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PULSE

SATURDAY, JULY 16, 2016

Sex and the seedy

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TIME FOR THAT TALK

To protect our children from online and offline predators, we need to have that serious talk about sex and cyber safety, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

"KALAU nak tau macam nana nak buat, pi tengok arnab." (If you want to know how it's done, go observe rabbits.)

That was "sex education" from our Form Two Science teacher. Granted, he must have been thoroughly embarrassed having to teach a group of precocious teenagers with raging hormones about the birds and the bees. Thereafter, our sex education was left to our parents, information we shared among ourselves and constant reference to the school's contraband, the latest Mills & Boons or Harlequin Romance novels.

Sex education today and, in particular, sexual abuse and exploitation of children online, was part of the conversation at the launch of #ReplyForAll-MY.

Designed as an informal meeting called a "townhall session", it was organised by The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), DIGI, RAge and WOMEN:girls. This campaign will run for five months to raise awareness about the violence, abuse and exploitation that children and young people face online.

HAVING "THE TALK"

As the conversation progresses, many stories are told of the horrors of child exploitation and abuse online. One home truth rings true, though—we cannot fully protect our children when some of them don't know what sex is. This leads us to consider what the appropriate age is to explain to a child what sexual intercourse means, particularly since child marriages are still prevalent in Malaysia. Someone in the audience answers, partly in jest: "Three years old."

After the laughter dies down, the consensus among those present is that there is no fixed age to talk to a child about sex. It should be whenever the opportunity arises.

Now that the "when" has been sorted out, we have to look at the "how", particularly when many adults are themselves shy to openly discuss sex. One young woman says that when the opportunity did arise for her and her friends, many had no one to turn to. At the time, a man in school was behaving inappropriately and they knew enough to be uncomfortable. Unable to turn to their teachers because they were terrified of them, she admits she was lucky her mother listened to her. Some other mothers refused to believe their daughters.

A lack of communication with her elders has never been a problem for young Reinupriya Ramaeswaran. In fact, this 15-year-old from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sri Hartamas says that by



Tan says there's no law to stop 'cyber grooming'.

PICTURES BY SHIRAZALI



Confusion arises because of numerous terms in use, says Eneng.

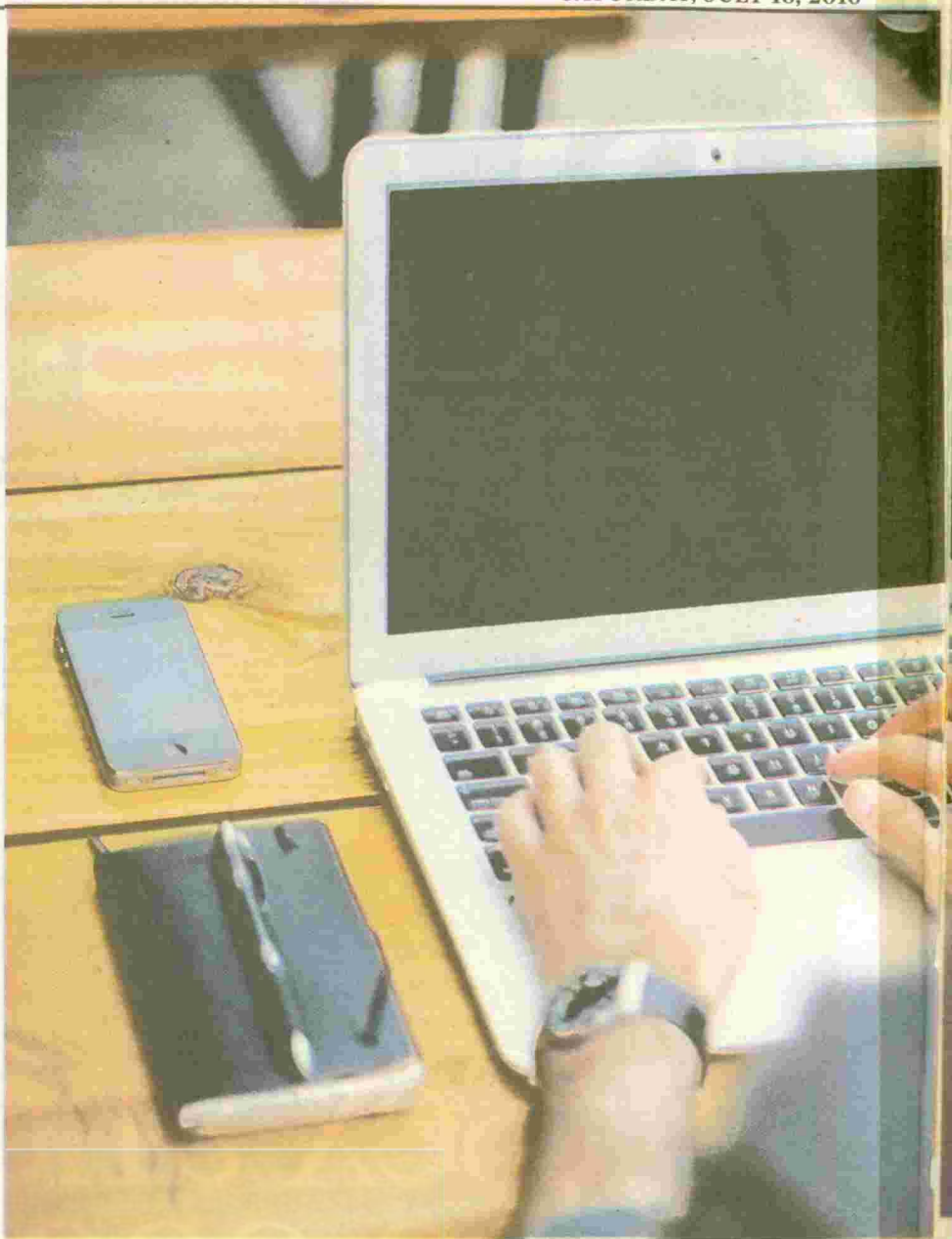
the time she was 10 years old, she was already aware of vulgar words, but was never inclined to use them.

