

**The Lifestyle And Values Of Young People In Singapore,
And The Way They Relate To The Family, Peer Groups;
And Media Exposure**

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Guide

The lifestyle and values of young people in Singapore, and the way they relate to the family, peer groups; and media exposure

Teens, a fortnightly page featuring articles aimed at teenagers, was started in Section Two of The Straits Times in mid-1985. From early 1986, we decided to test response from teenagers by inviting them to write in.

Unsure of young readers' response, we posed several questions on Jan 29, 1986, such as: "How can you have fun on a Saturday afternoon on a budget of \$3 a person? Tell us about your favourite place for an outing, what you do and how you enjoy yourself."

A second question was about physical appearance and its importance to teenagers. Third, we asked what teens look for in a friend and, finally, their idea of a happy home life and how they find time to be close with their parents if the parents are both working.

Despite these questions, which covered a large area of teenage life, the response was lukewarm: 30 letters in all on looks, friendship and home life.

Many who wrote said it was not merely because of the prize money (at that time, of S\$40 or about US\$19) that they had responded. But "because there is an urge in me to express my feelings and opinions about life," one wrote. Others reiterated that they had been waiting for a column like this as an outlet.

From the beginning, we had response from readers past their teens. A 20-year-old described her adolescence as "lost and wasted teen years. Looking back, I cannot help but wish more attention had been given to us teenagers back then." This was echoed in at least 20 or 30 other letters since then from those in their 20s who wished there had been a Teens column when they were going through what they described as difficult years -- when they wanted to find out how others felt, and when they had many questions nobody helped them to think out.

"Many a time, our questions never find answers," wrote Tammy, 15, who responded in January last year. She added: "Worse still, parents, peers, the world around us drown us with their values, their ideas, adding pressure. Most teenagers suddenly begin quarrelling with their parents who want nothing but the very best. Because of the vast difference in ideas, the once loving parent is now an antagonist. Who's responsible for this? The selfish teenager or the over-demanding parent? I am proud to be a teenager. If only you try to understand us, try to weigh our load, then maybe life would be made much easier. Teenagers are people too."

Letters from eight girls indicated they did not tell their parents. They told their friends, and sometimes only their boyfriends.

The only boy, 19, who wrote about his girlfriend, said: "She panicked, so did I. We talked about abortion for a while. But, finally, I refused her permission to do so. I was at a loss for words. I could not reassure her with promises, nor could I convince her not to kill our child. True, I was selfish and never got to see her position but it was my own flesh and blood and I had half the right to decide. She went for an abortion. My child was no more. After a few months she left me. I was crushed by the incident. I loved her very much but it is not easy to forgive. We boys are not that bad. Our hearts are made of flesh too."

I usually do not comment on a writer's attitude or action, because I think it is important not to give young people who write the feeling they are being condemned or judged. Besides, there are factors which may have influenced their behaviour and attitude of which the reader is not aware.

The letter format and the approach, of publishing winning letters and extracts, works because each letter is short and spontaneous. The writers understand their letters need to be cut, edited and grammar corrected. I choose letters reflecting a variety of views and experiences. The thoughts of the writers may be muddled, even contradictory. But it is through juxtaposition of opinions and ideas of the teenagers, that I hope readers begin to question their attitudes, ideas, values, prejudices. What I hope happens (which I think does take place in class in some schools, where a teacher can guide and comment) is that teens learn to think about various topics for themselves and draw some conclusions, without values and morals being dictated to them.

This may be a controversial approach at a time when adults complain too many things are no longer regarded as right nor wrong, and so many problematic decisions which used to be regarded as clearly right or wrong are now left to individual decision. But I feel (and this is backed by my observation as a mother and an ex-teacher) values are not lasting nor real unless they are internalised by a young person and accepted because he is fully convinced about them.

Letters related to school and exams show teens find the secondary school system a drastic change from primary school -- at secondary school level, it becomes impossible to get grades of 100 per cent or even 90 per cent, which intelligent pupils may be used to from primary school.

