

A Magazine for Singapore's Teens to Commemorate
the International Year of the Youth



Society Against Family Violence
People Who Promote Families



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People Who Promote Families

The Society Against Family Violence (SAFV), which started in 1991, is an umbrella organisation affiliated with the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) and the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO). SAFV is a network committed to a lifestyle of transformation towards non-violence both at the individual and community level, through the family. The mission of SAFV is to provide services that prevent and/or reduce the frequency of violence in Singaporean families.

SAFV's goals are:

- to prevent and reduce the incidence of family violence;
- to develop and implement programmes that support front-line professionals working with families in crisis;
- to develop and implement training/consultancy programmes for personnel to service victims of family violence;
- to develop a clearing house facility which will facilitate the coordination of existing services for victims of family violence; and
- to assist in setting up support groups and rehabilitation services for the victims and perpetrators of family violence.

SAFV believes that violence prevention is the concern of everyone and will only end with the collaborative efforts of everyone – the government, social workers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, community advocates and members of the public. To achieve effective intervention in violence prevention, SAFV looks toward the community of Singaporeans, including young people, to help define the problem of violence and identify useful programmes to end it in our lifestyles.

In order to have a realistic understanding of how violence prevention programmes are managed, SAFV representatives will conduct action research which helps to identify the needs of existing services and uncover gaps and duplication in the social service network. It has established a Secretariat to act as a coordinating base to pool together resources. The research bank is available to community agencies and the helping professions.

Applying a community paradigm to hopefully develop in Singapore a coalition team of violence prevention, SAFV is networked with over 20 front-line agencies including organisations that provide hotlines and shelter services, self help groups, hospitals and the police force. It provides intake and referral service for

all categories of family abuse - women, men, children, teens, elderly and the handicapped.

SAFV's members include professionals and interested volunteers from the local as well as the expatriate members of the community. The Society thus far is sustained by the inspiring commitment of all its members who in every aspect of their voluntary work, promote Singapore's core family values: love, care and concern, mutual respect, filial responsibility, commitment and communication.

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Want to learn more?

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Dear Singaporean teen,

The Society Against Family Violence (SAFV) wishes to pay tribute to you, the young people of Singapore who, in your many different ways, contribute to making Singapore a spirited and creative society.

In this International Year of the Youth, it is the right time to reflect on how you are coping and how you are going to shoulder the responsibility of nation building as we enter the 21st Century.

On one hand we are told that Singapore is economically vulnerable; on the other hand we boast of a high per capita income. In everyday living, you groan about the competitive paper chase, the stress of conformity, high costs of living and the pressure-cooker school life. At the end of the day, when you are alone, what do you think and dream about? What are your fears and concerns? How do you see yourself and evaluate your worth? How can we adults support and nurture you?

These are the issues that we at SAFV are concerned with because we care about your total well-being. In particular, we want to talk about the violence around you. We feel that violence has to be addressed and controlled within ourselves and in our personal relationships before we can become caring and responsible citizens. SAFV wants to communicate these values to the community and hear how you are coping with your anger and violence.

A gentle society does not automatically come with affluence. It comes through self-reflection and learning new behaviour and attitudes to cope with the changing world. It is about gaining control of one's life by letting go of what we cannot achieve at times without giving up hope of trying again. It is about feeling



By courtesy of Singapore Tatler

supported by those around us, having our contribution acknowledged – and appreciating others' support and contribution in return. In brief, a compassionate society develops with an increasing recognition of shared responsibilities to create this nation collectively. It is necessary to create a wealthy nation so that we do not have to struggle with poverty but happiness has such a complexity that economic success alone cannot always guarantee it.

"Voices of Youth" is SAFV's effort to give you a space to air your pains and triumphs; to hear you say what you want to say; to hear testimonies of role models for you to learn from; to let you hate, dream, scream, confess and fight in order to recover your equilibrium and feel whole again. We need to listen and then reflect what we as elders can do to nurture your growth.

You are Singapore's promise and hope. We too were young once, playful and irresponsible. Help us to seek, hear and understand your voice. It counts.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Claire Chiang".

Claire Chiang
President
Society Against Family Violence

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Photo by The Straits Times

The Pains of Growing Up

You overheard your parents complaining about you: "I can hardly believe that this is my child anymore—it seems as if overnight he has changed from a compliant child to an unruly adolescent. What's been happening?"

They complain about your mannerisms ("sulking, grimacing, finger-drumming, foot-tapping, cold aloofness and indifference to family affairs"). It's true, you prefer to go to bed later and have a hard time getting up in the morning. And sometimes you fall behind in your studies. Your quick mood changes surprise even yourself, and you find yourself complaining about not getting to watch your favourite programme because mum's favourite Mandarin serial is on, and

the flat being too small to invite friends to.

You are simply grappling with the tremendous physical and emotional forces of growth inside you as you set foot into the adult world. You are an adolescent.

The search for identity

"Who am I?" is the pressing question of life facing the average adolescent as he struggles to free himself from childhood bonds with his parents, establish a new association with peers and find his own identity.

It is important that the adolescent, in seeking to find himself, be allowed, temporarily at least, to distance himself from his parents. This is why it is painful

for him and for his parents.

At this stage, adolescents are trying out a variety of roles to see and evaluate what fits them. Should you behave as the "life-of-the-party" or limit your contacts to a close few? Should you act the part of the idealist, or the down-to-earth cynic? You and your peers use each other as sounding boards to test yourselves out—much of the endless conversations between teenage friends is made up of delightful discoveries that their likes and hates are similar.

The adolescent may also cling even more closely to his peer group and slavishly conform to them because of the deep fear that apart from his parents, he has no real identity. You may even be ashamed of your parents because if they

do not meet your unattainably high expectations, it might interfere with your own acceptance by peers. On another level, you may concoct or exaggerate the flaws and weaknesses of your parents to make them feel guilty and thereby free yourself.

While the young person is trying to find himself, society grants him some delay in settling down. You may switch jobs frequently or experience no motivation to seek employment. Our situation in Singapore makes it possible for those who have the brains and money to enjoy an almost endless opportunity for schooling, which buys more time for decision making by the young person. During this prolonged period of dependency (up to the 'A' levels and beyond) a young person feels he must differ from his parents more and more; and yet he may not get any closer to finding himself. A common example is the bright child who the family pressurises into following his father's footsteps. Lacking any idea of what he wants to be, he's sure he doesn't want to do anything like what his father does. Yet, after several years, the young man may become secure enough not to be afraid to be too much like father. ■

**“Who am I?”
is the
pressing
question
of life facing
the average
adolescent ...**

Parents play a part too

Stuck on how to get your parents to treat you like a grown-up? Here are some helpful tips to slip into your parents' diary.

Don't invite dependence

Teenagers crave independence and parents who encourage dependence invite resentment. The more self-assured parents help teens to feel, the less hostile they will be. Whenever possible, the wise parent would allow his teenager to exercise his own choices and use his own resources. Phrases that encourage independence like, "You can decide about that" or "Whatever you choose is fine with me" should be used as generously as possible.

Accept the restlessness and discontent

It is not helpful to ask the young person, "What has happened to you? or why are you behaving like this?" as these are unanswerable questions. At times like these, it is the continued assurance and commitment from parents that will see them through. Advice or veiled warnings will be promptly rejected. Simple words of affirmation like, "I like having you around" or "I trust you to be able to do this" are far more powerful tools of communication than belabouring discussions over how, when and why the adult has been right.

Differentiate between acceptance and approval

Parents' response to adolescent rebelliousness must distinguish between tolerance and sanction. A father, irritated by his son's long hair has the choice of responding, "How many times must I tell you to get your hair cut?" or, "Son, although it's your hair, it also affects me – I can't stand it before breakfast but I'll try to tolerate it after – so please have breakfast in your own room." The second response is more helpful as the father is able to express his feelings, and the son is left free to carry on with his harmless "revolt."

Allow privacy

Because adolescents are trying to create a life of their own, they need privacy. Some parents read their teenager's diaries and eavesdrop on his telephone conversations. Instead, parents should demonstrate respect and confidence as their adolescents venture forth into the unknown. As one twentysomething Singaporean told her parents, "As I think back . . . you didn't seem to do a thing but be available. A harbour doesn't do anything either, except to be there quietly with arms outstretched, waiting for the weary travellers to come home."

Adapted from Adolescence: The Pains of Growing Up, by Esther Tzer Wong in Becoming, vol. 3 no. 1, 1983.

Singapore's teenagers have it made. Or do they? Watching teens eating and chatting with friends at the fast food outlets along Orchard Road, it's hard to believe they have anything to worry about – but they do. Ask them about school and they get pained looks on their faces. Talk to them about their future and they tell you how insecure they feel. Tell them they look good and they are sure to doubt you.

instead of feeling challenged, he feels threatened. "My parents said they would give me \$10,000 if I get all As on my O-Levels. I know that even one B will disappoint them," he laments.

Forced to do what you don't want to do

"My worst fear is being made to do something I don't want to do," confides 17-year-old Johnson.

stress but a lot of parents make their kids stay home. As Brother Collin points out, this approach can backfire. "Parents tell me they see kids hanging out on Orchard Road and they don't want their teenager to be there. Parents perceive it as a place to waste time. One set of parents I see only let their son go downstairs to the car park with his friends to talk. The boys then started a game where they dared each other to pick car locks and they all got in

What Are You

SCARED

Of?

Dressed in Italian jeans and wearing the latest Doc Martens and accessories, teens may look free and easy but most are closely tied to Asian traditions.

You better do well, or else ...

First on the list of fears is the pressure to perform, sometimes to unrealistic standards set by parents.

At school, classmates vie for good grades which fosters a spirit of competition rather than camaraderie. "Everyone compares results," claims Celeste of Raffles Junior College. "If you see your friends getting good grades and you're not, you'll feel pressured."

Says Brother Colin Wee, a counselor with the Family Life Society: "Some parents give their kids no chance to do anything but study. These kids feel like they are being driven into a corner."

Jason was promised a financial reward if he does well on his exams. But

Although his parents want him to study business, Johnson is adamant about a career in graphic design. Whenever he can, he pursues his artistic interests by taking up classes in theatre and dance, and writing poetry. "I lean toward the art side and my father opposes me," he says shaking his head. "He doesn't want me to do anything I'm interested in unless it will help my career."

Johnson complains he is unable to talk to his parents. Most communication is one-sided and they are critical of his friends. "Sometimes, it's like they're interrogating me." When he told them about his girlfriend they worried he would forget his studies. "I never mix around with bad company and my grades are good so I think I'm entitled to some freedom and trust," he declares.

The guilt from control

Going out and having fun relieves

trouble."

Says psychiatrist Dr Pushpa Bose: "Extremely conservative, prim and proper parents cause a lot more guilt and as a result their children may get more involved in things they shouldn't be doing. They should be allowed to mix around with their friends, doing activities they enjoy doing together and working out their curiosities in an appropriate way."

"I met a boy and we started kissing and I was so afraid that maybe I was pregnant."

No say in life

Parents make the rules in most families and teenagers complain they don't have a say in their own lives. Alvin Tan, director of Necessary Stage, notices how helpless some students feel when he performs at schools with the theatre group. "They tell me: 'There is no point in expressing any of my unhappiness because no one listens to me.' Their attitude is one of complete resignation."

Television shows from America offer glamorous images of being young in a culture that allows more freedom. Says 13-year-old Diana: "The kids face challenges, solve them on their own. They can understand more about life. Here parents control you."

Losing parents' love and attention

Taking care of children and aging parents plus holding down full-time jobs is the plight of most parents. So with all the pressures on adults, it's easy for them to forget the emotional needs of teens.

Working hard and giving teens the best of everything isn't enough. Brother Collin emphasizes the importance of family relationships: "There's a 10-year-old boy who comes back from school and only the dog is there to greet him," he says. "Both parents are very successful and doing very well but they are tired when they come home and don't interact with their son. I advised the family to find time to be together even if it means just eating together and watching TV."