"But, when I went to a co-ed school in Standard Four, I began to understand that there could be feelings between a guy and a girl," says the pretty girl. She knows that, ideally, sex happens after a couple get married. Still, her mother makes her aware that sex is possible even at this young age. In a matter-of-fact manner, Reinupriya adds: "She told me that I need to really think for myself. I know who I am and I know what's right and wrong."

CONNECTIVITY ISSUES

This is very well and good, but what happens in today's increasingly "connected" world?

Reinupriya's online activity is monitored by her mother. The girl is only allowed an Instagram account, of which her mother knows the password. Her mother will not hesitate to tell her when something isn't right.



"Don't think that because you're not connected, you're safe from being exposed to risk," warns Marie Laure Lemineur, Head of Sexual Exploitation Online Programme for ECPAT, an international organisation fighting to end the sexual exploitation of children worldwide. Technology has allowed child exploitation to take place at a much larger scale, but the act itself is still something that's very much in the realm of human behaviour.

Indeed, as the panelists rattle off some of the statistics, such as the fact that Malaysia ranks third worldwide for possession and distribution of child pornography, the reality of what's happening to our children is frightening. In fact, as a signatory to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, and its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, Malaysia has an obligation to introduce measures to protect all children under the age of 18 years from sexual abuse, including Internet-related abuse.

At this point, there's rising frustration in the audience when the unspoken question is this: Is enough being done to protect our children?

Even more so when Bukit Aman's Head of Sexual Investigation, DSP Tan Gee Soon points out that Malaysia doesn't have a law to prevent "cyber grooming". This is compounded by the fact that in such cases, no stranger has hacked into a child's computer system. The child has voluntarily accepted the predator(s) into his cyber space.

TOO MANY WORDS

At the mention of the words "cyber grooming", another layer of complexity becomes apparent: There are so many words in use today from "porn" and "child abuse" to "grooming", "cyber grooming", "sextortion" and "live



