

Home away from home

Welcome to the Infant Jesus Centre, two conjoined three-room HDB flats and home to eight children from troubled homes. Photojournalist [Samuel He](#) gives us a glimpse into their lives at the home. He spent four days in the home documenting the lives of the children who battle troubled backgrounds or abusive or absent parents to make a go of life.

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Some attend regular schools. So the condition the home set was that no faces, school uniforms or relatives should be identified in the pictures and story. Any publicity for such children - no matter how well-intentioned could lead to them being singled out or teased.

This is what he writes in his article:

THERE are no PlayStation Portables, Xboxes or expensive toys here. Well-thumbed books and worn toys line the shelves. Mattresses are stacked in the rooms.

Apart from the clothes on their backs, there is no such thing as private property for the children. Even a toy given to a particular child is eventually shared with the others. The storeroom is filled with donated food and clothes, which are handed out to the children when their current ones wear out.

Welcome to the Infant Jesus Centre, two conjoined three-room HDB flats which serve as home to eight children from troubled backgrounds. Their parents are either abusive, in jail, ill, homeless, or unable to care for them. Their "family" is one another and a rotating crew of 20 volunteers who come in several days a week to cook and tutor them, plus a few full-time staff.

Live-in supervisor Maria Swee, 58, programme assistant Janie Marie Joseph, 23, and Myanmar house parents Zar Zar Soe, 29, and Ei Khiang Win, 31, look after them around the clock.

Over the past 30 years, the centre in the western part of Singapore, which is supported by Catholic parishioners and the public, has been a refuge for almost 100 children who have passed through its residential care programme.

Ms Swee, who has worked at the centre for the past 27 years, hopes they all leave with enough good memories and values to sustain them through life "so that if they have problems, they can reach into their wellspring for all those resources to help them overcome them".

The oldest of her charges is 12. The youngest, aged two, arrived in August and suffers from enterocolitis, a condition that prevents him from releasing his stools normally and requires him to use a colostomy bag. The centre also provides subsidised day-care services for 14 needy children in the neighbourhood from 8am to 8pm.

Mostly, the centre hums with quiet efficiency as the children go about their tuition, naps and meals. But occasionally it gets boisterous with squeals and peals of laughter - for example yesterday, Children's Day.

In the morning, the children were taken to a magic show paid for by a donor, who also gave them \$100 each last December to spend at Popular bookstore. The outing was followed by a lunch treat sponsored by the Jumbo Seafood restaurant chain.

On weekends, excitement hangs in the air as the children wait expectantly for their parents to come take them for walks in the park, a meal or even a sleepover. But having been disappointed often, their hopes are tinged with apprehension.

On Sunday, the mother of a seven-year-old failed to show up at the appointed time, and the child made repeated telephone calls to find out where she was. The child paced the doorway, clutching her sign-out form. When her mother finally arrived two hours late, the child's face lit up; all was forgiven.

There is an age limit at the home - no children above the age of 12 are allowed as residents. And caregivers begin to discuss options with them when the time nears.

By age 12, if their family situation has not improved, they are transferred to other centres that take in teens, such as Boys' Town or Melrose Home.

When it comes time for a child to leave the coop, the adopted "family" at Infant Jesus Centre brace themselves to let go. Ms Swee sees herself as the "children's friend and ally, but not their mother, because "mums tend to hold on to their children for too long".

"When they leave, of course there are mixed feelings," she says. "But the stronger feeling is that I'm happy that they are independent, especially for those who go back to where they belong."

She reminds all former residents that they can always return to the centre if "their home condition is not 100 per cent okay".

"They know they can drop in at the 'centre, just to do their homework, to hang out, or have a hot meal.

"Former resident Revathi Guna, 24, who stayed there for three years when her parents split up, says she will always be grateful for how she was given a sense of security at the home, yet pushed to do her best. Now an IT administrator and diploma holder, she credits Ms Swee and the home attendants for their close supervision of her studies.

"They made sure the students brushed up on their weakest subjects. They pushed me at Maths and wanted to see me do well.

"Without Auntie Maria's support, I'd have stopped my education after the N levels. I will never forget that."

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