

Exploring Parent's Perceptions of Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Early Childhood Students in Indonesia

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Abstract

The importance of sex education for children is one of the main mandates of the United Nations (UN) for its members; the UN mandates the governments of the member countries to provide sex education for students. Despite the mandate, sex education has not been implemented comprehensively in Indonesia and is seen as a controversial issue. Implementing comprehensive sexual beliefs is one of the valuable efforts to prevent the increase of sexual violence against children as well as preparing children with the knowledge and skills to achieve prosperity, health, and self-dignity. In implementing comprehensive sexual education, parents' perceptions are considered significant. This research aims to determine parents' perceptions regarding comprehensive sexual education for early childhood students. This research is qualitative research with a descriptive phenomenological approach. Participants were three pairs of parents who have young children (aged two to seven years) and have been married for at least seven years. The data collection method uses purposeful and convenient sampling and semi-structured interview techniques. Data was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The research results showed that parents' perception of comprehensive sexuality education in early childhood was a combination of cognitive and affective components. In the cognitive aspect, parents perceive the existence of situations or opportunities that can be applied to teach comprehensive sexual education to their children. In the affective aspect, parents report both negative and positive emotions regarding their efforts to educate their young children about comprehensive sexuality education including worry, fear, joy, and pride.

Keywords: Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Early Childhood, Parents, Perception

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Introduction

Child sexual violence in Indonesia has seen a concerning increase in recent years. According to data from the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA), 9,588 cases of child sexual violence were reported in 2022, marking a rise of 4,162 cases compared to the previous year (Janah, 2023). Sexual violence has devastating physical and psychological effects, including trauma, making its prevention a critical issue. Sexual violence against children is a global and widespread problem because it is very detrimental to individuals and society at large. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have the mandate to require countries to eliminate violence against children, including sexual violence against children (Qosyasih & Komariah, 2024). One effective preventive method is the introduction of Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) for young children.

CSE aims to provide children with the knowledge and skills needed to protect themselves and make informed decisions in the future and equip young individuals with appropriate knowledge and attitudes concerning healthy sexual development (UNESCO, 2024). Globally, it serves as a preventive method against sexual violence and promotes well-being among children. Studies have shown that early introduction of CSE can lead to better health outcomes and decision-making skills among youths (Banerjee & Rao, 2022). Studies show that early sexual education fosters self-confidence, positive personalities, and an understanding of one's rights, enabling children to recognize and avoid potential dangers. Based on Piaget's developmental theory, early childhood (ages 2-7) represents a critical period or "golden age" for learning, where physical and psychological growth lays the foundation for future development (Santrock, 2019). As such, providing optimal guidance and education, including sexual education, is vital during this stage (Yunesty et al., 2024).

CSE goes beyond basic knowledge of sexuality, focusing on understanding sexual and reproductive rights, making healthy decisions, and achieving a high standard of sexual health. The UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education emphasizes the role of CSE in promoting well-being, human rights, and gender equality. It also empowers children to make healthier decisions later in life. For young children, CSE incorporates lessons on respect, consent, safe practices, and gender equity (Banerjee & Rao, 2022). Given the holistic nature of CSE introducing it at an early age can significantly improve the quality of life for future generations (Nyimbili et al., 2019).

The family, particularly parents, plays a central role in delivering CSE. As primary educators, parents influence children's development and understanding of the world. Parental perceptions of CSE are crucial, as these perceptions shape their attitudes and behaviors in educating their children (Jeti et al., 2024). Previous studies reveal a wide spectrum of parental views on early sexual education. In Indonesia, some parents regard sexual education as taboo, opposing its implementation for young children. Results study by Qosyasih and Komariah (2024), found that cultural and normative norms are still inherent in conveying accurate and comprehensive information about sexuality for children, the findings indicate respondents are aware of the importance of sexual education but have difficulties in discussing gender because it is considered taboo, dirty and inappropriate.