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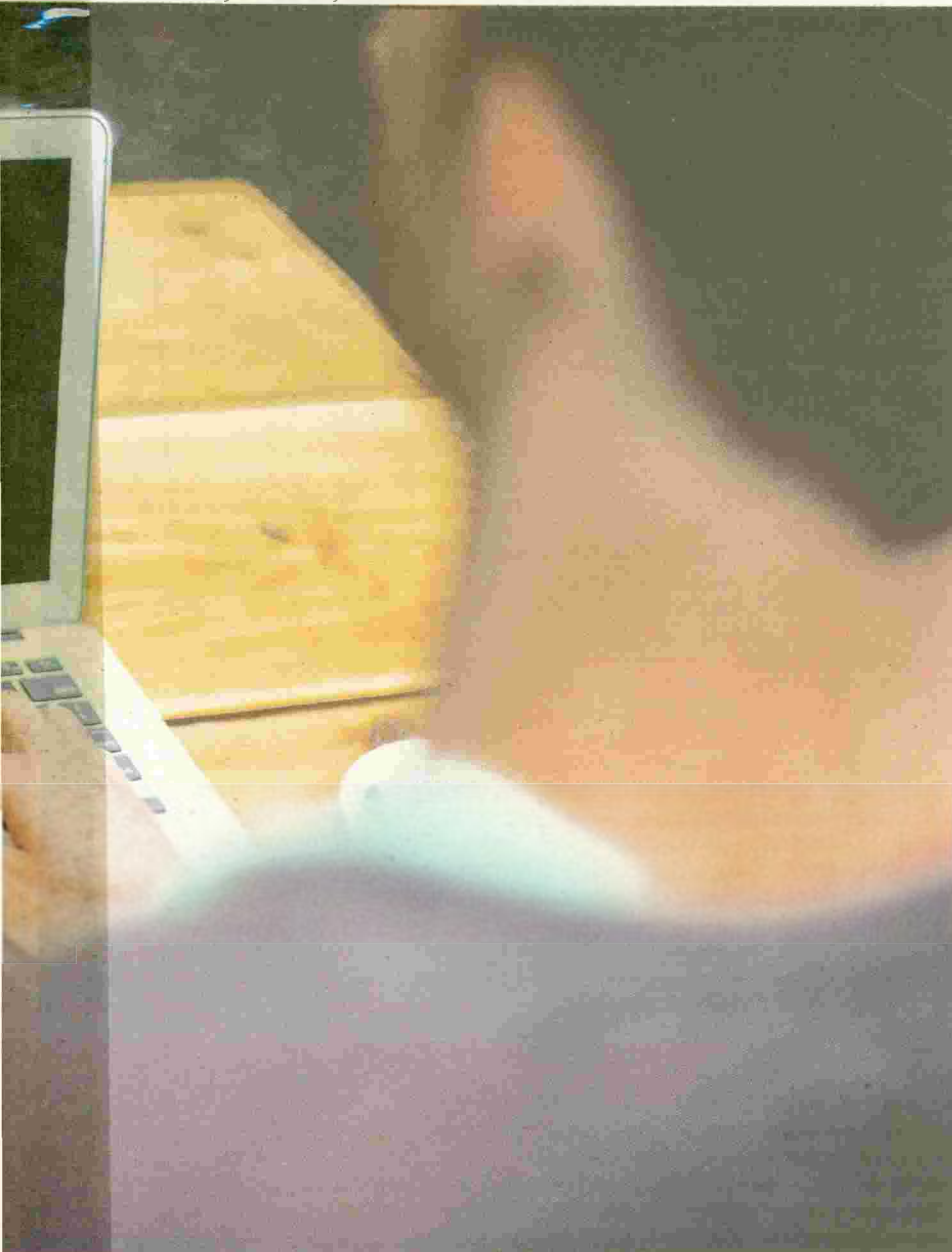
Marie Laure Lemineur

streaming" that, sometimes, adults don't know what they mean and how to help these children.

The confusion these many terms create was highlighted by Eneng Faridah Iskandar, Senior Director, Advocacy and Outreach Division MCMC (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission). Says Eneng: "We need to speak the same language." Once we know we're talking about the same thing, we can then talk of strengthening the collaboration between various agencies to address sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.

In the end, the message is clear: The Internet is an awesome place and Malaysia is becoming increasingly connected. Such technology enhances

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USEFUL TERMINOLOGIES

THE Terminology Guidelines, now dubbed the Luxembourg Guidelines (<http://luxembourgguidelines.org/>), is an initiative by ECPAT International and its partners.

Its aim, explains Eneng Faridah Iskandar, Senior Director, Advocacy and Outreach Division MCMC (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission), is to harmonise the complex lexicon of terms and definitions commonly used in relation to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children. Here are extracts of five of the most common terms:

Sexual abuse: The sexual abuse of children requires no element of exchange, and can occur for the mere purpose of the sexual gratification of the person committing the act.

Incest: This refers to "sexual relations between people classed as being too closely related to marry each other". It's sometimes also defined as "the crime of having sexual intercourse with a parent, child,

sibling, or grandchild".

Sexting: This refers to "self-production of sexual images" or "exchange of sexual messages or images" and "the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and/or the Internet."

