

Sex Counselling and Its Impacts on Adolescents' Moral Behavior

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Abstract

The paper examines the concept of sex counselling and its significance in the contemporary society. It also dissects the misconceptions upheld by adolescents and their implications on their moral development. The paper further addresses the reasons why adolescents engage in non-marital sex and its consequences. The counselling methods and approaches for tackling this are discussed. The paper concludes by giving the implications of the approaches on the moral development of adolescents.

Introduction

In the good olden days, virginity was a virtue that every young woman must uphold. After the wedding ceremony in the old days, if the bride was not found as a virgin, it was a great disgrace to her family. This cultural practice then in the Nigerian society prevented ladies from engaging in non-marital sex. But, nowadays the reverse is the case. If a bride still keeps her virginity till her wedding night, she is seen as an uncivilized girl (Ola, 2000).

Sexuality is an important aspect of growth. Proper upbringing and thorough training of the body and its functioning will be of great help to our adolescents.

According to McMahan and McMahan (1982), sexual desires and activities should be seen as natural tendencies and instincts that will come when they are needed and necessary. Sexuality involves physical, personal and symbolic aspect which is connected indirectly with the sex act. Sexuality must be viewed in the light of the society. Sex problems begin in adolescence and adolescents face major difficulties in handling their sex drives (Dacey and Travers, 2004).

According to Ventura, Mathew and Curtin (1998), adolescents who can go to their parents or other adults with questions about sex and those who get sex counselling from school or community programme have a better chance of avoiding pregnancy and other risks connected with sexual activity. Papalia (2004) observed that many societies have witnessed a revolutionary change in attitudes toward sexual activities. Many may not believe in keeping their virginity again. There may be no more fear in the heart of the young ones towards sexual activities. He opined that regarding non-marital or premarital sex, homosexuality, sexual minority and specific sexual acts are probably more open and permissive today in the life of the younger one than they have been at any time in recent history. Young people are exposed to sexual stimuli in magazines, on television and by the movies to a great extent than ever before.

Parental monitoring during pre-adolescence affects the age at which adolescents start and begin sexual activity. He was of the view that adolescents who are knowledgeable about sex are more likely to use contraceptives consistently. They are also more likely to postpone sexual intimacy the most effective means of preventing sexual problems. Sex counselling can be regarded as a process of making an individual develop a positive and wholesome attitude towards sex. Sex counselling is a way of providing adolescents with valuable knowledge about sex so as to avert risks associated with sex such as teenage pregnancy, sexual diseases and emotional problems.

The issue of sex counselling should not be left in the hands of parents alone. Teachers, professional counsellors and more importantly the society should be involved. Sex counselling is the reproductive rite that gives one knowledge about one's body and value so that it cannot be abused. It, therefore, needs a right interpretation and according to Anyagwa (2001), it should not be compartmentalized.

Parents are of different schools of thought on the issue of sexuality. Some parents are of the view that exposing a young girl or a young boy to sex issues could be dangerous. This school of thought believes that by telling a young person that having a sexual relationship with the opposite sex could result into pregnancy may prompt such an adolescent to practice and test whether it is true or not.

The other school of thought believes that knowledge is power that such knowledge may prevent an adolescent from engaging in such act. To some parents, sex counselling is against their cultural beliefs. In some cultures, discussing sexual issue is a taboo; therefore, sexual discussion should be delayed to marriageable age before such discussion is welcomed. To negate this idea, some parents may see the school as mixture of many cultures. Therefore, it is very possible for a child to learn from another child who comes from another cultural background where sexual discussions are allowed. Some may be biased because of their religious belief. They may see sexual discussion as “sinful” and therefore to them it is better to avoid such discussion and allow the medical professionals to do so when there may be need for such information.

Needs for Sex Counselling

Despite these different points of view, sex counselling may still be a necessary end in the development of adolescents. It should be seen as part of the formal education that every child needs to survive in the society. To prevent young adult from ignorance, they need to be told about issues surrounding their growth and developments. This will reduce the number of embarrassment they will receive when they begin to experience developmental changes. Apart from this, the knowledge of sex counselling will help young adults to differentiate fables from realities.

Some parents are fond of telling their children’s fables instead of the real thing in order to satisfy their quest for answers to their questions. For instance, a mother can tell her daughter that good girls don’t get pregnant; only the bad girls get pregnant; the ones who stay out late and hang around with boys. But to the surprise of the girl she found herself pregnant after having sexual relationship with her boyfriend for the first time. She was surprised and said to herself “how could this have happened to me? So, all of these things my mother had told me were lies. To prevent this type of episode, sex counselling is inevitable in the life of young one.

According to Feldman and Rosental (2002), adolescents are far more likely to have conversation about sex with their mothers than with their fathers. This is true of both female and male adolescents; although female adolescents report having more frequent conversations about sex with their mothers than their male counterparts do.

Phases of Sex Counselling

Pre-adolescence sex counselling: sex counselling should begin as soon as a child is conscious of his or her sexuality. The basic instructions and training on sex will depend on the age and maturity of the individual child. The counselling on sex becomes more obvious at adolescence period. A child should be told the names the sex organs are called. And what he or she should not do with the sex organs. The child should know the little functions of the sex organ like using it to urinate and limit it to that until he is more mature to know other functions.

