

# I'M NOT NAUGHTY



Newsletter of the  
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ADHD Research and Knowledge

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SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF ADHD  
RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

# A New Spark Library



Finally, we are going to have a library for our Spark members. Edmund Wee, our founding Secretary, and I have pooled together our collection of books on ADHD and parenting, some 80+ titles, to set up a Spark Library for our members to borrow from.

This library will be set up in Child Guidance Clinic, Health Promotion Board, in the room where we hold our monthly parent support group meetings, by courtesy, once again, of the Clinic. The library will be operational from Jan 2018, and members will be able to borrow/return books when they come to the monthly meetings on the first Sat morning of each month (except Dec).

Borrowers will need to pay a deposit of \$10, which will be refunded when the book is returned, to encourage responsible use of the library and timely return of books so as to benefit as many of our members as possible.

The book titles will be listed on the Spark website in the month of Dec 2017, so members can browse the collection to know what books are available. So do look out for this new resource on our website.

By the way, the Spark website has been selected as one of the **Top 100 ADHD Blogs** on the web, by Feedspot.com. The Top 100 ADHD Blogs is a comprehensive listing of the best ADHD blogs on the internet. The Spark website has been ranked No. 41.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year 2018, everyone!

Bella Chin (Mrs)  
President

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Ezra Tan

# YOU'RE NOT ALONE!

by Ashokan (Ash) Ramakrishnan,  
Honorary Secretary, Spark



Nicholas Ong

ADHD can be a difficult journey for both parent and child. At times, it can feel like you are alone and no one can ever understand the struggles that you have to deal with every day. Carrying a load like this can bring down even the strongest person. But you are not alone. There are many like you, living with ADHD. They experience what you experience. They understand how much effort it takes to do what comes so easily for others. They know the hurt that you feel when others judge you as being difficult or for just not trying hard enough.

At the Spark meeting on 7 Oct 2017, we had two outstanding teens with ADHD, Ezra Tan and Nicholas Ong, who shared their experiences living with ADHD and learning to succeed in spite of it. It was inspiring to see how every story shared resonated with everyone in the room. They spoke about how they first learnt that they had ADHD, how they struggled with the negative aspects of the condition and how they experimented with different tools to cope. And most importantly, they shared how they realise that they alone have all it takes to beat the odds and regain control over their lives.

I was sitting at the back of the room as Ezra shared how he first learnt that he had ADHD. He described how he was “tested” and how the psychologist broke the news by saying, “Ma’am, I think your son has a bit of severe ADHD”. He said he saw his mother struggling to hold back her tears on the ride home from the hospital and repeating to him that “everything is going to be alright”. Ezra, then only 11, had no idea what ADHD was, yet he felt his mother’s fear and pain so sharply that this memory was etched in his mind. This small piece of his story left an impact on me. It reminded me that the ADHD child has empathy just like any child; though in their worst moments, they can often say and do things that hurt others deeply. But more importantly, it reminded me of my own experience as I grappled with the realisation that my child has ADHD and that the hopes I had for her would no longer be realistic. It was

a sense of fear and helplessness that only a parent can know. Now looking back, and having walked the journey for several years, I realised that my mind had exaggerated my fears and that had blocked me from making the changes in my mindset and methods that would help my child most.

Looking around the room, I was surprised to see so many kids in the audience. Watching them as they listened to our teen speakers, I was taken aback by how focused they were. I saw them nod as Nicholas shared how he experimented with different study methods. I saw them laugh as Ezra joked about how he got his NPCC mates in trouble every time he could not resist the impulse to scratch his face while standing in drill formation. They were almost spell-bound. I can only imagine that hearing Ezra and Nicholas talk about familiar experiences that they thought no one could understand must have felt so liberating.