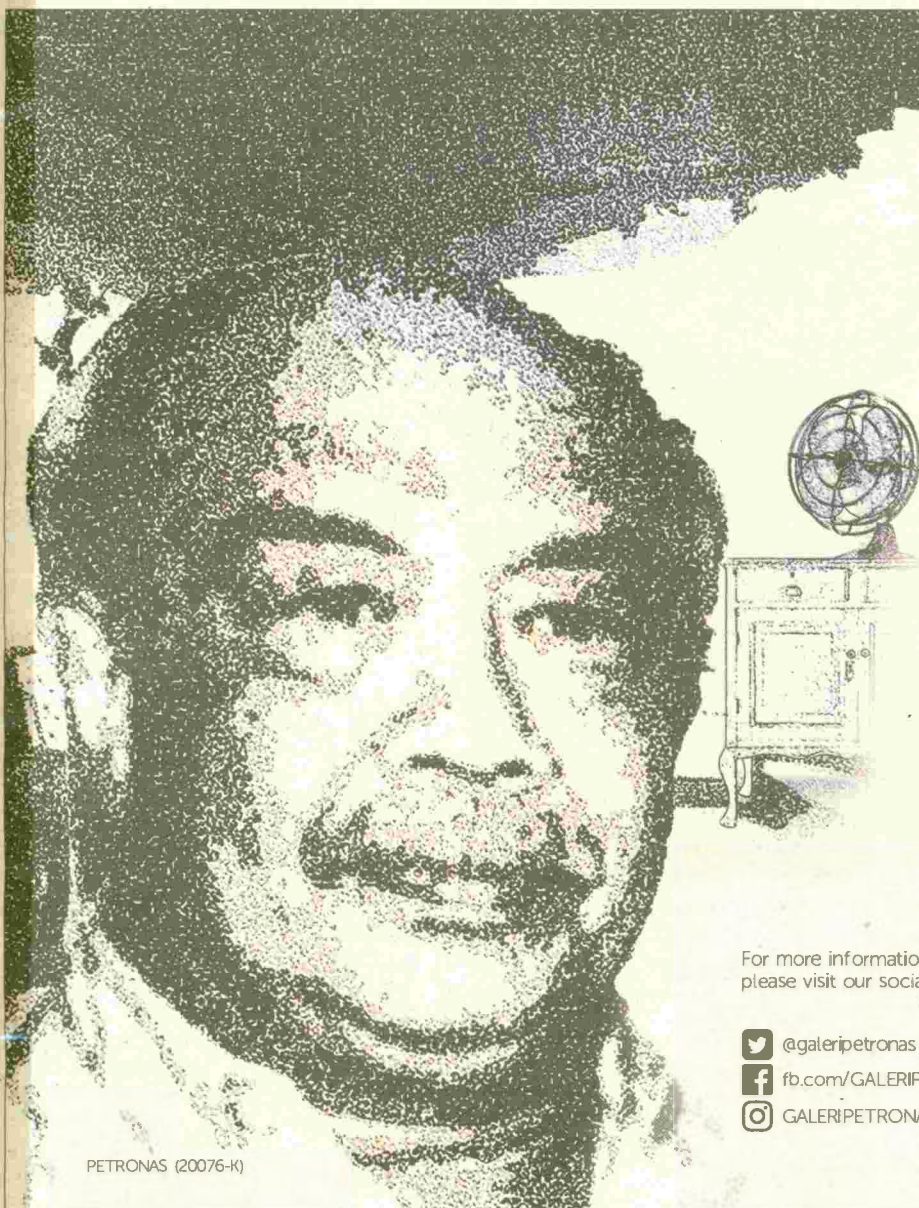
Live streaming: This means that data is transmitted instantaneously to the viewer, who can watch and engage while the abuse is occurring. Importantly for the viewer, streaming leaves no trace on the device, because no file is downloaded; when the streaming is stopped the child sexual abuse material is gone, unless the offender deliberately records it.

Grooming/online grooming: This refers to the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the Internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person.

the opportunity for child exploitation and abuse. That said, we cannot blame technology alone because such heinous crimes are still about human behaviour. Therefore, instead of regulating online behaviour, we should educate our children about how to behave properly

when they're both online and offline.

The responsibility to do this must be shared among law enforcement, the politicians, the Internet service providers, non-governmental organisations, parents and the children. No one can solve this problem alone.



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