



### Perception of Sexuality Education amongst Secondary School Students in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

*Perception de l'Éducation à la Sexualité Chez des Élèves de l'École Secondaire à Port Harcour, Nigeria*

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#### ABSTRACT

**BACKGROUND:** Sexuality behavior amongst young people in Nigeria and indeed Sub-Saharan Africa is seriously going through transformation from what it was previously. It is therefore important that young people have adequate information about their sexuality so that they can make informed choices.

**OBJECTIVE:** To determine perceptions and knowledge of sexuality education amongst secondary school students in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

**METHODS:** A structured, anonymous and self-administered questionnaire, used as instrument for data collection, was distributed amongst a convenient sample of 1050 secondary school students attending a series of Schools debates in Port Harcourt Metropolis.

**RESULTS:** The students were aged 10–20 years, with a median age of 15. There were 486 males and 564 females giving a M:F ratio of 1:1.2. Four hundred and fourteen (73.4%) of the females had attained menarche. Nine hundred and fifty (90.5%) of the respondents had heard of sexuality education but only 422 (40.1%) discussed relevant topics on the subject. 52.8% believed that sexuality education should be given at home by both parents. However, only 164 (31.2%) and 19 (3.6%) got such information from their mothers and fathers respectively. Only 7.6% acknowledged the school teacher as a source of information.

**CONCLUSION:** Secondary school students are aware of the subject of sexuality education, but lack adequate information on sexuality issues. Parents and teachers are a poor source of information for students. Parents, Teachers and students need to be enlightened on sexuality education. There is also a need to incorporate it into the school curriculum. *WAJM* 2012; 31(2): 109–113.

**Keywords:** Perceptions, sexuality education, secondary school, students.

#### RÉSUMÉ

**CONTEXTE:** Les habitudes sexuelles chez les jeunes gens du Nigeria mais aussi de l'Afrique sub Saharienne sont en pleine mutation comparées au passé. Il est important que ces jeunes aient des informations adéquates sur leur sexualité afin de les aider à faire des choix éclairés.

**OBJECTIF:** Déterminer les perceptions et connaissances sur l'éducation à la sexualité parmi des élèves de l'école secondaire de Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

**METHODES:** Un questionnaire auto administré et anonyme a été conçu comme instrument de collecte de données. Il a été distribué à un échantillon de 1050 élèves de l'école secondaire participant à une série de débats scolaires dans la métropole de Port Harcourt.

**RESULTATS:** Les élèves étaient âgés de 10 à 20 ans avec une médiane de 15 ans. Il y'avait 486 garçons et 564 filles avec un sexe ratio garçon/fille de 1:1,2. Quatre cent quatorze filles (73.4% des filles) avaient atteint la ménarche. Neuf cent cinquante élèves (90.5%) avaient entendu parler d'éducation à la sexualité mais seuls 422 (40.1%) avaient discuté de sujets en rapports avec le thème, 52.8% croyaient que l'éducation à la sexualité devrait être réalisée à la maison par les 2 parents. Toutefois, seuls 164 (31.2%) et 19 (3.6%) avaient une telle information de leurs mères et pères respectivement. Seuls 7.6% avaient affirmé avoir reçu des informations de la part de leur enseignant.

**CONCLUSION:** Les élèves de l'école secondaire sont bien informés concernant l'éducation à la sexualité mais ils manquent d'informations appropriées sur les problèmes de sexualité. Les parents et les enseignants constituent une mauvaise source d'information pour les élèves. Les parents, les enseignants et les élèves ont besoin d'être éclairés sur l'éducation à la sexualité. Il y'a lieu d'incorporer cette éducation dans le programme de formation. *WAJM* 2012; 31 (2): 109–113.

**Mots clés:** Perceptions, sexualité éducation, école secondaire, élèves.

**INTRODUCTION**

Sexuality education also referred to as sex education or family life education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs and values. It encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image and gender roles.<sup>1</sup> Sexuality behaviour amongst young people in Nigeria and indeed Sub-Saharan Africa is seriously going through transformation from what it was in the past.<sup>2</sup> This transformation has been attributed to the effect of modernisation caused by industrialisation, education, exposure and importation of various foreign cultures that were alien to Nigeria and Africa.<sup>2</sup> This has increased the vulnerability of young people to sexual and reproductive health problems. In recent times the Nigerian youth have been reported to be highly vulnerable to antisocial behaviours including unsafe sexual activities.<sup>3</sup> This has been attributed to their great lack of information and knowledge about the implications of their behaviour on their sexual health.<sup>3</sup> There is therefore the need for sexuality education amongst this vulnerable group. It develops young people's skills so that they make informed choices about their behaviour, and feel confident and competent about acting on these choices.<sup>1,2</sup>