Dealing with the unknown

Teenagers have fears and if they don't share them with their parents, they'll keep them bottled up inside or go

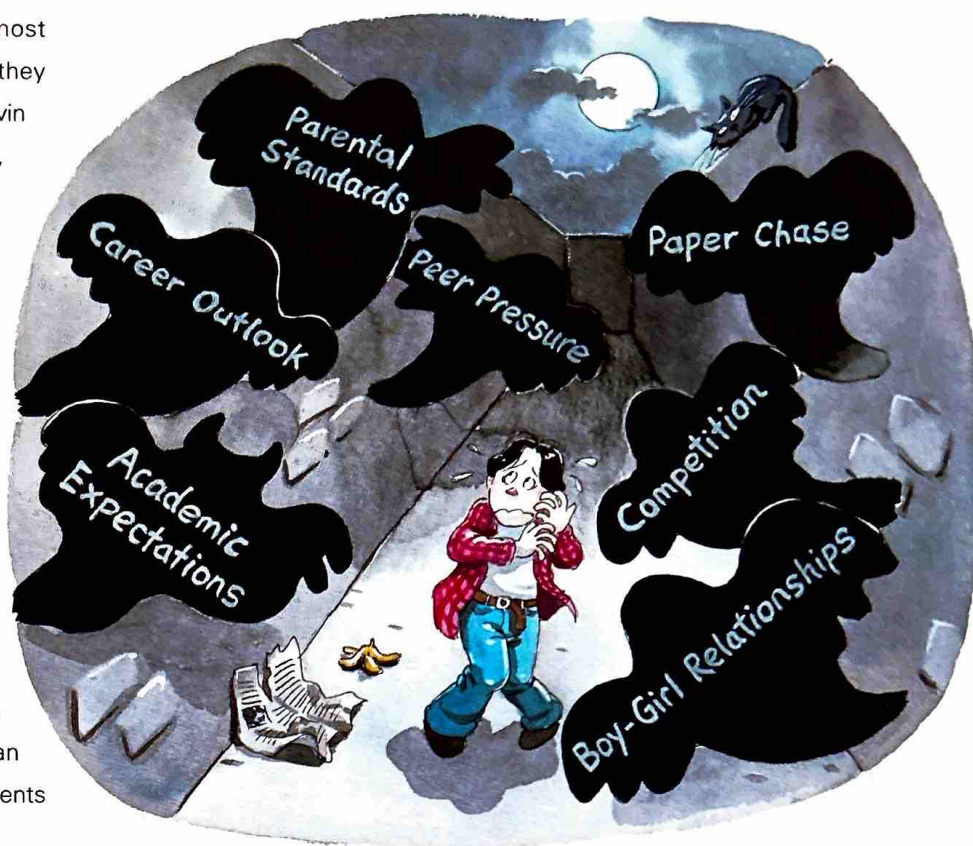


Illustration by Roy Foo

to their friends for answers. Without guidance they may come to the wrong conclusions.

"I met a boy and we started kissing and I was so afraid that maybe I was pregnant. My grades started to drop because I was so anxious but I didn't dare say anything to my parents," says Alissa.

Boys are apprehensive about National Service. They worry about losing two years of their lives running through the jungle. Brother Collin allays their fears by telling them of his own military experience: "At the time I didn't like it but I came out a better person. I can look after myself and the army is a good start to learn to be responsible."

Not meeting expectations

Seeing their parents work so hard, teenagers think about their own place in the work force. Those who study don't dare stop because they know the higher their grades the better their chances for a good job later.

"My grades are still my biggest concern," says Thilakam. "I studied about four hours every day for my PSLEs. My scores were quite okay and I was accepted at my first choice of secondary school. Now I study at least two hours every day so I can take my exams and move on."

Teenagers with little or no education face even greater anxieties. "What is there for me to do? I quit school and never took my PSLEs. For me, life is quite boring," says Lina.

Filled with hopes and dreams as well as tears for fears, teenagers are screaming for understanding. Parents wondering how to help kids overcome their anxieties might want to consider Lina's advice: "I would tell parents to make their children happy – to talk to them, to spend more time with them and to take them out and do things like go window shopping." ■

Adapted from What Are You Scared Of? by Ellen Bai in GO, March 1994.

Saying **"NO"** To **DRUGS**



Saying "No" to drugs and alcohol may be the hardest thing you ever have to do. Knowing why and how to say "No" might help.

Most teenagers learn about drugs and alcohol from friends who tell them how good drinking a few beers, popping pills or smoking heroin makes them feel. Users don't talk about the bad effects chemical substances have on their minds and bodies probably because they don't really know.

Think about it. Doctors and pharmacists are trained and licensed professionals. The drugs they give you are produced in a laboratory and are made to cure illness and disease. When you buy something on the street for a good time you can never be sure what it is or how it was made.

Sharon and her friends take white pills that "make you giddy." They don't know the name of these pills or anything about the prescription drug they contain. No one told them that the combination of this drug with alcohol is eight times more powerful than either the drink or drug itself. Something else Sharon doesn't realise is that these pills are habit-forming.

Teenagers often turn to alcohol and drugs because they are bored. What starts out as a good time can soon become a nightmare. Drugs and alcohol can change your personality.

"Just to show off, a kid will do things he doesn't ordinarily do," says Mohammed Sharif, a chemical dependency counsellor at Pertapis, a Muslim drug rehabilitation centre in Geylang. "He gets high with some friends, becomes quite fierce and feels less inhibited.

By courtesy of The New Paper

Then he picks a fight and is in trouble without even realising it."

It's easy to become an addict. Once that happens you are no longer in control of your own life. Raymond was introduced to heroin by his older brother when he was 13 years old. Soft-spoken and shy, he and his friends beat up a taxi driver one night because they needed money to buy drugs.

When bad things happen in your life,

probably say something like, 'Hey man, you have to do what you have to do.'"

It helps when parents establish rules so teenagers always have a good excuse not to participate.

"I like to go out with my friends but I know if anything bad happens my mother will make me stay home for a long time," sighs Brad. "If I start to mix with bad company I will lose my privileges. I don't want that to happen."

you to make your life better.

Teenagers without strong back-up at home have an even tougher time saying "No." They have to come up with their own excuses and find activities to keep them out of trouble.

"The best advice is to be in control of your own behaviour," advises Sharif. "If you don't have anyone to talk to, call one of the teen hot lines and ask to speak to a counsellor.

and **ALCOHOL**

drugs are an easy escape. Alicia remembers feeling very alone when her parents divorced. She was 12 years old and studying for her PSLEs. Unable to concentrate, she failed her exams which made her feel even worse. Alicia started mixing with a group of friends that liked to get high. She stopped coming home at night and was arrested for shoplifting. Now she is 16 years old and in a drug rehabilitation centre.

"For me drugs meant freedom and enjoyment," she recalls. "I thought the negatives were beyond me."

Saying "No" to drugs isn't easy. Usually it means saying "No" to friends you like and have known a long time.

"There are ways to say 'No' without being snobbish or being chicken," says counsellor Mr. Sharif. "If you give a legitimate reason such as, 'I have another appointment' or 'my cousin's expecting me but thanks for the offer,' then there's an understanding. Your friend will

Many parents aren't aware of the problems their children face. When Rene stopped seeing friends she had known since primary one her parents were concerned. When she dropped another group of friends they became alarmed.

"My husband sat her down and gave her a lecture on being a good friend,"

Kids need to be on the alert. There are many opportunities to get involved with drugs. Falling into a bad situation is easy.

"Look for the clues leading to trouble," advises Sharif. "When your friends invite you to go out by the beach for an overnight party, stop and think for

a moment. Once every-one is congregated the need to be accepted becomes very strong and it won't be easy to say "No" when drugs are offered to you."

Chances are teenagers who want to stay away from drinks and drugs will have to say 'No' more than once. It's tough. You

sometimes lose your friends and are left alone while everyone else is out having a good time.

But think of what's at stake. Drugs start out as a fun time but can take you to the jailhouse before you realise what's happening. ■

Adapted from Saying No by Ellen Bai in Teens.

"For me drugs meant freedom and enjoyment," she recalls. "I thought the negatives were beyond me."

recalls her mother. "A couple of days later Rene came to me and said she didn't want to be friends with these girls any more because they were on drugs. We had no idea."

Finding new friends is usually the best solution. Instead of mixing with friends who push you to take drugs or alcohol, look for friends who encourage



Is He Pressuring You To Have

You're pushed further than you want, but an inner voice says if you don't comply, you may lose him. Yet another voice says if you do, you'll regret it. Trouble is, you don't know whether to let your head or heart rule. Before you can decide, he's down to the last button.

Is sex ok?

Sex is no big deal, the movies seem to say. Hollywood does it all the time. But off-screen, sex is a totally different ball game. It changes the relationship. You don't expect the guy to tell you the morning after, "Hey, that was fun. But I've got to go. See you around." Overnight, what was a chummy friendship takes on a new dimension. Notions like possessiveness and jealousy can creep up and confuse you.

Girls usually expect sex to deepen their relationships but often this isn't the case. Sex is part of an intimate

relationship, not a weapon for it.

Peer pressure

Local girls are under a different set of sexual pressures than Western girls. Many girls in the West have sex because of peer pressure. All their friends are doing it and if they don't, they're classified prudes. A girl may do it because it would put her among the "in" group.

Nineteen-year-old Jess echoes the views of many local girls: "Down here, the girls are more pressured by their peers to have a boyfriend. Everyone has a boyfriend and you can feel left out if you don't. I think the girls here are more pressured by their boyfriends to have sex."

You've got a choice

Sex is like a jigsaw puzzle: Is he the right guy? Should I go ahead or not? How far should I go? Follow this invaluable rule:

If in doubt, wait it out.

The important thing is to not let anyone push you. When a guy starts to pressure you into sex, question his motives and examine your relationship with him. Is he doing it to impress his friends, to make another conquest, to satisfy his selfish desires?

He'll say, "Prove your love to me" or, "I've come this far; I can't stop." He can try to convince you very subtly, making you feel guilty because you've led him this far and then chickened out. Or he may threaten to leave you if you don't go all the way. Are you doing it because you want to keep him? If you are, then you're in danger of short-circuiting the relationship anyway.

Sex without regret involves mutual satisfaction. If the guy proceeds further than what you want, and you give in, you're likely to end up feeling hurt, used and cheated. You may feel that you've led

him on even though you've not.

I'm not saying that premarital sex is a sin and you'll burn in hell if you have it. What I'm saying is, don't let anyone pressure you into doing something you're not ready for – whether it's sex or kissing.

It's difficult when your heart and head are drifting in different directions. The only way to cope with this situation is to be ruthless. "No!" "Cut it out!" "Keep your hands off me!" All these lines can save you from heartache. Sure, it may flush his ego down the drain, but when it comes to the crunch, you have to put your true feelings before his.

It can be very difficult to follow this through when you're in a romantic setting and he begins rolling over like the 11:30 Express. Your senses may become deadened.

So it's important to keep your eyes and ears open for verbal and non-verbal messages before you're in a sticky situation. Say he shifts gears and guides his Honda into an unlit path, when your destination is supposedly home. If you sense it is going to lead to fire-play and you don't want it, ask him to send you home right then. Or when you're embroiled in passionate kissing and his hands suddenly go up to your off-limits zone ... and you push him and he doesn't stop. That could be an alert signal. You can mouth the words tactfully, "We'd better stop."

Saying no to someone you love

Perhaps the biggest difficulty is saying no to someone with whom you

have a steady relationship. You want to shelf sex until both of you exchange rings. You say no and he adds to your guilt: "You don't love me enough. If you love me, you would." You might deflate his ego, but look, you can't play your own cards without staking someone else's.

As with any big problem in a relationship, the first step is to talk to him. Tell him you love him, it's just sex you can't cope with right now. Talking with him might crystallise a lot of things for him and put them in perspective. If he continues to hassle you sexually, then it may be wise to re-examine the relationship. Either you give in and risk ending up feeling guilty, or unchain yourself and spend your weekend with your girlfriends. ■

Reading Between His Lines

Here's how to respond to the lines guys use to persuade girls to have sex.

"My friends are all doing it, so what are you afraid of?"

AIDS, for one. An unplanned pregnancy, for another. A 15-year-old girl confided that her boyfriend kept asking her for sex and saying that all his friends were doing it with their girlfriends.

In reality, it just looks as though everybody is doing it because half are probably conned into it and the other half can't keep their mouths shut. If you look around, a lot of girls are keeping their clothes on.

"If you love me you would."

The most common threat and trap. Tell him: "If you love me, you won't." Don't mistake sex for love. He's saying, "If you love me, be my slave." Well, are you? A lot of girls are afraid that once they say no to a guy they will lose him. Toughen up. If a guy is only after one thing and he dumps you if you won't give it to him, drop him. The lout is not worth keeping.

"Don't you trust me?"

A booby trap similar to "Don't you love me?" Use this as a boomerang: Ask him how he would relate Valentine's with Halloween, and so how he could relate trust with sex. Tell him you trust him (if you do) but that doesn't mean you give him

the right to force you into something you're not ready for yet. Or you can return the shot: "Don't you trust me? Then wait until I'm ready."

"Don't worry, I'll pull out in time."

Look, the question is not whether he pulls out before, after, or on time. The issue here is whether you want the thing in at all. If you're not certain the time is right, then don't give in.

