

Welcome to SENIA-Beijing, a volunteer organization committed to support, teach, and learn from parents, teachers, students, learning support professionals, counsellors, and anyone involved with education for differently-abled people!



### The Kindness Wave™



Start a ripple... Create a wave.  
It begins with YOU!

Image source: <https://ya-webdesign.com/imgdownload.html>

Dear All,

Let us share kindness. In times like this, being kind is our great power. Open minds, hearts and actions towards ourselves, and for those who are in need. Kindness is fulfilled with **courage, compassion and connection**. Together we can shape a better way to live within our planet.

*By Juliane Karlsson*

## Mental Health Awareness Month

According to the WHO and the World Bank the number of people with depression and anxiety is increasing. Nowadays, due the pandemic, these numbers are at peak levels. In China, cases of panic disorder, anxiety, and depression have increased widely due the pandemic. Women, young adults, and expats are among the vulnerable groups to develop psychological distress. Uncertainty all around the world is putting huge pressure on our perception of **lost time**. In the education field, there is a huge concern linked to what has been “missed” in academic content. Worried parents, students, and schools are trying their very best to offer online learning and others meaningful ways to cope with this new normal.



Image source: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mental-health-awareness-week>

In this context, more than before, learning is still our best tool to change perspective, from education at school to education anywhere (with the right support). Furthermore, we also need to think about

how to return to schools. The pandemic has imposed additional pressures on schools. We are witnessing an increased demand for safety and health solutions to improve our wellbeing. However, stigmas associated with mental health disorders have also increased, as well as xenophobic behaviours. The lack of sufficient, available mental health services broadens the gap to help those who are in need. Lack of awareness, understanding, and acceptance about these problems, fuelled by the pandemic, has highlighted the importance of thinking and acting together towards a more inclusive world.

It is time to rethink what we want as a society. It is time to reimagine our education systems and the planet we are living in. Attention, intention, and attitude are essential skills to nurture in our lives. Decisions need to be made in order to confront misleading contemporary ideologies about success, the steps to achieve it, and the impact it has on people's minds. A good start would be to open the discussion, to bring different sectors to the debate, to design new action plans, and to track their accountability. There is no "magical recipe", but together we can transform the situation. We are our greatest resource!

The "old school", as a rigid structure that focuses on making children "fit in" and test scores, does not help the development of autonomy, creativity, curiosity, and different ways of learning. The bright future dreamt by parents and educators for their children and students needs to acknowledge the benefits of inclusive settings. Moreover, people with disabilities are an essential part of our society and work force. It is time to slow down. To discuss how social pressure is guiding us to extremes and unacceptable behaviours. This discussion can both help schools become more inclusive in different ways; and help people better cope when faced with unexpected circumstances we may not understand (like the current pandemic). The group shapes our behaviour. Behaviours are "contagious" and spread among people. What are our beliefs, our biases and influences?

Finally, recent studies conducted by Schaefer et al. show our tendency to assume we know what mental health is and is not. In fact, only a small segment of the population endures it well. **The vast majority will suffer, either temporary or long-lasting, mental disorders at some point.** The good news is that reaching out to therapy and following a treatment plan (which may or may not include medication) often ease symptoms. A good reminder to ourselves that "being normal," means, "being abnormal" and that's ok!

***By Juliane Karlsson***

## Parents' Letters

Welcome to our new session! A space dedicated to reflecting upon our reality, whether to celebrate what we are doing or to look critically at our programs. We hope that courage, candor, and cooperation may lead our discussions to celebrate advances and act as an opportunity to look at what is still needed to keep moving forward. Shaping our future where no one is left behind.

### Editor notes: **The school role**

Any school is a complex community and its main purpose should be to provide a fair opportunity for everyone to learn. Moreover, being a teacher demands a broad knowledge that transcends merely academic subjects. The rights of differently-abled students increase the responsibilities not only of teachers, but of a whole group of people. As a team, family, therapists, and staff should ideally be involved to elaborate a comprehensive plan focusing on the pupil's need.

We know that implementing best practice requires considerable amount of time, consistence, patience, and learning. It requires rethinking the educational system and what we want as a society. Due to our specific circumstances, sometimes it seems to be a daunting task and may not be accomplished at once. However, it is possible and a goal worth seeking.

We are all in this together. There is no such thing as "their problem" (as just "the family" or "just the teacher"). In fact, it is our "problem", and everyone should strive to adapt.

Talking about our fragilities and learning from them will enable us to move forward and experience sharing is extremely important. Specially to highlight current systemic limitations. So here we provide a space for parents to share their experiences; that may sometimes not be accessible to a wider group.

Let's hear them and let them help in the learning process for all of us. It is our time to create, to move, to being more than just test scores at the end of the year. Life is much more than that. Let us all embrace this opportunity!

Below is the first of many letters.