Adolescence Sex Counselling

The adolescence period is a turbulent one because the child is moving from childhood to adulthood. This period which acts as a bridge between childhood and adulthood for some children usually begins between 11 and 14 years and continues to about 19 years. Adolescence is a period of storm and stress characterized by moodiness, inner turmoil and rebellion (Palotnik&Kouyoumdjian 2008). Another aspect of the life of the adolescents that requires proper sex counselling is the development of the self-concept. During adolescents, a person’s self-concept is almost fully developed.

However, frequently, the ideas one has about oneself are based on what others (parents, friends, relatives, teachers, counsellors and so on) think one is or should be. From these experiences with others, the person develops what is frequently referred to as the ideal self (the part of the self-concept based on the expectations of other people important to him. This ideal self frequently is challenged during adolescence because it is during this time that the person develops more independence and autonomy so that his real self (that part of the self-concept that is based on what the person feels about himself) can develop more fully.

This real self then develops as the adolescent has more experience in the world in general. This is why it is often during adolescence that such intense conflicts develop between parents and their children. It is in this conflict between the real and the ideal self that the person is able to develop further toward self-actualization.

Pre-Marital Sex Counselling

Parents can introduce sex counselling to teach their young adolescents to accept themselves, their complexion, physique, height, family background and so on because they are unique and should not compare themselves with others around them. Another method of pre-marital sex counselling is good communication line between parents and their young adolescents. The communication between parents and their children should be open because communication may be everything to them. Sometimes, there are conflicts of opinions or ideas. Most of the time the adolescent succumbs to peer pressure which encourages a lot of immoral acts such as having sex, smoking, taking drugs and many more.

If the communication line is free, the child can tell the parents what he or she is going through and proper counsel can be given. If adequate sex counsel is received to face the challenge of growing up, then parents and their children will be protected from embarrassment of messing up while growing up. Parents should let their children see them as friends at all times. In this way, they may not want to keep anything bothering them away from their parents. According to Ventura, Mathew & Curtin (1988), most adolescents who are not ready for marriage are found pregnant and most of such pregnancies end in abortion. This is because they cannot open up to their parents what they are passing through.

The aspect of sex counselling that is related to this study is the area of value judgment. In the Nigerian context, how is sexuality valued? According to Gump *et al* (2000), high level moral reasoning can be based on values other than justice. This implies that the type of justification given to what people believe affects their attitudes to sexual issues. It is very possible for young adolescents to justify why they are engaging in immoral behaviour and not the rightness or wrongness of it. A young adolescent girl whose needs are not met by the parents may justify the reason why she is involved in pre-marital sex. Her reason may be because of money and this shows the type of values she places on sexual issues. Killen *et al* (2000) buttress this point that moral development has a behavioural component which overlaps other aspects of personality which occur within a social context.

Methods/Approaches in Sex Counselling

According to Kleinplatz (2001), counselling approaches in sex counselling depend on the client age, sexual orientation and present problems. There are lots of approaches in counselling like behavioural counselling, psychoanalytic counselling, client centered counselling, existential counselling and a host of others that could be applied to sex counselling. This paper is interested in using rational emotive behaviour therapy. This therapy's primary objective, according to Kottler (2004), is to help clients identify their patterns of irrational thinking; those habitual beliefs that lead one to misperceive reality and subsequently learn alternative tools of thinking that are in real-world terms, more logical, consistent, rational and scientific. This paper is interested in using cognitive restructuring which is another name for rational emotive behaviour therapy.

Cormier & Cormier (1998) believe that cognitive restructuring has its roots in the elimination of distorted or invalid inferences, disputing irrational thoughts or beliefs and promoting rule governed behaviour. According to Kuehlwein (1992), cognitive restructuring has been used with gay men and lesbian women to help gay male clients examine and correct internalized heterosexist beliefs and thoughts. Wolfe (1992) has described the use of cognitive restructuring with a lesbian client in dealing with both parental and social discrimination as a result of her sexual orientation.

Treatment Rationale

To use this approach to help solve problems of clients requires the counsellor presenting contrast between self-enhancing or rational thought and self-defeating or irrational thought. It will enable the client to discriminate between their own-self enhancing and self-defeating thoughts during treatment. Many clients may be aware of their self-defeating thoughts but may be unaware of or unable to generate self-enhancing thoughts. The counsellor can prove a contrast by helping the client to see that they can develop more realistic thinking styles. The counsellor can contrast these two types of thinking by giving examples of both positive, enhancing self talk and negative, defeating self talk. The examples can reflect before, during or after a problem situation.

Example: A situation that makes a client uptight such as not yielding to a demand from a boyfriend (negative thought).

Before Meeting

“What if I don’t allow Caleb to have sex with me, what will happen?”
“What if he decides to break the relationship?”
“I’ll just blow this chance of establishing an intimate relationship”.

During Meeting

“I am not happy about his demand for sex regularly”.
“He is wishing that this relationship be cemented with sex”.
“I’m thinking of leaving so as to be free from his demand”.
“I’m sure he doesn’t want to see me until I’ve made up my mind to please his sexual desire”.