**“No matter how dire the situation feels for us now, others have walked the path before us and have come out stronger as a result.”**

From my own experience listening to fellow parents share their struggles and open up about their fears and doubts, I know that the “load” we carry suddenly feels lightened when we know that we are not alone and that we are amongst people who understand. And even if that relief was only for a moment, it is enough to snap us out so we can think clearly again. No matter how dire the situation feels for us now, others have walked the path before us and have come out stronger as a result. And by supporting one another, we can grow as parents and help our children realise their potential, as Ezra and Nicholas have shown us.

This is the magic of a parent support group like Spark.



# HOW I HELPED MY SON MANAGE HIS ADHD

Tina Tan, Vice President of Spark, describes her struggles raising a child who has ADHD, and how she helped him manage the condition through the years.

I have three sons. My oldest, Mark, is in Secondary 2. He loves drawing and reading and is a mature and sensitive boy who shows responsibility and great care for his brothers. My second son, John, is in Secondary 1 this year. He is very creative and often thinks out of the box. He loves programming and coding, as well as drawing and reading. My youngest, Paul, is in Primary 2. He's a humorous little chap who often makes jokes and cracks the family up. He is very outgoing, loves playing outside and enjoys cycling. He also reads avidly and loves to draw, like his older brothers.



My boys, who have distinct personalities and differences, are very close to one another. Now that the two older ones have longer hours in secondary school, it's very fun to watch all three of them reconnecting when they return after school. They have a lot to update and talk to one another about.

John has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He was also diagnosed with dyslexia and later Asperger's syndrome, which is on the autism spectrum. I first noticed that John was struggling to learn to read when he was in preschool. So, in K2, at 6 years of age, he was tested and diagnosed with dyslexia. Through the tests, he was found to also have ADHD.

In the initial years after he was diagnosed, he had all the symptoms. He was highly impulsive, often acting before thinking, highly distractible and extremely hyperactive. He had high anxiety — he bit his fingernails and pencils regularly, had low communication skills, and was unable to maintain his attention and focus for long periods of time.

I have a degree in psychology, so I knew a bit about ADHD. But I was also under the misunderstanding that it had more to do with

parenting abilities, and how the parents were able to discipline the child. So I didn't focus much on it for a few months after his diagnosis. Instead, we focused on his dyslexia and got him a personal tutor trained to help such children. He improved exponentially within a few months.

On the other hand, his ADHD symptoms started to affect his school life. He got into trouble with teachers in his kindergarten, and started to refuse to go to school. It was then that I realised I had to find out more about ADHD and get support for him and myself in this journey.

## How did ADHD manifest itself in John?

John had frequent meltdowns and tantrums when he could not get his way; got into trouble with his classmates because he acted in anger, and hurt them even though he knew he should not; threw tantrums when he was told to start an activity he didn't like, or stop an activity he loved.

ADHD children don't know any better than being their ADHD selves. They don't intentionally break the rules or disregard instructions.

It is a neuro-developmental condition in which their executive function is less mature than their peers'. This is the part of the brain responsible for emotional regulation, working memory, planning and organisational skills. When these don't function well, the child acts younger than his age in terms of self-regulation and self-management.

It was a frequent struggle to manage him,

**“I still held the misconception that ADHD is a label for children who haven't been well disciplined at home.”**

especially in the early years. As a family, we didn't get to interact freely with other families on social outings, because we were not sure if they'd accept our son with his ADHD symptoms, and be willing to work with us should anything happen between their children and ours. So, we mostly did things on our own and usually chose not to have joint family outings.

The strain of having an ADHD child in the family is tremendous. Everything you take for granted for

your day to run smoothly can be hijacked at any moment by his strong refusal to follow instructions, his insistence on doing things in his usual preferred manner, and his inability to remember daily instructions and rules. The list can go on.

Families like us face judgement frequently whenever he melts down in public — there is a lot of criticism and a lack of empathy. There is so much strain and pressure on these young parents — we've been there. Even relatives and extended family members can often be insensitive in their comments and advice.

Initially, I had just accepted his hyperactivity as very much a part of his personality. I was a bit dismissive, and thought that I had to just be firmer and stricter with respect to my discipline approaches with him.

