

When parents dial 999

Last week, Amos Yee, 16, was arrested and charged for his now infamous video. Reportedly, his mother reported him to the police. Why do some parents want the authorities to intervene?

Report by NG JUN SEN
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He thought his mother and grandmother blamed him for his father's death, and it made 12-year-old Kevin snap.

His father had just died from stomach cancer, and Kevin believed his family thought it was his video gaming addiction and truancy that had "worried (his father) to death".

One day, a furious Kevin picked up a kitchen knife and pointed it at his mother, threatening to kill her.

He had enough of the "accusations". The hour-long stand-off ended when his mother Lily sought help from the police and social services.

Their real names and ages are withheld to protect their identities as Kevin is a minor.

This was one of the worst youth-related cases that Ms Joy Lim, assistant director of Youth Service Centre (Toa Payoh), run by Singapore Children's Society, has encountered.

While cases of juvenile delinquency are common, it is not often that parents are forced to call the cops on their children.

Says Ms Lim: "It is a dilemma for parents with these kids. It is a difficult decision for them initially, but they come to realise that they have run out of options to control their children.

"Either they condone their behaviour and the children turn out to be bad people, or they decide to grapple with the root of the problem and get help from the authorities."

Known as a Beyond Parental Control (BPC) order, it is meant for children below 16 years of age who display behavioural problems at school or at home.

Desperate parents can file a BPC complaint against their child at the Juvenile Court as a last resort.

Last year, there were 66 BPC cases: 40 involved girls and 26 involved boys.

These can be cases of truancy, runaways, underage sex and, in rare cases, violence against the family, says Ms Lim, who has 13 years' experience in social work.

In Kevin's case, he was deemed to be beyond control and was placed in a boys' home under a statutory supervision order for two years.

This meant that he had to report to a supervision officer and was required to attend counselling and other programmes.

"During counselling, there was a lot of digging up of old wounds and sorting out the misunderstandings," says Ms Lim.

"(Kevin) learnt that his mother was distraught and bereaved, and (Lily) needed to know that her son used video games as a form of escape."

Even Kevin's grandmother realised that the words she had used were interpreted as accusations by Kevin.

Today, Kevin and Lily have put aside their differences and repaired their mother-son relationship.

"He actually told me that it was a huge relief for him, as counselling unearthed the root of the problem and allowed them to solve it together."

In January, Lianhe Wanbao ran a report on a mother who dragged her daughter, in her early 20s, to the police station to turn her in.

The mother had seen closed circuit television pictures of her daughter, which had been put up by the police, claiming that she is involved in loan shark harassment.

But what leads a parent to do so? Psychiatrist Lim Boon Leng believes it happens when "parents can no longer implement any form of discipline to control their children's severe conduct disorders".

Says Dr Lim: "It is a good thing to seek help early on. Through time, the child will come to understand that it is for his own good."

Each month, his private clinic receives about three cases of parents seeking counselling services.

EARLY COUNSELLING

Rather than let miscommunication and misunderstanding fester, counselling can help bring parent and child together through combined activities and programmes.

But both parent and child have to participate. Says Dr Lim: "When the child has conduct disorders, it cannot just be the child's problem."

However, parents have to be aware that filing a BPC complaint against their child can lead to an undesirable record in their files, says Ms Lim.

"It isn't a criminal record but if they are institutionalised in a home, there will be a record nonetheless."

Another qualm that desperate parents might face is that an arrest warrant may be issued against their child if the child fails to turn up for the court session after the complaint is filed.

Says Ms Lim: "An arrest warrant is a criminal record. The child can be so out of control that he or she just refuses to turn up."

Dr Lim also cautions that children could be "contaminated" by other BPC children if they are institutionalised.

"It is known that delinquents tend to hang out with other delinquents, and (the child) might end up picking up other bad behaviour. Hence, BPC should be considered as a temporary milieu for therapy to happen," he says.

The good news is that the number of BPC cases has been falling over the years, from 121 in 2008 to 66 last year.

Both Dr Lim and Ms Lim believe this can be attributed to the increasing number of pre-court programmes that prevent children from being labelled as BPC.

Two options exist: Parties can undergo four to eight sessions of pre-complaint counselling, or they can enrol in the six-month-long BeaconWorks programme.

This programme, according to the Ministry of Social and Family Development, "works on improving strained parent-child relationships".

If the child has committed a minor offence but is not charged, he or she can be placed in a six-month rehabilitative programme to help him or her stay away from crime.

Ms Lim adds: "It helps that there are other upstream initiatives from schools and family service centres that intervene before it reaches the BPC stage."

"A parent who files a complaint against his or her child can destroy that relationship forever. That is why BPC has to be the last resort."

Mum calls cops after finding knife in son's backpack

My 'good son' turned into a stranger

Reports by MAUREEN KOH
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For more than a month, Madam Chua Kee Ching agonised over what to do.

"It was the hardest decision of my life but reporting my son to the police was the only way I could make him come to his senses," the 52-year-old production worker says in Cantonese.

"He is my only child. I didn't want his future to be ruined if he ended up with a police record."

Her son, then 17, had gone on a rebellious path in secondary school.

She says: "Do you know, he actually scored an aggregate of 240 for his PSLE? My son went to a good school, but somehow, when he was in Secondary 2, something just went wrong."

