

Original Article

Exploring Parental Perspectives: Unveiling the Significance of Sex Education for Children before Puberty in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: The discourse on sex education remains a contentious issue, particularly within conservative societies such as Pakistan, where cultural and religious norms significantly influence educational content. The importance of sex education in safeguarding children's physical and psychological well-being is increasingly recognized, amidst growing concerns over inadequate knowledge and the proliferation of misleading information through the internet.

Objective: This study aimed to explore parental perspectives on sex education for children before puberty in Pakistan, assessing their views on its necessity, appropriate timing, delivery methods, and the influence of cultural and religious beliefs on sex education.

Methods: Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilized thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to examine the viewpoints of ten parents (3 fathers and 7 mothers) of children aged 7 to 11 years. Data were collected through online interviews using a purposive sampling strategy. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2020) five-phase guide to identify patterns and themes within the data.

Results: The analysis revealed that parents view sex education as a crucial part of their children's development, emphasizing the need for it to be introduced at an appropriate age and through accurate and respectful content. Religious beliefs were found to support, rather than contradict, the provision of sex education, with Islam permitting discussions on sexuality in an educational context. Gender-specific roles in delivering sex education were highlighted, with a preference for mothers to educate daughters and fathers to educate sons. Despite recognizing its importance, parents expressed concerns about the potential for sex education to distract from academic studies and the challenges of ensuring the accuracy of the information provided.

Conclusion: The study underscores a complex balance between acknowledging the importance of sex education and addressing its implementation amidst cultural and religious sensitivities. It highlights the need for collaborative efforts among parents, educators, and health professionals to develop effective sex education programs that are culturally and religiously appropriate, aiming to empower children with knowledge and protective strategies against misinformation and abuse.

Keywords: Sex Education, Parental Perspectives, Pakistan, Cultural Sensitivity, Religious Beliefs, Thematic Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Pakistani society, where discussions on sex are entangled with social and moral taboos due to the profound influence of religion and tradition, the discourse around sexuality education is often perceived as detrimental (1). This perception is further complicated by the challenges posed by the digital age, where the proliferation of explicit content online exacerbates the difficulty parents face in addressing such subjects with their children, often due to embarrassment or a lack of comfort in discussing these topics (2-5). The absence of adequate sexual education has been linked to sexual disorders as categorized in the DSM-V, highlighting the critical need for informed discussions on this subject (6-8). The evolving dynamics of family structures and the increasingly complex and information-rich environment underscore the importance of understanding parental attitudes towards sex education (9). The World Health Organization (2023) advocates for sex education, emphasizing its role in equipping children and

teenagers with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to protect their health, foster healthy relationships, and respect the rights of others. The onset of sexual maturity, occurring between the ages of 9 and 14 as stated by the National Institutes of Health (2021), marks a critical period of adolescence characterized by significant biological changes that can impact decision-making processes, often without a full understanding of the consequences (5, 10-13).

The primary goal of sex education, according to Finkelhor (2019), is to arm children with the knowledge and skills required to identify dangerous situations, prevent sexual abuse, and recognize boundary violations (14). The authenticity of the material provided is crucial, as misinformation, especially from unreliable sources like the internet, poses significant risks. In the absence of guidance from parents, children often turn to peers, the internet, and the media for information on sex (Nimbi et al., 2021) (15). Comprehensive sex education, through a sex positivity approach, addresses not only the biological aspects of sex but also its emotional, social, and relational dimensions. This approach, championed by Ivanski & Kohut (2017), promotes inclusivity, destigmatizes conversations about sex, and empowers individuals to make informed decisions regarding their bodies, relationships, and sexual health, thereby fostering personal autonomy, healthy relationships, and overall well-being (16).

