

"[These Kids Are Not Afraid] Karen Chew: That Girl Taught Me"



Everyone was once a child. This feature invites open-hearted conversations with three rising stars, discussing breaking boundaries, daring to imagine and love, and finding the courage to conquer fear.

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In 2023, 11-year-old Karen Chew made it into the Malaysia Book of Records as the “Youngest Author in Malaysia” with her book, *What Can an 8-Year-Old Tell You?* She plans to complete her second book before turning 14, marking the end of her childhood and stepping into her teenage years.

Before officially publishing her book, Karen didn’t think too much about it. Her initial intention was simply to record her daily life through writing and drawing. Having developed the habit of keeping a diary at around the age of five, she recalls her biggest challenge being her poor handwriting.

“I learned to write by mimicking the letters in books, almost like drawing shapes. My handwriting was so messy when I was young that I can’t even understand some of what I wrote back then. So, my mom taught me how to type and encouraged me to write on a blog.”

What Can an 8-Year-Old Tell You? is a collection of Karen’s diary entries and her thoughts on various topics. Now 13, she speaks with clarity and confidence during the interview. Her mother and older brother accompany her throughout the session, and Karen answers questions with poise, even laughing and joking along the way.



Learning Through the World

Since 2016, Karen, her mother, and her brother have embraced a lifestyle of world schooling. This alternative educational model allows children to learn by traveling and engaging with local communities, instead of sitting in a traditional classroom. Through these experiences, children develop communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills more holistically.

At first, I couldn't help but wonder: without formal lessons in math, science, and literature, and without a diploma, how could someone compete in society later on? But I quickly realized my assumptions were too narrow and one-sided.

Karen shared how she has lived in mountain regions of Taiwan, Japan, and Switzerland, immersing herself in local communities, learning new languages, experiencing different lifestyles, and gaining hands-on exposure to environmental conservation and scientific creativity. Besides being an author, Karen is also an entrepreneur—she collaborated with her grandmother to create and sell a toy bear called “KaTY Bear.”

Happiness is Actually Simple

“My inspiration for writing comes from the everyday things I see.

I hope this doesn’t offend anyone, but Japanese people are very polite, and everyone follows traffic rules. Every country has its own way of doing things, and there’s so much I can learn from them.

I’m still a child, and many things seem novel to me. Even things that appear ordinary to adults are worth discussing in my eyes. These topics often act as a bridge for communication between adults and children because they are relatable and invite people to share their perspectives.”

The world through a child’s eyes isn’t necessarily smaller than that of an adult. Karen says her book explores topics like addiction, depression, and the definition of happiness—subjects often considered “taboo” by adults but not foreign to her.

“I’ve heard stories from friends who have personally experienced depression. I’ve also gone through a phase of being addicted to video games, though my case was probably milder than most. I think addiction is repeatedly doing something that brings temporary happiness but isn’t beneficial in the long run.”

So, what does Karen think real happiness is?

“Kids have a lot of time, and we can find joy in small, everyday things. For example, I love being outdoors and collecting things from nature. Every item in my collection might seem ordinary, but to me, each is a unique treasure.

From a scientific perspective, happiness is just like anger or sadness—an emotional response in our biology. My happiness is simple: I feel happy when I read, discover something new, or spend time with my family.

Adults, on the other hand, have so many responsibilities. They’re busy with work and often learn about happiness secondhand through others.”

Would Karen disagree with how adults define happiness?

“No. I think everyone has their own definition of happiness. If someone says something makes them happy, sad, or angry, I’ll accept it.”

A Lesson in Curiosity

This interview was a learning experience for me too. Listening to this 13-year-old girl with genuine curiosity and an open mind taught me to let go of my assumptions and receive her answers without judgment. This is the lesson Karen Chew taught me.

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