And she is certain it had nothing to do with her being a single parent.

"My husband died (of cancer) when my boy was eight. If anything, I felt that his father's death made him grow up overnight," says Madam Chua with a wry smile.

"He'd help with the household chores when I was at work, and he kept promising me he'd study hard so we could both have a better life."

To reward her son for his good results, Madam Chua even saved up to take him to the Gold Coast in Australia.

But things started to go downhill after her son turned 14.

"Suddenly, he was an angry teenager. Nothing seemed to please him. He'd come home late at night, still in his school uniform and smelling of stale cigarettes," she recalls.

"He'd just ask me to get out of his room and then slam the door shut. Because he was at that age, I controlled my urge to scold him and tried to advise him instead. I had to keep my worries at bay."

Then one day, the school called to tell her that her 15-year-old would be suspended for

punching his physical education teacher.

Madam Chua says: "I was so shocked. I couldn't believe that my 'guai guai zai' (good son in Cantonese) had turned into a stranger."

During the two weeks of suspension, her son returned home only twice – the first time was to stuff some clothes into a paper bag. Five days later, he turned up to demand \$300 from her.

"At first I refused. I kept asking him what he needed it for, but he just said, 'You can give me the money or you can regret it later if you don't'," says Madam Chua.

In the end, she gave in. "Later on, when I thought back about the early days, I realised that it was I who had allowed my son to go further astray. I should have stood my ground," she says.

Her son stayed out of trouble when he returned to school and she thought "closing one eye" would help ease the tension.

POLY OVER JC

He did well enough to get into a junior college but insisted on going to a polytechnic.

"I was happy that he did well and I didn't mind. I thought he had got over that phase," she says.

Until one day when she was cleaning her son's room. She had picked up his backpack and had accidentally dropped it on the floor.

"I heard a clang so I opened it. To my horror, there was a long kitchen knife and the blade was wrapped with a piece of newspaper."

"My hands were shaking, my heart was beating so fast. I couldn't believe what I was holding in my hand."

Yet she did not confront her son. "I don't know why... I just put the knife back and went about my chores."

But the image of the knife kept replaying in her mind.

"Finally, I told my sister about it. And the first thing she said was, 'Call the police.'"

"I screamed at her, 'Are you mad? He is my son! How can I do that?' I was in denial then. I didn't want to face up to the fact that I had lost control of my only child."

Three weeks later, she confronted her son about the knife.

"It was his reaction that woke me up. Glaring at me, he warned me never to touch his things. He even told me to keep out of his room. 'Do that or live to regret for the rest of your life,' he told me."

"It was then I knew I had to save my own son."

Two days later, she approached her sister "for strength" and together, they walked into a neighbourhood police centre.

"When my son came home from school that afternoon, two policemen were waiting for him at the void deck," she says quietly.

For possessing an offensive weapon, he was arrested, convicted and sent to a reformative training centre for 18 months.

"Fortunately, he had not done anything seriously wrong, otherwise it would have been worse. But the first few months were terrible. He didn't even want to see me."

When he was finally released, he went to live with her sister and mother.

"By then, he didn't mind being in the same room as me but he refused to acknowledge me."

The good thing, she adds, was that he started going to church with his aunt.

"Then two days before Christmas, I returned home to find him at our doorstep with his belongings. We were a mess that day. He cried, apologised and asked that I forgive him."

"I knew my 'guai guai zai' had returned to his mother."

TNP PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Do you know, he actually scored an aggregate of 240 for his PSLE? My son went to a good school, but somehow, when he was in Secondary 2, something just went wrong.

— Madam Chua Kee Ching

Grateful that mum was 'hard-hearted'

It took nearly a year before he could forgive his mother for turning him in, says Madam Chua Kee Ching's son, who is now 22.

Madam Chua had reported him to the police for possession of a dangerous weapon, and he was sentenced to 18 months in a reformative training centre (RTC).

"I hated her. Every day in the RTC, I wished for possession of a dangerous weapon, and he was sentenced to 18 months in a reformative training centre (RTC)."

He is currently studying at a local polytechnic and says that most of his friends now do not know of his past.

"It's something that I am ashamed of," he says. "For as much I can, I hope to keep that part a secret."

Mr Tan is reluctant to give more details

on why he became rebellious, but lets on that he had joined a street gang when he was in Sec 2.

"I got to know them through a classmate's brother and the gang members became my good friends," he says.

"We'd hang out together and pick fights with anyone and everyone."

"I think it was a matter of trying to look cool. After a while, my studies suffered because it was really uncool to be smart."

DISAPPOINTED

But the knife he carried in his backpack, he insists, was not meant to be used at all.

"I can't justify why I did that but I also did not think I'd use it on anyone. When we fought, we used our fists, not a weapon."

Mr Tan says he initially felt "very hurt and disappointed" when his mother turned him in.

"She is my mother. I could not understand why she had to be so hard-hearted."

He even refused to see his mother while he was in RTC.

After his release, Mr Tan went to live with his aunt.

"It was only much later that my aunt told me about the agony my mother had gone through," she says.

It took Mr Tan another full year before he could finally speak to his mother "nicely".

He says: "But now, I am grateful that it is because of her that I have a new chance at life."