In contrast, other studies highlight growing parental acceptance of sexual education for early childhood. A 2017 study in Bekasi showed that 67.36% of parents viewed sexual education as important and urgent for young children, a percentage that rose to 80% in 2022 according to further research in Indonesia (Nadar, 2018). Despite this increasing support, gaps persist in

parental understanding and attitudes, particularly concerning comprehensive approaches to sexual education.

Indonesia's rich cultural and religious diversity significantly influences parental perceptions of CSE. Sexuality remains a sensitive topic, often considered taboo, which affects the openness of discussions both at home and in educational settings. A study highlighted that while parents acknowledge the importance of sexual education, cultural norms often hinder open communication on the subject (Qosyasih & Komariah, 2024). Moreover, cases of sexual violence and the importance of sexual education cannot be separated from the cultural taboo that is still attached to openness in discussing sexuality. In addition, general existing research in Indonesia often addresses sexual education in a general context, without fully exploring its comprehensive aspects.

Therefore, this study aims to explore **parents' perceptions of comprehensive sexual education (CSE) for early childhood**. By understanding parental perspectives, this research aims to bridge existing gaps and develop culturally sensitive strategies to enhance the acceptance and implementation of CSE, ultimately contributing to the prevention of child sexual violence in Indonesia.

Method

This is a qualitative study using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The descriptive phenomenological approach aims to capture the essence of individual narratives from research participants without including external meanings (Willig, 2001). This type of research was selected because it can yield rich data concerning parents' perceptions regarding the implementation of comprehensive sexual education for early childhood. Perceptions are influenced by individual feelings, cognitive abilities, experiences, and knowledge (Walgitto, 2010).

The criteria for participants in this study are as follows:

1. Parent with early childhood children (two to seven years old).
2. Parent with a minimum of seven years married. This research requires parents who have been married for at least seven years. According to Harrar & DeMaria, 2007 (Atkinson, 2021). This duration is significant because a seven-year marriage typically reaches the stage of cooperation, where couples are likely to have productive and satisfying relationships, and have acquired sufficient experience in managing a household or family. With this experience, parents can provide insights into how they perceive, as experience is one of the factors influencing perception (Langton et al., 2006).

Participant selection in this study utilized a purposive- convenience sampling method, whereby the researcher deliberately selects participants with specific characteristics to explore the research phenomenon by choosing those who are available and willing to participate (Creswell, 2012).

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide, which included additional questions based on participants' responses (Magaldi & Berler, 2020, as cited in Mashuri et al., 2022). Subsequently, a coding process was undertaken to label the text, identify emerging themes within the data, and interpret the findings. The data analysis strategy employed was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for

analysing qualitative data to identify patterns or themes that facilitate an understanding of the thoughts, behaviours, or experiences of research participants (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Result and Discussion

Perception involves the relationship between cognitive and affective components. The cognitive component of perception involves the intellectual processing of information, understanding, reasoning, and interpretation which includes how parents understand and recognize the stimuli they encounter related to sex education (Jiang et al., 2021). Then, the affective component of perception involves parents' emotional responses or feelings towards the stimuli they experience, including positive or negative evaluations, feelings of joy or disappointment, or other emotional reactions to sex education (Gervasi et al., 2023). These two perception components are interrelated in forming a complete and complex perception of sex education.

The importance of sex education in early adolescents involves complex issues and is often related to diverse values and beliefs. Therefore, a comprehensive and family-focused approach to conveying information about sex education can help in understanding parents' needs and expectations. It is important to remember that parental views and perceptions can vary widely (Rifan Muhammad Rafi et al., 2024).

In the cognitive aspect, parents perceive the existence of situations or opportunities that can be applied to teach comprehensive sexual education to their children.