Be firm. Don't be wishy-washy about it: "Are you sure? I do like you but... I don't know...do you reeeally think it's all right?" He'll think you want it but are only afraid of getting pregnant and often, there's more to it than that. Besides, his claim is not a foolproof method of birth control. Anyway, you have the right to decide to have sex or not, as well as the type of protection you both use.

"You're so beautiful I can't resist you."

Yes, he can. Ask him this: Ted, Rick and Henry find you attractive too, but does that mean you can give in to them if they ask?

You don't have to go to bed with someone to show that you care. A solid relationship is based on a lot of other things – talking, sharing experiences, holding hands. Crumbling under sexual pressure only takes the fun out of it.

Adapted from Is Your Boyfriend Pressuring You? in Teenage.

Teens & Dating Violence

WHAT'S YOUR RELATIONSHIP LIKE?

1 Does your date put you down about how you look or act?
Do you put your date down?

2 Does your date pressure you to do uncomfortable things?
Do you pressure your date to do uncomfortable things?

3 Does your date threaten you or someone you care about?
Do you threaten your date?

4 Has your date pushed or slapped you?
Have you pushed or slapped your date?

5 Do you ever get so jealous that you stop your date from doing activities or seeing friends?

6 Does your date demand to know how you spend your time when you are both apart?

Do you demand the same thing?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may be in an abusive relationship.

KNOW THE FACTS

Why does dating violence happen?

- "I didn't know it was wrong."
- "I thought the jealousy meant he really loved me."
- "I thought I deserved it."
- "I saw the same thing at home so I thought it was okay."
- "I thought it was okay to hit my girlfriend ... I had to keep her in line."

Why do teens stay in abusive relationships?

- "I thought I could change him with my love and understanding."
- "I can't live without him."
- "I thought that this was just how relationships are."
- "I was scared to break it off."
- "He told me it was my fault."
- "I was embarrassed to talk about it with anyone."
- "I didn't want to be without a boyfriend."

TALK IT OUT!

If you are being abused:

- Tell a close friend or family member. Often a person outside the relationship can provide a more objective look at the situation.
- Take time out to think things through. This may mean not seeing your partner for a time or taking a short trip.
- See a professional counsellor with your partner to work at the problems, or by yourself to better understand and cope with the situation.
- If your partner has been physically abusive, see a doctor and obtain a medical report on your injuries, if any.
- In case of serious injuries, report to the police, who will send you to the hospital and then proceed to charge the offender.

- If the police do not take up the case, a victim can take out a private summons or complaint. Go to the subordinate Courts at Upper Cross Street for this purpose.

If your friend is being abused:

- Help your friend by being a good listener and offering your support.
- Tell your friend that he or she does not deserve the abuse.
- Offer to go with your friend for help.
- Be patient; it can take time for your friend to make changes.

KNOW THE SIGNS:

If you are in a healthy relationship, you:

- talk about your feelings.
- respect your date's friends and activities.
- consider the other person's opinions and feelings.
- respect differences in others.
- state differences of opinion.
- have an equal say in the relationship.
- figure out a solution that is good for both of you.

If you are in an unhealthy relationship, you:

- shout or yell when you are angry at your date.
- use the silent treatment.
- pester your date or pout until you get what you want.
- practice name calling (put-downs).
- act extremely jealous and possessive.
- push, hit, restrain or hold your date against his or her will.
- force sexual touching or intercourse.

Adapted from the City of Edmonton Community and Family Services' brochure on teen dating.



VIOLENCE in the Media

In Singapore, more and more people are able to watch a bigger variety of television shows and cinema films. The issue of violence in these media forms becomes especially relevant because of their increasing popularity.

It is necessary to show, and think about, the realities of life. If urban decay is a fact in many countries, then urban decay is a relevant issue for the media to present. There are, however, two different ways of portraying an issue.

Something that is portrayed objectively is factual and unbiased. For example, if a movie scene shows teenagers taking drugs and suffering the natural consequences of doing so, it is objectively depicting what happens when people behave in a certain way.

On the other hand, a normative portrayal has a value judgment attached to it. If the scene shows a happy celebration among kids while they are "high," it is then glorifying the act of drug taking, and applying the value judgment that this is a desirable thing to do.

Violence can be portrayed either objectively or normatively. It is one thing to show the destructiveness of war, but quite another to suggest that war is an end to be encouraged.

Exposure to violence is said to change two things: attitudes and behaviour. It can be argued that repeated exposure to violence can "numb" the audience into taking violence for granted. Also, if people are exposed to something long enough, they will adopt a "monkey see, monkey do" attitude and start imitating the violence on the screen.

However, the real danger lies in attitude. One of the reasons that public tolerance of violence in the movies here is so high could well be because audiences in this part of the world have been fed a steady diet of sword fighting and kung-fu films which make fighting, decapitation, disembowelment and other ghastly acts the norm. Put simply, the more you see these things, the more acceptable they become.

The cause and effect relationship between violence in the media and violent behaviour in real life, though, is less clear. True, young children may try jumping out of a window after seeing Superman fly, but children are influenced by everything they see. It is not only the media that are

responsible for shaping their behaviour.

So what should we do about all this? Clearly, awareness is an important first step. The more conscious we are of the issue of violence in the media, the more we will pay attention to what we are exposed to and how it affects us.

Secondly, film classification has a big role to play. With the current rating system, it is no longer the case that anyone of any age can see any film. Movies with a high violence quotient such as *Natural Born Killers* are restricted to adult audiences in order to minimise the problem of children being influenced. ■

Written by Kenneth Tan, Chairman,
Singapore Film Society.

Adult or Child?

It's tough being a teen. You face many changes – in your self-image, relationships, sexuality. All teens feel mixed up. You're not alone.

As a teenager you are going through a process of change that takes you from childhood to something new to you. It is a new experience for you to be treated like a child at one time, while feeling grown-up. At another time you may feel and behave like a child, and be reprimanded for not growing up. This is confusing to your identity. "Am I a child or

an adult?" you may ask. The answer is neither.

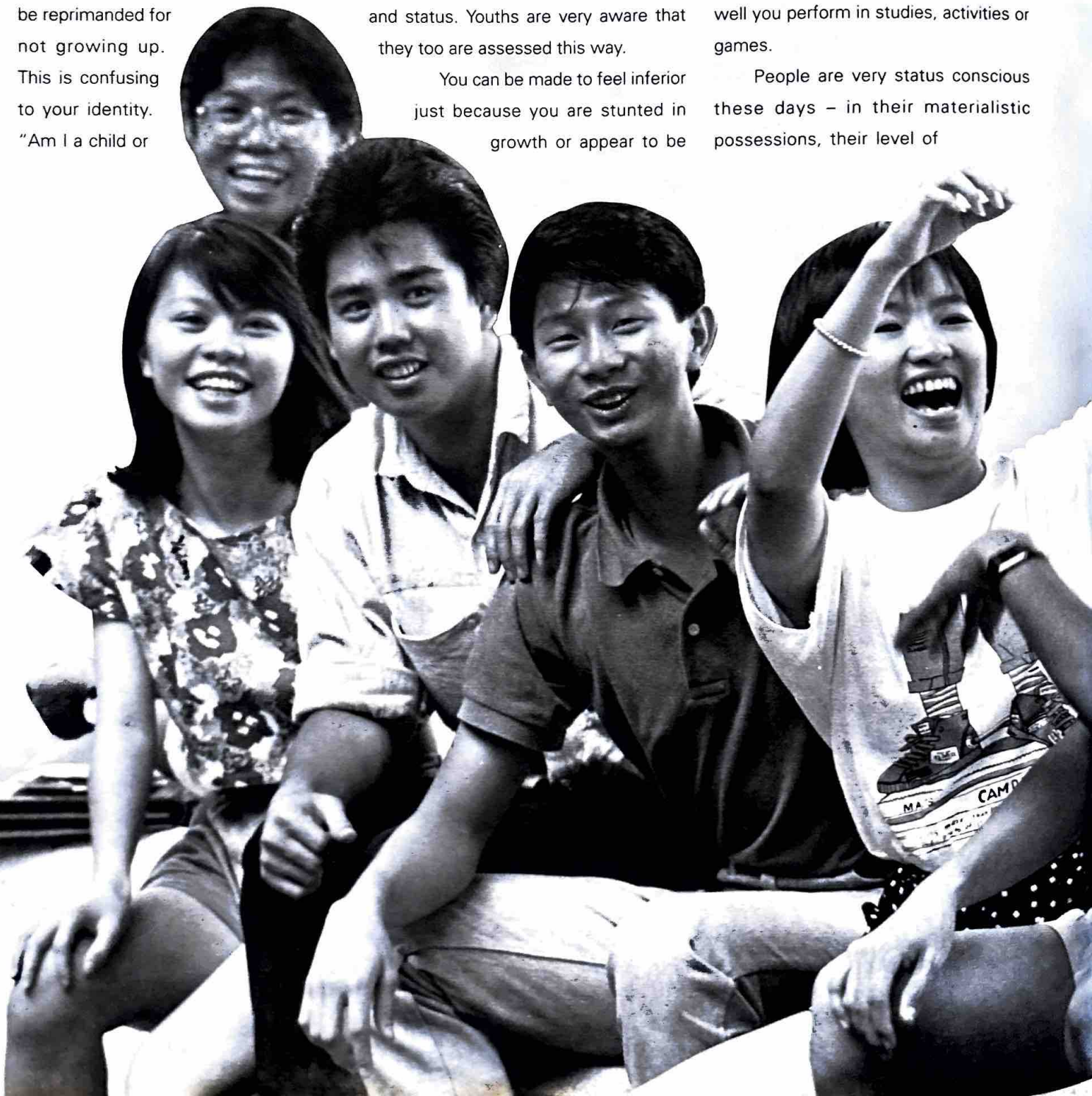
Related to your needs is your sense of worth. Teens need to feel good about themselves and to develop a positive self-image. Normally, society judges people's worth by their appearance, performance and status. Youths are very aware that they too are assessed this way.

You can be made to feel inferior just because you are stunted in growth or appear to be

different from what people think of as "normal looking." Some teenagers are very self-conscious when it comes to their physical appearance.

In a society where only those who do well are recognised, it is not unusual for you to base your self-image on how well you perform in studies, activities or games.

People are very status conscious these days – in their materialistic possessions, their level of



education, the places they have travelled to. The norm in Singapore is that a person who does not own a car, a well-furnished flat or has not travelled out of Singapore is not worthwhile.

A person's self-image is not the product of any single factor. It is rather your interaction with the major influences in life which include the environment, life experiences and relationships with significant others.

Life experiences

Some significant events in life leave deep impressions in a person.

These usually occur in childhood and adolescence. If you have experienced the death of a father and reacted negatively to it, you may grow up feeling angry and depressed. Those who have consistently experienced failure may have a low

opinion of themselves.

Some teens feel inferior because some schoolmates tend to be nasty and exclude them from their company. Other experiences that leave deep impressions include traumatic changes or successes that you feel really good about.

Family versus friends

Friends, peer groups and people outside the home become your central focus. You are far more interested in developing relationships outside the home and tend to be influenced by your peers rather than your family.

Nevertheless, you still want to maintain relationships at home. You still need understanding parents and good relationships with family members. While you appear to be losing interest for home, home is where you need to return to ultimately.

Sexuality

Adolescence begins with the physical changes that take place inside you. You begin to discover pubic hair and find your sexual organs growing larger. Suddenly you feel a stronger sexual drive and boys begin to have wet dreams and an urge to masturbate. You also feel a greater attraction to the opposite sex.

During this period you are conscious of your maleness or femaleness. Both boys and girls try to know what it is to be a boy or girl, man or woman. You might feel odd when you find that you are attracted to members of the same sex, or you might feel inadequate if you are not as manly or lady-like as you think you should be.

Interpersonal relationships

Someone said that our lives are shaped by those who love us and those who do not. People who love us teach us what it

is like to be loving. Those who are constantly negative in attitude and speech make us feel worthless, insignificant and create insecurity in us. We all need warm, loving relationships in life as our self-image is to a large extent formed by the kind of relationships we experience while growing up.

Developing a positive self-image

Our self-image is shaped by people's reaction to us, the kind of environment we live in and experiences that we encounter. These factors act as mirrors to us and tell us who we are and what we are worth. A person who experiences failure, receives continual scolding from parents, and comes from an environment that says, "If you're not a success, you're a useless person" is bound to think lowly of himself.

To have a positive self-image, you need an affirming environment and accepting people who will help you think more positively about yourself. When you fail, you need encouragement, not rebuke. Should you be slower than others, you need a patient helping hand, not a chiding demand to shape up. If at all possible, you need a relationship with someone who dares to believe in your capability to improve and change.