On one hand, some teens struggle to obtain passes. On the other, there are those who not happy with A2s (second-level distinctions) because they wanted A1s. What also emerges is that mothers put more pressure on children and teenagers to study, a fact discovered in research in 1985 by an educationist Dr Elwyn Thomas. Dr Thomas's finding was reflected in some of the letters.

But fathers, too, can be unkind. One child who failed wrote that his father had commented to him: "You are hopeless." In some families, poor grades are punished with caning, but this occurs more in pre-teens and early teens.

A doctor in his late 30s was so moved when he read the letters of the teenagers on exam results (it reminded him of his own student days) that he wrote me a letter which he decided later not to post.

One attempt on my part to present the girls' view on premarital sex (they were all 19 and against it) backfired, I think, because it was one-sided, giving the impression that teens do not want to be told what to do. They want to be given two sides, or as many facets, of a question, then they want to be able to decide for themselves, with some guidance which they ask for.

When the Teens page printed letters on pre-marital sex, we presented the views of writers who were not against pre-marital sex, on condition their full name, telephone numbers and addresses were given. Anonymous letters are not entertained, and we hardly get these nowadays. In 99 per cent of letters, the telephone numbers are given, though I am occasionally given strict instructions not to call them. Very few teenagers do not have a telephone in the home. A few even have their own line.

Gauging from letters, 90 per cent of them are against pre-marital sex, and abortion.

When we asked about abortion, a 19-year-old girl who had gone through it wrote: "I felt so lucky because he really took care of me that painful moment when I had to do something against my wishes. He even warmed up a bottle of essence of chicken for me..."

reaction was best summarised by the reader who asked: "A three-dollar outing. Are you kidding?" A hamburger (the cheapest) and drink (the smallest) cost a total of S\$2. At a food centre, fried noodles costs S\$1.50 and ice kachang (ice shavings with sweetmeat, like the halo-halo of the Philippines) cost 50 cents.

Most teenagers, however, do not have to spend a lot on transport because their monthly S\$15-bus passes can be used for travel on the public bus system at any time. On the other extreme, a teenager on a date may need to spend as much as S\$30 on taxi fare to take his date home. The last bus gets to the terminal by midnight. My son, 18, takes his girl friend home by taxi, then takes the last bus home. When he told me, my first reaction was annoyance, until I realised this is how I would want a young man to take care of my daughter.

There are teens who know simple ways of entertaining themselves, such as exploring the island, or bicycling. A number (nobody has attempted to ascertain what proportion of the teens population) sit around in various parts of shopping centres to chat and watch people during weekends.

A question on the recession in Singapore and how the pocket money of teens had been affected showed teens do accept and adapt to a cut in their allowances, which can range from about S\$200 a month to less than S\$1 (about 12 bahts or US 45 cents) a day.

In the second month after we started the letter format last year, a breakthrough in reaching out to more readers and getting them to respond came when we asked a question on how teens react to disappointing exam results. This was just after the release of the O-level and A-level results. Their 180 letters showed parents regard study and doing well academically as the main duty of teens.

This priority given to studies was again reflected in their answers to a mother who accused teens of having a "give-me-give-me!" mentality -- of regarding pocket money and outings as an unquestioned right. Some of the 120 teenagers who wrote to defend themselves argued they deserve a break -- at fast-food restaurants, skating rinks, shopping centres and other places -- using pocket money given by their parents because they spend so much time, from Monday to Friday, studying.

Many young people regard the first move as not just a step towards friendship, but romance. Such fantasy makes the teenager more self-conscious, anxious to create a good impression and so more sensitive to negative response.

This same short-circuiting in relationships is reflected in 310 letters on dating. These show many young people fail to understand that dating is simply going out together to enjoy each other's company, to learn social graces and about people. Many teens don't see dating as a natural process towards making friends. At least one in eight who wrote see dating as leading to going steady -- by the second date.

Many young people meet their dates outside the home -- a cinema, shopping centre, near a fast-food restaurant. A pity because a boy fetching a girl from her home makes discussion of the outing something the family can share and enables parents to keep in touch with their children's friends. As one teen notes: "I think it is a joy for parents to know their children's friends."

