

## PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM STRANGERS: PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT PAEDOPHILIA IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*In 2014, Malaysia was awakened by a terrifying paedophile case involving 23 children, aged between six months to 12 years old, committed by a British man named Richard Huckle. Some of the children were raped while others were sexually assaulted. This case sparked anger among the society and community in Malaysia. However, the same anger slowly faded away as the society has moved past the dark scar. This was not the case for the victims and their family who forever have to live and breathe the pain. At the same time, parents' protection for their children becomes 'seasonal'. Today, children's pictures, videos, and private details are carelessly made available through various mediums of online communication. This leaves children vulnerable not only online, but also in the physical environment. Following the heart-wrenching case, a survey involving 900 parents in Kuala Lumpur was conducted to explore similar scenario, with the aim to derive parents' feedback on actions to be taken. Findings revealed 83.3% parents to have good parenting practices upon protecting their children from strangers. Whereas 11.3% showed lackadaisical attitude. 4% were found to have poor parenting that they would "definitely send their child/children to free English tuition provided by an unknown middle-aged man at his house nearby residential area". Though 4% (36 parents) out of 900 could be considered a small proportion, the number remains a worrying discovery, hence raising critical questions about current parenting practices among Malaysians upon protecting children from strangers. This could lead to other problems such as abduction, molestation, paedophiles, and many others. This study concludes that parents as the closest to children need to play their roles in protecting their children from harmful and risky situation. On the same note, parental responsibility for children's protection and privacy are rightfully bestowed on parents as they are the closest to ensure children's safety.*

Key words: Paedophilia, parenting practices, child protection

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### INTRODUCTION

The seriousness of paedophilia is undeniable. Its implication can cause death not only to children as victims, but also family members including parents. Debates and discussions on paedophilia since 1880s have shown that this heinous sickness is complex. Based on the literature discovered, this study argued that previous debates and discussions on this phenomenon were very much interrelated to psychological perspective (Krafft-Ebing, 1886; Hall & Hall, 2007; Seto, 2009, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, due to wave of globalisation and modernisation in countries around the world, the phenomenon of paedophilia is argued to intertwine with many other aspects such as criminology (sexual crimes, exploitation, and child pornography), economics (demand and supply of sexual exploitation), global security (cybercrimes), biology (abnormal genetics, mental disorder, and sexual identity) and social (human behaviour). While there are many aspects that can be explored, this paper aimed to only focus on sociological perspective upon exploring parental responsibilities and effective parenting practices to prevent children from being the victims of paedophiles. Notably, the world recognises children as one of the vulnerable groups who require adequate protection and privacy. Hence, the responsibility of protecting children and securing their privacy is bestowed on parents. This is because; parents are the closest persons to children who have lifetime obligations towards children's development, protection, privacy, security and growth. Although the world for a long time, has been dealing with myriad of social problems including paedophilia, we still struggle to ensure children's protection and privacy. Children's private details, pictures, and videos have been posted online massively by parents without thinking about the negative consequences. This is one of the gaps that this study aimed to explore, as to whether the current parenting practices are adequate to protect children from being the victims of paedophiles.

In the Malaysian context, paedophilia is not a new societal problem faced by Malaysians. The year 2014 marked a dark scar among Malaysians. The revelation of Richard Huckle's case, a British paedophile who took advantage over vulnerable

Malaysian children shocked the nation to its core. Police investigation indicated this dark episode to involve 23 abused children from the poor communities in the Kuala Lumpur city (The Star, 2016). The most heart-breaking finding from police investigation was the youngest victim involved in that case was a six-month-old child. Police reported that Huckle gained parents' trust by masquerading himself as an English teacher to victimise these vulnerable children. He generously offered free English classes to children (The Star, 2016). Ironically, the classes offered by Huckle were not free at all: the children have to pay the price for parents' negligence. As time goes by, Richard Huckle's case has been forgotten by the society and community. Parents still neglect children's protection and privacy especially on social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Carelessness means opportunity for these 'silent monsters' who prey on victims to unleash their sexual desire, be it an adult or even a child. This calls for a research to be undertaken to explore the current parenting practices among Malaysian parents upon upholding child protection and privacy to prevent children from being the victims of paedophiles. Thus, by using the similar plot of Huckle's case, the main purpose of this paper was to explore parents' feedback and actions to protect children and securing their privacy from sexual perpetrators including paedophiles.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Paedophilia is recognised as a complex social issue that can only be identified through proper investigation and diagnosis (Studer & Aylwin, 2006). This issue is regarded as one of the serious social problems involving prepubescent children, normally below 13 years old (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). To some degree, paedophilia involves rape, molestation, incest and many others (Kaplan, 2015; Capra et al., 2014). Though many know and are fully aware of the serious negative consequences, this issue is still not acknowledged by the society. Its complexity is one of the reasons that makes paedophilia a taboo, sensitive subject. There are many angles that contribute to the complexity of paedophilia like the nature of paedophile cases involving sexual relationship between adults and children; huge age gap between victims and perpetrators; shame or family's dignity, social stigmatisation, social stereotypes, and many others. Together, they worsen this issue and expose children to dangerous situations such as child pornography and grooming. In worst case, parents may not even know that their children are the victims of paedophiles.

