

'Kids, you've got a friend in me'

63-year-old has been volunteer with kids' helpline for 28 years

By PRISCILLA GOY

CHILDREN sometimes do not want advice or suggestions, but just want someone to listen.

"Be approachable and make time to hear them out no matter how small you think the issue is", so goes the tip from Mrs Sarasa Seshadri, whose calm voice is usually the one children hear when they call the Tinkle Friend helpline.

The 63-year-old has been offering a listening ear to lonely and distressed children for 28 years, as a volunteer with the helpline set up in 1984 by the Singapore Children's Society, which last month launched Tinkle Friend Online.

The helpline's longest-serving volunteer, Mrs Seshadri goes twice a week on average to the society's Student Service Hub in Bukit Merah to take calls, with up to three staff and volunteers.

Over nearly three decades, she has heard how problems faced by children have changed.

Latchkey children who pick up the phone out of boredom used to form a bigger proportion of callers, she said.

But over the years, more have been calling over academic stress. Some even ask for help with homework, such as spelling and maths.

"For simple things, we help them. But otherwise, we don't, and they understand," she said.

Boy-girl relationship issues are among the most challenging topics in her chats with children, she said. "When they go deep into a relationship, and they ask you if it's right or wrong to do something, we can't say it's right, but we can't say it's wrong either..."

"We ask them, 'If it's right, why do you think it's right? The fact that you're asking me a question suggests you have doubt'."

Instead of telling children what to do, she finds out more and lets them decide. She also checks if they have talked about



Mrs Sarasa Seshadri enjoys talking to children as she finds them innocent and fun to talk to. She is the Tinkle Friend helpline's longest-serving volunteer. PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

the issue to other adults they are close to.

Then there are those who call, hurl vulgarities, then hang up.

"Some of them are frustrated and they have nobody at home to shout at... For those who hold the line, we tell them, 'I talk to you nicely, you talk to me nicely'."

There are rewarding parts of her job, too. One of Mrs Seshadri's most memorable conversations was with a boy who admitted he was addicted to computer games.

"It's very difficult for children to admit that they have a problem... I liked this boy because he knew he had a problem and wanted to correct it. That's the first stage towards (progress)."

She has also received invitations to callers' birthday parties, which she politely declines.

Mrs Seshadri, who has two children and two grandchildren aged 10 and 13, became a Tinkle Friend after seeing a newspaper advertisement. She was a housewife then and had more free time as her children were in

secondary school.

Her daughter, now 41, lives in the United States and works as a pre-school teacher. Mrs Seshadri lives with her lawyer son and her husband, a 73-year-old management consultant.

Said son Jayapal Seshadri, 43: "She's always loved kids... When we meet friends or relatives, she gets along with kids very well, and they like talking to her, too."

A few years after volunteering, she became a pre-school teacher for 15 years before retiring.

Mrs Seshadri likes talking to children as "they're innocent, they're fun to talk to".

It is fulfilling when some young callers tell her: "When I grow up, I also want to be a Tinkle Friend."

She said the helpline's adults tell the children: "It's Tinkle Friend. It's not that we're big and you're small. We're friends, and you can talk to us about anything."

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The Tinkle Friend chat service is available at 1800-274-4788, or online at www.tinklefriend.com