One possible reason why teens meet outside their homes is the convenience of central meeting points. Another is, some parents do not know what their children are doing, and forbid them to go out with the opposite sex. And finally, some letters indicate, some parents would not welcome their children's friends at home -- let alone friends of the opposite sex.

When asked whether their parents know where they go, with whom they are and when they will be back, 25 per cent of writers said parents do not know. Some teenagers go out without telling their parents. Some say they are going to the library, or to school for extra-curricular activities (when they are actually going out with their friends).

Others do not have to tell their parents as long as they get home before their working parents. In at least two cases, where the father did not allow the girl aged about 16 or 17 to go out, the mothers helped out, conspiring with their daughters to enable them to attend parties in the homes of their friends.

On the other extreme, 18- and 19-year-olds have been caned by their mothers for going out or coming home late. One was caned after she was caught getting a goodnight kiss from her date.

When we asked teens whether they could have a good time without spending more than \$3, and to give us some idea of how they spend their time, the general

I have met Tammy. She is pretty, vivacious, intelligent, unspoilt (to me) and very likeable. For her pre-university (the equivalent of American Grade 11 and 12), she opted to go to a junior college, more than 12 miles from her home.

Her mother drives her there every morning (something I would not do for my own daughter, or son -- certainly not every day). Her parents trust her and allow her to mix with boys. She is well-adjusted and, in many ways, more fortunate than most other teenagers I have met.

Their letters show that teen readers are concerned about boy-girl relationship. In response to the January 29, 1986, question on falling in love, infatuations and crushes, 130 teens wrote. Since then, variations of questions on relationships with the opposite sex and getting to know each other have attracted the largest number of letters -- between 200 and 420 each time.

Letters received vary from 50 to 450 each week. Up to August 13 1987, the largest number was 450 letters in response to the topic of teachers who have inspired young people or teachers best forgotten.

But back to what in teen language is called boy-girl relationship or simply BGR. About eight months ago, we asked: "Who makes the first move, guy or girl? Is it all right for the girl to make the first move?" 420 young people wrote in. One in three letters was from a boy, a departure from the usual ratio which varies from 1:6 to 1:4 (boys:girls).

When the boys said it was not easy for them to make the first move, their letters were eye-openers to the girls who often did not realise that boys too are shy. To encourage the boys (whom I wish would write more often), I printed their letters first, and indicated the girls' letters would be printed the following week. In the interim, about 30 more teens wrote, excited about the topic of who should make the first move, though it was long past the closing date and it was too late to consider their letters for publication.

In all the letters, teens expressed fear of being ridiculed and rejected. The girls were afraid they would be branded "cheap". Because teens discuss their interest in a peer of the opposite sex with their own gang, making the first move becomes more complicated. A boy loses face with his gang if a girl rebuffs him.

I get complaints from a handful of parents -- a few of whom will not give their names -- that I dwell too much on boy-girl relationships, when young people should be concentrating their energy on studies. In the same vein, one mother who made this comment said: "I feel so sorry for my unmarried female friends in their 30s. Perhaps, you should start a column that would help them learn how to mix." This seems to be very contradictory. Teenagers who have not been given a chance to regard the opposite sex as ordinary human beings with whom they can relate to as friends, may become gauche and awkward adults.

From letters on the topic of part-time jobs, I find the bulk of teenagers earn extra money by giving private tuition, a fact backed by my conversations with National University of Singapore undergraduates and with their lecturers who note that they earn anything from S\$40 to S\$800 from private tuition alone. Pre-university students also give private tuition. More girls than boys go into temporary teaching jobs. I get the impression, too (though I cannot back it with statistics) that more girls than boys give private tuition.

When we asked teens to describe their most embarrassing moments, a few teachers used the letters published in the column to help their students talk about their own embarrassing moments which they had bottled up. This topic, I was told, acted as a catharsis for teens. After talking about their own experiences, they felt better.

From the 120 letters on being trapped in a lift, teenagers do a lot of daydreaming, about Prince Charming or a beautiful girl. Only one girl wanted to be stuck in a lift with her mother, and even then she wanted to know about her parents' courtship.

