

BY JALELAH ABU BAKER

SHE was just 15 years old and her boyfriend was 18. With his monthly national service pay, he would buy her necklaces and teddy bears, and sex was a regular affair.

Social workers, counsellors and teachers told My Paper that they are seeing more cases of teenage girls having sex.

Typically, they start with boys their own age. Sometimes, as their material needs grow, they look for older men to buy them luxury goods.

The girls are usually either given a lot of freedom, or rebel and find their own freedom.

But while the girls may appear to know about sex and may be interested in it, their decisions often spring from a lack of maturity.

Young girls having sex. But why?

Iris Lin, 33, who heads the youth division at Fei Yue Community Services, said: "Even if they are physically well-developed, they may be very, very young cognitively, emotionally and socially."

Sex comes after being in a relationship with a man they believe loves them, she said, adding that they may not have a good grasp of the complex concept of love.

Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services, Singapore Children's Society, grouped these girls into three types: those who see men as a means to be pampered and to get luxury goods, those who are seeking a father figure, and those who are in it for the physical intimacy.

Relationships involving older men and vulnerable minors sometimes end up in court.

Earlier this month, a former teacher was jailed for sex-related offences with his student, who was then 15. The student had confided in him about her family and struggles.

Last month, a former journalist was jailed for having sex with a minor who was clinically depressed and bullied in school. Later, the girl tried to kill herself.

Those found guilty of sexual penetration of a minor under the age of 16 face up to 10 years in jail, a fine, or both. If the minor is below 14, the penalty is harsher.

Interestingly, their family backgrounds are not a major factor when it comes to girls becoming sexually active. Dr Balhetchet said that she has seen several such girls from close-knit families, and not just broken homes.

She put it down to their views towards sex.

Quoting a teenager she has counselled, she said: "It's no big deal."

In some cases, however, there is only a physical relationship between the minor and the man.

In a recent case, the court heard that a 15-year-old girl responded to an advertisement asking for a no-strings attached relationship, and insisted on having

sex with an initially reluctant 44-year-old man.

Counsellor Mani Joseph said that in such cases, the girls may be emotionally "hardened" after having several failed relationships, or could be looking for someone to give them a sense of security.

They usually come from families where there is little parental involvement, he said.

Also, times are changing.

Ms Lin said that the idea of relationships is planted very early nowadays, with children as young as 10 claiming to be in a relationship.

They even date the way adults do, with the boys taking the girls home at the end of the dates, she said. Later, sex becomes "no big deal".

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