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## Opinion

### » The Mummy Chronicles

# When a slip of the tongue spells trouble



BY TAN KENG YAO

**A**T ONE time, my five-year-old son was a fan of Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou. He could belt out the entire chorus of Chou's Ting Ma Ma De Hua (Listen To Your Mother) while using a tube of diaper cream as a mic.

The chorus is about paying heed to what your mother says and not hurting her. Because my son could sing it, I was hopeful that he would also internalise the values suggested by the lyrics and listen to what I said.

So, does he pay attention to my words? It depends. When I tell him to put away his Lego

pieces so I won't step on them and injure my sole, no, he definitely does not listen.

But when I'm saying things that I do not want him to hear, yes. In fact, at times like those, he suddenly develops a super-power-like ability and can hear a whisper from about 800m away.

So certain words – candy, iPad, toyshop, YouTube – cannot even be whispered. These are trigger words that will potentially cause trouble in the form of, say, a tussle over whether he is allowed to eat sweets (Me: No. My son: I want, and I want them now).

My husband and I have taken to spelling out words that we don't want him to hear, such as: "You better put the c-h-o-c-s in the fridge before he sees them."

This method currently works because the boy cannot spell very well. But eventually, my husband and I will need a new code to prevent him from picking up banned words. Pig Latin? Orth-way a ought-thay.

What's harder to avoid saying are words and phrases that I thoughtlessly scatter about in everyday conversation, but which are considered impolite in civilised circles.

Like my current penchant for blurting out "your \*beep\* head ah" in response to silly things that people say to me.

Example:

My husband: "When are they going to promote you to become the editor?"

Me: "Your head ah!" (And sometimes spoken in Hokkien.)

And sometimes, my son asks me ridiculous questions that are devised to get a maximum rise out of me, like: "Can I eat 1,098 sweets?" To which I'll retort: "What are you, crazy?"

This makes him laugh, which I take to mean he understands I am not actually verbally abusing him.

(And before I get angry mail saying that I should answer him properly so that he will learn the right things and so on, I

need to point out that he jolly well knows why he cannot eat "1,098 sweets". To begin with, I do not have 1,098 sweets at home.)

One night last week, I was chilling on a rocking chair when he came up to me and said: "Mummy! Are you crazy? Your head ah!"

I nearly tipped over on the chair.

"Oy!" I snapped. "Cannot say that!"

He giggled. He had provoked a huge reaction from me. Achievement unlocked!

I tried to salvage the situation by telling him that things like these can be said only by adults, not young children. He immediately interpreted this as a cue to say more of these words, and louder.

Oops, bad move.

I shouldn't even be saying rude things in front of him anyway. But for a long while, he didn't echo the things I said, so I got deluded into thinking that he wasn't picking these things up and that it's safe to say whatever I liked.

I do realise, now, that little ears are always listening, even if the child is pretending to be oblivious.

Therefore, I need to stop saying rude things.

(My husband, too, is not entirely averse to the use of mild profanities. But to protect his image, all I will say is, our son seems to prefer imitating my potty mouth than his.)

So, no more saying "your head lah" and other things that will cause civilised people distress.

Experts have suggested that every time parents feel like saying something rude or nasty, they should replace it with a more socially acceptable word.

Something like saying "oh fudge!" when you really want to break out the more infamous f-word.

Not such a freaking bad idea, I think.

Wait, did I just say that? What I meant was, have a nice day!

[myp@sph.com.sg](mailto:myp@sph.com.sg)

## HK's small living spaces could be trendy too

BY HONG LIANG

THIS may sound cruel, but let the truth be told that Hong Kong salary earners will have to come to terms with the fact that housing prices are getting higher and living spaces are getting smaller.

Of course, they have a choice of moving to suburban areas and bearing the long and unpleasant commute to work every day. Despite property prices and residential rents having risen to levels fewer and fewer people can afford, many Hong Kong people still prefer to find accommodation close to work.

Such insistence has given rise to the proliferation of the much maligned and ridiculed subdivided flats in older apartment blocks around the city. The legality of these structures has been called into question time and time again. Sceptics have warned that the maze of partitions could trap residents in the premises should a fire break out.

The logical answer to the problem would be to build more small apartments for sale or rent to young families. But when a developer put on sale a batch of studio apartments of less than 200 sq ft each, it was roundly mocked by the local media for insulting Hong Kong people.

It is not clear how many potential home buyers actually felt insulted. But that batch of apartments was sold within a few days.

In land-scarce Hong Kong, living in small apartments does not carry a stigma. Most people in Hong Kong, as well as in some other major cities, live in small apartments.

In New York, it is considered trendy for a young professional to own a pad in Manhattan. Studio apartments and subdivided flats are in high demand not only in New York, but also in London and Tokyo.

Japanese salary workers and their families have long learnt to adapt to living in tight



**CITY LIFE:** Many Hong Kong people still prefer to find accommodation close to work despite rising property prices, leading to the proliferation of subdivided flats in older apartment blocks around the city. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

quarters. The alternative is to move out to the suburbs or neighbouring townships.

A friend of mine, who was a senior editor at one of the country's large daily newspapers, did just that. He had to change trains three times every day to get to his office in the city centre.

The trip took almost three

hours, not including the 20-minute walk from his home to the town's train station.

To many people who work in Tokyo, spending many hours on crowded trains every day is a normal routine that is not worth mentioning. In contrast, people in Hong Kong gripe about the need to spend an hour or so commuting between office and home.

The government has set a high target to increase housing supply in the coming years. Meanwhile, it makes sense to try to set a standard to ensure the livability and safety of subdivided flats. If done right, they could become trendy in Hong Kong too.

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