care and Counselling, which, according to its website, deals largely with youth-at-risk, school drop outs and "late bloomers".

Noting that proper guidance is required for these students, Ms Jebal warned that they were often unaware of the consequences of their sexual conduct as they may lack knowledge about these infections.

Hence, the need for a customised programme to ensure different students can relate to the dangers of Aids and STIs, said Ms Theresa Soon, assistant manager at the Action for Aids/DSC Clinic.

"For instance, in a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school you can be very academic, very technical, but for normal students you should use simpler terms and language," she said. By customising lessons, instructors can use different approaches, and relevant case studies to engage the students, she added.

While Ms Jebal did not want to generalise or stigmatise, she said that in her

It is a concern that younger children below 12 are involved in sex and parents are ignorant of the reality.

Ms Hema Gurnani, programme director, Wings Counselling Centre, suggesting that the HPB look at customised sex education programmes for younger students and not just for Normal students.

experience, Normal stream students are at higher risk because many have low self-esteem so "it is a form of escapism for them when they turn to unprotected sex".

Ms Jebal noted that Express stream students are also at risk. She suggested customised programmes for these students too.

The AFA/DSC Clinic has seen an increase

in youth — across all levels — seeking help, from 775 in 2006 to 820 last year. One factor that some counsellors say has increased the vulnerability of some youth to STIs or Aids is family background, said Ms Soon, citing as an example those students parents are often busy at work or do not speak to their children on these "taboo" topics.

However, beyond customising class-based lessons, Ms Jebal also feels that form teachers or school counsellors zero in on students most likely to be engaging in sex and pay greater attention to them as a mass programme does "not have much impact".

Ms Gurnani from Wings Counselling Centre, one of the first organisations to start a sexuality programme in the primary schools, also suggested that the HPB look at a separate preventive programme for these younger students.

"It is a concern that younger children below 12 are involved in sex and parents are ignorant of the reality," she said.

UMNO CALLS IN GRAFT WATCHDOG

Malaysia's ruling party has, in a turnaround, asked the country's anti-corruption watchdog to help it wipe out money politics and vote-buying in the contest for top posts in the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), which has become a heated and closely watched contest since the party's poor showing at the general election in March.

Several Umno members have in the past alleged that aspiring candidates to top party posts were rewarding supporters with money in exchange for their votes, but the ruling party has until now opposed involving the graft watchdog.

Umno secretary-general Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor said: "There have been complaints of money changing hands at party meetings but we do not have proof. The party's disciplinary board cannot check such complaints as it does not have the means to do so. If there is proof, we will refer them to the ACA." AGENCIES

MALAYSIAN POLITICS

Cracks in the opposition

DAP wants Pakatan Rakyat to relook PAS membership

KUALA LUMPUR — Dissent has begun to show in Malaysia's three-party opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, with one component party openly declaring that it wants the alliance to relook the membership of Islamic party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS).

Chairman of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) Karpal Singh, said PAS' credibility was in doubt, adding that Pakatan should seriously consider whether PAS should be allowed to continue its membership in the alliance, *Bernama* news agency reported. Mr Singh was responding to recent reports confirming that PAS and the ruling party, United Malays National Organisation (Umno), were in talks to sustain Malay unity in the country.

His remarks came in the wake of reports that said Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak had suggested expanding the Umno-PAS negotiations, even as PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang

sought to reassure its Pakatan partners that the party would not abandon the alliance to join the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. Umno is the dominant partner in the BN coalition.

"The assurance by PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang to Pakatan Rakyat partners (Parti Keadilan Rakyat and DAP), that PAS will not abandon the alliance to join the BN, is not *bona fide* and is not supported by past events," DAP chairman Singh said in a statement yesterday. "After the March 8 general elections, PAS had talks with Umno to form a coalition government in Selangor. This was an act of bad faith as both DAP and PKR were not informed of such a move by PAS."

On Saturday, Mr Abdul Hadi said: "There is no joining with Umno, none. We are also not entering Barisan."

Deputy Premier Najib, who is also Umno's deputy president, on Saturday suggested expanding the Umno-PAS talks.

"It should not only be limited to discussions by the party president (Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) but also, if PAS agrees, to cover

any issue that suits PAS and Umno," he said on Saturday. He was quoted by *The Star* as saying the discussions could benefit Muslims as well as promoted better ties between the various races in Malaysia.

Pakatan Rakyat, comprising DAP, PAS and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's PKR, govern five states — Kelantan, Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor. Any break-up in the coalition will result in a change in the opposition state governments, except for Kelantan where PAS has a majority of the state seats, according to *Bernama*.

On Saturday, PAS spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat suggested Umno and PAS be dissolved and a new party formed to unite Malays.

DAP's Mr Singh said yesterday: "Nik Aziz's statement reduces to nought Hadi Awang's statement that PAS would not merge with Umno or join BN. Obviously, statements made by PAS leaders of late, give the perception that they are out to scuttle the Pakatan Rakyat."