I found it is interesting, too, that Rambo, machine guns, and Falcon Crest featured in the night dreams of three teenagers.

The topic on housework show some teens do not help out in the home at all. This was backed by a mother who wrote soon after publication of the topic. Of those who do housework, a significant number complained their mothers were partial to brothers who often got away with doing nothing. Sometimes, the girls even had to wash their brothers' school sneakers. "I was brought up with the message 'girls and not boys do household chores' and my brother claims it's not boys' work. And my mum asks me to help her," lamented a 19-year-old.

This preference, or favouritism, for boys is also reflected in some of the letters on sibling rivalry, indicating that some boys, especially younger ones, get away with a lot of bullying of older sisters.

A 14-year girl wrote: "I love my younger brothers but they don't seem to understand my love. Dad bought three durians when I was out camping. Imagine it, rich, yellow, soft flesh and the taste....When I got home, I found one succulent seed in the refrigerator. I could almost taste it. My youngest brother also wanted it. Without hesitation Mum gave it to him. 'Just one, Mum, the only one and yet, you still give it to him. Have you no thoughts of me?' I said."

Yet, "Jealous Al", a 15-year-old boy, wrote: "I wish I had been born in a traditional family which prefers a son. My parents adore my sister, 13. To them life is worthless without her. She is their life. They shower her with love and they admit it to my face. I try to console myself they pamper her because they want to sell her to a rich husband with maybe a big house. But it tears me apart."

Again, in the situation where the male child is favoured, mothers are unfortunately cast in a poor light. As with failure in exams, fathers seem to be more understanding. "I have five sisters. Dad says, 'What's the difference between sons and daughters? They are still my own flesh and blood?' Mum says, 'Boys are better than girls. Girls get married and belong to other people. And girls cannot earn much.' Then a family debate starts with Mum for the proposition and the girls for the opposition. My father is the judge. We always win (six to one)," notes a 16-year-old girl.

Then there was the girl who was saddled with the name "Ah Boy" because her parents had wanted a boy. She didn't mind it until she grew older, especially when her sisters used the nickname in front of her boy friends.

There is the usual irritation of older siblings with much younger brothers or sisters who destroy their possessions and get away with it because they are younger. Yet, many of these teenagers love their younger siblings.

Judging by letters on food, hamburgers are the favourite food of one in four teens, who spend between 80 cents and S\$5 each time they go to a fast-food restaurant. McDonald's is a favourite haunt

because of the air-conditioning and because it provides them opportunity to watch their peers. Their letters also indicate, because young people are impressed by good looks, an eating place can be a favourite for no other reason than there is a handsome young waiter in the outlet.

Another reason why teens go to fast-food joints is well summed up in this statement of a 15-year-old boy: "The waiter or waitress says: 'May I help you sir, and enjoy your meal.' That brightens up my day." It makes a 15-year-old feel like a man.

Food centres are popular for food, not for hanging out, although newly-introduced air-conditioned food centres were mentioned by a number of writers as favourite haunts. But they are not as conducive for hanging around for long periods as the burger joints, because they are well-patronised at meal-times and hanging around would be frowned on.

What do young people read in the newspaper? In the main paper, the Home News pages, the Forum page, and the Sports pages are most popular -- in that order. In Section Two, comics and the television guide are most read, with the Teens page coming in third.

The fact that teens are moody is backed in the 140 letters on the topic. Many described their moods as unpredictable and disappearing as quickly as they come. The most quoted method of getting out of the blues is turning to music.

Nicknames are part of teen culture, as is slang. Nicknames come often from a combination of dialect and Malay terms, as are many slang words used by teenager. Kia soo (meaning afraid to lose out) is used often. So is Ah Beng (meaning boys who try to be stylish without class). Buaya, from the Malay for crocodile, is the local equivalent of a "wolf". Malu is a Malay word meaning "shy" or "embarrassed". English-speaking teenagers using this word have devised variations, to take the place of the noun "maluation" and "maluating" for the verb.

Teen language also includes Americanisms picked up from television and fanzines.