Even though I had basic knowledge about learning and special-needs conditions, I still held the misconception — this is very prevalent among parents and educators — that ADHD is a label for children who haven't been well disciplined at home.

It was not till I realised that managing him was a daily, frequent, endless battle and I admitted to myself that it was beyond my simple understanding. So, I sought to read up and find help.

## Steps I took to help John manage his ADHD

When I thought through it, I realised that ADHD symptoms are totally contrary to our Singapore classroom expectations. Children in Singapore classrooms are required to “sit down and listen”. I became aware that I needed to give him better support to adapt and do well in the school system.

As I have psychology and social-work training, I read up and we worked at home with him a lot. We attended a PACE (Parent and Children Empowerment) programme by the Society for the Promotion of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Research & Knowledge (Spark) in 2012, where I picked up practical tips about how to manage his behaviours.

I worked very closely with his school's allied educator for special needs, and also requested yearly dialogues with his form teacher and PE teachers. This is so that any event that happened would be accurately handled by all parties with insights into his condition. They would be able to understand his limitations and yet hold him accountable for responsible behaviour.

When we revisited his diagnoses closer to the PSLE in 2016, his ADHD symptoms were too well managed for him to score as ADHD. However, he had some socio-communication issues, which were a concern. A psychologist thought this might be due to Autism Spectrum Disorder. So, we explored that and he was diagnosed to have Asperger's syndrome.

John has since done very well in regulating himself better and having a better understanding of himself. Most people who meet him now can't tell that he has ADHD. He is currently studying at the School of the Arts Singapore.

## Teachers play a key role to help ADHD children in schools

ADHD awareness in Singapore is definitely increasing over the years and many schools are proactively requesting talks on the condition for their teachers to better understand and manage these children.

The more teachers are willing to adapt their traditional expectations on how a child should behave in class, the more they will use creative and empowering methods of teaching, as compared to just “sit down and don't move” instructions. Not only will the ADHD students benefit, all students will benefit.

A lot of ADHD children refuse to go to school because of issues with teachers. So teachers are in the frontline and they have a great impact on the child's perception of school and education. It's surely not easy to manage ADHD and special-needs children, and I have a lot of empathy for teachers in this respect. Even as a parent, I needed to overcome my misconceptions about ADHD and learn new skills. Teachers, too, need to be equipped and be willing to put aside any misconceptions that prevent them from adapting themselves to better manage the ADHD children in their classes.

It's my hope and endeavour to increase awareness about ADHD in the community, and that more skills training will be provided for those who teach and manage ADHD children, parents and teachers alike. ADHD children, like all children, deserve to be given the right learning environment and support to realise their full potential.

*This article was first published on Smartparents.sg on 24 April 2017. This is reproduced with permission from Smartparents.sg.*



# CATCHING UP

## With ACE Kid Award Winner Joshua Jeremiah Tan

When Joshua Jeremiah Tan won the ACE Kid Award in May 2016, he was in Primary 4, Chongzheng Primary School. Spark got in touch with his mother, Sabrina Wong, to find out how Joshua has been doing since winning.

### Were there changes observed in Joshua since he won the ACE Kid Award in 2016?

Upon winning the ACE Award, we could see his confidence increasing in terms of self-esteem. When he faced a bully in 2016, we could see him controlling his temper and impulses to hit back despite being in pain. It was an amazing step for him as he was so upset.

He took a while reality sink in that he actually won the ACE Award and what the award meant. It was in 2017 that we saw some changes in him. He became more determined and focused to do well in school. He started believing in himself that he could do it. As parents, we always told him that even though he has some special needs, it doesn't mean that he's different from everyone else. He just has to turn the "impossible" to "*IM POSSIBLE*". We used the ACE Award to motivate him that if he could win this award, he could also do well in school.