Adolescents need to be taught how to handle stress and crisis in life. You need to know how to think positively. Having a realistic appraisal of yourself, your capabilities and potential can be helpful. You need help to develop your strengths. A caring and encouraging relationship with someone significant can really help you to build a positive self-image. ■

Adapted from Adult or Child: The Making of an In-Between, by Anthony Yeo in Becoming, vol. 4, no. 3, September - November 1984.



TEN WAYS To Make Friends

1 Learn good manners if things like "good morning," "thank you" and "please" are not automatic to you. Good manners are nothing more than consideration for others but it makes a big impact and is part of being charming.

2 Instead of worrying or talking about yourself all the time, give the other person a chance to talk and you may hear some surprising things – and learn a lot. People also appreciate being listened to.

3 Being able to flip from listening to talking and back to listening does not come easily but that is what good conversationalists do. Develop your conversation skills. The art of making conversation is learnt through regular practice, and even more important, fed by a wide-ranging interest in things other than yourself. Newspapers, television and movies are a constant source of ideas. Develop opinions about what you read or hear.

4 Charm is a very attractive quality in anyone and it comes from nothing more than trying to think well of people you meet and letting them know it. If a friend shows up in a pretty dress, tell her so. On the other hand, if she does not look nice, do not say, "Yuks, where did you get that thing?" Being tactful is part of charm. But it does not mean that if she asks you what you think of her dress you should lie. Say, "I like the blue one better. This is not quite you."

5 Learn the art of giving and accepting compliments. Many people act modest and end up belittling the person who has complimented them. If someone says, "That dress looks good on you," don't say, "Aiyah, so cheap – can get anywhere." A simple "Thank you" will do.



Illustration by Roy Foo

6 Make an effort to remember the names of people you have been introduced to. To fix the name in your memory, visualise the person's name stamped on his forehead to associate it with the face. Use the name a few times when you are first introduced to that person to fix the name in your memory.

7 Get involved in activities instead of staying in the background, or worse still, staying home because you don't know anybody. There is nothing like organising something or helping out to get the conversations moving or to strike up friendships. You get ready-made topics to talk about.

8 Friendships require an investment of time, emotion and effort. If you meet someone you like, you have to work to develop the ties. On the other hand, beware the danger of rushing a friendship.

Really good friends are hard to find. It does not follow that someone who is very friendly is necessarily a good friend.

9 The sooner you conquer your fear of rejection, the more friends you will have. The fear of rejection or loss of face prevents many people from making the first move. You don't know that the answer is a "No" until you actually hear it. And a "No" is not the end of the world; the next person you ask may say "Yes."

10 Be clear in your mind of the kind of friends you want and what you hope to gain out of a particular friendship. You also have to see what you have to put into the relationship to achieve your end. Some friendships may cost too high a price. ■

Adapted from All About Sex (and other things): A Teenager's Guide To Growing Up by Lee Geok Boi, published by Federal Publications, 1992.

Beating The BULLY

Harassment at school does more than hurt feelings. Bullied teens often become depressed, and sometimes are convinced they are worthless. But what can teens do when they're being bullied? Here are some tips:

Tip 1... Don't give the bully an emotional payoff

When some older teens kept taunting Michael about his weight, he came home terribly upset. His mother told him this was just what the bullies wanted. Anyone who cries or gets upset when bullied may find themselves attacked more harshly.

With advice from his mother, Michael stayed calm and walked past the bullies without reacting. The taunts soon stopped.

Tip 2... Be assertive

Many young people do not know how to stand up for themselves without fighting back. When a group of students kept ganging up on a younger student, a guidance counsellor worked with the victim, training him to be assertive. He was instructed to stand up straight, look the bullies in the eye and tell them in a firm voice to stop.

Tip 3... Rehearse assertive behaviour

Ask a parent, friend or teacher to help you by taking turns pretending to be the bully and the victim. Practice your assertive behaviour and say the lines in a convincing

way without mumbling or looking down, and end the encounter by breaking off eye contact.

Tip 4... Do the unexpected

For 15-year-old Eric, physical education class was an ordeal. One boy was continually throwing his clothes on the floor, pulling his underwear and scratching him.

His solution: The next time the boy came near, Eric shouted loudly: "Get your filthy hands off me." The bully was surprised, because everyone turned to look at him. Eric did this only twice before the bullying stopped.

Tip 5... Ask for help from teachers or counsellors

You may not want to involve adults, but sometimes they can devise effective solutions. One teacher put a bully and his victim, a star math student, in the same group for math projects. The victim's skills made him essential to the team's success and he became the leader. ■

Adapted from Beating the School Bully, The Straits Times, February 22, 1993.



By courtesy of GO*

Young & Restless

Nobody messes with Ida. In her blue denim shirt, designer jeans and wide leather belt, she looks little different from any other girl of 16. But Ida (not her real name) is a senior member of "369," one of the largest teenage gangs in Singapore. The Malay girl is a *da jie*, a "big sister" to the hundred or so boys and girls in the gang. They often hang out along Orchard Road in the shopping arcades and malls. "We have a drink and smoke. At first it was quite fun, but really it's gotten quite boring."

The gang members find excitement in robbery, shoplifting and assault. "We beat people, snatch people's jewellery and tell them that if the police find us, we'll find them," says Ida. Some get caught, but loyalty is strong. "If one of us betrays the others, we'll beat her up." When drunk or after taking sleeping pills, Ida sometimes goes on a rampage. "Everybody respects me," says the big sister. "I feel I'm someone when I'm with the gang. Inside my house, nobody wants

me." She now wants to break loose, though. It's easy to join a gang – but very hard to leave.

There are actually few teenagers like Ida. According to the government, fewer than 600 youths are members of the 30 or so teen secret societies. In 1994 Minister for Law and Home Affairs S. Jayakumar said the number of students joining secret societies – about 54 out of every 100,000 – was not alarming. The Criminal Investigation Department's Secret Societies Branch found only 9% of about 200 youths aged 13 to 19 surveyed recently were gang members. A third, however, knew about gangs and their activities.

Still, many are worried. "There is more violence," says youth counsellor Vincent Lam, 30. In October 1992 Chong Kok Siong, 14, and a friend were assaulted with metal rods. The two boys had refused to join a gang. In 1991, a 17-year-old boy was fatally stabbed by youths believed to be gang members.

Fights break out almost every week, some in front of crowded shopping centres. The boys carry *parangs* (long knives) while the girls arm themselves with belts. However, Lam stressed that the gangs "are not 1960s-style highly organised secret societies."

Singapore is not the only place with wayward youths. Triad involvement is a growing problem in Hong Kong. "It's quite serious in the secondary schools," says Albert Chan, a member of the territory's Legislative Council. In 1993 police arrested 54 students from 27 schools for gang-related offences. Still, Singapore is tackling the problem. Social workers say it's more than a law-and-order issue. "We have to look at it from a societal point of view," says Singapore psychologist June Wong. Among the broader ills: family problems and early pressures to excel in school.

Ida's story is instructive. Both her parents work. She is the youngest of four. Her one brother is in a drug rehabilitation

centre. The other two siblings are married and have homes of their own. "My mother doesn't understand me," says Ida. "When I have problems, I talk to my friends." She craves affection. "My mother loves her only grandchild more than she loves me. My parents don't understand me at all. If I spend their money, they ask me when I'm going to pay them back. What kind of parents are they?"

At age 12 Ida started smoking and hanging out at discos. "When I was 14, I met a group of girls," she recalls. "They asked me if I wanted to join the 369 gang. They said I could get protection. If anybody touched me they would come and help me." She initially said no, but was later persuaded. The 369 is comprised of mainly Chinese and Malays. Ida had to learn Hokkien because "it's no fun speaking in English." The 369 is possibly the largest gang in Singapore. It has "branches" in several neighbourhoods.

Life in a Gang

Other gangs go by names like Orlando Magic, Chicago Bulls and Go West. There are also all-girl groups such as Black Cloak and Bangles. Hardcore gang members pass the time between fights by smoking, drinking, sniffing glue or popping pills. Ages vary. "The youngest of our members is 14," says Ida. "The oldest, the leader, is around 30-plus." Many gangs have dress codes. The 369 girls dye their hair and wear more than two earrings. "If today we all decided to go out wearing a skirt," says Ida, "everybody must wear a skirt."

Gang members pay a nominal fee to join. They are also charged monthly "protection" money. The price for opting out is much higher. The 369 gang demands \$369 – and may even prescribe a beating for good measure. "I don't want them to touch any part of my body," says Ida. Without the gang's protection, ex-members are easy prey for other gangs seeking revenge. The social work organi-

sation Youth Challenge led by Lam has advised Ida to go to the police. She says: "I couldn't bear it if my friends get caught because of me."

Raids on Gangs

There are laws allowing preventive detention of suspected criminals. And the authorities are said to know the identities of eight out of ten gang members. Police have raided billiard saloons and discos in a drive to control gangs. They have beefed up their presence along Orchard Road, particularly in places frequented by the young. The police have also started taking teens on visits to cramped Changi Prison to show them how miserable life is behind bars. Also helping out are volunteer groups such as Befrienders of Youth (BOY).

Social workers warn against exaggerating the gang problem. "Most of the so-called gangs are just groups of youths congregating together in shopping centres," says Wong, BOY's director. Adds BOY youth worker Juliana Teo: "Everyone needs to belong somewhere." The danger, says Lam, "is when they are involved in violence." That happens when an informal group develops its own hierarchy and loyalties. To protect their turf and gain clout, members prowl the streets and schools for recruits.

Vulnerable Kids

"In the past, gang members would only approach kids who were in their teens or late teens," says Wong. "But now they're even going down to primary school kids." The most susceptible are young people with family problems and those doing poorly at school. "If you come from a family that is broken and you need to be somebody and need a sense of identity, then you're more vulnerable," says Wong. "If parents aren't sensitive to their child's emotional needs, he will look to others for support."

Some kids cannot cope with the

stresses of the tough educational system. Students in Singapore are "streamed" into courses of study based on their academic performance at an early age. "We're brought up to believe that if we don't have the proper education, we'll end up doing some blue-collar job," says Teo. Discos and other entertainment places aside, there are few outlets for youthful exuberance. "Adolescents don't have places to go to," says Wong. "They have to hang out in shopping centres and other public areas."

Parents Play a Part

The parents of gang members usually have little involvement with their kids. They're often too busy pursuing their careers or enjoying the fruits of affluence. "Singapore has become a materialistic place over the years," says BOY youth worker Melissa Chor. There is no instant solution. "It's a long process," says Wong. "Parents really have to get to know their children and be part of their lives." And they should keep an eye on the tell-tale signs. These include truancy, smoking, spending lots of time away from home and packing clothes to take to school.

Is it too late then for young people like Ida? Not necessarily. She has taken a "sabbatical" from the 369. Though her studies are not going well, Ida wants to be a lawyer or a flight attendant. But her gangmates continue to keep an eye on her. "I told them I'll be back, but I don't want to." In school she studies and eats by herself. "I don't know how to mix with other students," says Ida. "They're really different from me – more decent." Youth Challenge is lending emotional support. But it's tough going. When she was being recruited, Ida recalls, the gang told her she would have more friends and more fun. This may yet come true – if Ida has freedom to choose. ■

Reproduced from Young and Restless, Asiaweek, July 14, 1993.

I Made It!

All teens face struggles of one sort or another. Here are the stories of two young Singaporeans who overcame problems to achieve meaning in their lives.

SHAWN

Shawn Dok works at the heartbeat of our government. Her position as Legislative Assistant for Nominated Member of Parliament, Dr. Kanwaljit Soin, gives her the privilege of networking with Singapore's leaders. But Shawn has not always rubbed elbows with the upper echelon. In fact, she has gotten where she is due to her own determination, struggle and sacrifices.



Shawn is the only girl in a family with three boys. She comes from a traditional Chinese family where the priority of education was given to her brothers. As a result, the biggest challenge she faced as a teen was funding her university education. "My family couldn't afford my first-year fees at NUS, which was around \$2,400. I remember that two days before I had to pay the fees I had no money. I went to a church friend who took a loan out for me. It was only at the eleventh hour that I obtained the money," recalls Shawn.

"I raised money for my daily allowances by giving tuition and from part-time jobs," says Shawn. "What makes me different from other people is the pocket money I made while working went toward my daily survival."

From her teen years until now, when she is in her mid-twenties, Shawn bemoans our apathetic society and how people are caught up in acquiring material goods with little interest in current affairs, the community and politics. She channels these frustrations into her work. "I look for an avenue to advocate and lead to changes in society. We are all responsible for our society."