Parents must be hands-on. If we want to instill a certain value, the child must first encounter the situation, and parents should be willing to seize that moment to impart the value. (Participant 1)

Broadly, participants considered these situations as appropriate when they were involved in children's real-life experiences. Such situations include parental work, physical, personal, and hygiene activities, as well as media usage. They associated these activities with daily contexts to explain roles and responsibilities differences related to gender.

In the affective aspect, parents report both negative and positive emotions regarding their efforts to educate their young children about comprehensive sexuality education. Firstly, participants expressed feelings of worry regarding the teaching of gender roles. This concern arose from their perception that their young children were already exposed to various media influences, despite not fully understanding sexual rights, particularly the boundaries involved in interactions with the opposite sex.

Parents recognize the importance of teaching reproductive health, human relationships—including romantic relationships—and sexual rights; however, they express uncertainty regarding their ability to convey this information to their children. There is a fear that their inability to effectively communicate such information to their young children may lead to misunderstandings and inappropriate attitudes in the future.

For instance, I have taught my daughter the proper way to behave, especially in the presence of boys. Nevertheless, I still observe her sitting inappropriately when she was with her male friends.

I am worried whether it is appropriate to discuss this topic at her current age, and to what extent I should explain the reasons. I worry that my words may be inadequate in providing valid explanations to my child. (Participant 1)

Concerning this issue, the research conducted by Morawska and colleagues (2015) indicates that parents may have planned to discuss sexual education with their children but have yet to find the appropriate opportunity. Additionally, they often feel a lack of confidence in dealing with this information (Morawska et al., 2015). An increase in parents' knowledge about their children's educational needs is expected to help them identify appropriate times to provide sexual education.

Participants also expressed feelings of joy and pride as their children began to understand the importance of the concept of consent concerning their bodies. Parents felt reassured by their success in teaching that their children have the right to refuse physical contact with others. Participants demonstrated confidence and happiness stemming from their children's ability to establish healthy relationships with others.

It is as simple as hearing them say, 'You cannot touch my cheek; that is my right to say NO,' which makes me proud and optimistic that they will be able to protect themselves. (Participant 3)

Furthermore, parents possess perceptions of effective methods for teaching comprehensive sexual education. They believe that effective approaches to teaching gender aspects involve modeling through their own professional lives and household responsibilities, as well as engaging their children in practicing household chores. Parents illustrate the equality of men and women in rights and obligations within the formal sector and emphasize collaboration in household tasks, therefore encouraging all children, regardless of gender, to participate in domestic duties. This is an uncommon practice in most Indonesian communities that implement patrilineal cultural norms.

We emphasize that both men and women, fathers and mothers, must work. Both parents must also manage the household. Therefore, we train all the children to help with tasks such as washing dishes, so they understand that both boys and girls should be willing to contribute to household chores. (Participant 2)

Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that the issue of sexual violence is a primary concern for all participants, leading them to decide to use media as a source of information (such as games and television) to educate about the dangers of sexual violence, as well as the importance of self-protection and seeking help when they feel threatened. Sexual education should be tailored to the child's abilities and understanding, necessitating careful consideration of communication techniques and language (Mukti, 2018). A child's ability to protect themselves from sexual harassment is influenced by parental communication regarding the prevention of such harassment and parental education (Zhang et al., 2013).

Conclusion

The research results showed that parents' perception of comprehensive sexuality education in early childhood was a combination of cognitive and affective components. In the cognitive aspect, parents perceive the existence of situations or opportunities that can be applied to teach comprehensive sexual education to their children. Participants considered these

situations as appropriate when they were involved in children's real-life experiences. Such situations include parental work, physical, personal, and hygiene activities, as well as media usage. In the affective aspect, parents report both negative and positive emotions regarding their efforts to educate their young children about comprehensive sexuality education. They perceived feelings of worry regarding the teaching of gender roles and feelings of fear related to boundaries involved with the opposite sex. Furthermore, parents perceived joy and pride, related to children's understanding of the concept of consent concerning their bodies and the ability to establish healthy relationships with others.

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