Albert Bandura's social learning theory provides a framework for understanding how social influences, including parents, teachers, and the media, shape attitudes and behaviors towards sexuality (12, 17). This theory underscores the importance of positive role models and accurate information in promoting healthy sexual practices, while also highlighting the potential consequences of false representations (7). Furthermore, the theory stresses the need to consider peer interactions within sex education, with positive peer relationships and open communication serving as catalysts for responsible decision-making (18). The literature reveals a significant gap in both the availability and quality of sexual health services and education in Pakistan, pointing to the necessity for curriculum-based sex education in educational institutions (19). Research by Robinson et al. (2019) indicates that nearly 70% of parents recognize the importance and relevance of sex education for their children, underscoring its role in fostering interpersonal respect, ensuring safety, and dispelling myths (20). Parental perspectives often reflect traditional gender-specific roles in the provision of sex education, with a division of responsibility where fathers educate sons and mothers educate daughters. However, only a third of parents view themselves as solely responsible for their children's sex education, suggesting a preference for collaborative efforts between families and schools, with shared responsibility in educating children (Lukolo & Dyk, 2014; Robinson et al., 2019) (20, 21). Given the contentious nature of sex education within Asian cultures, often perceived as shameful, the imperative for delivering precise, age-appropriate information on sex and relationships is clear. Parents play a crucial role in this educational process, balancing cultural, religious, and personal values. This study aims to bridge the knowledge gap between what parents feel comfortable discussing with their children and what they believe their children should know. To develop programs that align with family beliefs and preferences, a comprehensive understanding of the diverse parental approaches to sex education is essential. This necessitates a collaborative effort among healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers to ensure that sex education is both effective and culturally sensitive.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, the methodology adopted aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of parental perspectives on sex education for children before puberty, employing a qualitative research design grounded in the thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) (22). This approach was selected for its robustness in facilitating the integration and interpretation of complex data sets, allowing for the extraction of meaningful themes that reflect the nuanced viewpoints of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for its versatility and adaptability across various qualitative research scenarios, offering a methodological flexibility that is not tied to any singular theoretical framework, thus enabling a broad exploration of the subject matter (22).

The participant pool was carefully selected using a nonprobability purposive sampling strategy, resulting in a diverse sample of ten parents, comprising three fathers and seven mothers, of children aged 7 to 11 years. This demographic was specifically chosen to ensure the inclusion of perspectives from parents of children who are approaching or have just begun their prepubescent stage. Eligibility criteria for participation included mothers who had at least one child within the age range of 7 to 11 years and had attained a minimum of 12 years of educational background to ensure a baseline level of understanding and articulation regarding the subject of sex education.

Data collection was conducted through online platforms, with WhatsApp phone calls serving as the primary medium for conducting interviews. This method was chosen for its accessibility and ease of use, facilitating a higher response rate and convenience for participants. A self-constructed set of questions was developed to guide the interview process, focusing on exploring parental attitudes towards sex education, including their preferences, perceived benefits and drawbacks, and the influence of Islamic teachings on their perspectives.

The analysis phase adhered to the five-step guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021), which involves familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing these themes, and finally defining and naming them (11). This structured analytical process enabled a detailed exploration of the data, uncovering the depth of participants' views and experiences related to sex education for children before puberty.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. In alignment with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, all participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's objectives, the nature of the questions, and the confidentiality measures in place to protect their identities. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of data collection, ensuring that all participants were fully aware of their rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. The privacy and anonymity of participants were rigorously maintained, with all data handled in a manner that ensures confidentiality and respect for the participants' privacy.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of parental perspectives on sex education before puberty in Pakistan revealed a consensus on its critical role in a child's development, emphasizing the necessity for it to be imparted at an appropriate age and with accurate information. Parents acknowledged sex education as fundamental, akin to other forms of education, and stressed its timely delivery based on the child's curiosity, maturity, and societal demands, generally advocating for initiation before puberty. The positive outcomes identified included aiding children during their exploratory stage, providing guidance on sexuality, preventing misinformation, and satisfying curiosity. Significantly, the support from Islamic teachings was noted, with an emphasis on the permissibility and encouragement of sex education within religious norms, including references from the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Despite no consensus on gender differences in receiving sex education, a tendency towards gender-specific parental roles was highlighted, with a preference for mothers to educate daughters and fathers to sons. Parents viewed themselves as the primary sources of sex education, underscoring the importance of integrating such education within the school curriculum and advocating for collaboration with child psychologists to ensure a comprehensive approach.

