



Day of dialogue, riveting stories, shared experiences highlight conclave on adolescent mental health

- Experienced professionals from diverse fields in mental health, caring for the differently-abled, education, policy and advocacy came together to share multiple perspectives and expertise, to embark on a dialogue towards collaboration and resolution.
- Key speakers included [Dr. Sue Jennings](#), [Dr. Nandita De Souza](#), [Dr. Vibha Krishnamurthy](#), [Prof. Shekhar Sheshadri](#), among others.

New Delhi. 27.10.18: Inspiring change with dialogue amongst a community of like-minded people and professionals, **IMAGINE** began a critical and much-needed conversation around building emotionally safe environments for children and young adults. A collaboration between child and adolescent mental health institute **Children First**, and **The Teamwork Fine Arts Society**, a not-for-profit initiative of Teamwork Arts, **Imagine** has been conceived as a movement to combat the disturbing corrosion of the mental health of our young.

A day-long forum, **IMAGINE** brought together national and global experts to share ideas and practices, within the disquieting context of marginalizing experiences like mental illness, disability, sexual orientation and gender issues in individuals from birth to 25 years of age.

“Emotional safety is a pre-requisite for a child to live a joyful life where he or she can grow, thrive and flourish. Therefore, it becomes our responsibility to come together and build ecosystems that our children deserve.” said **Dr. Shelja Sen**, one of the co-founders of Children First.

Mr. Sanjoy K. Roy, Managing Director, Teamwork Arts, said, “An escalating depletion of mental resources in children and adolescents is currently at a tipping point and needs to be tackled with effective tools and vast pools of collective empathy and experience. The time to do this is now: we need to think with the strength of all our expertise and begin the narrative of change.”

IMAGINE’s gathering of influencers included psychologists, occupational therapists, educators, special educators, psychiatrists, pediatricians, NGOs and policy-makers, participating in debates and discussions, identifying hurdles and seeking solutions.

NURTURING EARLY YEARS

Moderated by child and adolescent psychiatrist and co-founder of Children First, Dr. Kavita Arora, **‘Nurturing Early Years’** started with Dr. Sue Jennings explaining the importance of



play and attachment in the early years of a child's life and understanding the nuances within. She spoke about emotional safety and emphasized on the basic fact that as adults we shouldn't make assumptions about or define how children are going to feel. It is important to nurture curiosity with care as children are often able to self-direct their developmental process when allowed to play in emotionally, physically and psychologically safe spaces.

Ms. Urmila Choudhary spoke on the need to provide quality education in the early years for all children, no matter what and how. She spoke about the challenges faced in underprivileged schools which are often low on resources. Poor student-teacher ratios, limited languages of instruction, meagre infrastructure and lack of familiarity with teaching staff are some of the things that make schools emotionally unsafe for children. She recommended multi-tiered support systems, inclusive policy and structures, family and community engagement as measures to enhance the quality of education children receive. The idea that an effective and supportive education system in the early years fosters self-confidence which lays the basic building blocks of a happier adult, was discussed too by her.

Finally Ms. Lavina Nanda from the Children First Developmental Team emphasized on "Early Intervention" and discussed a multi-faceted community-based empowering model for working with young children with diverse neurodevelopmental profiles. She stressed on the need to constantly develop this model to make it more contextually and culturally appropriate.

SCAFFOLDING STRENGTHS

Moderated by child and adolescent psychologist, family therapist and co-founder of Children First, Dr. Shelja Sen, the second set of sessions highlighted how early nurturing can be further supported by developing processes and capabilities and recognizing the individual's existing strengths that can be built upon, especially in the case of children with special needs.

Dr. Vibha Krishnamurthy shared stories of three children with different disorders who overcame their challenges through essential capacity-building, and became change-makers in their own right. She spoke about the need to open ourselves to the idea that children are not just to be protected but can be writers of their own stories. Giving children the gift of self-awareness, a platform to practice their own advocacy and opportunities to amplify their voice are some steps that allow them to become leaders of their own lives.

Following this, Dr. Nandita De Souza spoke about 'Professionals as change-makers' and how they can be advocates for children and facilitate the building of requisite support systems.



She spoke about identifying people from within the community, the importance of collaboration in allowing change to occur and creating circles of love so that children can have a better future.

In the third session, Dr. Jo Chopra shared her experience of raising a special needs child and emphasized the need for parents to understand that 'it's not what you do, but, the way you do it' that matters. She spoke about how raising a child with different abilities can be uncharted territory. She said that it is important to not forget to take care of your own self, to accept that the child's disability is not the only thing that defines you or your child or your family. She emphasized on the need to not feel alone or be alone in that journey and to ask for and allow people around you to help.