The similar situation happened in Malaysia more than five years ago. In 2014, Malaysia was shocked by a terrifying paedophile case, leaving lifetime scars to 23 unfortunate children, aged between six months to 12 years old. This was all done by one British man named Richard Huckle (The Star, 2016a; The Star, 2016b). Some were raped while others were sexually assaulted. Based on police investigation, Huckle masqueraded himself as an English teacher. He offered English classes to children, especially those from the poor families, with learning difficulties in Kuala Lumpur. Without thinking about the negative consequences, parents gave full permission for their children to 'learn' English with Huckle, all in the name of 'trust'. The generosity became a tragedy. Huckle used the parents' trust to unleash his sexual desire for children. Due to ineffective parenting practices to protect and secure the children's privacy, parents have 'voluntarily' made children as victims. Police investigation found Huckle to have had almost 200,000 images of child pornography and 1,000 videos in possession, showing him committing sex offenses including rape in his heavily-encrypted laptop and camera. Some of the pornographic materials involved the 23 Malaysian children. All of this was revealed when he was arrested at London Gatwick Airport in December 2014 during his return for Christmas (The Star, 2016a; The Star, 2016b).

What goes around, comes around: if someone treats others badly, he or she, eventually, will be treated the same way by someone else. Shockingly, recent article written by Zack (2019) reported that Huckle was found dead in prison in his own country, as informed by the United Kingdom media. The media reported that Huckle was repeatedly stabbed with a makeshift blade in his cell. The motive behind the case is still under the investigation of the United Kingdom police department (Zack, 2019). The paedophile case involving Huckle and 23 Malaysian children sparked anger among Malaysians during that time. The same anger however slowly faded away as the society has moved past the dark scar. This was not the case for the victims and their family who forever have to live and breathe the pain. At the same time, parents' protection for children also becomes 'seasonal'. Today, children's pictures, videos, and private details are carelessly made available online, leaving children vulnerable not only online, but also in the physical environment that allows paedophiles to prey on victims at a specific location and time.

Despite the pain the victims and their family members had to bear following Richard Huckle's case, many Malaysian parents still expose children's private details, pictures, and videos to predators (The Star, 2017). Datuk Dr. Amar Singh, a senior consultant paediatrician, said to The Star (2017); many Malaysian parents seem unbothered despite the sexual abuse case involving 23 children by the 30-year-old British man. Though this case was considered serious, parents still happily post pictures of their children on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Some Malaysian parents also use their children's pictures as a profile image on messaging platforms including WhatsApp and WeChat. Without thinking of the consequences, parents actually provide access to child pornography to predators including paedophiles who have sexual interest for children (The Star, 2017). Thus, this calls for a research to be undertaken by a doctoral candidate specifically to explore parenting practices and parenting styles to uphold child protection and privacy to prevent paedophilia in Malaysia. Using the scenario of Huckle's case, this study aimed to derive parents' feedback on actions to be taken. Relevant methodological processes and procedures are presented in the following section.

## METHODOLOGY

*A middle-aged man who has excellent English proficiency offers his expertise to provide free English class to children aged 12 years and below, at his house near your residential area. What is the action that you would take?*

This research mimicked the above scenario of Huckle's case. It was developed to explore parents' feedback on actions to be taken when dealing with this situation. By using quantitative approach through survey, this scenario was presented in a specific section in the questionnaire of this study. In the section, parents were provided with few selective answers and allowed to share their views for the scenario in 'others' section. The selective answers provided to parents were (1) "I will not take the offer to send my child/children"; (2) "I will search for more information about the English man before sending my child/children"; (3) "I will send my child/children if other parents do so"; (4) I definitely will send my child/children because it is free and good for my child/children"; and (5) "others" (where parents can provide their own views). The four selective answers reflected the degrees of effective parenting practices to protect and secure children's privacy: (1) excellent parenting practices; (2) good parenting practices; (3) weak parenting practices; and (4) poor parenting practices. Table 1 shows the the selective answers and their degree.