» ANWAR EYES BY-ELECTION 14

BRILLIANT ROSE®
The Cut of Ultimate Brilliance

The Promise of Eternity

NEW YORK • MILAN • KUALA LUMPUR • SINGAPORE • TAIPEI • JAKARTA • HONG KONG • BEIJING • TOKYO • SOUTH AFRICA

EXCLUSIVELY AVAILABLE AT
Sookee®
Jewellery
WE BELONG TOGETHER.

MAKING BABIES: BOSSES, FRIENDS, RELATIVES MUST CHIP IN

Singapore needs the "proverbial stork" to visit more regularly to deliver babies, and hopefully a new package of measures to be unveiled next month, coupled with a strong collective desire towards supporting family life will do the trick, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said yesterday.

Speaking at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital's 150th anniversary dinner, Mr Wong underlined the challenges Singapore faces in trying to boost its flagging birth rate.

Mr Wong said the hospital's evolution as a maternity hospital "mirrors that of our population trend." When the hospital was operating at its peak in 1966 and delivered 40,000 babies, a total of 54,680 babies were born in Singapore. "Fast forward to about 40 years later, just 37,074 were born in the whole of Singapore last year," he said.

"Singapore now has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world at 1.29. If this rate is not increased, Singapore's population will be halved beyond 2070 without an inflow of immigrants."

Mr Wong highlighted the key areas where Singaporeans need more support and encouragement to start families.

The first is financial support. "While monetary incentives should not be the reason for a couple to have a child, we understand that they can be helpful," he said.

Time is another crucial factor. Noting that Singaporeans work longer hours than their counterparts in other developed countries, he said: "Work and life should be more balanced. It takes time to get to find someone special, get married and start a family."

He also highlighted the need for childcare support. With dual-income families becoming the norm, potential parents who are worried about childcare arrangements might put off starting a family, noted Mr Wong, who is also the Home Affairs Minister.

But ultimately, there needs to be "a societal mindset change," said Mr Wong. To foster an environment conducive to getting married and having children, everyone will have to play a part: Employers will have to support better work-life practices, while friends and relatives have to chip in to help.

"Most of all, Singaporeans must desire to get married and raise families in the first place," he said. ALICIA WONG

Pro-family, SME style

» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

This has set the stage for some to argue that SMEs may need more help from the Government to be pro-family.

"Cost is the underlying issue for these employers' reluctance to adopt such policies," said Ms Cordelia Quan, group finance and human resource director of the GMP Group, a home-grown HR consultancy.

"When a staff member goes on extended leave, employers might have to hire someone temporarily to replace her. Otherwise, the job load is heaped on other team members."

Said Mr Adrian Chan, honorary secretary of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, which boasts more than 5,000 members: "SMEs are receptive, but the first question they ask is: 'What kind of grants are there that can help me?' For them, it always comes back to maximising resources and minimising expenses."

But with retaining talented manpower becoming a key issue for employers in a tight labour market, SMEs have to find a way to persuade staff to stay with whatever means they have, beyond the usual maternity benefits.

Singapore Business Federation chief executive officer Teng Theng Dar feels that SMEs

UBS Singapore's nursing rooms are so popular there are even 'rush hours' for their use. WEE TECK HIAN



need to look beyond monetary incentives in boosting their family-friendliness. "Flexible work arrangements are one way," he said.

While there are pro-family role models among the SMEs, there are many that feel being small means they "do not need to do all this", said Mr Teng. "The other issue is they don't know how to go about implementing policies."

Fortunately, this wasn't an issue at HR consultancy GMP, which went pro-family by actively redelegating duties to facilitate staff going away on maternity leave.

"Delegating work is important especially

in cases where there is a small team or limited talent pool," said Ms Quan.

For instance, executives are empowered by managers. "This means that should one of the managers be unavailable, his or her staff can take over decision-making duties and ensure productivity of the team is not affected."

Also, bosses needed to change their perception of "face-time" and productivity, as technology enables staff to work away from the office, she added.

But pro-family policies aside, it is their day-to-day practice that needs to be stressed,

said many working mothers.

Indeed, beyond the incentives and comfortable facilities available at UBS Singapore, Ms Sim added that the understanding of her bosses and colleagues went a long way in making her feel comfortable about her mothering duties.

Explaining that it took about 30 to 45 minutes to pump milk each time — twice a day — she said: "They're very understanding about me being away from my desk for a while and my colleagues are very helpful — covering for me for that time."

Mr Chan, who holds a management position at a mid-sized law firm, said SMEs should not view pro-family policies as a financial drain. "In fact, for a small firm, it's even easier to move fast and be flexible about work arrangements. It's an advantage," he said. "It's not about offering cash all the time."

For instance, to retain its legal talent, his firm continued to work with former women employees who moved overseas with their husbands on a project basis.

"They work from wherever they are, and it works for us," he said. "The important thing is we were open to it and willing to explore solutions ... we have to walk the talk. So, for the SMEs that are not converts, we need to push on with the education and keep preaching at them."

FANCY SOME KETUPAT TO GO WITH THAT?



Mr Takeru Kobayashi of Japan (left) and Joey Chestnut of San Jose, California, seen here during the Major League Eating contest Asia Face-off in Singapore yesterday. Mr Kobayashi won the contest after consuming up to 5 kilogrammes of satay, beating the Californian by a whole kilogramme. OOI BOON KEONG