Being a member of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) gives her another avenue to voice and act on her concerns. "By addressing gender issues, AWARE serves as a platform to provide a better society for women, men and families. AWARE is my second home, a place with compassionate people I can identify with and relate to," says Shawn.

Apart from her limelight work, Shawn places high priority on her family obligations. "As the only university graduate, my responsibility to my parents is very high. Being the only daughter, it's up to me to take care of them. If they are ill, I take them to the doctor. If they have problems, I sit down and talk to them."

Shawn has learned to overcome the barriers in her life and deal with family pressures. She derives her optimism and motivation from her motto: "Do not belittle yourself. A lot of things can happen to you but you have to create the opportunity for them to change." ■

Interviewed by Lisa Smelter Cadiz.

RAMON

When Ramon was seven, his father gave him a glass of French brandy that started his alcoholism. "I'd get shaky and couldn't concentrate when I couldn't drink and I used my \$20 weekly allowance for beer," Ramon says.



By courtesy of The Straits Times

Ramon was depressed about his volatile home life. "Mum was busy working at a hawker stall, so I'd cook and clean for my family. My father drank, took drugs, womanised, and beat my Mum." When his parents divorced in 1990, Ramon and his younger brother stayed with his father. They lived in a shophouse above a restaurant owned by his father's friend.

"I felt like a refugee: no TV, no furniture, big rats running. My Dad worked downstairs, but got lazy and made me do his job. He disappeared for days after getting his salary. We had to ask the people downstairs for food. I felt like a beggar."

One night, he had a terrible fight with his father, after which he never saw him again. "I left home that night and lived with my Mum." Ramon stayed with his mother in a three-room flat that was crowded with other relatives. Then, last year, his friend Ismail's mother invited him to live in their spacious five-room flat. It turned out to be a turning point for Ramon.

One night, Ramon poured out his problems to Ismail who then introduced him to his group of six buddies. Over the months, the eight rallied round to pull each other away from trouble. Ramon went on camping trips with them and slowly found he could substitute fun activities for his drinking.

He says the group became a surrogate family for each other. They forced him to kick his alcohol problem by nagging him.

"You have to choose your friends well, especially if you don't have anyone else. I did think of joining a gang but I'd get into more trouble and land in jail," he says. "But these guys stop me from being negative. We often talk about our futures. I don't want to be like my Dad."

Ramon is happy at Ismail's house, with his own bed, the first since he was 13. He cherishes a particular memory: "One night, we had no money so we called the other guys to bring ingredients from their homes – onions, ginger, garlic, chicken – and I cooked. Then we sat down at the table and ate. We were so happy."

"Our parents were never around so we had always eaten alone at home or outside together. But here we were, with home-cooked food, at home, at a table, with each other, all of us, a family. I'll never forget that." ■

Adapted from Reformed Teenage Alcoholic Talks by Ida Bachtiar in The Straits Times, July 15, 1993.

Dear Diary,

Here I am on the threshold of adulthood.

People tell me I must be a responsible person, confident and in control, sure of what I want in life. This is my prime - vigour and vitality are my middle names. People tell me I have so much to offer: my energy, my commitment, my all. I am part of the new generation of computers, fast foods and electronic gadgets.

People tell me that they never had it so good, that I should not waste opportunities for education and moving up the social ladder. Yet I'm not convinced . . . I still have struggles and battles without and within.

I need to learn first to accept myself, let alone others. Flaws and defects are glaringly prominent. I feel awkward, think awkward, am awkward. I strive to attain, to become like so and so, only to fall miserably short. Perhaps I should concentrate on just being ME!

People tell me little of the strengths I have. Instead, my upbringing has been full of criticisms and negative comments. What I have been told I've begun to believe.

"You're stupid." "You're useless." "You're clumsy." Is that all I am? Not really. I have the capacity to care, to be warm, to be a friend.

I need to be allowed to express myself - to be me! I am an individual, I am different. Sometimes what others think or say about me bothers me greatly. They give little room for expression. They always compare.

I need to love and be loved in return; to reach out and touch another with kindness and affection. To experience being vulnerable and risk rejection. To be cared for in return and to know the warmth and joy that being loved brings.

I need to dream, to cross the blockades that reality creates to stifle such dreams. Dreams help me face the stark reality of life. Give me time, I'll learn to cope somehow... I have so much potential to be tapped, I am a powerhouse of ideas and thought, creative imagination - sometimes I could burst with all that is going on within me.

Until next time,
Susan Xin Li

Winston was planning to see a movie with his friends on Friday night. When he mentioned it to his mother, she said, "I need you to stay with your little brother on Friday because Dad and I have a business function to attend." Even though he is rarely called on to babysit, Winston exploded. "I never get to do anything I want in this family," he yelled. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Hannah and her friend Yvonne were shopping together. Hannah pulled a pretty dress off the rack and asked Yvonne what she thought. "Oh, I saw that one already and I'm going to buy it. You better not get the same one." Hannah knew it wasn't such a big deal, but she was mad at Yvonne for being unkind to her. She sulked the rest of the afternoon and avoided Yvonne for a week until her bruised ego had recovered.

Sometimes emotional upsets like these are triggered by previous incidents that may be unrelated to the present experience. This may lead us to blow up to the point that our behaviour gets in the way of our everyday functioning. We may end up feeling depressed, resentful, guilty, inferior or insecure.

We can manage our emotional upsets. One way is to learn to recognise less serious emotional upsets at the early stages when we can control them effectively. The following questions may help you to recognise which emotional upsets disturb you more than they should.

- Do you find it hard to take your mind away from anxieties?
- Do you avoid social situations that did not bother you previously?
- Do you find it hard to restrain your anger and find it difficult to get along with others?
- Are you constantly worried about doing well? Do you feel inadequate or constantly compare yourself with others?

- Do you find it hard to shake off irritations?

If most of your answers to these questions is "yes," you might need to take a closer look at how you deal with your tensions and emotions.

Learn To Deal With Anger

Many people find that doing some hard physical work is a positive way of coping with angry feelings. Others go for a long walk or play a good game of squash. Whatever you find helpful as a way of cooling off will be a more positive and constructive method than saying things you may regret later.

reasons for these negative feelings and find a solution to the problems. The solution may be simple: It may be because you are studying too hard or doing too many outside activities.

Talk To Someone

If your depression or anxieties do not go away within a reasonable period of time, find a good friend with whom you can talk things over. A parent, sister or teacher may be that friend who can be trusted. Airing your feelings, talking and listening to another person's objective view may give you a better perspective and help you to realise things are not that

GET A GRIP *on your emotions*

Improve Interpersonal Skills

Some people may be too difficult for us to cope with, especially if they become aggressive or manipulative. This sometimes results in situations where you feel taken advantage of. You may feel inadequate and unable to speak up. It is necessary to learn to be more assertive, positive and confident.

When Things Seem Depressing

"The thought of going to school tomorrow makes me weak. I dread it." If this is your general feeling on most days, it is time to take some action. Look at your

bad. In learning to communicate, you are learning to cope with your own emotions in a more positive way.

Be Realistic About Goals

Sometimes you may need to think about your abilities and goals. People often get anxious and tense because they have "over planned" and become carried away by the things they want to accomplish. Perhaps you may be overestimating your own abilities. If you learn to set your priorities, you can become realistic and your life will be less of a hassle. ■

Adapted from Emotions: Hints on Handling Them by Ginny Heng in Becoming, vol. 2, no. 3, December 1982.

CONFLICT CRITIQUE

Conflict does not have to be negative; it can very well be an opportunity for growth and development. Here are tips for handling conflict in a positive way.

Do's

- Keep calm, think and absorb aggression.
- Ask for the other viewpoint.
- Keep the incident in perspective.
- Listen with respect and caring – empathise.
- Ask questions to get at the underlying problem.
- Check your understanding – by repeating back.
- Focus on the facts.
- State your point of view calmly and clearly.
- Keep the discussion on track.

Don'ts

- Don't refute criticism.
- Don't defend, justify yourself or argue.
- Don't agree or disagree.
- Don't judge the other person.
- Don't sound threatening.
- Don't get into a win-lose situation.

Adapted from handouts by Alberta Family and Social Services, July 1989.

Bye-Bye Shy

Everyone is shy at certain times, but you may be among those people who experience this cringing feeling of embarrassment several times a day. With determination, even the most timid can break through his or her inhibitions. Here are some tips on how to open up:

- Set yourself small goals each week. Start by doing things which will not earn you a rebuff: Admire a new baby next door, chat up the neighbour walking his dog or offer to help a classmate. When you have made the first move, people will likely be more friendly toward you.
- Focus on getting to know people in situations where you feel most comfortable, for example, when you are working on a project with someone else. Then you do not feel the need to make conversation and silences will not seem awkward. Parties are difficult

to handle even for the more socially adept, so avoid them until you are more sure of yourself.

- If a friend always includes you in his or her invitations, reciprocate. You need not throw a party – an invitation for a meal will do. Getting closer to individuals will help bolster your confidence in general.
- Extend your interests so you can enjoy doing things with people who have similar likes. Most people are delighted when they find someone who shares their interests. And once you can talk about a specific topic with them, it becomes easier to converse at a general level too.
- Engage in something worthwhile, such as volunteer work. Knowing you are contributing will raise your self-esteem and confidence.

Adapted from AP article Born to Be Shy in The Straits Times, April 1, 1991.

Do You Have An ATTITUDE PROBLEM ?

It is common for teenagers to dislike their appearance: "My friends call me 'bamboo pole'." "I hate having to wear glasses." "My face is full of pimples and I hate looking at myself in the mirror." "I am a girl and I have a moustache – yuks!" "I am too short/tall."

The list is endless. Hating yourself is negative and harmful yet it is all too common. Many teenagers feel insecure about their appearance, the way they speak and the way they behave. They lack confidence about themselves.

Yet the very same problems that some teenagers complain about pose no problem for more confident teenagers. Ping has pimples and wears glasses. But she is cheerful, outgoing and has a string of friends lining up to talk to her.

In the end, you choose to be the person you are. If you keep telling yourself how awful you look, if you cannot love

yourself, you are sending out negative vibrations which invite a negative response. It is not easy for others to like you when you quite clearly do not like yourself.

Ping does not love her pimples or her shortsightedness any more than any other pimply teenager. But she realises that there is little she can do about them.

“ If you act confidently even though you are quaking inside, you will eventually still those quakes. ”

So she might as well work on being an interesting person in spite of them. What is her idea of an interesting person?

Someone with interesting ideas and opinions to contribute to a conversation. The model behind this idea was a friend who was really nothing to look at, yet when he spoke you did not really notice his looks because you were too busy lis-

tening to what he had to say.

The mental screen through which we view things has physical effects. It colours the way you look at things and is

the force behind your decisions about relationships and friends. It even shows up in your body language.

It follows that if you can make yourself change your body language consciously, you can get your self-image to fall in line too. For example, if you act confidently even though you are quaking inside, you will eventually still those quakes. At first it will be difficult but in the end your self-image will shift to conform to the external behaviour.

We need to change our negative feelings if we want to improve our relations with those around us. Even if these negative feelings are not bad enough to cause mental illness, they do limit our ability to give and accept love and friendship. They open us to exploitative relationships and make it hard for us to cope with loss, failure and stress, all part and parcel of life.

Improve your self-image

Of course, ideally, every parent and care giver should help a child build a positive image of himself, to build his strengths to balance his weaknesses. However, the truth is that many adults are insecure too and suffer from negative self-images created by other inadequate people.



Illustration by Roy Foo

Learning to like yourself

Follow this action plan to become a new, happier you.

1. Highlight your good points

Write down your good points on a sheet of paper and stick it up in a prominent position where you can see it first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

2. Check with family and friends

If you cannot find any good points yourself, ask your family and friends to say one nice thing about you.

3. Pat yourself on the back

Each day look in the mirror and say to yourself, "I like you," or, "I love you because you have nice ears/good teeth/pleasant manners" Ignore the pimple that is threatening to burst out or hair that looks too curly or too straight.

4. Say hello to a new you

Greet the warm, friendly human being that is hiding behind those eyes and underneath the mass of insecurity.

The way to break out of this cycle of negativity is to revamp your mental screen by picking up new values and new ways of seeing things from other sources. We can control our self-image by changing the way we see ourselves. The mind is the ultimate creator of reality.

To reshape this mental screen you need awareness and some objectivity. Instead of focusing on your glasses or your face, you could choose to concentrate on, say, your voice. You may have a beautiful, sweet voice. Better yet, you could choose to concentrate on a spiritual value which neither ages nor wrinkles. You could choose to develop into Mr Nice Guy or Miss Friendly, someone who is considerate and cares about the feelings of others.