Common in all junior college slang is Lecture Theatre 5 (if there are actually four lecture theatres) or lecture theatre 6 (if there are five) to mean the toilet. "Sian, lah", means I've had enough. "Lah" often peppers a Singaporean's speech, especially when he is most relaxed.

The telephone plays a significant role in the life of teenagers. It would be a safe estimate to say that at least half of teenagers who write to the Teens page use the phone regularly. The topic of whether teens can live without the telephone brought 230 letters. From dialect, several teenagers referred to the colloquial saying: "Making (or boiling) telephone porridge". The number of hours teens spend on the phone is unbelievable. One writer achieved an eight-hour bout. From the letters, I get the impression telephone mania starts sometime around the age of 13.

This is an example of teen talk on the telephone: "So how?" "Good grief, you actually studied those topics." They talk about crushes, secrets, juicy news, rumours, rate peers of the opposite sex....

One teen explains how she gets away with such long phone calls: "This is one way to use the phone without interruption. I put an impressive textbook beside me. I talk to my friends about whatever I want to talk with my eyes on the book, hand scribbling notes, head nodding with comprehension at appropriate times. I listen to the latest gossip, all the while maintaining a studious posture. But this requires lots of practice. I practice very hard."

But parents too can learn the game. One teenager made the observation that when she is on the phone, she notes her mother is reading the papers without turning the pages and her father stirs the coffee ceaselessly, while trying to listen in at interesting points in the conversation.

On the topic of death, and losing a loved one: "Someone should actually teach you how to handle this sort of inordinate hurt. I didn't know how to react to the news. I couldn't cry though I tried (after all that is what they do in the movies). I figured there was something wrong with me because of my mixed feelings," wrote a 20-year-old guy. He was writing about the death of a girl friend.

When 40 teens wrote about what they hoped to achieve in the next 15 years, a 20-year-old reader was appalled by their worldly ambitions and criticised such aspirations as "I can't wait to have a Dr in front of my name" and a 13-year-old who couldn't "wait to have lots of money".

But I wonder whether we were that much different when we ourselves were young and before we came down to earth. Like teens today, we wanted to get married,

be happy and have good jobs. Perhaps we were not so ambitious. The young people who wrote seem to aspire much higher today. Their aims reflect life today -- "I'll get a maid to look after the kids" -- and at least 10 wanted to travel.

Autograph books are part of school culture, and from my observation, more female teens own autograph books than boys. These notebooks, sometimes with scented paper, are passed round the class and to teachers at the end of the school year, particularly in graduating classes. A teenager asked to sign an autograph book may decide to write several pages, tactfully praising and analysing the character of the owner. Compare this to about 30 years and more ago when anyone asked to sign an autograph book was entitled to one page to be filled with a poem or a quotation.

School proms or graduation parties are also part of secondary school and junior college culture. The prom, which has become popular in the last four or five years, can range from a simple affair in the school hall to a polished event, costing around S\$30, in a hotel. For some teens, this is their first party into which hours of planning what to wear are invested.

A large proportion of teenagers in Singapore are shortsighted, so contact lenses are becoming popular especially for those above 15.

One strange phenomenon, in a country as small as Singapore, is that of penpals around the island. I don't know how many exactly, but a large number of teenagers -- about a hundred -- wrote about having, meeting or speaking on the phone to penpals. This could be because parents do not allow them to mix with their peers of the opposite sex. It could also be because many teenagers like to write. I still have not found out. But every so often I get requests for a penpal column. Having penpals is something that starts before their teens. Even *Sharity* magazine a publication of the Community Chest of Singapore for children runs a penpal column.

One teen describes having penpals as "mail order friendship". Sometimes girls write to other girls and pretend they are boys. Many, the letters indicate, choose interesting names from the list of penpals on a page. Next, pictures are important and the name of the school, some schools having a higher standing among teens than others -- particularly in

the case of boys' schools. Letters are often brought to school to be read by the gang and the boys share and compare "achievements".

