



A COMMON STAND FOR SPECIAL CHILDREN: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF AD/HD HEAD-ON



The new logo of the ADHD Society of the Philippines, designed by 3rd-year high school student **Khristhony Leaño**

THE World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in developing countries such as the Philippines, at least 10% of the children's population suffer from disabling conditions. "We are a poor country where malnutrition is high to begin with," says Peter Mallonga, executive director of Eucharistiana Center for Special Children, based in Marikina. "Add to this the rising incidence of drug abuse, alcohol abuse as well as HIV/AIDS, which are linked to many of the disabilities children suffer from. In the Philippine General Hospital, some babies born with foetal alcohol syndrome are tinier than kittens." These babies are at higher risk of a handicapping condition.

Founded in 1986, the Eucharistiana Center for Special Children realizes only too well the need to equip special children, their families and caregivers with the skills, knowledge and values to cope with the children's special needs. While the Centre, together with partner institution Learning Inn,

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provides the children special education, physical therapy (for motor coordination), occupational therapy (for daily life activities such as eating, dressing up, toilet training, etc.), and speech and language therapy, the group is also relentless in training and counselling parents and siblings. “The parents could feel inadequate in coping with their children’s needs. Sometimes it’s a matter of explaining to them the specific nature of their children’s situation and showing them ways they could help,” says Rose Aligada, head of Learning Inn.

Other times, the problem could be different. Some disabling conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or AD/HD are not physically obvious and could be mistaken for simple behavioural problems. The parents are devastated when they see their affected children unable to cope with the demands on them. Although AD/HD has been around for years, and is the most commonly diagnosed mental health condition among American children today, the level of awareness about the disorder is low among Filipinos.

AD/HD, which afflicts between 3% and 5% of school-age children, is more common among boys than girls. Key features of the disorder include poor attention span, impulsiveness and age-inappropriate hyperactivity. The child with AD/HD is impulsive, easily upset or excited, and may be more irritable and aggressive than other children. Symptoms tend to worsen in situations that require sustained attention or mental effort or situations that lack appeal or novelty. Activities such as listening to classroom teachers or working on monotonous, repetitive tasks are difficult or even impossible for children with AD/HD.

Teamwork and Grit

The First National Conference on AD/HD was organized by a team from the Center and Learning Inn, with Peter as project director. This was the first-ever gathering of parents, adults with AD/HD, medical and allied health practitioners, educators, psychologists, and other individuals that would provide a better understanding of AD/HD through lectures and discussions, and establish a referral and support network that would address the psycho-educational, socio-economic and therapeutic needs of children with AD/HD.

The team was totally committed to the idea of the conference because “from the start we were hoping that the conference would be the launching pad for

right: Iya Nicole and Andrew Dominic, children of Susan Gosalvez-Pe, vice-president external of ADHD Society, recite a poem during the conference “Managing AD/HD in the Grade School Classroom.” Both Nicole and Dominic have AD/HD.

below: Ambassador Robert Collette confers a special prize to Jesus Rafael Santos, 10 years old, during the awarding of the logo contest.



some kind of organization focused on AD/HD,” Peter said. “There were times when we were bogged down by practical considerations – rental of venue and equipment, conference materials. At some point we were already arguing among ourselves,” Peter revealed. But the team was convinced that the conference’s underlying objective of a support/advocacy group would be a tremendous form of empowerment to parents, educators and institutions dealing with AD/HD.

Someone broached the idea of applying for a grant or institutional support. “We were all the more convinced by the encouragement of the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives who came to screen us. Our application wasn’t yet approved, and we were not sure it would be. But the encouragement from an outsider was enough to convince us that we could do this,” Peter said. If holding the conference meant more out-of-pocket expenses from the organizers, they would persevere.

“We were told that Canada Fund does not support conferences and the like and there seems to be no ‘development’ context in these activities. I think what

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made the difference was our determination that the conference would pave the way for a form of organization that would sustain AD/HD advocacy and outreach,” Peter said.

The conference, which aimed for only 100 participants but attracted 292 in all, paved the way for the creation of the ADHD Society of the Philippines. The organization, composed of parents and professionals, is now registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission as a non-stock, non-profit organization providing support to children and other individuals with AD/HD.

It has designated officers and board of directors and an organizational framework that divides Metro Manila into different geographical sectors. Each sector has its own regular meetings, as well as the larger meetings of the association as a whole. The society has reached out to similar groups in other areas in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

Full Circle

The solidarity that the formation of the ADHD Society of the Philippines has cultivated among parents of children with special needs and concerned child development specialists and educators, has given momentum to the advocacy for children with AD/HD. Besides circulating its own quarterly newsletter, the association has gained significant coverage on both television and radio. Its officials have explained AD/HD in general, and how families, relatives and teachers could better cope with AD/HD.

The society launched a logo contest open to students aged 10 to 16 in an effort to educate children on the disorder and encourage compassion for children with AD/HD. The members have paid visits to different schools in the effort to familiarize institutions with

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AD/HD and solicit their support for the organization's programs. Representations have also been made with lawmakers and cabinet members for their endorsement of the organization's activities.

A true test of the success of an organizing effort is when the organizers are able to fade in the background as the newly formed group is empowered to organize and sustain activities on their own. On 24-25 October 2002, the society made full circle by holding its first educational conference entitled "Managing AD/HD in the Grade School Classroom" at the very place where it was born – the Institute of Social Order of the Ateneo de Manila University. The conference was organized and executed by parents of children with AD/HD. This was attended by educators from different parts of the country who shared "best practices" in managing students with AD/HD. There is renewed hope that schools will be more open to accepting children with AD/HD and improve the learning environment to respond to their special needs. A parallel activity was an exhibit of paintings by children with AD/HD.

The presence of Canadian Ambassador Robert Collette during the conference provided inspiration to the society to reach out in solidarity to their counterparts in Canada and other countries in an effort to share the breakthroughs in managing children with AD/HD and integrating them into the mainstream of the educational system and society as a whole. The seed of hope that Canada Fund for Local Initiatives helped plant has indeed borne fruitful endeavours that provide better opportunities for children with AD/HD.