BUILDING ECOSYSTEMS

The final theme of 'Building Ecosystems' was moderated by Dr. Amit Sen, co-founder and director of Children First, and the founder of the mental health programme at Salaam Baalak Trust. Building on the first two themes, this segment addressed the unsafe spaces that children are a part of, especially in today's day and age where there is a lack of community spaces, unfiltered social and digital media platforms and increasingly isolated lives of people. It stressed on the need to create safe ecosystems for children and young people. A panel comprising young adults Ambuj Sen Patra, Veer Mishra and Afreen Khan who shared their experiences of when they felt safe versus feeling marginalized within their own ecosystems. They shared their experiences of unsupportive environments in schools and boarding schools, victim-blaming, cyber-bullying, slut-shaming and gender insensitivity, and how their ecosystems failed them at different points in their lives. They spoke about how safe and unsafe can no longer be a binary and that there are some spaces that are safe, but still not safe enough.

Following this was a presentation by Counselling Psychologist Ankita Khanna & the Schools That Care Team where they shared stories of invisibility to visibility and the impact that they have created in 2 years across 45 schools, using the 5C model – Connect, Community, Coach, Care, and Commitment. Next was a talk by Clinical Psychologist Priyanka Mittal & the Communities That Care Team, where they spoke about how they have taken the conversation on depression and society to colleges and the safe community that was formed with young adults coming together talking about their stories. In a world where such safe spaces are not present to talk about mental health, creating a space and dialogue like this was a success.

Shailendra Sharma, Principal Advisor, Director, Education, Directorate of Education, Government of NCT Delhi, discussed the problems in government schools. He spoke about changing the perceptions of teachers, the relationship between teachers and students and



emphasized on relooking at the norms that have been set to foster learning. He further talked about how his government is addressing the foundation of learning in these schools by initiating a “Happiness Curriculum” which gives a child a space in the classroom to reflect on feelings and express themselves.

Next was a talk by Sanjoy K. Roy, also Founder-Trustee of the Salaam Baalak Trust, who shared his experience of working with children whom we all see but choose to ignore, the need for creating safe and secure spaces for them and how we have to take up this initiative in our own communities. He emphasized on the fact that we cannot keep silent about mental health anymore. It is a ticking time bomb and has to be one of the key anchors when we work with children and a part of curricular programmes at schools.

Talking about how we can make mental health practices accessible in our neighborhoods and communities, Dr. Shekhar Sheshadri talked about the importance of going back to these schools to see the status of work done and relook at the work we are required to do. He further said that a culture of obedience is problematic and a culture of conversation is the way ahead and stressed on the need for rethinking the very purpose of education. It should, according to him, aim at egalitarian personhood, empathy, happiness and social responsiveness.

All the three theme discussions throughout the day were followed by ‘Open House’ where parents, teachers and young adults put forward a range of questions for panelists and shared their own perspectives. The discussion closed with a shared commitment towards coming together as a community to think of ways of making our environments safer and equipping ourselves and our young with mechanisms of confidence.

The day closed with a delightful and touching evening of live music and open mic, music and poetry by young people.

**For Media Queries, please contact –
Teamwork Arts**

Vidushi Khera: vidushi@teamworkarts.com

Deeksha Purohit: deeksha@teamworkarts.com

Longform

Pooja Gulati: Pooja.gulati@longform.in

Ayushi Mathur: ayushi@longform.in

NOTES FOR EDITORS



About the Organizers

CHILDREN FIRST | Children First was set up by Dr. Amit Sen, Dr. Shelja Sen and Dr. Kavita Arora. Over the years they were joined by some of the most committed, well trained, experienced and skilled professionals to build a multidisciplinary team. The main objective initially was to move away from a hospital setting and establish a children's centre in the community, which provided effective, ethical and culturally grown services. They have strived to create communities of concern for children for over a decade through attempting to provide clinical services, school and college programmes, trainings, developmental interventions, working with parents, within the community and with other organizations, as well as increasing awareness. Children First firmly embodies the belief that a small group of passionately connected and determined individuals can create a movement for the voice of our children to be heard.

[Website: www.childrenfirstindia.com](http://www.childrenfirstindia.com)

TEAMWORK ARTS | For over 25 years, Teamwork Arts has taken India to the world and brought the world to India. In countries such as Australia, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Israel, Korea, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK and USA, Teamwork Arts produces over 25 highly acclaimed performing arts, visual arts and literary festivals across more than 40 cities. Teamwork Arts produces one of the world's largest free literary gatherings, the annual ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival, international festivals Shared History in South Africa, Eye on India in the United States of America, India by the Bay in Hong Kong, and many more.

Website: <http://www.teamworkarts.com>

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