"I have met 25 of my penpals," writes a 15-year-old. "A penpal is a very ordinary person who wants to 'crawl out of his shell' and make friends. Actually some of the teen writers (in the Teens pages) would make good penpals -- they seem to be good writers," observed one writer. I get many requests from readers who want to contact some of the writers, but I can't oblige.

Predictably, because of teenagers' interest in BGR, the topic of an ideal life partner drew 380 replies. From the letters on this topic and the one on beauty, boys place more emphasis on physical attributes than girls. They want girls to be shorter than them, for example.

When we asked young people about the most difficult problem teens had to cope with in 1986, we received 150 letters. My attempt to break down the most common problems during the years of growing up show that anxiety about school work, exams or disappointment with academic results head the list, with about 38 per cent of writers having difficulties.

About 22 per cent mentioned relationship problems, such as jealousy and misunderstanding, 10 per cent mentioned breaking up with steadies and boy-girl relationships, 20 per cent had family problems like parents breaking up and over-protective parents. Financial problems affected 6 per cent of writers. About eight per cent had problems with confidence, including the search for identity, and anxiety about appearance.

Teens, who are not so self-centred as they are made out to be, are also concerned about their siblings who did badly in exams, as two girls -- aged 13 and 15 -- expressed. Wrote a sister of her brother: "James was shattered by his results. We tried in vain to comfort him. He grew more depressed. Although he maintained a stoic front, I heard him crying softly at night. It nearly broke my heart."

When 100 young writers described their favourite old person, at least half did not mention grandparents. Many mentioned their father or mother, a teacher (all not past middle age) or even someone a few years older than them.

When it comes to pets, dogs are the most popular. But contrary to the belief that animals are supposed to make young people more responsible, I get the impression that a lot of the caring for pets is also taken on by parents and, in some households, completely by maids. But the teens who wrote spoke of how their pets listened to them attentively and accepted them for what they were.

There were a few, unintentional horror stories, particularly in a letter which described how one dog after another -- four in a row -- was sent away or sold. One couldn't be toilet-trained. One had ticks. And at least three teenagers wrote how their parents loved their dogs more than their teen children.

As for co-education, this is the kind of scene when some teens of junior college age experience it for the first time: "Oi! They say there's a very cute guy coming in from Anglo Chinese Secondary School." (ACSS is a top boys' school.) "Where, where?" "ACS boys all look alike one, how to see?"

"Why all boys on one side and all the girls on the other?" the teacher asks. Because we feel more comfortable. Because it is known territory, because if we do something embarrassing, they don't know." This situation of groups of boys and girls sitting apart in class is common in co-educational secondary schools and even junior colleges.

Pop music, pop and film stars, how they live, what's happening to them, are common topics for teen conversation. From 160 letters received on pop music, teenagers like their pop stars squeaky clean. Morten Harket of Ah-Ha, is most popular. "He is not afraid to make his beliefs and opinions public though he has been criticised by many as being too traditional and for his abstentious life. He does not indulge in drinks and drugs," writes a 14-year-old fan.

Of Dick Lee, a Singaporean singer: "He's still a down to earth Singaporean boy. He doesn't put on an act and try to look cool and pop-starish," writes a 17-year-old.

Crushes are common among teenagers. Then, some pour their emotions onto paper, send the letter and regret it when their ego takes a bashing. I notice this from questions they ask at talks and from their letters. "Should I write to this boy whom I'm interested in. Should I write to this girl?" Often, if they are not sure and they consult a good friend, the latter -- glad of the opportunity to inject some

excitement into their lives -- offers to act as messenger, with embarrassing results as word gets around.

The problem of how to make friends and how to make the first move surfaces at every talk I give. They want to make friends, they don't know how to. They don't get enough practice, often because parents are too strict -- and also they find the boy next door uninteresting because he is too short, wears spectacles, and has pimples. It is the same with the boys too. Too many teens ignore peers who are within reach, whom they can be very comfortable with, and dream about the tall handsome tennis player or the demure, pretty girl, both completely inaccessible.

