

Take him!



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Gaunt and soft-spoken, with earnest eyes framed in black-rimmed glasses, 15-year-old Faisal (name changed) looks more gangly geek than teen terror.

But to his parents, the Secondary 4 Express stream student has committed a major transgression: He spends up to eight hours daily hooked to the computer.

After a falling out with his father over his computer use and argumentative ways in March, his 44-year-old mother dragged the boy not to a counsellor, but to court.

She applied for a Beyond Parental Control (BPC) order, which can lead to a child being sent away to an institution for up to three years.

The tool is usually reserved for serial runaways, violent teen terrors and those experimenting with sex, crime or drugs.

But over the past few years, more parents have been pleading with the courts to push their kids into State-approved homes for the most ridiculous of reasons, says Dr Carol Balhetchet of the Singapore Children's Society. It screens BPC applications to make sure only the deserving ones wind up in court.

Some come because their child won't do his or her homework, others because the child comes back at 6.30pm instead of 2pm.

The numbers speak for themselves. In 2002, around 35 per cent of all BPC applications resulted in a court order. By last year, this number had fallen to 24 per cent of all applications, or less than one in four.

BPC applications, meanwhile, hit their highest note in seven years, at 676.

In the first four months of this year, there were a further 296 applications. Only about 18 per cent of these resulted in a BPC order. The rest were either dismissed, or the children sent for counselling.

Interestingly, the number of applications from divorced, widowed or single parents has dropped significantly in recent years.

Housewife mothers form the largest number of complainants and they sometimes haul in kids as young as seven.

In the wake of the rise in frivolous applications, counsellors say that changes in the law to ensure compulsory counselling for parents – or possibly a fine for their kids' transgressions – could help make disciplining a child once more the prerogative of mums and dads, rather than the State.

The Children and Young Persons Act (CYPA), which governs the BPC process, is being reviewed.

Outsourced parenthood

Unfortunately, too many parents are trying to "farm out their parental responsibilities to the State", notes Dr Balhetchet, director for youth services at the Children's Society. A trained counsellor, she did her PhD thesis in juvenile

delinquency.

"Children who are dragged to the court by parents for a trivial reason see it as an emotional betrayal, which could hurt their relationship even more," she says.

But many parents beg to differ. In Faisal's case, his mother says that she was worried about the boy's deteriorating relationship with his sales executive Dad. The duo had come to blows once.

She concedes that, most of the time, Faisal finishes his homework before logging on. In fact, their middle child's "computer addiction" may be the result of overly strict parental control. The boy was, for example, not allowed to go out with friends for fear that he may develop "bad habits".

"His father does not like him on the computer so much. He would not listen to us, so we wanted the court to send him away," says Faisal's mother, a housewife who wanted to be known only as Madam Siti.

That threat is becoming increasingly common, says Dr Balhetchet: "Parents often use the BPC order to frighten a child into obedience."

Some months ago, a well-groomed *tai tai*, with a designer handbag and timid husband in tow, dragged her recalcitrant 14-year-old daughter in to apply for a BPC order. The reason? The girl had got herself a tattoo and skipped a few classes.

"Just by the way she spoke to us, we could make out that she was someone who always nagged rather than listened," Dr Balhetchet says.

"The girl was sullen and her mother kept frightening her by saying she had the power to send her to the Girls' Home."

Thanks to an efficient system of sifting the grain from the chaff, most of such cases are dismissed at the pre-screening stage.

Parents and children also have the option of attending counselling sessions ranging from a month to six months.

But these options, which are not compulsory, are rarely taken up.

Among the counselling options available is Beaconworks, a free service run by the Children's Society, which seeks to counsel both parents and children.

Faisal, Madam Siti and her husband are now on the programme, which involves weekly sessions for the child for up to six months. Parents are required to turn up for counselling at least once a month.

But out of the 676 parents who applied for BPC orders last year, only 44 agreed to join Beaconworks.

In view of this reluctance on the part of parents to acknowledge that they, too, may need professional help, Dr Balhetchet suggests that the CYPA be amended to exert a tighter rein on parents.

One way to deter frivolous com-



More parents are seeking to hand unruly kids over to the State, some even for reasons such as "My child won't do his homework" or "He comes back at 6.30pm instead of 2pm". What's up with parents? Isn't disciplining a child the job of mums and dads, rather than the State?

He's beyond control

plaints is to mandate counselling for parents too. Currently, this is optional, except in cases where the judge issues a mandatory counselling order.

Another way is to fine parents of delinquent children who fail to fulfil their parental responsibility.

In Britain, parents of delinquent children who are unwilling to try to improve their child's behaviour can face a fine of up to £1,000 (\$2,670).

Singapore's CYPA already has a clause that can lead to parents being fined up to \$2,000 for failing to comply with any court order pertaining to BPC cases. But there is nothing to deter parents from approaching the court with frivolous applications.

Refundable Baby Bonus?

Other programmes for delinquent kids are seeing an eager bevy of par-

ents who want to foist their kids on the State. Introduced in 1997, the six-month Guidance Programme aims to rehabilitate first-time offenders involved in petty crimes, such as shoplifting, by counselling them, rather than charging them in court.

Parents, too, are required to attend some of the sessions, but in about 15 per cent of the cases, they don't turn up even once, points out community welfare officer Winston Seah from the Care Corner Family Service Centre, Admiralty.