### What are Joshua's achievements in 2017?

In 2017, he started Primary 5. In the beginning of the year, after CA1, he failed Maths. This failure was the biggest lesson for him and I was glad he failed. Because it woke him up and taught him that if you don't work for something, you don't get anything. After that failure, Joshua started to realise that he needed to study hard. He would complete all his school homework and tuition work. He would attend every tuition lesson even when he's not well. His hard work would be met with rewards such as new comic books or going fishing. By SA1, he passed his Maths and he came in third in class for English and Science. This encouraged him to spur on. He continued to persevere and by CA2, his Maths grade improved by 10 marks. He came in first in class for English, third in Science and scored an A for Chinese for the first time. After SA2, when the overall marks came in, we were pleasantly surprised that he came in top in class! This was an amazing achievement.

In 2017, Joshua took part in the 3rd Singapore International Wushu Zi Jin Cup Championship



and won three gold medals in Southern Cudgel, Double Nunchucks and Drunkard Fist. He also did his endurance swim test of 5,000 metres in 2 hours 31 minutes and 40 seconds, and earned himself a gold trophy. In addition he earned a bronze trophy for Open water, where he swam 1,000m in 22 minutes and 58 seconds at Changi Beach. We are very proud of him.

Joshua has donated many times the fishes that he caught to charity. One of the charities we donate to is the Charity Fridge at Tampines which was set up by our MP Mr Baey Yam Keng.

**“Upon winning the ACE Award, we could see his confidence increasing in terms of self-esteem.”**

### What are some issues you faced with Joshua due to his ADHD?

When Joshua was first diagnosed with ADHD, it was shocking as I couldn't believe that my sweet adorable boy had this condition. However, it was a relief when the shock was over. I could finally understand why my son could not sit still in lessons, why he could not organise himself. Joshua was also delayed in his motor skills and had weak muscle tone. So he would trip over easily. When he entered primary school, he had trouble with his focus and could not hold his concentration long enough for lessons. He could not pack his school bag and once, he was so bored that he actually took a pair of scissors and gave himself a haircut in class. We had to educate his teachers about his condition and how they could help him.

Joshua also struggled to control his mood swings and temper especially when it comes to being with friends. His temper would flare when things didn't go as he would like it, and this

would sometimes scare his friends. Being big for his size, he could be intimidating.

To this day, Joshua still struggles with his disorganised ways, his inability to pack, his mood swings and his impulses. It's a daily challenge for us as parents as we have to learn how to read his mood and adjust his schedule according to his mood. He still struggles with short focus, so his workload is divided into manageable chunks. His psychologist and I meet his teachers every year and alert the new teachers of his conditions and what works well for him.

### How does Joshua manage to balance his time between studies and swimming/wushu activities?

When Joshua has wushu or swimming training for that day or night, we would let him know that he only has 30minutes to 60minutes to complete all his school homework. With that, he would put in almost 100% focus in it because he would want to go and meet his friends and coaches whom he has a good bond with. He would learn his Chinese earlier during the weekends and do the revision during the weekdays.

### What are other things you do to help Joshua improve his focus and concentration?

He's doing brain training with a brain trainer once a week. He is on this special goat's milk powder which we bring in from Malaysia. It has other ingredients made from all healthy natural products which stimulates the brain and quiets him down to focus. It helps to eliminate any allergies that affect concentration. We make sure that he has enough sleep and keep his workload to manageable chunks. During study time, frequent breaks help him to relax and focus better.

When Joshua is not well, we don't put him on Western medication as we realised that when he's on Western meds, he's more irritable and more restless. We put him on TCM Chinese medicine which uses herbs and has a calming effect yet targets his illness. Keeping him on all natural food instead of artificial food helps a lot. We keep sweets, chocolates and sweet drinks to a minimum. Fishing helps him to relax yet teaches him that patience yields rewards.