What do teens read? Girls go through a phase when they devour romantic paperbacks so 140 letters, 99 per cent from girls, indicate. Some can laugh at themselves and parody the novels and the stereo-typed plots very well. Most outgrow such pulp, usually by the time they go on to junior college or pre-university. Some never stop. A few girls explained their mothers introduced them to romantic paperbacks. The letters show a few girls base their expectations from these books which end with a happily-ever-after.

"I feel that as long as one can draw the line between fantasy and reality, reading romances is fun," wrote Julia, 17. "Some of my friends have the most disgusting way of grading romances by the number of steamy scenes," wrote Su-lin, 15. "Why do I read romances with a happy ending? Because the real world is too complicate that's why," wrote another teen.

"What would you do if you were not allowed to go dating even at the age of 18? My solution is to turn to books for an answer. Since I am shy and introverted, I find that reading such romances is the only way for me to learn to react to people, especially to the opposite sex," wrote an 18-year-old girl.

Wrote another: "Mum found the book under my pillow. She said: "Small girls shouldn't be reading such books. It's unhealthy. Wait till you're 18. By then I would have died of waiting."

"Wait," is a sentence teenagers hear quite often. When they ask their parents whether they can go on dates, for example. The topic of dating attracted 310 letters. "Wait till you're in pre-university." "Wait till you are in the

university.' 'Wait till you're earning your own money.' Wrote a 15-year-old wryly: 'My father says I am not to go on dates until I am 30. And when I am 31, I can do whatever I want.'

Again when it comes to another relationship topic, on breaking up with friends or steadies, the response was twice the average -- 310 letters.

Their letters on relationship came up with gems of wisdom: 'Sometimes two friends try too hard to grow closer. They feel pressured in each other's presence as if they must talk to each other, and they must get to know each other better with each conversation. Before long they start to feel uncomfortable together and the friendship starts to die,' wrote a 15-year-old.

Sometimes, I feel some of the writers are moving too fast: 'Everything went smoothly throughout our first movie. But two days later, I received a phone call from him. 'Let's break off,' he said. He said we had taken things too seriously at the movies. If holding hands and putting your arm around a girl is what he considered serious then he might as well be a saint.' This is from a 15-year-old.

Most teens are healthily fickle-minded: 'After three years, I just got tired of him. There's nothing wrong with him. It's just that I want to have the freedom to mix around with other guys,' wrote a 16-year-old.

Also from a 16-year-old comes this: 'After being with a guy for too long, I would find it tiresome and very soon I'd write to him. I would say: 'I think we are not fit for each other. So let's break up, okay?' And he would disappear like magic.'

And this from a 13-year-old: 'I've just broken up with my girlfriend because she found out that I'm not serious about her. I know that we can't be together forever, as I'm very fussy over girls. I don't really feel sad. Actually I'm in love with another girl. To tell you the truth, I'm quite handsome.'

'Why can't you write about something that glorifies teen love instead of condemning it?' asked my 18-year-old son who is my fiercest critic when he read these letters. But their letters indicate teen love is too often short-lived.

Teens are very conscious of their appearance, the 80 letters on why teens, particularly boys, carry combs in their pockets confirmed. When a guy feels

awkward and doesn't know what to do with his hands he reaches for his comb. Film and television also play a role in this habit. The boys want to imitate John Travolta or Fonzie in the serial, Happy Days. Another reason for carrying combs, their letters showed, is they want to belong to the group. Combing the hair in the school toilet becomes almost a ritual.

Do teens use make-up? The girls do. They apply it thickly or lightly, sometimes depending on peer preferences. Boys, the letters reveal, restrict themselves to cologne and hair gel. Make-up, nail polish, punk hairstyle and jewellery are banned in schools.

In fashion, last year, black was in (despite parental objection to the colour which symbolises mourning), and so were layers (despite the heat). This year, our fashion editor says, layers are "not so in", but black and white are.

Sometimes young people have a muddled notion of what is valuable. "The pain I could stand," wrote a 15-year-old. "What made my heart ache was the amount of money they had to spend. Imagine spending \$250 on a stupid leg." This letter, as well as several others, show that teens appreciate their parents and there are many families where there is communication between parents and children. And letters from parents show they do try to understand the terrible teens.