"These parents see the Guidance Programme as punishment for their children and not them, and so see no reason to attend," says Mr Seah, who regularly counsels young offenders on the Guidance Programme.

There is not much that officers like him can do if the parents don't turn up.

This needs to change, says Ms Melissa Lim, centre director of the Students Care Service at Yishun, who also counsels such youth.

"If a child fails to turn up for counselling, we can close the case unsuccessfully and return him to the courts. But if parents don't turn up, there is not much we can do. Perhaps that is one area the CYPA review can look into," she says.

Member of Parliament and well-known family lawyer Ellen Lee suggests that the new CYPA could include clauses that make errant parents return their Baby Bonus or tax incentives.

The trouble, says family lawyer Veronica Joseph, is that the law right now is "too broad". The CYPA does not really stipulate what behaviour constitutes "beyond parental control".

"It would be good if, during the review, the lawmakers stipulate some situations that could constitute BPC," she says.

Mandatory counselling, too, would help. "If parents know they must commit their time to these sessions, they will think twice before lodging frivolous applications."

Other areas of the law could also do with some tweaking, she adds.

A few years ago, Ms Joseph appeared in a case where the grandparents sought custody of a teenager. The parents were estranged and facing allegations of child abuse.

Although the grandparents were willing to look after him and the teenager himself wanted to live with them, he was sent to a "cold institution" because his mother wanted it, said Ms Joseph.

She adds: "He had family who were ready, able and willing to take him in. This was another instance of parents pushing their kids over to the State."

Laws that prioritise family-arranged care rather than institutional care should be encouraged, she says.

But some experts, like National University of Singapore law don Chan Wing Cheong, who specialises in child-related laws, say this trend of overzealous parents trying to thrust their kids onto the State is not necessarily a bad thing.

"More parents turning up at the courts is a cry for help. We should look at how to help them best rather than fine them," he says.

Indeed, services such as the Children's Society's Beaconworks counselling programme can help cement fractured parent-child relationships, as Faisal and his parents are learning.

Counselling sessions have shown that her husband's quick temper played a big role in her son's rebellion. "My father does not scold me as much now," says a beaming Faisal. "I can even go out to play football with my friends on weekends."

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HOW TO TELL

Your child could need a Beyond Parental Control (BPC) order if he:

- Is a serial runaway, staying away from home for a day or more
- Behaves violently, beating up classmates or family members
- Regularly plays truant from school and returns home late at night
- Regularly gets into fights at school or is rude to teachers

- Has begun smoking, drinking, glue sniffing or experimenting with drugs or sex
- Is beginning to get involved in gangs
- Faces a moral hazard. Recently, there was a case of a young girl who thought her older sister's sex life involving multiple partners was "glamorous" and wanted to emulate it.

'She used to be such a sweet girl...It's heartbreaking'

In primary school, little Latha (not her real name) was a cheerful, friendly and helpful girl, often pleading with her mum to buy books for friends from poorer families.

An only child, born when her mum was in her late 30s and her dad well over 40, she was the apple of her parents' eye.

But some time in secondary school, she became quieter and more sullen.

At 13, she began skipping class and hanging out with men twice her age. She met them in Tamil classes which were held outside her school.

Soon, she began failing her exams and was downgraded from the Express to the Normal stream. She stayed out late without informing her parents where she was.

And then, she went out on New Year's

Eve last year – and never came home that night. She was 14.

"We were up the whole night, sick with worry," recounts her mother, a 52-year-old laboratory assistant. She turned up at 11am on New Year's Day.

Less than a month later, she disappeared again – this time for two days. "I was afraid for her safety. She could have been drugged and raped," says her mother. The worried woman and her 59-year-old chef husband applied to the Juvenile Court for a Beyond Parental Control (BPC) order.

The court heard the case, issued an 8pm curfew order, placed Latha in the care of a probation officer and asked the family to return in a week's time.

On the day of the court hearing, the seri-

Timely, worthy BPC order

"Her stay in the Girls' Home has made her even more resentful. But it's safer than her being on the streets."

Mother of a 15-year-old girl who, at 13, began skipping classes and hanging out with men twice her age. When the teen started staying away from home, her parents applied for a Beyond Parental Control order.

al runaway disappeared again. She was missing for three days before her father found her loitering around Little India.

This time, the court ordered her to be remanded for a month at the Singapore Girls' Home, a state-run facility for delinquent children.

Upon her release last month, Latha behaved for two weeks – before failing to turn up for a mandatory counselling session with her probation officer late last month. She was promptly ordered back to the Girls' Home.

"Her stay in the Girls' Home has made her even more resentful," laments her mother. "But it's safer than her being on the streets."

Latha's case, says Dr Carol Balhetchet of

the Singapore Children's Society, is a good example of a timely and worthy sought BPC order. Their daughter had run away too often, almost dropped out of school and was brazen about flouting court orders. "Her parents clearly need the State's help."

The mother, however, has been agonising over what went wrong. "She used to be such a sweet girl. She just mixed around with the wrong company," she says, referring to her daughter's older boyfriends, most of whom are school dropouts.

"If we had other children, we would not have been so upset," she says, choking back tears.

"But she is all we have – and it's heartbreaking."

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