



PICTURES BY ZUNNUR AL SHAFIQ

**A** LITTLE Malay boy, Adam, wakes up at six in the morning. After a quick breakfast he goes to a Chinese school and returns home at two in the afternoon. From then on, it's a round of tuition classes until nine at night. After a quick dinner, it's off to bed. On weekends, he has extra classes plus music lessons, art class and martial arts training. Each December, he goes for "Advanced" classes to be ahead of his peers in the coming year. Sadly, Adam's grades are below average. Even worse, he's only 9 years old.

"We decided that we were never going to send our children to a Chinese school," says Dr Lee Shen-Li, author of *Brainchild: Secrets To Unlocking Your Child's Potential*. "When they grow up, if they want to learn Mandarin they can go ahead. We don't know Mandarin. If we send them now, we won't be able to help them with the homework and we'll end up spending all our time sending them to tuition classes. That's not what I want."

This new author, who spent some years in Australia during her childhood, explains that the book is aimed at exploring the importance of providing children with optimum fundamental necessities such as sleep, rest, nutrition, touch and security so that they're focused on the best they can be.

Now settled in Kuala Lumpur, the 39-year-old confides that there was a time when she felt unprepared for motherhood. She expected to defer to her mother-in-law's experience. Recalls the mother-of-two: "My first child was also her first grandchild. Generally, if someone is more capable than me, I'll usually bow out."

But it didn't happen that way. "Suddenly, I became extremely protective. I became like Mama Bear wanting to do everything right." After the birth of her child, she started her website. "It started out as something personal. But the name comes from rock climbing. In rock climbing, the first thing we learn is how to tie a Figure 8 knot. It seemed fitting because I was going back to basics."

**MAGIC BULLET**

Determined to create the right environment for her child, Lee started to fill up the days with activities. "We had art les-

# TIMEOUT

A child needs sleep, rest, nutrition, touch and security so that he can focus on being the best he can be, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

sons, music lessons and..." she shakes her head, letting her words trail away. Her son had a strong personality and refused to complete many of the tasks.

After much introspection, Lee saw a pattern developing: Her son had learnt that if he was nasty enough, she'd stop pestering him and he wouldn't have to complete a task. It was particularly tough when the boy absolutely refused to go to school. "I realised then that I had created this idea that he could quit and that it was my fault," says Lee.

Indeed, she recognised herself in another mother who'd enrolled her child into a particular programme. Initially, the programme was deemed wonderful. It wasn't long before the child was removed because the instructor was considered to be at fault. "If it happened once, I could understand," says Lee. "But it was happening again and again. Maybe her expectations were unrealistic."

Understanding her frustrations, though, Lee says: "We're looking for that magic bullet."

Magic bullet? Surely she means magic pill? "No. Magic bullet," stresses Lee, adding: "So we can shoot the problem and it'll go away." Mimicking the act of pulling a trigger, she continues: "Kill it."

**RIGHT BRAIN**

In spite of her frustrations, the need to help her child reach his full potential remained and she stumbled on something called right-brain education. What really hit home was the work of Angela Duckworth who developed something called Grit. Using rock climbing as an analogy, Lee says you don't have to be good at it to solve a problem. "But if you could stick it out, you'll solve the problem," she says. In other words, you must be willing to put in the time to see any kind of success.

How does this apply to her child?



*I could see that my children were spending too much time on the computers. So I decided that we'd have a screen detox. No iPad. No computers. Nothing."*

"I learnt that when we do an activity, we have to give it time," she answers simply. She proceeds to share that some time ago, her son had started Judo lessons and wanted her to buy the uniform. She explained to him that if she bought the uniform, which wasn't cheap, he'd need to commit to all the lessons. If they didn't buy the uniform, he could try Judo out for a term and not continue thereafter. "He still had the option of quitting. Once we bought the uniform, though, he couldn't quit."

Two years down the road, the boy is still going for Judo lessons.

Eager to share another story, Lee recalls something that happened during the school holidays: "I could see that my children were spending too much time on the computers. So I decided that we'd have a screen detox. No iPad. No computers. Nothing."

As expected, the first day was awful. The bickering between the brothers was so bad that Lee almost wanted to give in. Especially since the next day she was due to visit her aunt's place. "I was so worried I'd have nothing to give them to keep them out of trouble," she says, smiling at the memory. She persevered and in a few days, they reached that stage Lee calls a "huge break of boredom", the point where if they didn't do something, they'd get so bored. The "something" here was creative play, where they created adventures and imagined everything.

Describing her book as a passive way to tell parents to rethink the need to overschedule their children, Lee has some parting words of advice: "Now, when I find that my children are doing too much, I'll cut back on their activities. They need time out to play."

## **Brainchild: Secrets To Unlocking Your Child's Potential**

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