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Adults must be examples for the young

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I FULLY agree with A. Kadir Jasin's Other Thots (New Sunday Times, Feb 23) that adults are equally responsible for causing social problems and participating in them.

The groundwork for the virus causing the social infection has been laid on fertile ground. And what we have now is the full-blown case of "social ills".

The adults have to take responsibility for this situation.

One thing is obvious - this situation did not arise overnight. It has been festering for a while and all the signs were there.

It has a lot to do with choices we have been making over the past two decades as to what we want for ourselves.

While mere finger-pointing alone is a futile exercise, pin-pointing precisely where the problem is would ensure that effective and long-term solutions can be found.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was right when he said "Let's face it".

It is now time for some soul searching.

As adults we have been sending confusing messages to our young people. Often we have been telling them, "Do as we tell you to do but don't do what we do."

We smoke and drink and encourage others to do so through advertisements, but we tell our young not to follow suit and fine them when they do.

We allow indirect cigarette commercials on television daily and associate tobacco with sports to make money and then we are shocked that 71 per cent of our youths are smoking.

After many millions of ringgit, strict laws and aggressive campaigning, we have acknowledged that our dadah campaign is a complete failure.

The problems have worsened and now we even have pushers among schoolchildren.

The experts have stated clearly that the dadah problem is linked to smoking. One cannot expect to succeed in the dadah campaign without addressing the smoking problem seriously. Yet we insist on promoting the tobacco industry and are hesitant in taking firm measures.

The result - both problems worsen.

We hang out in pubs and karaoke lounges till late at night and now react with alarm when young people want to follow suit.

We approve licences for tea dances and happy hours which entice teenagers to lounges and discos, then lament they are engaging in unhealthy activities.

We approve and encourage the shopping mall culture and entice the young people there daily with Western pop music, dazzling decor and glitzy fashion. Then we are surprised our young people don't go home after school but want to lepak at such places.

We urge mothers to go out and join the lucrative labour force, than rebuke them for not being good parents when they have no time for their children and are unable to fulfil the demands of juggling two full-time jobs.

Why do we want our children to go home straight after school if both parents are not at home and foreign maids have become surrogate parents?

We teach our young and overwhelm them with what are the "real" pleasures in life.

We clamour after expensive designer labels and frequently change our cars to more expensive, faster models, then scold our teenagers when they resort to earning money through prostitution or other illegal means for wanting to get a headstart on this same pattern of lifestyle.

We display big billboards which show teenagers posing seductively for jeans and other fashion apparel and then we are horrified as to why our innocent offspring are being sexually abused and the age of rape victims is dropping.

Advertisements in the media peddle crass materialism and aggressively promote hedonism as the ultimate aim in life. Why do we assume young people will ignore these screaming messages and practise only what they learn in religious lessons?

While statistics may show that more Malay youths are affected, other youths are just as exposed to the ills and just as vulnerable. In fact, it is documented that the crime rate among Indian youths is rising.

We need to look at the situation overall and what needs to be done. It's really a question of will and what sacrifices we are willing to make.

As Kadir pointed out in his column, discussion on social problems affecting the youth started long ago and strategies were proposed.

What took so long until the situation has deteriorated to such an extent? Perhaps we were waiting for an order from the Prime Minister which thankfully has come.

We must be wise not to resort to easy solutions or quick-fix measures. It is vital that we address the root causes and seek long-term solutions rather than rush into symptomatic treatment. Cosmetic changes simply won't do.

Better parenting and religious education alone are not going to solve the problems.

Not only do we need to strengthen the family, but equally important, we need to stop destructive activities which actively contribute to the deterioration of our youths.

Here are suggestions which may contribute to the overall process of identifying solutions:

- * For families with growing children, which do not have the privilege of extended families, encourage one parent to stay home full-time with the children. Incentives should be given for this. It is more important to save the family unit than to meet the labour market needs;

- * Institute compulsory pre-marital counselling;

- * Ban all forms of alcohol promotions and indirect cigarette advertisements, including sports sponsorship activities;

- * Implement the fatwa issued in March 1995 on smoking that "smoking is haram to Muslims";

- * All new schools and housing estates should have ample open spaces and playing fields;

- * Redefine youths to those below 18 years. Evaluate and revamp activities of youth groups to meet current challenges and the stress of modernisation. Youth groups should stay clear of party politics;

- * Evaluate TV programmes being screened;

- * There should be comprehensive advertising laws. Guidelines and self regulation do not work. Stop sexist advertisements; and;

- * Ban advertising to children, during children's TV viewing time and the use of children in advertisements.