Young people get information about sex and sexuality from a wide range of sources, including each other, their parents, teachers, through the media, magazines, books and websites.<sup>4,5</sup> Some of these sources give accurate information while others do not. Myths and misconceptions about sex and sexuality acquired by young people from wrong sources may be carried throughout life and passed on to their own offspring. It has however been documented that when young people are well informed, there is a delay in the age of onset of sexual activities and increased use of preventive measures against STDs and pregnancy amongst those already sexually active.<sup>6-8</sup> This leads to an overall reduction in teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>6,7</sup>

This study was carried out to assess knowledge and perceptions of sexuality

education amongst secondary school students in Port Harcourt

**METHODOLOGY**

**Subjects**

The study was conducted amongst a convenient sample of secondary school students attending a series of Schools debates organized by the Medical Women Association of Nigeria, in Port Harcourt from 1st–30<sup>th</sup> June 2009. Schools in these debates were selected proportionally from private and public schools within Port Harcourt as follows.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

There are 52 secondary schools in Port Harcourt, 36 private and 16 public schools. Giving a ratio of 2.3:1. Based on this, 4 private and 2 public schools (total of six schools) were determined to participate. Thus, two co-educational schools (one public and one private), two all boys (one public and one private) and two all girls (private schools) were randomly selected from a list of all the schools. These six schools were spread across the three school districts in Port Harcourt – Diobu, Township and Elekahia districts (two schools per district).

All students spanning all the classes of Junior and Senior secondary school (JSS1 to SSS3) present on the days of the study were included in the study. Permission for the study was obtained from the school authorities of participating schools and consent was obtained from participating students.

One thousand and fifty students who were in attendance and filled the questionnaires properly participated in the study. Twenty six were excluded because of incompletely filled questionnaires.

Data were collected using a structured, anonymous and self-administered questionnaire. Information obtained included bio data, awareness information, and practice. Where appropriate, respondents were allowed to tick more than one answer. Data were entered into a Microsoft Excel spread sheet and analyzed using SPSS version 15.0.

**RESULTS**

One thousand and fifty students participated in the study. There were 486 males and 564 females giving a male: female ratio of 1:1.2. Students were aged 10–20 years with a median age of 15 years. Most of the students (67.1%) live with both parents. Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the students.

**Table 1: General Characteristics of Respondents**

|                   | Number | Frequency (%) |
|-------------------|--------|---------------|
| <b>Age</b>        |        |               |
| 10–12             | 64     | 6.1           |
| 13–15             | 616    | 58.7          |
| 16–18             | 266    | 25.3          |
| ≥19               | 18     | 1.7           |
| No response       | 86     | 8.2           |
| Total             | 1050   | 100.0         |
| <b>Sex</b>        |        |               |
| Male              | 486    | 46.3          |
| Female            | 564    | 53.7          |
| Total             | 1050   | 100.0         |
| <b>Care giver</b> |        |               |
| Both parents      | 704    | 67.1          |
| Mother            | 140    | 13.3          |
| Father            | 52     | 5.0           |
| Relative          | 119    | 11.3          |
| Others            | 35     | 3.3           |
| Total             | 1050   | 100.0         |

**Table 2: Students' Perception on who should give Sexuality Education, and where it should be given**

|                                  | Frequency (%) |       |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-------|
| <b>Who should give?</b>          |               |       |
| Mother                           | 260           | 24.8  |
| Father                           | 12            | 1.1   |
| Both parents                     | 554           | 52.8  |
| Teacher                          | 80            | 7.6   |
| Pastor                           | 10            | 1.0   |
| Mass media                       | 26            | 2.5   |
| Others                           | 64            | 6.1   |
| Don't know                       | 44            | 4.2   |
| Total                            | 1050          | 100.0 |
| <b>Where it should be given?</b> |               |       |
| Home                             | 608           | 57.9  |
| Primary school                   | 16            | 1.5   |
| Secondary school                 | 260           | 24.8  |
| Church                           | 18            | 1.7   |
| Others                           | 76            | 7.3   |
| Don't know                       | 72            | 6.8   |
| Total                            | 1050          | 100.0 |

**Table 3: Relationship between Gender and Source of Sexuality Information**

| Sex          | Source of Sexuality Information |                  |                   |                   |                   |                  |                  |
|--------------|---------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
|              | Mother (%)                      | Father (%)       | Friends (%)       | Media (%)         | Books (%)         | Teacher (%)      | Others (%)       |
| Males        | 94(28.7)                        | 30(78.9)         | 116(58.6)         | 132(68.0)         | 48(36.4)          | 35(46.0)         | 22(61.1)         |
| Females      | 234(71.3)                       | 8( 21.1)         | 82(41.4)          | 62(32.0)          | 86(63.6)          | 41(54.0)         | 14(38.9)         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>328(100.0)</b>               | <b>38(100.0)</b> | <b>198(100.0)</b> | <b>194(100.0)</b> | <b>132(100.0)</b> | <b>76(100.0)</b> | <b>36(100.0)</b> |