The only problem with this plan is that many teenagers are not clear about what their self-image is, and why they should change or reinforce parts of it. If more of us were clear about how we would like to turn out to be, there would

be fewer problems with drugs, drinking, smoking, delinquent behaviours and eating disorders.

These start out as self-image problems before they become medical or police problems. A person takes the first cigarette because he wants to be like a particular friend who is a smoker. Another finds it difficult to say no to an offer of beer because his friends jeered at him when he once tried to decline their offer. It takes confidence and a good self-image to stand up to people.

To do something about your self-image, you have to start by liking yourself more often than you dislike yourself. A certain amount of insecurity is normal; otherwise we will appear to be insufferably arrogant. Insecurity or being "kiasu" makes us try harder and look for better ways to do things. But too much insecurity can paralyse us into inaction, even into disliking or hating ourselves. Before we can get others to like us, we must like ourselves. ■

Adapted from All About Sex (and other things): A Teenager's Guide To Growing Up by Lee Geok Boi, published by Federal Publications, 1992.

FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT

Take off your boxing gloves. Here's how to solve your disagreements so everybody wins.



Illustration by Roy Foo

When faced with a potential conflict, remember the conflict paradox: "If a conflict is brewing, it **NEEDS** to happen for things to get better. When conflict does not happen, things get worse."

When people avoid conflict, the relationship becomes cold and distant, and the two people will drift apart.

The three most common strategies for avoiding conflict are:

• Flight

Betty and her mother have been out doing the marketing all morning. Neither

has mentioned the fact that Betty has asked to stay out late with her friends that night. Betty knows her mother is not happy about the idea.

Refusing to talk about a disagreement is all right if it is not an appropriate time or place to talk. But to continue to avoid the subject all day is Flight.

• Diversion

Robert is angry with his friend Jason because Jason lost a CD which Robert loaned to him the previous week. Every time Robert tries to bring up the subject

Jason talks about something else.

To keep deflecting attention away from a difficult subject like this is a Diversion. It could be damaging to their friendship because Robert's resentment will not go away. It will grow.

• Fighting

Cindy and her sister Janet are arguing over who will do the washing up. They are avoiding the real work of making a constructive plan for how to share the chores fairly.

It sounds odd but fighting is a way of avoiding the resolution of a conflict.

Remember this the next time you find yourself in the middle of an argument.



How To Resolve Conflict

Now that we have seen how we DON'T resolve conflicts, let's see how we DO! Constructive conflict resolution is a direct and positive way of solving problems. We need to acknowledge that there is a conflict, figure out its source, pick an appropriate time for discussion, and be willing to work toward a constructive solution.

What's the problem?

Is it about fact or about a different perception of things? If it is about fact, it can be simply resolved by checking with a reliable source. If it is about perception, remember that our perceptions shape our opinions and everyone sees the world a little differently.

Wendy and Joan argue about whether the movie they just saw was any good. Wendy thought it was; it reminded her of things that had happened to her family. Joan thought it was not; it did not seem true to life at all to her because nothing like the story had ever happened to anyone she knew.

Instead of arguing, Wendy and Joan can just listen to each other's thoughts – both can benefit. We learn more about the world when we hear how it looks to other people. There is often no "right" way to see things.

Both of you can decide a time and place that is right to discuss the issue more deeply. It is important that you do not evade the issue at this point, but agree to get together and discuss it fully at another time if it is not appropriate to do so immediately. ■

Work It Out

Here are some tips to help you solve your disagreements.

Listen

Give your full attention to the other person while she or he is speaking. Forget rehearsing what you will say afterwards. What gets you the best results is really listening to what the other person is saying – both the words and the feelings underneath them.

Check out what you heard

Tell the other person what you think you heard them say and ask if you got it right. You might say: "What I thought I heard you say is that you feel like I sometimes get so busy that I don't pay attention to you. Did I understand you correctly?" Never assume that you really know what the other person is saying until you check it out.

Stay on the issue

Don't bring up things that happened in the past – just those that you are worried about now! Don't label the other person by saying (or even thinking) that what she or he is saying comes from a particular point of view.

Walter's father is scolding him for watching too much television. He is saying how much more important it is to study and do well at school. Walter is thinking what a BORE his father is.

He begins to "tune out" what his father is saying. Walter's father knows he is not getting through to his son and begins to yell at him.

If Walter wants his father to stop scolding he needs to stop putting him in a category (Boring) and start listening to him and acknowledging that he has heard what his father is saying. When his father knows that Walter has really heard him, he will stop lecturing.

Look at many solutions

Choose a solution that feels good to both of you. Don't worry if your first idea to solve the problem does not work. Continue to think together about what else might be a good solution.

Betty and her mother might think of several solutions to their conflict about what time Betty will go home that night. They might compromise on a time half-way between the earlier one Betty's mother wants and the later one that Betty wants. They might decide Betty would stay out later but would telephone her mother to let her know she is all right. They need to find the solution together which allows Betty to enjoy her evening and allows her mother to enjoy hers too without worrying.

A good parent-teen relationship is not one without conflict. It is one in which the participants can resolve conflicts so that both people win.

Written by Mary Bell, a family therapist in private practice in Singapore and from information by Alberta Family and Social Services.

It's OK To Feel Angry

When you get mad, instead of hitting someone or losing your temper, try these steps:

Notice the signs of anger rising

- A hot feeling in your neck, hands and face.
- A hot feeling somewhere, perhaps your ears.
- Your breath coming faster and harder.
- Your voice getting louder.

Before the explosion, distract yourself, take time out

- Go for a walk, a run or participate in a sport.
- Take a bath or shower.
- Listen to music or play an instrument.
- Cook a meal.

Talk yourself down

- Don't talk yourself into being more angry by thinking that the person you are mad at is deliberately out to get you.
- Don't exaggerate what is going on. Tell yourself that what is happening is probably not as serious as you think it is.

Figure out why you are angry - ask yourself

- Am I really angry at myself or someone else and am I taking it out on the person close to me?
- Am I feeling hurt, afraid, sad, disappointed, embarrassed or insecure? Are these feelings coming out as anger?
- Am I experiencing stress that is triggering my anger?

Express your feelings verbally, whatever they are

- Describe how you are feeling.
- Don't use hurtful words.
- Don't blame the other person for how you are feeling. Remember, you are in control of your own feelings. You alone choose how you feel and act.

Adapted from handout from Alberta Family and Social Services, Canada, July 1989.

A Better Way of Saying It

Sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it that matters. Take a look at how the tone of these statements could help calm a situation which is reaching the boiling point.

To reject a suggestion:

"Your study habits work great for you. My approach works well for me."

To avoid gossip:

"I prefer not to talk about my friend's failings when she isn't present."

To appear supportive rather than critical:

"Our friend is under a lot of pressure, let's give her some leeway."

To be a team player:

"What can I do to help you?"

To show appreciation:

"Your contribution made a difference."

To encourage participation:

"You always have good ideas. What do you think about this?"

To listen with empathy:

"Tell me what you're feeling right now."

To disagree without being disagreeable:

"I feel strongly about it. I can't change my mind just to get your approval."

To end a disagreeable conversation:

"We've probably gone as far as we can right now. Let's pick it up again soon."

Adapted from Some Perspectives on Conflict and Conflict Management, by Dr. Margaret S. Gremli.

I Need Help!

Q. I have never seen my father strike my mother, but I am afraid because sometimes he shouts at her very loudly and throws things close to where she is standing. She seems very afraid. Is this family violence?

A. Yes, it is. It is the beginning of the pattern. Violence usually gets worse and worse, escalating from one form to another. Usually it begins with things that seem not so serious like one parent criticising the other. Then there is shouting, then smashing a fist against a wall or table, then kicking or throwing something. Eventually, things become really dangerous with one parent striking or kicking the other.

Q. Last week my mother was very angry at my father and she threatened to cut him with the kitchen knife. I was very frightened because she has a temper and I thought she might really do it. My father told me I must never tell anyone about this, but I am afraid it will happen again. What should I do?

A. No teen should have to be alone with the fear of something dangerous happening between parents. You need to talk to an adult who understands your situation. Call one of the help lines to find a professional counsellor who can help you.

Q. My friend was crying after school last night and I asked her what was wrong. She made me promise not to tell anyone and she said that her father hits her mother and her mother has been badly injured. She is very afraid it will happen again and that something worse will happen. I promised not to tell, but I want to do something. How can I help?

A. Try to talk your friend into getting help from someone who is trained in dealing with family violence. She needs an adult she can trust to help her help her parents. Breaking the secret about family violence is the first step to making it stop. You can help her by giving her the phone numbers of agencies which deal with family violence.

Q. I was at my aunt and uncle's flat last Saturday and they had a terrible fight while I was there. They thought I couldn't see because I was playing with my little nephew. They were arguing and he hit her across the side of her head. She ran into the bedroom and didn't come out again before I left. What should I do?

A. Tell an adult in your family who you think could help – a parent, grandparent or other trusted family member. Let him or her know you are worried about your aunt and uncle. Another family member could talk to your uncle and let him know that violent behaviour is not acceptable. ■

Written by Mary Bell, a family therapist in private practice in Singapore.

Singapore Teens Speak Out

Our families are not spending enough time with us, say some Singaporean adolescents in a survey taken in August and September of 1994.

Their answers revealed that slightly less than half – 48 percent – shared a meal with their parents every day.

Other results: About 30 percent went out with their families on weekends, 31 percent spent time watching television with their families and 12 percent played games with their families on weekends.

Conducted by three teachers, the informal survey on family values and adolescents was conducted in three schools, St. Hilda's Secondary, St. Thomas Secondary and Dunearn Secondary. Two hundred and six students, aged between 13 and 16 years from the normal stream, filled out questionnaires.

Many students wanted their parents to spend more time with them. "One implication of this is that there is not much communication and interaction between children and adults in a family," commented one of the teachers.

Another teacher said, "Sometimes parents feel teens don't want to communicate. But here, the teens say they want to spend more time with their families."

She continued, "I think the family provides a certain fundamental safety net for teens. They want a bit of freedom, but also the security of the family."

Ms. Gracia Wiarda, a therapist at the Counselling and Care Centre, suggested that instead of impromptu outings, the whole family could sit down and decide on a day when they are all free to do something together, such as watching a movie or going bowling. ■

Adapted from Parents Spend Too Little Time with Kids: Survey by Tan Hsueh Yun in The Straits Times, June 1995.

The Trouble With Parents

When I talk to teenagers who have trouble with their parents, I usually ask them what they don't like about their parents. Surprisingly, the answers are often the same.

- **My parents don't trust me.**
- **My parents don't love me.**
- **My parents don't listen.**
- **My parents always pick on me.**

These common complaints do exist, and they are not all your fault. But you usually can't say that "they are at fault and I'm the innocent one" either. So let's look at some things you can do about the problem from your end.

My Parents Don't Trust Me

Many teenagers say that their parents don't trust them. What they mean is that they don't trust them to stay out all night, or go to a party somewhere, or

choose their own friends.

But how do you get to be trusted? Well, you have to develop that trust in your parents by being trustworthy. You start by doing the little things. For example, if your parents tell you to be home by 11:00 p.m. and you're always late, they're going to say to themselves, "Well, if he can't be trusted with this little thing, then he can't be trusted with bigger things." If, on the other hand, you call from where you are and say, "Pa, I'm already leaving, but it'll take half an hour for me to get home - I'm going to be 10 minutes late," then you might find your parents behaving differently towards you the next time you ask to stay out late.

If you really want privileges at home, just start doing all that dumb stuff like making your bed, picking up your clothes and emptying the rubbish without having

to be told to do it. Do that for awhile and your parents will be sitting ducks.

One other thing: the need to talk things over with your parents. Do you ever sit down and tell your parents what kind of person you really are? Or about your friends? How will your parents learn to trust your friends unless they've met them and you've told them what your friends are like? If every time they ask you a question, you grunt and make them feel it's none of their business, they're not going to trust your friends any further.

My Parents Don't Love Me

When teenagers say that their parents don't love them, I wonder how much they really know about their parents. Imagine being in your father's shoes, murmuring to the mirror in the morning, "I've got to go to work again, the same job I've been pushing myself to do for the last 17 years. There's no way out. The children are growing and eating more, the rent is going up, the more I make, the more expenses seem to rise... help!"

Why does he do it? One explanation could be that he's determined to give up certain privileges to take care of you. Maybe he doesn't know how to demonstrate his love openly (many Asian parents don't) but it's there all the same.

Or, what about your mother? Do you know what she's like? I'll give you a hint. First, go to the kitchen cup-



board, open the door and count the daily dishes. Start with the number of days in the year. Multiply that by the meals in a day. Then multiply that by how old you are. That's roughly the number of times your mother has washed that same set of dishes. Don't you think that gets kind of boring?