What makes teens nervous? They are conscious in the presence of a handsome or pretty peer of the opposite sex. They don't like being watched, though they enjoy watching, especially in groups. Bus stops and buses are good vantage points for girl or boy watching.

Most of the 170 teens who wrote on punishment were against corporal punishment though some said they deserved it and a few said they would use the cane on their own children. One in three writers felt harsh words and indifference could cause more harm than physical punishment. In school, punishment or scolding without explanation and in front of their peers is resented.

By July 1986, response from readers was good enough to enable us to make it a weekly column. The Teens page started appearing on Tuesday instead of Wednesday. The response of the young readers was so spontaneous, it was decided the Teens page was strong

enough to go on Page One of Section Two, with a turn into an inside page.

I think one reason why the Teens pages have been getting good response is expressed by this comment by a teenager: "I'm better at writing than talking. Somehow my thoughts and feelings flow freely when I'm writing." Another reason why teens relate to the column is because in reading it they realise that other teenagers have the same problems. Older people who read the page recall their own teen years and find their experiences similar in many areas.

The readership of the Teens pages, letters and telephone calls indicate, is not restricted to only teenagers.

"I have no one to express my thoughts to, being the only daughter in the family. I also find it hard to talk to friends about such topics no matter how close we are. Everytime I try to express my innermost thoughts, I always stop short with a lump in my throat. You may be surprised that I do not know about some of the topics discussed in the Teens pages. Ever since I graduated from school, I have worked in a company's accounts department where 99.9 per cent of the employees are female. Maybe I have been too sheltered, a late starter and lacking exposure," writes a 25 year-old female.

A mother wrote: "My son's name appeared in your column. He is not 14, as he stated. He will be 12 in March. I have explained to him deception is not the means to reach his goal, and that is why on his behalf, I am writing this. The reason he did not give his true age was because it was stated that one could 'give or take a few years' to one's actual age. He took it to mean he could add or subtract some years so he could put himself into the teenage bracket. He desperately wanted to be accepted and he reasoned that if he were to put his age as 11, you would disregard his contribution. He chose to add three years because at 14, he says, you have really become a teen. Thirteen, he says, is an under-developed teen."

At present, there is one topic each week and I ask guiding questions to set the reader thinking. A reader is not required to answer all the questions. To date, we have asked about 80 questions relating to various areas of teen life and received 9,000 letters.

We aimed to reach a readership aged between 13 and 19, although we make allowances for those who are a year or two outside their teens.

The letters we receive indicate that even nine to 11-year-olds are beginning to read the page and are writing in. About 40 writers (out of a total of 450) who wrote on the topic of teachers were, aged nine to 12. I see this as precociousness and an anxiety to become "teens". Many students also write because they are encouraged to do so by their teachers. Several have commented their English has improved since they started reading the page.

The standard of their English varies. The strength of their letters lie in their spontaneity. They write as if they would in a diary.

Every week, some letters start: "This is my first time writing in to Teens Page. I have always wanted to write but I just never got down to it."

One 19-year-old reader wrote: "Since this is my last teen year, I thought I had better make a contribution this year before it is too late. I think you are doing a wonderful job compiling all the letters. I must say the topics are well chosen as they are always related to teenagers' issues either directly or indirectly. I have always enjoyed Teens page. In fact, I look forward to every Tuesday just to read it."

Wrote a 17-year-old: "I guess you must have received my late letter about dating. I thought I have posted it not until when I discovered it between the pages of my text book. Sorry for all the inconveniences that I may have caused." Wrote another teen: "If I have done or written anything wrong or stupid, please forgive me. I know I am begging. This is my first time you know. Please correct my grammar mistakes." These two writers reflect their Asian background. I don't think a column like Teens would work in the West where youngsters seem to have more active outlet, with or without adult approval, to express themselves.

The young people write on all kinds of paper in different colours including black and red, using expensive letter pads, exam paper, as well as the back of old calendars. They use home-made envelopes, stapled envelopes, gold ink, silver ink. Explained one enterprising writer who made her own envelope: "Note: I am in school. Heaven don't rain envelopes. So I hope this substitute will do."