



PHOTO: COURTESY OF PAULINE TEO

To make up for not allowing her 10-year-old daughter Chissy (left) to own a pet cat, corporate communications specialist Pauline Teo takes the child to a cat cafe in Boat Quay to get up close with the felines.



ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

Take time to say 'no'

Parents should explain to their teens the rationale for their decision to help them understand why some requests are denied



Kezia Toh

As teenagers start to grope for their identity, they will inevitably go to their parents with more requests for possessions and permission.

Not all of the requests will be possible to accede to. The trick to saying "no" to a teenager and have him toe the line is not to state it immediately, say experts and parents.

This applies to seemingly innocuous situations such as hanging out late to even obvious ones such as trying smoking, says housewife Tonia Goh, 47.

"Particularly for teenagers, conversation ceases the moment you blurt out a quick 'no'," says Ms Goh, who has four sons aged seven to 16. "By asking me for permission, they are letting me into their life and space, so I capitalise on that and avoid passing judgment so quickly."

Instead, she probes the reasons behind their requests – such as wishing to feel accepted within a social group – and discusses the pros and cons of each decision.

The word "no" tends to escape well-meaning parents' lips too quickly, say counsellors.

Ms Iris Lin, 33, who heads the youth division at Fei Yue Community Services, says: "You hear teenagers telling their friends: 'No need to ask, parents sure say no', then they go on to do what they like."

Particularly as the child is leaving the "structured cocoon" of primary school and moving on to secondary education, he enters a stage of building his self-identity and esteem.

"For teenagers, they no longer want to be known as 'Mr and Mrs so-and-so's child', but prefer to assert their own mind, heart and personality, and find a group of peers to which they belong," says Ms Lin.

Fitting in with social circles also brings accompanying troubles – parents say they often grapple with their teenager coveting things that his friends own, such as a pet.

Corporate communications specialist Pauline Teo's 13-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter have pleaded with her for a pet cat. But she has had to put her foot down as her daughter has a sensitive nose.

Instead, she offers a compromise – the family feed cats in their housing estate and visit cat cafes.

Comparing possessions with peers tends to start young, says marketing manager Matthew Fam, whose two daughters aged 10 and eight have asked for bags and shoes similar to their classmates'.

Mr Fam, 35, says he would check if the girls' existing belongings are in good shape. If not, he makes them wait anyway, provided the items are not falling apart.

"I would say, for example, that we can shop for bags after the examinations. This teaches them the value of delayed gratification, so they do not always get their wants fulfilled immediately," he says.

Teacher Norizah Jamari faced arguably more dicey issues in her family, such as her children asking to learn to ride a motorcycle and colouring their hair.

Ms Norizah, 47, has four children – a 24-year-old daughter and three sons aged 17 to 22.

When her sons, for example, wanted to dye their hair brown during the school holidays, she had to bite her tongue for her immediate reaction was "no". Instead, she asked them what their purpose was.

"First impressions count, so I asked them if they wanted to look like an Ah Beng," she says using the local Chinese dialect colloquialism for uncouth youth.

Her ploy worked – her sons did not colour their hair.

Mr Nur Syafiq Adi, her 22-year-old son, says of the incident: "I wanted to do something fun, but when my mother took the time to explain and reason with me why I could not do something, I thought I



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NORIZAH JAMARI

"By asking me for permission, they are letting me into their life and space, so I capitalise on that and avoid passing judgment so quickly."

HOUSEWIFE TONIA GOH (above) on how she takes time to discuss her children's requests instead of saying "no" on the spot. With them are her husband Tan Kay Kheng

When the children of teacher Norizah Jamari ask to do something she does not approve of, she finds out their purpose and counsels them. With her are her sons (background from far left) polytechnic student Nur Syafiq Adi, student Nur Syafi Adli and national serviceman Nur Syahmi Aliff, and (foreground, left) her police officer husband Samsuri Masuki.

should listen to her."

Far trickier was when he announced three years ago that he wanted to learn to ride motorcycle.

Ms Norizah says: "I worry for his safety, so I told him that it would pain me if he got hurt."

Psychologist Daniel Koh of Insights Mind Centre says when parents share their concerns, as well as explore consequences – how it would feel to lose a loved one and how the family would cope mentally and financially if the child got injured – the children can make a more informed choice.

Despite Ms Norizah's efforts to make her son change his mind about riding a motorcycle, he went ahead and got his licence anyway, using his earnings from a part-time job to pay for lessons.

While she still worries for his safety whenever he rides his motorcycle – which

he bought also with his money – and would prefer that he used another mode of transportation, she is at least pleased that his interest was not a passing whim.

"He really showed his responsibility and resilience," she says.

Moreover, his act of independently striving towards the goal of obtaining a licence has reassured her that he would not be a reckless rider.

Other minefields for teenage drama include sleepovers and boy-girl relationships.

Parents such as senior administrative assistant Lestrine Tan, 49, discourages her 16-year-old son from both. Her rule: He is not allowed to stay overnight elsewhere. Instead, she offers to pick him up wherever he is, even as late as midnight.

A relationship is also not encouraged, she says. "I tell him he should be able to feed and look after himself before he looks

after someone."

Experts are divided on how parents should handle these two areas, and counsel a measured approach.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, senior director of youth services at the Singapore Children's Society, suggests parents could invite their children to have the sleepover with friends at their home first. This is an opportunity for parents to get comfortable with their teens' social circle before assessing if they are ready for sleepovers elsewhere.

For boy-girl relationships, Dr Balhetchet advises parents avoid a direct no. "Parents could ask their teen if he is ready to be so emotionally linked to a person, pay for flowers and gifts, and spend all festivals and birthdays with that person."

Parents could even draw on the experience of courtship with their spouse to illustrate their point, and instead encourage their child to have non-romantic friendships with the opposite sex during his teenage years.

Explaining the rationale behind each decision is important. While parents may get their way with saying no "because I say so" to younger children, this approach does not work for teenagers, says family therapist Benny Bong.

"Such an authoritarian response may not be adequate. An explanation is helpful to teach your child what behaviour is not permitted and why not," he says.

But if the final answer is "no", stick to your guns, says Fei Yue's Ms Lin. "Some parents get guilty because it breaks their heart that their teen has slammed the door in anger or is sulking, so they say no once or twice, then give in," she says.

Ultimately, saying "no" preps your teenager for the workforce where he would likely hear more people saying "no" to him than "yes", says Dr Balhetchet.

She adds: "It is the goal of parenting for your children to learn the reality of the world by familiarising them with the word 'no'. From there, they learn the value of resilience."

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How hard is it for you to say "no" to your child? E-mail suntimes@sph.com.sg