After Meeting

“How stupid I must have sounded.
“I might as well not bother myself again about the relationship”. Example of self-enhancing thoughts about the same situation.

Before Meeting

“I am just going to be sincere and tell him my mind”.
“I am just going to tell him the side effect of such a desire”.
“I’ll talk about something else that I enjoy”.

During Meeting

“I am going to sustain this relationship but not by giving in to pre-marital sex”.
“This is an issue that my mother had strictly warned me about”.
“The chain reaction of premarital sex like abortion, unwanted baby and the likes can be avoided”.

After Meeting

“I can remember how easy it was for me to say my mind in issues of sexuality”.
“I was able to be myself”.
“I was able to say my mind without pretending”.

These examples buttress the fact that people are likely to behave what they believe and what they tell themselves. The practice of self-enhancing thought will lose the grip of preservative, self, self-defeating thoughts and enable the client to formulate experiences more realistically (Beck 1993). In addition, the counsellor can query the client about the particular distressing situations encountered and the things the client thinks before, during and after the situations. The counsellor can say something like this “sit back and think about situations that are really upsetting to you. What are they and how then can you identify exactly what you are thinking about or telling yourself before you go to a counsellor?”

The counsellor can tell the client that a negative thought have a “worry quality” such as I’m afraid or a self-oriented quality” such as I won’t do well. It also includes elements of catastrophizing (if I fail, it will be awful) or exaggerating (If I never do well or I always blow it). According to Guidano (1995), clients who find it difficult to identify negative thoughts can engage in what he calls the movieola technique. This is the process whereby the client is instructed to run a scene of the situation in their heads.

Then as if (he or she) were in an editing room, the client is instructed to pan the scene, going back and forth in slow motion, thereby allowing the client to “zoom” in on a single scene, to focus on particular aspects” of the scene. Then, the counsellor can point out what the thoughts are, the link between the situation and the resulting emotion and ask the client to notice explicitly what the links seems to be. Other activities that will help parents to discuss sex counselling with their children are the following:

- Parents should shower their children with love. A child who is denied love at home can find it elsewhere and most times at the wrong places

- Parents should let their daughters know about their private body parts and what they are meant for. The uniqueness of their physique and structure should be emphasized. It is also important to let them know that it is of no use changing the natural structure. Parents should teach their daughters to understand that their virginity is their pride and nobody has the right to violate them. Parents should teach their daughters how to react to any immoral advances towards them. They should not allow anyone to take advantage of their sexuality.
- Parents should instill a strong sense of self-discipline and responsibility in their children.
- Parents should encourage their adolescent girls to dress properly by not exposing the sensitive parts of their bodies.
- Parents should not be shy or embarrassed to discuss sex counselling with their children.
- Parents should not leave the caring and upbringing of their children to outsiders, house-helpers, relatives and the likes.
- Parents should ensure the security of their children in respect to whom and where to send them to.

Conclusion

The rate at which adolescents engage in sexual activities these days cannot be compared to what it used to be in the past. Modern civilization and sexual revolution have affected our traditional cultural background to the extent that today nobody values virginity as it was in the past. Freedom is now at its highest peak. Youths are so free that sexual act can even be done in the open, and they are no longer ashamed to engage in such act. Some parents are even encouraging their young daughters and sons to have boyfriends and girlfriends. Sexual activity now serves as a weapon in people's hands to get anything.

Students use sex to get "marks" from their lecturers. Politicians use it to get "positions" while civil servants use sex to get "promotion". Some others use it as commercial means of getting their livelihood. The major source of these problems of sexual activities is lack of sound sex counselling. Young ones need to be told the morphology of their body structure. They need to be counselled how to relate with the opposite sex and the consequences of engaging in pre-marital sex. Proper sex counselling will be of help, even though not all the counselled adolescents will yield to these instructions but some will accept the counsel and they can serve as good examples to others in the society.

Therefore, sex counselling is a very important aspect of education that must not be ignored or handled carelessly. Adolescents need to be informed how to dress decently because a lot of them may be raped these days because of the way they expose their sensitive parts. Proper sex counselling will help solve all these problems. Counsellors too who are giving the counsels are expected to be role models showing good examples to their clients to emulate. The stages of sex counselling as emphasised in the body of this paper are equally important. A child should be exposed to sex counselling as early as he or she is able to recognize his sexuality and the world around him so that he will not be deceived and fall due to ignorance.

Giving them proper sex counselling at this stage will go a long way to help them solve sexual problems. The approach suggested in this paper is of utmost importance to solving sexual problems of adolescents including helping them to resolve their irrational beliefs. Cognitive restructuring approach exposes some of the irrational thinking of the adolescents and thereby prevents them from unnecessary problems. Some of them believe that they can use their bodies to get what they want. Some see it as a means of getting their livelihood. Others think that they may not get partners to marry especially the girls if they do not involve themselves in sexual activities. Exposing clients to cognitive restructuring approach will enable them to have self-enhancing thoughts that will give them positive approach to life and sexual issues.

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