**Table 4: Students Perception on Age to Start Sexuality Education**

| Age to start (years) | Frequency   | Percent (%)  |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|
| 0 – 5                | 38          | 3.6          |
| 6 – 10               | 138         | 13.1         |
| 11 – 15              | 676         | 64.4         |
| 16 – 19              | 148         | 14.1         |
| Don't know           | 50          | 4.6          |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>1050</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Four hundred and fourteen girls (73.4%) had attained menarche.

Nine hundred and fifty (90.5%) of the students had heard about sexuality education. On who should give such education, 554 (52.8%) of the students perceived that it was the responsibility of both parents (Table 2). However, 260 (24.8%) of them thought it was the mothers' responsibility while only 12 (1.1%) thought it was the fathers' responsibility. As to where sexuality education should be given, 608 (57.9%) believed that it should be at home, whilst 260 (24.8%) thought it should be at school (Table 2).

Three hundred and twenty eight (31.2%) had their mothers as their regular source of information on sexuality issues while 76 (7.2%) mentioned the teacher as a source of information. One hundred and ninety eight (18.9%) and 194 (18.5%) had their friends and the media respectively as their source of information. Fathers were amongst the least mentioned source of information.

Females were more likely to get information from their mothers and males from their fathers (p=0.000) (Table 3).

Six hundred and seventy six (64.4%) of the students were of the opinion that sexuality education should be started at 11–15 years. Forty eight (4.6%) had no

clue as to when it should be started. (Table 4).

Only 268 (25.5%) of the respondents agreed to discussing sexuality issues frequently. 572 (54.5%) of them would only discuss it occasionally.

Four hundred and twenty two (40.2%) discussed a wide variety of sexuality issues including menstruation, sexual intercourse, boy/girl relationships, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

#### DISCUSSION

The study shows that the subject of sexuality is not alien to secondary school students in Port Harcourt as majority of them had heard about it. This was similar to findings in a study done in a rural community in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, which showed that even in a rural area, adolescents were to a great extent quite aware of sexuality issues.<sup>2</sup> This goes to buttress the fact that with urbanisation and industrialisation there is increasing exposure to various kinds of information and therefore increased vulnerability of young people to wrong information and myths.<sup>2,5</sup>

Students perceive that it is the responsibility of both parents to educate them on sexuality issues with more of them attributing this responsibility to mothers rather than fathers. This perception is further enhanced by the fact that quite a number of them also think that the home is the best place for such education. Other studies show that even parents agree that the home is the best place for sexuality education to take place and that it is the responsibility of the parents to give such education while some parents oppose such teaching with the fear that it will lead to experimentation with sex.<sup>3,5</sup> Majority of the students in this study reside at home with both parents and so

should have the benefit of being taught at home. However it is also known that in our society the subject of sex is a taboo and most people including parents and teachers get anxious when it is

Although students assign the responsibility of sexuality education to both parents, only 31.2% and 3.6% got such information from their mothers and fathers respectively.

Mothers were the highest source of information on sexuality issues in this study. This is in keeping with a study in China where adolescents perceived mothers as the main source of sexual knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Also, in a qualitative study of parents' experience in providing sexuality education for their children,<sup>10</sup> it was found that mothers tended to be the main educators, although a few fathers shared the role. In most Nigerian cultures mothers are expected to be concerned primarily with the home while men are concerned with work and acquiring wealth.<sup>3,11</sup> This affords mothers more time with children and so gives them better opportunities to educate their children on relevant issues, little wonder then that they were the highest source of information in this study.

Fathers are seldom involved in the transmission of sexual information to their children especially their daughters.<sup>13</sup> This is also reflected in this study. However, males were more likely to get sexuality information from their fathers and females from their mothers. This in keeping with the Chinese study which showed that males were more likely to talk with their fathers and females with their mothers.<sup>9</sup> This trend seems to cut across different cultures.

