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"My teen won't go to school!" How to manage your child's absenteeism

Christine Leow // August 14, 2020, 12:17 am

Deena (not her real name) was one of the top scorers in her primary school. When she did well enough in her PSLE to make it to a brand-name secondary school, her parents were overjoyed.

Six months in, however, she began making excuses for not going for classes.



Parent-teacher meetings
and sessions with the
school counsellor
produced anger, tears,
and then, silence.

“Some mornings, she just couldn’t be woken up for school no matter how hard we tried,” said her mother who didn’t want to be named.

When she did go, she was listless and disengaged. School work got ignored and her marks plunged.

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By the time she was in Secondary Two, Deena had given up all pretences. She refused to go to school entirely.

In desperation, her parents got her into a neighbourhood school hoping that a change in environment would help. It didn’t. Eventually, they found her a place in a private school.

It has been a year. Deena still hardly goes to school.

Said her mother: “She’s in her room all day either on her laptop or her handphone. If we tell her to go to school, she won’t talk to us for days. So I’ve stopped asking. I’m afraid she’s depressed.”

There are many reasons why students like Deena skip school and eventually drop out. But school stress can play a part. In the upcoming episode of *Salt&Light Family Night* on Tuesday, August 18, school and exam stress is the topic of discussion. (See the sidebar below for registration details.)

Meanwhile, *Salt&Light* spoke to a counsellor, an educator and a youth worker for advice on what parents can do if their teen chooses to turn his or her back on school.

1. Don't panic

The first thing Bettina Yeap, 41, Senior Counsellor at [Care Corner Singapore's](#) Mental Health Department, Insight, wants parents to know is: Don't panic.



“Ask yourself: ‘What is my role and responsibility as a parent? Is it school or my relationship with my child?’”

“When you panic, you will push and coerce. When you are anxious and upset because your kid is not doing what you want them to do, it creates a lot of tension and rational decisions become harder to make.

“Instead, ask yourself, ‘What is my role and responsibility as a parent? What is my KPI? Is it school or my relationship with my child?’”

Richard Lim, 62, is a retired Ministry of Education (MOE) principal who will be one of the guests on *Salt&Light Family Night's* upcoming episode on exam stress. He was the principal of Henry Park Primary School, Anglo-Chinese School (Primary) and Si Ling Primary School.

Mr Lim said one of the goals parents can aim towards is focusing on their child’s character rather than academic achievements.

“Many parents do things the other way around. They give their children tuition from kindergarten, but miss talking about character. They should start with character right from the start.”

Ms Yeap added: “Your child has choices and a mind of his own that may go against your own values.” Keeping calm helps you to have perspective on “what you can and cannot control”.

2. Find out why

Your efforts may be met with stony silence, tearful tantrums or a nonchalant “I don’t know”.

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**“Provide them with
options to understand
themselves.”**


But that may be because “they may genuinely not know why themselves”, said Ms Yeap. “Or they may not know how to explain it to you. So, provide them with scaffolds to understand themselves.”

One scaffold is to adopt a “posture of curiosity and put yourself in your child’s shoes”. Provide them with options to understand themselves instead of expecting them to answer open-ended questions.

“For example, you could ask them, ‘Is this the reason? Or is it this?’ If there is a response to one of the guesses, help them to articulate it. Reflect their words back to them, ‘I notice you said this. I’m wondering what happened?’”

3. Persist even when they resist

If your child still refuses to talk to you, don’t give up. It may take more than one conversation.



**Messaging your child can
be just as effective for
this digital generation.
The key is to “just try and
connect”.**

“Continue to create a safe place for your child to talk,” said Ms Yeap.

Added Lok Liang Xun, 31, a manager with Care Corner Singapore’s Youth Services: “Youths want someone to listen to them, not rush to give them advice.

“So avoid dispensing advice, judging, making comparisons, or saying, ‘I told you so.’ Talk instead about the issue at hand.”

Communication need not be face-to-face, added Ms Yeap. Messaging your child can be just as effective, particularly for this digital generation.

The key is simply to “just try and connect”.

4. Get support

Mr Lim believes getting support from all the people in the teen’s life can help, too. This includes getting these people to talk and listen to your teen, especially when he or she won’t talk to you.

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“Who are the significant people in your child’s life? Work with them.”

“Work with the school. Talk to the counsellor and the form teacher. Who are the significant people in your child’s life? Is there a certain teacher whom your child likes? Work with them.

“Sometimes, the teen can even build such a good rapport with the counsellor that the counsellor can bring them back to school.”

Added Ms Yeap: “It can even be an adult figure in other areas of the teen’s life. It could be a sports coach, a mentor at church – someone your child can connect with.”

5. Play to your teen’s interests

Some youths refuse to go to school because they find school meaningless.

“We must not always think that there is only one way to go – polytechnic or junior college then on to university,” said Mr Lim.

“Our education system has changed so much that there is no longer just one track. We have moved from the efficiency era and the survival era to the ability-driven era.

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“Encourage them in what they are good at. When they are interested in something, they will blossom.”

“So, look at your child’s abilities and encourage them in what they are good at. When they are interested in something, they will blossom.”

This may mean finding something in school that your teen enjoys, such as a co-curricular activity.

Added Mr Lok: “There are some schools we work with that have allowed students to attend school for specific programmes instead of lessons. Through that, they help the child to see a purpose for coming to school.

“Learning then takes place through an alternative method. Then, slowly, they transit them back to school.”

The bottom line – parents need to know they are not alone; there are others who can journey alongside them.

6. Develop a God perspective

Perspective counts for a lot, for instance in the case of teens who fail to enter the secondary school of their choice and then give up on school entirely, said Mr Lim.

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“Show them love when
you pray with them.”

“As a principal, I get moved to different schools. To me, it’s not MOE who decides but God deciding where I should go.

“So, as parents, they can help their child see that this is the place God has placed them. It will make it much easier for the child to adjust to the new school.”

When there is the opportunity, pray with them.

“When you have some time with them, don’t scold them. Show them love by praying with them,” Mr Lim added.

7. Build the relationship

All who spoke to *Salt&Light* highlighted that the strategies need to take place within a strong parent-child relationship.

“Way before the child faces stress, be sure to establish rapport and provide your children with platforms to share their stressors,” said Ms Yeap.

“Raising a child is like flying a kite. You need to know how to let go, how to pull back.”

“Intentionally talk about deeper issues and don’t be afraid to be vulnerable in front of your children. Often our children see our anger but they don’t see our pain, sadness and broken-heartedness.

“The response to anger is to stay away. The response to sadness and pain is often to draw closer. So, develop a culture where you can talk about struggles.”

And if such a relationship had not been established before, Mr Lim maintained that it is never too late to start.

“Spend time with them now. Talk to them. Don’t give up.

“Raising a child is like flying a kite. You need to know how to let go and how to pull back so the kite can fly high.

“Similarly, parents need to learn when to be firm and when to let go.”

Salt&Light Family Night: Help! My kid's exams are stressing me out

Zoom talk show *Salt&Light Family Night* takes on another topic close to the hearts of families – school and exam stress and its impact on parents and