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Photo courtesy of Lisa Khoo; TNP

Wed, Apr 22, 2009
The New Paper

'Maid could have suffocated my son'

[Photo inset: This 'air freshener' actually has a camcorder inside.]

By Crystal Chan

PROPERTY agent Lisa Khoo sent her maid packing after closed-circuit video footage showed the latter pressing her palm over her toddler son's mouth.

Madam Khoo, 32, had installed a hidden camera as she didn't feel safe leaving her three young sons alone with her maid.

On 1 Feb, the footage showed the maid's abusive action.

The maid denied wrongdoing, but confessed when Madam Khoo told her everything had been recorded.

She said: 'The maid cried and begged me not to call the police. But I was so angry as she could have suffocated my son. I made a police report and returned the maid to the agency.'

Madam Khoo is among a group of customers who are increasingly common in shops selling surveillance equipment.

With closed-circuit cameras and other monitoring equipment becoming cheaper with technological advances, employers are finding it easier to spy on their maids.



Photo courtesy of Lisa Khoo

Mdm Khoo's 2-year-old son was crying non-stop as the maid put a diaper on him.

Shop owners told The New Paper that many maid employers decide on surveillance after bad experiences with previous maids.

Mr Jeffrey Tan, general manager of ABC Asia Pacific, said: 'One customer bought a CCTV after his maid brought men to his home.'

'He found her notebook which had '\$5' and '\$10' written several times in it.

'He thought the maid stole his money and when he confronted her, she admitted to moonlighting as a prostitute.'

Mr Tan told The New Paper how two customers used cameras to catch their maids contaminating their food.

He claimed: 'One maid was shown spitting into a hot drink and serving it to my customer.'

Another maid added bleach to her employer's baby son's milk and served it to the infant.'



Photo courtesy of Lisa Khoo
Fired: Mdm Khoo fired her maid after the latter was caught on CCTV pressing her palm over Mdm Khoo's son.

Mr Tan added that demand for such equipment from maid employers began picking up in the last five years.

He said: 'It's becoming more affordable to have peace of mind. A system used to cost over \$4,000 but now, it can be easily done with \$1,500.'

Customers are also not shy about their motives.

Mr Tan said: 'Some customers say specifically that they want a CCTV to watch over the maid.'

'On a per-year basis, I've seen customers growing by 20 per cent since 2004.'

Mr Shaun Eric, general manager of AA Security, which also does CCTV installations, has also reported good sales, with business going up by 20 per cent in recent years.

As Singapore has no privacy laws, such surveillance is legal.

Lawyer Bryan Tan said: 'The employers own their homes so they're entitled to wire up the premises.'

It is also important to know where to install a CCTV if you do not want your maid to know she is being watched.

Convenient

Showing us the various equipment in his Kaki Bukit office, Mr Tan explained: 'Common areas like the living room are a must when installing the cameras, as you need to watch the main door. This is to check maids who bring men home.'



There are gadgets that can be concealed in normal household objects.

Such cameras have pinhole lenses to fit into objects which have a small hole for filming the maid's movements.

You need not be home to watch the footage.

The CCTVs can be connected to a digital video recorder, which acts as a web-camera server after being connected to an Internet router. This allows customers to watch footage of their homes from their office.

Some CCTV sellers also help customers to set up a web page which is linked to the server.

Want a cheaper alternative?

For just \$199, you can get cameras that are made to resemble pens and these can be left anywhere in the house.

These cameras work like storage devices and the footage can be viewed once the gadgets are plugged into a USB port on a computer.

Not all customers practise covert surveillance.

Mr Chew Chai Seng, managing director of Sin Chew Alarm, said: 'If you tell the maid you have a camera, it will deter her from idling and misbehaving. She knows she'll lose her job if she does something wrong.'

'Prevention is better than cure. If you sack the maid, you may have to look for another helper.'

Mr Chew said real cameras are unnecessary if deterrence is the motive. Dummy cameras which look like the real thing are also available.



Maid agent Alice Cheah is in favour of using CCTV cameras to watch over maids, but feels employers should draw the line when privacy is concerned.

Madam Cheah said: 'Surveillance is a good idea as employers are mindful of their children's safety.'

'But employers shouldn't install cameras in bathrooms as the maid may be captured changing clothes or bathing. I think that's an invasion of privacy.'

Ms Bridget Lew, founder of the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, which helps abused foreign workers, feels that such spying only highlights a lack of trust between employer and maid.

She said: 'If the maid knows she's being watched, she'll think her bosses don't trust her and this isn't conducive to a good relationship.'

But Mr Tan also reminds customers not to take offence at the slightest mistake.

He said: 'Mistakes like being sloppy with household chores are forgivable. But if the maids steal, bring men home or beat your children, you have to take action.'

This was so in Madam Khoo's case.

In the one month the maid worked for her, Madam Khoo said the CCTV caught the maid having long phone conversations with friends and lazing on the job.

She said: 'I closed one eye when she was sloppy but her ill-treatment of my son was the last straw.'