### **Raising a child with ADHD: A mother and clinician's perspective**

#### **Brief background**

As a mental health clinician and a mother who has a child with ADHD and dyslexia, my son has undergone a variety of early non-pharmacological interventions that significantly alleviate his ADHD symptoms. I felt free to openly discuss my son's developmental needs before moving to Mainland China. However, this was not the case when we arrived in Beijing because the diagnoses subjected us

to a degree of discrimination and prejudice.

For us, ADHD is a misleading diagnostic label because ADHD is not purely about attention deficit and it falsely gives the impression that children with ADHD are characterized only by hyperactivity and impulsivity. **The diagnostic label does not give an in-depth understanding of the disorder such as executive function deficits (Brown, 2013; Barkley, 2013).** When I look at my child and discuss with other parents who also have children with ADHD, we realize that our children with ADHD can be very focused, especially when appropriate strategies were integrated into their learning and daily living. For example, effective instructions, encouragement, effective praise, strength-based approach, structured teaching environment, small class, routine, and sensory-based learning, etc. Furthermore, children with ADHD do not only exhibit symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity/impulsivity, but they face common difficulties such as emotional dysregulation, social skills deficits, and sleep problems, as well as other comorbid disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorders, specific learning disabilities, depression and anxiety (Schatz & Rostain, 2006; Cumym, Fench & Hechtman, 2009).

### **School experience**

Frankly, I am not optimistic about the provision of quality inclusive education in many of international schools due to our personal experiences. We approached multiple international schools for admission inquiries. For example, one international school in Beijing welcomed our school application, but terminated communications with us suddenly when I informed them of my son's diagnosis. Besides, our own experience in at least two international schools where my son studied exerted additional pressures and enormous stress on our family.

In another international school, the principal decided to isolate my child and exclude him from the main class without seeking my consent. One day my son asked me sadly, why he had to sit outside of the classroom to learn. He felt he was inferior to others. I then understood from other teachers that my son was not receiving learning support outside of his classroom. Instead, the school arranged "a teaching assistant" to guide my son to randomly learn "something", so my son's learning delay would not affect the whole class's progress. I also witnessed the school put pressure on other SEN students to leave the school. My son also suffered from several non-accidental injuries from school because of his vulnerability in social functioning. I remember I used to receive regular calls from the school nurse for my son's injuries. The most serious incident was his pair of glasses was broken, he had several bruises, and cuts on his face and hand. The anti-school bullying policy and inclusive education support were not in place. The principal responded to me that my son should be responsible for being hit by other students and "learn" from this incident. I was alarmed and very disappointed, but I was fortunate to receive empathy from parents in similar situations and other teachers who witnessed the incident and knew my son was a victim. I had daily struggles about dropping my son at

school. I was worried about my son's safety and the principal's unfair treatment of my child. Hence, we decided to leave this school.

Later, my son was transferred to a third international school. Despite the availability of many experienced teachers, awareness and understanding of ADHD were not ideal. I heard negative comments about my child, and I witnessed staff "judging", "diagnosing", and labelling him. **He felt sad and gradually developed a negative self-image and low self-esteem.** He also faced several bullying incidents that were however mostly "invisible" to the school unless he sustained physical injuries. One time, he was hit by older students; and another time a child forcibly dragged my son to the ground from a climbing rack. He was upset, frightened, and repeatedly shared with me his traumatizing experience. At the time, he told me that he did not want to play with others anymore, as he felt safer to play quietly alone. It took me a long time to rebuild his self-esteem and confidence in our supportive family environment. The lack of experienced staff in ADHD/SEN made us feel worried and frustrated. Finally, we left.

### **Vulnerability in schools**

My son is gentle and not impulsively aggressive. However, his disorder makes him socially immature. As he began to grow older, other children at his age recognized this difference and therefore he became more vulnerable to school teasing and bullying. Our previous schools failed to work with us on how to solve these problems. **My son understands social skills when you ask him, but he is prone to "performance deficits" (as many children with ADHD are).** Thus, it is not effective to simply send a child with ADHD to counsellors by telling him what he should do. When there is no particular ADHD-centred social-emotional program in schools, I would recommend basic counselling services (i.e., active listening skills, show empathy, and understanding) to children with ADHD. They often experience psychological issues caused by the daily ADHD-associated difficulties (e.g. academic performance, emotional dysregulation, family problems, interpersonal relationships and symptoms of co-existing conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disorders, depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder, etc.)

### **How teachers may help?**

I want to summarize from my experience in previous schools that inclusive education should not be just about the provision of psychologists, counsellors, learning support teachers, or learning/teaching assistants in schools. It is also not just a matter of how many years of teaching experience someone has in China or abroad, or whether they have received SEN training.

As per my experience, one key factor that leads to a positive, inclusive education for a child with ADHD is having teachers who are: **caring, understanding, non-judgmental; willing to collaborate with parents; able to learn basic classroom management technique; provide effective instructions and**

**setting reasonable rules; and willing to establish a positive teacher-student relationship.** "Ideal" teachers with these positive qualities may not have an in-depth understanding of ADHD, but they genuinely care about a child and see the world of the child through the child's eyes. I would like to fairly say that we did meet these "ideal" teachers in international schools, but they were few. We also managed to find these "ideal" teachers in local educational settings where I later transferred my son to learn Mandarin. However, more could be done to more widely identify and nurture such "ideal" teachers.