It is also important for his teachers and tutors to understand him and believe in him. We inform his teachers every year that he needs to sit in the front and nearer to the teachers which helps him to stay on task. We have to teach all his tutors and teachers to know how to read his mood and to give him room to work out his restlessness such as taking a walk to the toilet, which will help him to gather his focus again. Working with rewards helps him to focus too and setting a certain timeframe to finish his homework helps too.

### What would you like to share with other parents?

It's really not easy to bring up an ADHD child. They keep throwing curve balls with all their tantrums, impulsiveness and negative attitude. There are many times when I felt like throwing in the towel and giving up, especially in the beginning when I faced family denial that the child has a special need. But please don't give up. If you do, you blow out the hope that they put in you. You are their candle in their midst of darkness. But they are the most loving, fun loving and jovial people to be around. Life is never boring when Joshua is around. My son may never achieve as much as many of his peers in terms of academics or sports, but he has a heart of gold and I am so proud of him. I am just so impressed with his perseverance and endurance and never-give-up attitude. I call on all parents to do the same.

**“It was in 2017 that we saw some changes in him. He became more determined and focused to do well in school.”**

The ACE Award was a start to help Joshua think of achievements. People should not look down on ADHD children thinking that these children will never do well just because they can't sit still and learn. They learn differently that's all, and they all have talents and gifts. Also having the right teachers and people in their life helps. Joshua was truly blessed to have good teachers in his life and people who helped mould him. I also like to encourage parents to accept their children's condition and rally people around them to help the child. Set your child up for success. Small successes should be met with loud cheers and celebration to build confidence. Teach them it is okay to fail too and help them to learn from the failures. Tell them nothing is impossible in this world as long as they have their dreams and work hard towards them. The impossible can be turned into **I M POSSIBLE!** Never give up on them. It takes a kampong to raise a child.



## Parent Support Group Meetings: February to April 2018

### Enjoy the Popcorn: Re-scripting the Bully Horror Show

3 February | Speaker: Dr Lim Kok Kwang, Lecturer, James Cook University Singapore

The bully is virtually a fact of life for so many these days. Children have to endure the physical and emotional harm from bullies in school canteens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and cyberspace. But they can arm themselves with safe and proven skills. In this lecture, Dr Lim Kok Kwang will share with parents practical strategies from his book *Enjoy the Popcorn: Helping Your Child Re-script the Bully Horror Show*, published last year. Dr Lim teaches and supervises master's and doctoral trainees in clinical psychology, and child and family therapy. He is also a recipient of the Award for Outstanding Contribution to Psychology in Singapore from the Singapore Psychological Society.

### Social Media and Children

3 March | Speaker: Mr Dennis Tan, Senior School Counsellor, St Andrew's Junior School

Social media changes the way we live, and have positive and negative impacts on all of us, especially children. How can we support our children when it comes to managing social media? Do you worry when your child spends all his time online? Does it concern you how it might affect him? Electronic devices like smartphones and tablets are useful for learning, but these devices can also be obstacles. It is important to guide your child when it comes to using social media. Dennis Tan is the ACE Mentor Award winner in 2016 and has been a school counsellor for 10 years.

### Succeeding Through a Different Path - An ITE Student's Journey

7 April | Speaker: Shazuan Shiraj, ITE East student

Shazuan Shiraj is a 2nd Year student pursuing his Nitec in Community Care and Social Services in ITE East. He possesses a maturity way beyond his 18 years and is passionate about Social Work because he believes it is meaningful and enables him to empower people. Last year, Shazuan was selected by his school to audition for the Plain English Speaking Award. He was the only ITE student to have ever made it to the finals. Join us as Shazuan shares his not-so-traditional journey in the education system, one where he has had to overcome bullying, delinquency and rejection to get to where he is today. Do bring your teens.

**Meetings are held at the Child Guidance Clinic, Room 1, Level 3, Health Promotion Board, 3 Second Hospital Avenue (Outram Park MRT station). All meetings start at 9 AM and end around 12.30 PM. Non-members must register on the Spark website under Meetings.**