The role of parents in providing sexuality education has been acknowledged.<sup>13, 14</sup> Parents in Africa, and in fact other parts of the world, however constitute a very small source of sexual information to their children<sup>2, 10, 16</sup> as also shown in this study. Nigerian parents have been shown to relegate sexuality to the domain of the dangerous, unpleasant and unsavory.<sup>15, 16</sup> This is an unhealthy trend as family sexuality communication serves as a protective factor, exerts a favourable influence on adolescents' sexual behaviour and offers parents a

veritable cultural space to manage and control young people's sexuality.<sup>9, 16</sup> Furthermore, adolescents experience a spate of physical and psychosexual changes which they would better understand if they had adequate information on sexuality and sexual health.<sup>17</sup>

In this study the teacher and the school did not feature much as reference points for sexuality education. If young people cannot get information at home it is only reasonable that they get such information from school where they spend a better part of their day. 18.5% of respondents had their teachers as their regular source of information on sexuality issues, whilst 26.3% mentioned school as the place where it should be taught. This shows that as much as the issue of sexuality education in schools has been advocated,<sup>18-20</sup> it is yet to take its full place in the school curriculum. Sexuality education given in school is usually structured and given in phases according to the child's level of development and may be the only opportunity of providing accurate information to young people.

Other sources of information mentioned include the media, friends and books. These were more regular sources than teachers or fathers. Information gotten from these sources is more likely to mislead young people. Authors have noted that the large numbers of existing pictorial books combined with licit and illicit movies have contributed in no small measure towards the removal of guilt, fear and shame associated with unconventional sexual behaviour.<sup>2, 21</sup> Furthermore, over 70% of the females had attained menarche therefore wrong information and risky behaviour may put them at high risk of unwanted pregnancies amidst the other consequences of such acts.

Many of the students were of the opinion that sexuality education should be started at ages 11-15 years. This is not surprising as a lot of them were within this age group. This view probably reflects their needs and pleas to be properly educated. Teachers and Clergy in other studies also identified ages 11-15 years as the most appropriate to begin such education.<sup>22, 23</sup> Sexuality education that works however, should start early before children reach puberty.<sup>4, 12, 13</sup> This

empowers them before they develop established patterns of behaviour and helps them manage their sexuality and reproduction even in adulthood.<sup>12, 13, 23</sup>

Only a small percent of the students owned up to discussing sexuality issues frequently, although a wide variety of sexuality issues were discussed. This supports the fact earlier stated that in Nigerian societies discussion of sexuality issues openly is considered a taboo but also shows that young people are curious about their sexuality. This further emphasizes the need for young people to be given accurate information early. Proper education helps them understand and manage their sexuality and reproduction in the crucial period of social and physical development.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, Secondary school students in Port Harcourt are aware of, and curious about their sexuality. They neither get enough information at home nor at school and are therefore vulnerable to getting information from wrong sources. There is a serious need for sexuality education to be introduced formally into the school curriculum.

#### Limitations

The study was carried out among students spanning all classes from lower to upper secondary from various schools. As simple as the questionnaire was made to be, variations in levels of understanding may have influenced responses given. However investigators were on ground to help students who needed any clarification.

**Duality of Interest:** None declared.

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### Questionnaire on Knowledge and Perceptions of Sex/Sexuality Education among Secondary School Students

Dear Respondent, this is a study being carried out by female medical doctors to assess knowledge and perceptions of sexuality education among secondary school students in Port Harcourt. Kindly fill this questionnaire correctly. Your identity is not needed and all information given shall be handled confidentially. Thank you for your kind co-operation.

1. Age:.....
2. Sex:     a) Male                    b) Female
3. Class:   a) JSS1   b) JSS2   c) JSS3   d) SSS1   e) SSS2   f) SSS3
4. Name of School:.....

*Question 5 is for females only*

- 5a. Have you started menstruating:     a) Yes            b) No
- b. If yes to question 5a, how old were you when you started menstruating? .....
6. Who do you currently live with:   a) Both parents     b) Mother     c) Father
- d) Relative     e) Others (specify) .....
7. Have you ever heard about sex education?   a) Yes     b) No
8. Who should give sex education?     a) Mother     b) Father     c) Both parents     d) Teacher
- e) Pastor     f) TV/Radio     g) Others (specify).....
9. Where should sexuality education be given?     a) Home     b) Primary school
- c) Secondary school     d) Church     e) Other (specify).....
10. At what age should it be started?   a) 0–5yrs   b) 5–10yrs   c) 11–15yrs   d) 16–19yrs
11. How often do you discuss sexuality issues?   a) Often     b) Occasionally   c) Never
12. Who/what is your regular source of information?   a) Mother   b) Father   c) Friends
- d) TV/Radio     e) Books     f) Teacher   g) Others(specify).....
13. Which of these do you discuss?
- a) Description of body parts                            b) Description of reproductive organs
- c) Description of how babies are born                d) Education on HIV/AIDS; STDs
- e) Menstruation   f) Sexual intercourse
- g) Pregnancy and its prevention                     h) Boy/Girl relationship
- i) All of the above                                      j) Others (specify).....