Table 1 Thematic Analysis

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Themes
Opinions Regarding Sex Education	Significant Part of Education	- Equally important as other education
		- Significant piece of information
		- Should be at the right time/appropriate age
	Choice of Appropriate Time	- According to child's level of curiosity
		- According to child's maturity level
		- According to generation demands
		- Not before puberty
	Appropriate Delivery of Information	- Appropriate information
		- Information must be accurate/correct
	Positive Outcomes of Timely Education	- Exploration stage of children
		- Guidance about sexuality
		- Avoidance of wrong sources
		- Clear the doubts
- Curiosity satisfied		
Support by Islam	- Permitted by Islam	
	- Islam does not forbid	
	- Neglecting is not a religious norm	
	- Detailed information in Quran	
	- Prophet P.B.U.H's teachings	
Preference Regarding Providing...	Parents Supporting Idea of Sex Education	- Until they come with questions
		- Fulfill their curiosity
		- Welcome the child
		- Clear the confusion

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Themes		
		- Supportive father		
		- Comfortable space		
		- Guidance		
		- Friendly relationship		
		- Non-hesitant		
	Necessary for Kids' Protection and Well-being	- Well-being		
		- Male interaction		
		- Good and bad gestures from males and strangers		
		- Victim		
		- Bad touch		
		- Parents' neglect leads to problems		
	Provide Them with the Right Source of Education	- Uncensored sources		
		- Betterment		
- Avoid misleading sources				
- Kids get easily misguided				
Effect of Child's Gender on Sex Education	No Gender Differences More Important for Boys	- No difference		
		- More important for boys		
		- Earlier to boys		
		- To avoid boys from bad company		
		- Right source of education is important for boys		
	Provided by Same Gender Parent	- Mom to daughter		
		- Father to son		
		Source of Sex Education	Parents as Primary Source	- Family (Parents, elder siblings)
				- Timely education by parents
- Parents as priority/best source				
- Parents should educate				
- Parents through love and understanding				
- Parents through open discussion				
School and Curriculum	- School			
	- Curriculum			
	- Teachers should create comfortable space			
	- Mass education through curriculum			
Child Psychologists	- Curriculum of sixth/seventh grade			
	- Teacher's training			
	- Child psychologists are trained			

SUBJECTIVE OPINION

The participants hold the view of sex education as a significant part of education. They talked about the appropriate time to provide the education to children. Some individuals express a strong belief in the necessity of comprehensive sex education, arguing that it plays a crucial role in promoting informed decision-making, consent, and overall sexual health. They emphasize that providing accurate and age-appropriate information about reproductive health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and relationships can empower individuals to make responsible choices. Some of the verbatim were.

"I think timely sex education is crucial in schools. We live in a world where information is readily available, and kids are exposed to various influences early on. Having comprehensive sex education helps them make informed decisions about their bodies and relationships." [P1]

"It should be integrated into the curriculum so that it becomes a normal part of the learning experience for students." [P2]

"The sooner we start educating kids about their bodies and relationships, the better. It helps in breaking the stigma around discussing these topics openly." [P7]

"Timely sex education also addresses issues like body image and self-esteem. It's not just about the act of sex but understanding oneself, embracing diversity, and promoting a healthy body image." [P10]

ISLAM'S PERSPECTIVE

Participants noted how Islam places a strong focus on sexual seclusion and modesty. They emphasized the importance of parents in fostering open communication within the family and offering sex education in line with Islamic principles. Some emphasized tackling modern concerns like STIs and reproductive health, arguing for a well-rounded strategy that combines Islamic teachings with useful data to enable wise decision-making.

"In Islam, knowledge is highly valued. Ignorance can lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions, so it's crucial to educate ourselves in accordance with Islamic principles." [P3]

"Islam teaches us to approach matters of intimacy with modesty and respect. Sex education, guided by Quranic teachings, helps us understand the boundaries and etiquettes set by Islam." [P6]

"Sex education is often considered taboo in many cultures, but Islam encourages open communication within the bounds of decency." [P8]

PERSONAL PREFERENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Opinions on the personal preference and significance of sex education in children vary widely among participants. They emphasized provision source of providing the sex education and considered it important for the well-being and protection of children. Some participants mentioned that it is every parent's personal preference of when they want their child to be knowledgeable about sex education.

"I think personal preference should be respected when it comes to sex education." [P9]

"I'm concerned that introducing sex education too early may expose children to adult themes before they are emotionally ready." [P4]

"It's a responsibility to ensure children have the information to navigate a complex aspect of life safely." [P5]

EFFECTS OF CHILD'S GENDER

According to participants, having educators who identify as same gender improves relatability and inclusivity in sex education. This strategy might foster a more secure environment, enabling kids to talk about delicate subjects in comfort. Some participants, however, think that the effectiveness of sex education is not much impacted by the gender of the educator.