**Table 1: Selective answers provided to parents and their degrees**

Selective answer	Degree of parenting practice
I will not take the offer to send my child/children	excellent parenting practices
I will search for more information about the English man before sending my child/children	Good parenting practices
I will send my child/children if other parents do so	Weak parenting practices
I definitely will send my child/children because it is free and good for my child/children	Poor parenting practices
Others	Depends on the parents' feedback and views towards the scenario

Upon conducting the survey, Kuala Lumpur was chosen as the study location as it can be generalised to represent parents in Malaysia. This is due to the historical background of Kuala Lumpur: it has been receiving huge number of internal migrants from other states in the country (40.62 persons per 1,000 residents) since 1981 (Hussain, Abdullah & Abdullah, 2015). Internal migrations in Kuala Lumpur have become an increasing trend in 1990s and 2000s. A high number of internal migration (from other states such as Kedah, Pahang, Kelantan, and Sabah to the city centre, particularly Kuala Lumpur) is argued to have changed the population landscape of Kuala Lumpur and transformed it into a diversified city centre. Three areas in Kuala Lumpur were selected namely Batu, Petaling, and Kuala Lumpur city. The selection of these three different areas was made based on the highest population of the three main ethnics in Malaysia at the respective locations- Malay (Petaling), Chinese (Kuala Lumpur), and Indian (Batu). 900 parents participated in the survey. They were equally divided according to ethnicity- Malay (300 parents), Chinese (300 parents) and Indian (300 parents). Findings from the survey was analysed by using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences via descriptive analysis.

**FINDINGS**

**A middle-aged man who is has excellent English proficiency offers his expertise to provide free English class to children aged 12 years and below, at his house near your residential area. What is the action that you would take?**

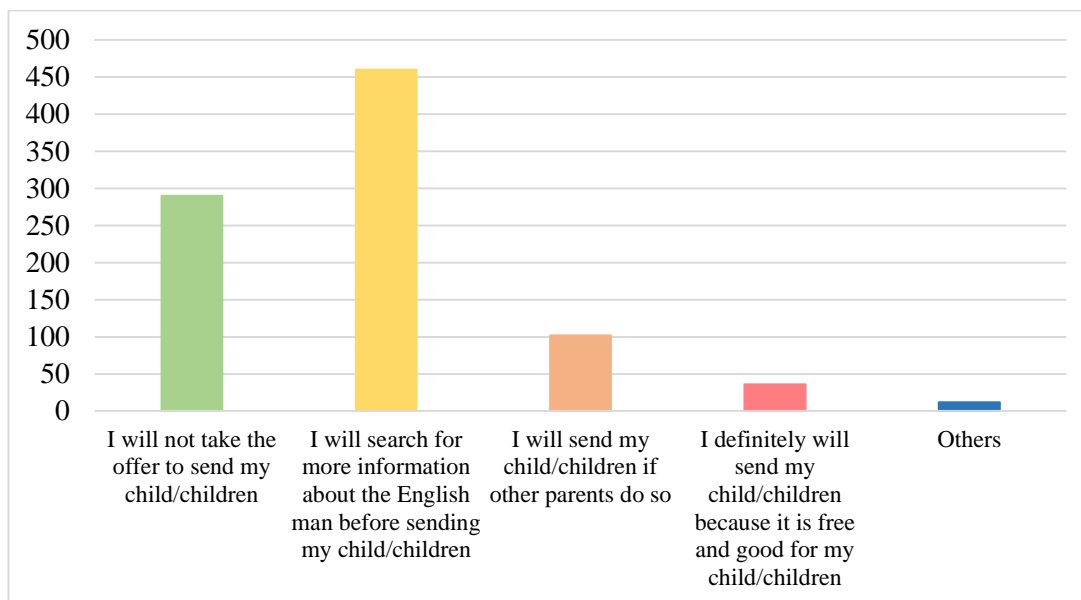


Diagram 1: Findings from the developed scenario based on descriptive analysis

Based on the descriptive analysis undertaken in this research, more than 50% parents responded that they will search for more information about the English man before sending their child/children to the English class offered by the middle-aged man (460 respondents; 51.1%). This asserted that the majority of parents in Malaysia possess good parenting practices. Findings also showed that more than 30% parents possessed excellent parenting practices, considering they will not take the offer to send their child/children (290 respondents; 32.2%). In comparison, less than 20% parents responded by indicating that they will send their child/children if other parents do so (102 respondents; 11.3%). Only 5% showed the interest to send their child/children because it is free, with the assumption that it is good for their child/children (36 respondents; 4.0%). Last but not least, less than 2% parents shared other feedbacks and views for this scenario (12 respondents; 1.3%). They were presented below:

- Find information and will ask the man to do class openly, rather than in his house* (3 respondents).
- I will send my child to the class but at the same time I will monitor my child's behaviour* (1 respondent).
- Find information and accompany my child to the class* (4 respondents).
- I will make sure the man has certificate from the government* (1 respondent).
- I will make a police report if there is something wrong* (1 respondent).
- I will refer to my husband and he will make decision* (1 respondent).
- I can guide her* (1 respondent).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Based on the above findings, the parenting practices practised by parents in Malaysia can be considered effective, as more than 80% parents showed high interest to protect children's protection and privacy. This trend is believed to have changed after some time due to globalisation and modernisation. The ineffective parenting practices by 4% parents are the small but critical possibility that could lead to social problems involving children becoming highly complex. This worrisome finding raises critical questions about current parenting practices among Malaysians upon protecting children from strangers. This is because; parent negligence could lead to other problems such as abduction, molestation, and paedophiles. Feedbacks and views from parents presented above portray that children are still exposed to strangers due to parents' lack of knowledge and awareness. Though there were few parents who claimed they would make a drastic move if something happens to their children such as lodge a police report, they were still considered reactive than proactive. Regardless of any drastic move, a child who is sexually abused will be left with a scar. Take the case of Daphne Iking, a Malaysian actress and television host, who posted her six-month-old daughter's photograph on Facebook, for example. Her carelessness in uploading photo of her child online without much thinking attracted predators such as paedophiles (Indramalar, 2015). It took her one comment to remove the photo. Having a first-hand experience, she then did research by watching a documentary on online sexual predators. She eventually learned posting

children's photos simply compromises their protection and privacy and exposes them to high risk and threat, especially online sexual predators (Indramalar, 2015).

Child sexual abuse issue in today's challenging world is becoming more complex and difficult to be identified. Paedophilia is recognised as another distinctive sexual abuse issue involving young children. Though the statistical findings of this study proved that the current parenting practices of Malaysian parents can be considered effective and relevant, they only represented the one part of parental responsibility. This proves that research related to parental roles, responsibilities and obligations is relevant and crucial to be undertaken, considering the numerous social problems faced by countries around the world. Children are young and fragile. They are incapable of protecting themselves. Their immaturity in making decisions or deciding what is the best for them, how to behave, or even what to eat requires them to always be protected and guided. As parents are the closest to children, they have the biggest obligations to protect and secure children's privacy from "silent monsters" including paedophiles. Today's challenging world due to globalisation and modernisation demands parents to perform their responsibilities beyond their home sweet home. Parents are urged to be sensitive of children's behaviour, development, growth, health, education, and most importantly their protection and privacy. A paediatrician, Datuk Dr. Amar Singh, recommended parents to pay high attention to children when they tell that they have been abused (Indramalar, 2019a). This is because; children almost never lie about being sexually abused. The paediatrician further added that a child does not have the capacity to make such things up. It takes a lot of courage for a child to speak up because often, they are threatened and blackmailed to stay silent. Datuk Dr. Amar Singh revealed that about 98% child sexual abuse cases are true. Nonetheless, only three out of every 10 adults believe them (Indramalar, 2019b).

When dealing with social problems like paedophilia, children require protection mostly from their parents. This is because; paedophilia can be recognised as a distinctive child sexual abuse due to its complexity. Paedophiles can be anyone, including those around us. They masquerade themselves by using many characters and roles such as volunteers, teachers, coaches, and even priests. These are the effective tactics paedophiles use to prey on their victims by gaining trust from parents. Due to limited knowledge and information about paedophilia, they can be easily groomed and influenced by these silent monsters. Children who experience abuse by paedophiles may also be the second-generation abusers if they are not saved and protected. Based on the above findings and discussion, this study concludes that parents as the closest to children need to play their roles in keeping children from harmful and risky situation. On the same note, parental responsibility for children's protection and privacy are rightfully bestowed on parents as they are the closest to ensure children's safety.

#### **LIMITATION OF STUDY**

Upon gathering information about parenting practices and styles to uphold child protection and privacy to prevent paedophilia, this study fully utilised every mechanism to access relevant literature such as online databases, online available sources, resources from libraries, reliable websites, government official websites, and other relevant sources. The literature was further classified into various themes of paedophile, parenting practices, parenting styles, child protection and privacy, and cases related to paedophilia. Based on the process of assessing relevant literature on parenting practices, parenting styles, child protection and privacy, and paedophilia, this study found the related literature to be limited. The importance of research pertaining this issue was only first acknowledged after the case of Richard Huckle, in 2014 who abused Malaysian children aged between six-months and 12 years old. Since then, paedophilia has been explored tremendously from every possible angle. However, sociological research on this issue remains under-researched. Thus, this study is relevant to be undertaken in the Malaysian context to contribute to existing body of knowledge.

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