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Opinion

BY TAN KENG YAO

ONE day, my son, who was five then, told me he spit out the hard-boiled egg he was served during tea break at school.

He didn't like its taste, he said.

His behaviour appalled me on account of his wasting good food. So, as a mature, responsible adult, I had the moral duty to tell him that many poor children in the world are starving and that he really shouldn't waste food. This led us to having a deep and meaningful discussion that went like this:

My son: "Why do other children have nothing to eat if I don't eat my food?"

Me: ...

My son: "I'm thinking if I don't eat my food, then there will be more food for other children."

Me: ...

This is not the first time I've been rendered speechless by my son poking holes in my logic. But to preserve the remaining fragments of my reputation, I will not talk about the other incidents except to say that having my logic ripped to shreds is annoying, especially when I'm the parent here and I'm supposed to be the wiser one.

After all, I have had a 34-year head start before him, enough time to gather all the experience and life wisdom that I require to bring him up, haven't I?

But, secretly, I think I'm a fraud. I very often have no idea what I'm doing. When dealing with my son, it can feel like I'm taking shots in the dark, logic-wise or otherwise.

I'm a fraud but it's OK



IRON BOY: Domenic Pace, nine, dressed as Iron Man on the Sydney Opera House steps. The writer questions boundaries in parenting, such as if she should allow her son to wear his favourite Iron Man mask to the supermarket. PHOTO: AGENCIE FRANCE-PRESSE

Sure, I know the basic parenting stuff like:

- » No excessive consumption of candy
- » Make sure the kid gets a shower every day
- » Do not let him leave the house naked but make sure he wears only one pair of shoes at a time
- » Do not let him try out gongfu moves on anything that is alive.

But parenting, like life in general, is full of grey areas, many of which are hard to make a judgement call on.

Like when he comes back from a birthday party with a goodie bag full of Things That Contain Copious Amounts Of Sugar and bargains to eat two more Sugary Things than the limit I set him.

Should I let him? And what should the limit be anyway? One piece of chocolate? Two pieces if they're small? Or one piece of chocolate and two jellies? What? I don't know.

Or, when he insists on wearing his Iron Man mask to the supermarket because he loves it so much it is almost welded to

his face but it makes people stare at me, do I let him?

Unfortunately, the wisdom and knowledge that I need as a parent did not magically descend upon me in a cloud of fairy dust the moment I became a mother.

And I have since come to realise that nothing could have geared me up to deal with the constantly changing situations that I find myself in with my son.

No number of childcare classes and parenting books or any amount of lurking in parenting forums and talking to

people would have given me all the answers.

So a lot of times, I ad lib and do whatever I think fits the situation at hand and hope I don't screw up and/or look too foolish. ("Okay, you can eat two pieces of chocolate but not three because you will become too heavy and then get constipation and a sore throat and, besides, if you eat too much, your stomach will explode.")

But you know what, I think it's okay that I do not know everything. The accumulation of wisdom is, after all, a life-long journey, and while I am trying to guide my son along on his path to maturity, I find myself learning things along the way too. My knowledge and know-how is growing in tandem with my son's.

For example, both of us now know that when someone – and I'm not saying who – stuffs a button battery into his nostril, it may be possible to snort the battery out without paying a visit to the A&E.

And therein lies the challenge – and the fun – in that big adventure called parenting where, together, my son and I explore the world and push towards new frontiers.

It is an exciting ride for sure.

And, I think, despite my fumbling around and getting lost at certain milestones in this adventure, my son will survive me and maybe not even need any therapy later on.

Children are resilient and, also, my son appears to have a finely-tuned bulls**t detector and he's not afraid to call me out on things that I do or say wrongly.

But it's all right, I live and learn. And, I think, maybe eating three pieces of chocolate at one go is okay. Probably.

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Courtesy pays off, even for the crooks

BY NURY VITTACHI

HERE'S an idea for thoughtful people. Always carry around a large number of prosthetic limbs, so if you're killed, the guy who does the chalk outline will be able to create a fascinating piece of conceptual art.

Of course, it's obviously better if one doesn't get knocked off, but it's important to be considerate, right?

The fact is a steady growth of civility and politeness is seeping into the whole evil-doer or law-enforcer paradigm. I started thinking about this when a

reader sent me a news cutting about cops raiding a suspected drug house in the US state of Illinois.

During the 90-minute search for evidence, a regular stream of drug-buyers turned up at the front door with cash, and police had to post officers there to politely deflect them.

The actual conversations (repeated at least 10 times) were not recorded but must have gone something like this:

"Here for illegal drugs?"

"Yes, please!"

"Terribly sorry, but we're doing a major police raid here.

Would you mind coming back later? Have a nice day."

The report reminded me of a robbery in Malaysia some years ago. Armed villains took over a 7-Eleven store to steal stuff from the stock room.

To buy themselves time, some gang members put on staff coats and served customers who came in.

Afterwards, witnesses told investigators that the only suspicious thing was that shop staff were more courteous and attentive than normal.

That tale in turn reminded one of my colleagues about a thief who went into a McDonald's in Sydney, Australia and demanded cash from the till. The quick-thinking manager said: "Sorry, we can't open the till unless you buy something." The robber checked his

pockets to see if he had enough cash to buy the cheapest thing on the menu.

He didn't. Again the exact words of the exchange were not recorded but must have been on these lines:

"Sorry, bit short of cash today, I'll come back another time."

"Sure, don't be a stranger."

Now, of course, committing robberies is still illegal whether you're polite or not, right?

Maybe not. Your columnist asked a lawyer who said that a bank robber in the US last summer tried to use his civility as a legal defence.

He argued that since he had waited in line, asked for the cash politely and used the terms "please" and "I would appreciate it" on the note he handed over, the demand

should be seen as a friendly request and the money handed over seen as a gift.

The defence failed but I do think he should have won some sort of award for Largest Public Display of Chutzpah.

Same goes for the prisoner from the famous lock-up at Guantanamo Bay who posted his profile on a big dating website, describing himself as "detained but ready to mingle".

He had been locked away for eight years, so "ready" was probably a bit of an understatement. But then "half-crazed with desperation" might have come across as needy.

Always better to play it cool. Unless you work at a certain 7-Eleven, where it might make customers suspicious.

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