### **Homeschooling**

Finally, I was compelled to homeschool my child. I enjoy homeschooling as it provides us with some benefits like academic flexibility, prioritizing my child's emotional and physical needs, our choice of curriculum and subjects (e.g., socio-emotional learning, bible study, history, science, etc.), efficient learning, and increasing our quality time in a family environment.

### **Tips to parents of children with ADHD**

There are many tips for raising a child with ADHD, but for short, my tips to other parents of children with ADHD include: a) never stop learning about ADHD. Ongoing learning enhances our knowledge and continues to remind us of the neurological-based challenges of children with ADHD; b) increase genuine empathy towards children with ADHD. When they feel loved and cared for by parents (or teachers), there will be more pro-social behaviours and less problematic behaviours; c) identify the child's strength and adopt a strength-based approach to assist learning; and d) maintain a secure parent-child relationship. The good parent-child relationship is indisputable in the overall development of children with ADHD.

*# The author of this letter is a mother of a child diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, a registered psychotherapist, a family therapist, and a final year clinical psychology doctoral candidate who has devoted her career to mental health for over 15 years. She has a strong passion for working with children with SEN and trauma through advocacy and therapeutic means.*

### **References**

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- Brown, T. E. (2013). Updated understanding of ADHD in children and adults: explaining inadequate executive functions. New York, NT: Routledge.
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- Schatz, D. B., & Rostain, A. L. (2006). ADHD with comorbid anxiety. A review of the current literature. Journal of Attention Disorders, 10(2), 141-149.

## WeChat Guidelines

**Being Together** is important and we do really appreciate all of you who are part of the SENIA-Beijing chapter. That's why it is essential to know our group better, so that we can direct our efforts more efficiently.



**It only takes 2 minutes to fill the form below. ;-)**

[https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id= ZA9iCifM0u67zTlIyNaHeSTwVK7Wy5NswmAj2dL9eRURUZNU01DOUdLSIBKU0dSM0U1T1FDWTZLMS4u](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=ZA9iCifM0u67zTlIyNaHeSTwVK7Wy5NswmAj2dL9eRURUZNU01DOUdLSIBKU0dSM0U1T1FDWTZLMS4u)

## Facebook Updates



Looking for more resources? **Check out** our Facebook group page!

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1728937867318355/>

## SENIA webpage

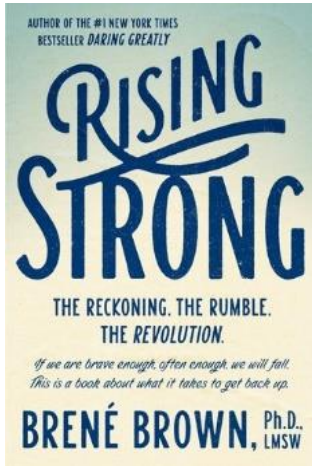
Our webpage is always a **work in progress**. There you can access our history, newsletter, new initiatives, and upcoming events.

<https://seniainternational.org/beijing/>



And, of course, visit **SENIA International** at: <https://seniainternational.org/>

## Resources: What we like this month

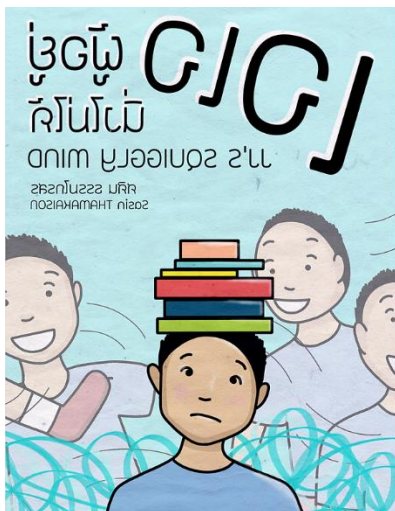


“We can’t be brave in the big world without at least one small safe space to work through our fears and falls.”  
-- Brené Brown

*Recommended by Juliane Karlsson*

Helpful webinars, websites, articles, and more free resources until June. To know more, please, visit <https://iscainfo.com>

*Recommended by Holly Popell*



More than just an ADHD book. Written and Illustrated by Sasin (Emmy) Thamakaison, a youth activist inspiring us to make a better world for all!

<https://www.jjsquigglymind.com/>

*From our friends - SENIT Thailand*





## Getting in touch. Meeting the board

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### Facebook

Another way to stay in contact is through our **Facebook** page, titled SENIB - Special Education Network in Beijing. It is a closed group, but you can request to join at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1728937867318355/>

### SENIA-Beijing Newsletter/WeChat

Are you interested to collaborate on our next edition? Ideas, experiences, questions, practices, and much more to share... Get in touch by emailing

**Juliane Karlsson**

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### L.I.N.K

Do you want to participate on it? Talk to **Dr. Gerald Anthony**

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### Website

<https://seniainternational.org/beijing/>