My Parents Don't Listen

Isn't it amazing that people who live together for so many years have such a hard time just making conversation?

Sometimes parents want to listen, but don't know how. They ask questions no one cares about like, "How's school?" or "What did you do today?" I sometimes tell parents not to ask questions that can be answered simply "yes" or "no." Rather, ask questions that say, "Well, what do you think?" or "What would you do?" The same thing applies when you talk to your parents.

Try this game for one week: Dream up two or three questions you can ask your parents whenever the family gathers for a meal. Start with something you've read in the newspapers or an event in school and ask, "Pa, what do you think about this?" or "Ma, in your case, what would you do?" They'd probably give you answers because most people, given a chance, enjoy expressing their opinions on everyday affairs.

You might know more about some subjects than they do, but you don't always have to correct them. Don't get caught up with proving who's right or wrong - just listen. And then ask a few more questions like, "Why do you feel that way?" or "How did you come to this opinion?" Play this game for a while, and you'll soon be teaching your parents to ask you questions that you'd be more interested in answering.

Making conversation is especially hard between two generations of people who have gone through such different ex-

periences in life but a little creativity and genuine effort go a long way.

My Parents Pick on Me

A lot of "picking on me" is really caused by a lack of information. Parents want to know what's going on in their children's lives, but many teenagers don't want to talk about this. What then, can parents do?

Teenagers complain that parents

“

**Many parents
who pick on their
teenagers are
grasping for some
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that you accept
them, too.**

”

pick on them about school. In many cases, they really just want to know the friends you mix with, what grades you're getting, and how you're doing in exams. Once you talk to them about school - what you like as well as what you don't like - the picking will slowly fizzle away.

One other reason why your parents pick on you is your growing independence. When you just want to be alone in your room, they think it's because you don't like them.

Talk to them. Tell them as patiently as possible that you do care about them, but you have to be known for what you are, not for what they are. Many parents

who pick on their teenagers are grasping for some kind of assurance that you accept them, too. They might feel that your life at school, your friends and your many new activities are crowding them out, which makes them feel unimportant and useless. To get them to stop picking on you, try giving them some assurance.

Parents are People Too

Most of what I'm saying is this: Let's be fair to parents. You know how unsure you feel when you are around a group of people you don't know? Well, that's how parents sometimes feel around teenagers. They have brought you up for years, and suddenly you are like a stranger. Overnight, you have grown away from them and they don't know how to act.

That's why it's up to you teens, because you read and think about things a lot more than your parents. You're also probably able to try out new ideas more than your parents are willing or able to.

What would it do to your relationship if you made those assumptions with your parents? What if you made it a point to be nice when you see them busy or all flustered up over something? What if you said "thank you" once in a while? Try going over to your mother one night when she's doing the dishes and just mention that you appreciate her. She may not say very much (most Asian parents are quiet about their feelings) but believe me, she'll be beaming all over inside.

It's tough to have a good relationship with your parents. But it can make a great difference in your life. Few people will come closer to you emotionally than your parents. That's what makes it hard to ignore them. When things are bad at home, everything else is affected. But when things are okay at home, life gets much better. ■

Adapted from The Trouble With Parents, by Esther Tzer Wong in Becoming, vol. 4 no. 3, September - November 1989.

Life stories:

Teens recount their experiences

Norsiha, age 13, lived with her mother and stepfather who fought every night. They fought about everything but the arguments that hurt the most were the ones about her. She feared she was causing their problems.

"Your daughter is worthless," was an opening line that was sure to bring an angry response from Norsih's mother. As her stepfather listed each fault he found in Norsih the argument would escalate and often the couple would come to blows.

They argued about the other children as well. Although he never hit Norsih, her stepfather often struck out at her younger sister and baby brother. She will never forget what happened when she woke her stepfather from a nap one afternoon.

"The baby rolled off the bed and started to cry," she tearfully recalls. "My stepfather picked him up and threatened to hurt him but my mother grabbed the baby and put her body over him. My stepfather slapped and punched her but he couldn't touch my brother."

The fights got worse when Norsih's mother discovered her husband had a girlfriend. Norsih didn't like going home and started spending more time with her friends. Instead of going to school they hung around coffee shops smoking cigarettes and drinking beer.

"Influence on the outside is so strong," she claims. "My friends also have problems at home. We would get together just for fun and to forget our problems."

When she saw her daughter start to mix with bad company, Norsih's mother reacted by restricting her. "She blames me," Norsih bitterly recalls. The fights between mother and daughter got worse.

Norsih ran away and went to live with a girlfriend. Her mother brought her home but one month later Norsih ran away again. She fell behind in her studies and stopped going to school. Unable to control or help her daughter, Norsih's mother took her to Pertapis Hostel for Women and Girls.

Counsellors encouraged Norsih to talk about her feelings. She promised not to smoke or drink and to behave in a responsible manner on home visits.

Norsih stayed at the hostel for one year. Counsel-

lors claim her behaviour and self-esteem improved. When she was 16 years old she returned home. By that time her mother and stepfather had divorced. Faced with the financial responsibility of raising three children on her own, Norsih's mother spent a lot of time at work. She relied on Norsih to help out at the shop and at home.

Working for her mother was about her only option. Norsih didn't finish secondary school and has no vocational training. "I don't have the interest to go to school anymore," says Norsih, who once dreamed of becoming a fashion designer.

Things did not get better. Her mother didn't always like the way she did things and criticised her in front of the employees. She also didn't like Norsih's boyfriend and accused her of planning to run away again. They would go for days without speaking to one another. At home Norsih complained that her mother couldn't forget the past.

After a few months Norsih started going to discos and seeing old friends. It wasn't long before she was smoking and drinking again and staying out all night. Her mother sent her back to Pertapis.

"What's the use of changing if someone looks down on me?" she asks. ■

A counsellor speaks. . .

Norsih has been abused by her parents in different ways – her father neglected her while her mother put an enormous amount of guilt and responsibility on her shoulders. This abuse is clearly taking its toll as Norsih begins her own path of self-destruction. Though she tried counselling before, Norsih still could not cope with the re-entry into her family because the circumstances were still the same. In such a dilemma, sometimes a longer separation from the home is needed. What would help is for the parents to get counselling themselves, so that they can make positive changes in the family. If they refuse to change, Norsih will have to face the cold reality of her life. She'll have to learn to mourn the loss of parental love and learn to accept help from those outside her family.

Wei Ming was eight when his mother walked out of the house one day. She said she was going for a adult movie and he couldn't go along. He watched her until she was out of sight. She never came back.

At that time, he didn't fully understand what was happening between his parents, but he sensed something was wrong. Their father never explained the reason for the divorce. He said it wasn't their business but Wei Ming felt differently. "My brother and I have the right to know what's happening to them and what's going to happen to us! He blamed it all on Mom. I hated it whenever he talked about her that way. Till today, I still don't know why they broke up."

Wei Ming used his parents' divorce as an excuse to misbehave. When his teacher reprimanded him, he'd blame his parents. I once threw a hammer at a teacher. I can't remember why I did that. To get attention, I guess."

One day, his father brought home a woman named Sue. Later, she became a regular visitor to their home. Auntie Sue was different from his mother, less hot tempered and more docile. He grew to like her. One day, the family was shopping and out of the blue, their father suggested they called Auntie Sue "Mom" instead.

He was stunned. "All I said was, if that's what you want,

okay."

His father and Auntie Sue married. Everyone seemed happy. Initially, he felt awkward having two "mothers." He started calling her Auntie, then Mummy Sue and finally Mom. But he feels lucky as, unlike Cinderella's stepmother, Sue is nice to him and his brother.

"Marriage is something that's beautiful," said Wei Ming. "It should never turn out this way. I'm scared when I think of my future. I definitely want to get married and I'll make sure my children will never experience being in my shoes. Sometimes, I question life. Why must I be the unlucky one to be caught in this web of circumstance? Life just isn't fair." ■

A counsellor speaks. . .

What Wei Ming needs is a strong, loving person who can empathize with his problems and direct all his confusion and anger in a more useful way. Most troubled teens misbehave in part to avoid the pain of coming from a difficult family situation. Acting up gives a sense of thrill while the possibility of punishment keeps the teen from thinking about his home environment. A wise counsellor can help Wei Ming get in touch with what he is avoiding and encourage him to channel his pain in things like sports, education or vocational accomplishments.

Although Yue Mei lives with both her natural parents, she is no happier than Norsiha or Wei Ming. She feels like an outsider. She is unable to get along with her family. Whenever she quarrels with her younger brother and sister, she gets into trouble.

She is the eldest but says her siblings show her no respect. She remembers, "One time, my ten-year-old brother was swearing at me but my mother said it was all my fault because I taught him all those bad words. I never did. I feel like an unwelcome member of the family."

When friends ring for Yue Mei, her mother gets angry and her brother or sister tells them she's not around. She's too embarrassed to bring anyone home because her family makes fun of her classmates. "My mum is quite suspicious and says she doesn't want me to mix with bad company. She opens my letters without my knowledge," explains Yue Mei.

Her mother thinks she doesn't study enough and compares her with a cousin. No matter how hard Yue Mei tries, her cousin is always ahead of her: "I told my mum it's better if I just leave school and go to work," she sighs. "I don't have the confidence."

On the weekends she goes window shopping with her friends. One of them introduced her to a boy and they saw

each other once a week.

"After about three months, he went after a girl who is prettier than me. I felt quite sad. He calls and says he still likes me. I don't know whether I should break off with him or not."

Yue Mei is afraid to go to her mother for advice, so she confides in her friend instead. "Supposedly, I am tied to my mum by blood, but I can talk to my friends and even to strangers more easily than I can talk to her," she says sadly. ■

A counsellor speaks. . .

When a child grows up with parents who constantly criticize her, the child will feel insecure, afraid and confused. She is also susceptible to unhealthy forms of intimacy in order to feel the closeness she never felt before. Yue Mei's mother would benefit from talking with a counsellor or a parents' support group so that she doesn't overreact to her daughter's behaviour. As for Yue Mei, before she can decide whether or not to break up with her boyfriend, she first needs to understand that her confusion is due to the fact that she doesn't have a sense of what she wants from life and relationships. She herself needs the benefit of an adult counselor or wise older friend who can guide her gently towards finding the answers for herself.

Teens and FAMILY VIOLENCE

Vanessa is 13. Almost every night she lies awake waiting for it to start. First she hears her father shouting. Then she hears her mother's nervous voice trying to calm him, to reason with him. Then she hears the pounding of a fist on the table. Then the smash of something being thrown. Her mother's voice crying out in fear, pleading. The horrible muted sounds as her mother is thrown against the wall, struck, pushed on the floor, kicked.

Seven-year-old Jennifer, Vanessa's younger sister, is now awake. Neither sister dares to make a sound. Jennifer's shoulders are shaking as she holds back the sobs that might alert her father to the fact that the girls are awake. Vanessa creeps over to her sister's bed and puts her arms around her. She holds her until the horrible sounds end and Jennifer falls into a fitful sleep.

In the morning, before the alarm wakes her father, Vanessa makes breakfast for the family. She tiptoes around her mother who is sitting with her face buried in her hands at the kitchen table crying. Vanessa dares not speak to her. She quickly and quietly makes the coffee for her father, stirs the congee and places everything on the table. Jennifer appears and the two girls sit silently at the table, waiting for their father. He sits down, invisible to his wife and daughters behind the newspaper. Without a word he eats and leaves. Vanessa's mother looks up as she hears the door close. Only then does Vanessa see that one of her mother's eyes is blackened from a blow. There is a deep cut beside her mother's eye and another above her eyebrow.

Abdul is 15. He is sitting nervously on the settee in the living room,



By courtesy of GO

pretending to watch television. Beside him, his mother is cringing, shaking her head in denial. Tears of frustration and humiliation are streaming down her cheeks. Above her stands Abdul's father. His face is flushed with rage. He is shaking his fists in Abdul's mother's face and screaming insults at her. Then comes the moment Abdul fears the most. His father picks up the lamp from the side table and lifts it to strike his mother. Like lightning Abdul is on his feet, lunging to block his father's blow. He crashes hard onto the corner of the table and falls to the floor. There is a sharp pain in his side.

He cannot breathe.

An hour later Abdul is in an examining room at the A&E department of the hospital. "I fell down the stairs," he hears himself lying to the doctor. He can sense the doctor's suspicion when the doctor says, "Your right collar bone and your two left ribs are broken. Did you fall both to the left and to the right? You seem to be an accident prone young man. I see from your record you were here with an injury a few weeks ago. Where is your father? Does he know you are here?"

Abdul does not answer. He has to think fast of what to say so that the doctor

will not telephone his father or go out to the waiting room to question his mother who is sitting hidden from sight.