"Kids might find it easier to relate and ask questions without feeling judged." [P9]

"I believe having same-gender educators for sex education creates a more open and comfortable environment." [P8]

"In my opinion, having someone of the same gender teaching about these topics helps eliminate stereotypes and ensures a more accurate and relatable learning experience for the children." [P1]

SOURCE OF SEX EDUCATION

Due to cultural, religious, and individual beliefs, opinions on the origin of sex education for children differ greatly. Some support using schools as the primary source, citing qualified teachers who deliver accurate knowledge in a way that is acceptable for the students' age. Some contend that medical professionals should play a major role since they are considered authorities in the field and are qualified to answer questions about sexual health and provide correct medical information.

"I believe parents should be the primary source of sex education." [P7]

"Schools play a vital role in sex education. Teachers can provide comprehensive and unbiased information that goes beyond what kids might learn at home. Sex education in schools should be age-appropriate and cover various aspects, including relationships, consent, and reproductive health." [P2]

"Sometimes, kids learn a lot from their friends. It's important to ensure that peer influence is positive and doesn't spread misinformation" [P3]

"Medical professionals should be involved in sex education to ensure that children receive accurate information about their bodies and sexual health." [P1]

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Participants contend that by providing children with factual knowledge, sex education promotes healthy body image and self-esteem. It lessens stigma and fosters an atmosphere where inquiries are welcome. Age appropriateness is a concern because some people worry that early exposure could be misleading.

"Having age-appropriate sex education can help children understand and respect diversity in relationships, promoting tolerance and inclusivity." [P4]

"Sex education helps children develop a healthy attitude towards their bodies and relationships." [P5]

"Open discussions about consent and boundaries can help prevent sexual harassment and abuse, fostering a safer environment for children." [P6]

"Sex education contributes to breaking down stigmas and taboos, creating a more open-minded and accepting society." [P8]

DISCUSSION

The study meticulously explored parental perspectives on sex education, elucidating its perceived importance in shaping a child's understanding of sexuality. The consensus among parents underscores the belief that sex education constitutes a vital component of a child's developmental journey. The nuanced differences in opinions regarding age appropriateness and the credibility of information sources indicate a deliberate consideration, mirroring findings from Robinson et al. (2019), which emphasized the significance parents place on sex education (20).

The awareness of the adverse outcomes associated with inadequate sex education was evident among participants. They argued that providing accurate information at a suitable age could quench children's curiosity and prevent them from resorting to unreliable online materials. This aligns with the observations made by Finkelhor (2019), highlighting the role of religious beliefs where Islam's endorsement of sex education was notably recognized, suggesting a harmonization of religious values with educational needs (14). Parents positioned themselves as the primary educators in the realm of sex education, advocating for its integration into academic curricula and emphasizing the responsibility of educators in this domain. This resonates with Ivanski & Kohut (2017), who recommended collaboration with child psychologists to ensure a well-rounded educational approach (16). The delineation of gender-specific roles in imparting sex education, with mothers for daughters and fathers for sons, reflects an adherence to societal and cultural norms concerning discussions on sensitive topics, as also observed by Robinson et al. (2019) (20).

The benefits of sex education, as identified by parents, include equipping children with the ability to differentiate between safe and unsafe touch, providing self-defense mechanisms, and fostering an understanding of bodily changes. Conversely, the potential for distractions from academic pursuits and the risks posed by incomplete information were recognized as drawbacks, echoing the concerns raised by Talpur & Khowaja (2012) (19).

The study, while offering a comprehensive analysis of parental attitudes towards sex education, is marked by certain limitations. The exclusion of children's perspectives presents a notable gap, suggesting that future research should incorporate the views of the younger demographic to enrich the understanding of sex education's impact. This recommendation stems from an acknowledgment of the study's strength in capturing a wide array of parental viewpoints, yet also highlights the need for a more holistic approach that includes the recipients of sex education themselves.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this investigation sheds light on the complex interplay between recognizing the importance of sex education and implementing it with careful consideration. It calls for enhanced communication strategies, integration into educational frameworks, and fostering collaborations among educators, psychologists, and parents. Such measures are imperative to ensure that children are not only informed about sex education in a manner that respects cultural and religious sensitivities but are also equipped to protect themselves and communicate effectively about their concerns.

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