Savita is 16. Her school results have been getting worse for the past three years. No matter how hard she tries to study, she cannot concentrate. What's worse, her parents fight about her marks. Savita's father hits her with a broom if she does not get good exam results. She has become more and more anxious about school. Her mother pleads with her father to stop the hitting, saying Savita is doing the best she can.

Savita's father blames her mother for interfering with his discipline and for not making Savita study hard enough. He shouts at Savita's mother, calls her "lazy" and "useless" and tells her that it will be her fault if Savita does not pass her exams. Sometimes he gets so angry at Savita's mother that he puts his hands around her neck and almost strangles her.

Savita is terrified that one day her father will kill her mother. She feels very bad for causing her mother so much pain. It makes her feel ashamed and guilty when her father berates her mother for something which is really her own fault. She feels she is failing not only at school but as a daughter. There seems little hope that things will get better. Sometimes she thinks about ending her life.

Teenage Victims

Vanessa, Abdul and Savita are victims of family violence. When one parent abuses another, the children in the family are also harmed. Usually it is a father who abuses a mother, but in some cases the situation is reversed or both parents resort to physical violence. Sometimes children and adolescents are also injured by an abusing parent.

For teens, family violence can be especially damaging. A teenager in a family where one parent abuses another is often forced to grow up overnight. He or she takes on the responsibility of protecting other family members. Teen girls often wind up as replacement "parents" for their little brothers and

sisters when the real parents are too caught up in their battles to look after their younger children. Teen boys often get caught in the crossfire while trying to protect one parent from being hurt by the other. Some teenagers find themselves staying home when their friends go out or even staying home from school because they are worried that a parent might be injured if they are out. Nearly all teens who live in families where there is physical abuse of one parent by the other feel guilty about it. They feel that if only they were somehow a better son or daughter, this would not happen.

The Family Secret

There is another burden which teenagers take on when they live with family violence. Because they are ashamed of the abuse, almost all of them are careful to protect their families from having the dark secret found out. They even take on the job of keeping younger siblings from saying anything about the abuse. It often becomes a family secret that no one talks about, not even to aunts and uncles.

After a time, no one talks about it even in the immediate family. It becomes too dangerous to say anything for fear of starting a quarrel and causing more violence. The whole family becomes like a quietly boiling pot and teens often feel responsible for keeping everyone from saying or doing anything that would lift the lid and make the pot boil over.

Adults who grew up in families where there was violence look back on their teen years sadly. Many of them remember very little except that it was tense, dark, frightening and unpleasant at home. Most feel they lost their childhood and adolescence because of the abuse. They were forced to grow up too fast. They never experienced the good school years, learning new things without adult cares and having fun with friends on weekends. Most of all, they missed the chance to have happy family experiences and memories. ■

Written by Mary Bell, a family therapist in private practice in Singapore.

Getting help

The best news about being a teen in a family where there is violence is that, with help, it is possible to make the abuse stop. Here are some things which Vanessa, Abdul and Savita need to know to help them make things better:

You are not alone

Countless children and teenagers in Singapore and all over the world have the same problem that you do. You just don't know about it because they're being as careful as you are to make sure no one finds out.

It is not your fault

The abuse of one parent by another is never the fault of a child or teenager. Even if parents fight about something you did, you are not responsible for that fight. They would find something else to fight about if you were not there.

Everyone wants things to change

Even the parent who is abusing the other is not happy with the way things are. He is very unhappy because of what he is doing but he is caught in a trap and does not know how to stop.

Family violence can be stopped

If your family gets help from a professional family counsellor, your parents can learn other ways to deal with angry feelings instead of fighting physically and you can start learning to relax and have fun again.

It won't stop without help

When one parent physically abuses another, it is usually part of a pattern which will not stop unless the family gets help from a professional counsellor. It may go away for a while, but will probably come back.

You can get help for your family

It is a big step for a teenager to expose his or her family and ask for help, but a decision that your family will thank you for later. To find a counsellor who can help your family, see the list on pages 36 and 37.

Getting Along With Parents

What went wrong wondered Mrs. Lee. How did her 16-year-old daughter become so rebellious?



Illustration by Roy Foo

She remembers when her daughter was 12, how they both enjoyed being with each other. There were no conflicts in those days and whatever Mrs. Lee asked of Sally, her daughter would comply. But in four years, changes occurred. Sally began to stay out late at night, became secretive about her activities and gave curt answers whenever her mother asked her where she had been.

Mrs. Lee sought the advice of her friends, but this did not solve her problem. She even attended a few parenting courses, but still found it hard to approach Sally. Mrs. Lee would either remain silent and hope things would change or yell at her daughter for being so disobedient. To make matters worse, her husband was busy at work and unaware of the

problems at home. He could not understand how his wife could not solve this problem with his daughter as effectively as he solved problems with his staff. He was not very sympathetic to Mrs. Lee's predicament.

In the meantime, Sally was enjoying her life – except at home. She began to find herself spending more time with her school friends and less time at home. She wondered what happened to the mother who used to trust her and enjoy being with her. Now it seems that all her mother wants is to pry into her life. Her mother now “blows her top” at the slightest disagreement. Sally feels much more comfortable outside her home and studiously plans her schedule to minimise encounters with her mom. In the

quietness of her heart, she feels hurt – she isn't doing anything wrong. She studies hard and will probably enter a junior college. There are no complaints from her school and she is not engaging in any delinquent activities – why is her mom treating her this way?

Make Peace

If you could talk to the friends of Mrs. Lee and Sally, you would find a most curious thing. Both of them express the desire to talk to each other, to try and understand what is going on, and to end this cold war between them. But both of them also express great fear that if they approach each other, they might make the situation worse.

When parents and teens are asked how the relationship between them broke

down, most, like Mrs. Lee and Sally, don't have a clear idea. Whatever the problem is attributed to – "Oh, you know teens today," "Parents are always like that," or "She's just moody" – parents and teens are still left with the question of how to begin to communicate and get along a little better.

Mrs. Lee realised that it would take a certain amount of courage and wisdom to approach her daughter. She also knew that being the mother and the adult, it was her responsibility to initiate some kind of peace discussion. She sought the advice of a trusted counsellor and friend. Though it was painful for Mrs. Lee, she began, together with her friend, to look at the strategy by which she was dealing with Sally.

When Sally started to become independent, Mrs. Lee began to react to these changes without realising it. She slowly began to see that in her fear of "losing" Sally because her daughter no longer needed her as much, she became

controlling. Instead of enjoying the fact that she had done a great job in raising a daughter who now could make her own decisions, Mrs. Lee tried to maintain the relationship as it had always been – a dependent little girl and a "loving" mother.

Look Inward

When Mrs. Lee saw this clearly, she was ready to take some responsibility for her relationship with her daughter. Sally, she realised, must have been reacting all along to her desire for control, so much so that all her daughter wanted to do was run away. Now that she understood her own fears, Mrs. Lee could begin to be free to look at Sally realistically.

Mrs. Lee was taking the wise and loving approach towards reconciliation by taking the first step: looking at herself first. Ironically, as Mrs. Lee began to change, it began to grow on Sally, who noticed that her previously "busybody" mother was busy with something else.

She didn't feel as pressured as before by her mother to supply information about herself. With the atmosphere at home more relaxed, there wasn't the same need to stay away as much as possible.

The story has yet to end, but it is off to a good beginning. The last time Mrs. Lee confided in her friend, she and Sally were still having occasional arguments over curfew and dating. But there is more openness on both sides to listen to each other. More importantly, Mrs. Lee and Sally say that they can now actually enjoy times with one another, and even laugh together.

Ask and Share

What teens don't know is how uncertain and afraid their parents are at times. Teens don't appreciate how scary it can be to be responsible for another life. What teens can do is to find out more about their parents by asking them about how they grew up, what their parents were like, how they were disciplined and how they lived through their teen years.

If teens are mature enough to ask and adults open enough to share their memories, adolescents will inherit more than just their parents' money.

They will inherit the very values that everyone is so concerned about preserving these days. There are many issues at stake, but at the heart of it all lies the main concern – how do I build a strong, healthy relationship with my son or daughter that can weather all kinds of problems and conflicts? Parents and teens share the hunger for relationships that are supportive, strong, caring and encouraging. ■



Illustration by Roy Foo

Here's Help - When You Need It

Singapore has many social welfare and youth organisations that help teens and parents in matters from school to family to personal. Highlighted here are six agencies that teens can contact for information and referrals.

Student Care Service

- Blk. 202 Yishun St. 21
#01-89 Singapore 760202
Tel.: 759-6821
- Blk. 18 Hougang Ave. 3
#01-159 Singapore 530018
Tel.: 281-2468
- Blk. 437 Clementi Ave. 3
#01-98 Singapore 120437
Tel.: 778-6867

The staff of the Student Care Service help students between the ages of five and 18. Led by a team of psychologists and social workers, the service offers programmes and activities for students and parents. Individual counselling sessions are offered to families and students free of charge on a drop-in basis or by appointment. There are also group workshops for such issues as parenting, friendships, school stress and interpersonal communication. Educational and intellectual assessments are available. Parents can also enjoy the benefits of a resource library.

*Hours : Mon. - Fri. 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. ;
Sat. 9:00 am - 1:00 p.m.*

*Hotline : 1-800-281-2522,
9:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon;
2:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.*

Call or drop by to talk about any issues regarding school, homework, parents and peers.

Police Boys' Clubs

- Marine Parade Police Boys' Club
Blk. 35 Marine Crescent
#01-63 Singapore 440035
Tel.: 445-2378
- Tanjong Pagar Police Boys' Club
Blk. 5 Everton Park
#01-20 Singapore 080005
Tel.: 224-0823

Open to boys between 12 and 18 years of age, the Police Boys' Club provides healthy recreational alternatives such as skating, camping, hiking and football. There are 14 such clubs in Singapore, each consisting of 300 to 400 boys. The organisation also has youth leaders to befriend boys and counsel those with problems. A community service project founded by the Republic of Singapore Police, the Clubs also offer boys a chance to establish friendships with a group of peers who wish to develop their educational and vocational potential.

Hours : Mon. - Sat. 10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.

Those interested can contact the secretary of the clubs listed above for the contact numbers of the other clubs around Singapore.

Samaritans of Singapore

- Blk. 18 Outram Park
#03-21 Singapore 161018
Tel.: 221-4444

The Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) is one of the best known hotlines in Singapore. Operating since 1969, the organisation has a team of paid staff and professional counsellors who lead a group of highly trained volunteers who run the phone service. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and would be useful to a teen or parent who is facing an immediate crisis, or who wishes to speak to someone while in the middle of a problem. SOS volunteers also have a ready list of referral agencies if they are unable to assist the caller.

This service is a safe way to talk with a trusted person as confidentiality is kept between the Samaritan and the client. Talking over the phone also means that callers need not reveal their identities.

Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre

- Blk. 230 Ang Mo Kio Ave. 3
#01-1264 Singapore 560230
Tel.: 453-5349

Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre is one of the largest family service centres in Singapore. Serving the surrounding community, the centre has a full staff of social workers who can assist parents and youths in a number of areas. Social workers are on hand to befriend and offer personal counselling sessions to individuals and families. Financial assistance is offered to those in need.

*Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Call for an appointment or drop by.*

Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre

- Blk. 26 Jalan Klinik
#01-42/52 Singapore 160026
Tel.: 274-2646

Another well known family service centre is the Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre. Established in 1969, this independent centre also has a full staff of administrators and social workers to assist the community at large. There are special programmes for teen students and youths at risk. Workers plan special events to reach out to youths. Other staff are also available to provide support for families in difficulty.

*Hours : Mon. - Fri. 2:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Saturdays 2:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.*

Counselling and Care Centre

- Blk. 536 Upper Cross Street
#05-241 Hong Lim Complex
Singapore 050536
Tel.: 536-6366

The Counselling and Care Centre (CCC) offers a wide range of counselling services. The centre is run by fully-trained professional counsellors who can counsel teens and parents on issues ranging from drug abuse to communication difficulties. The staff also conduct courses in counselling, parenting, marriage and interpersonal communication. CCC is committed to providing services to anyone regardless of race, religion or age. All clients are assured complete confidentiality.

Hours : Mon. - Fri. 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

By appointment only.

Fees for counselling are modest and based on a sliding scale.

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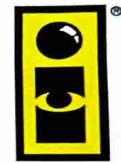
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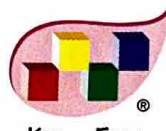
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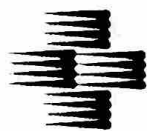
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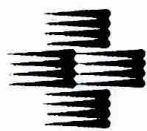


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