

# The moving personal story that led Cordilia to an amazing career in psychology

Cordilia Justin, Senior Principal Psychologist, Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore

**Cordilia Justin** 00:06

“So every time I experience the positive difference, the impact that we make in these children's lives, it gives me a lot of happiness, and it helps me to know that this is the place I should be.”

**Andy McLean** 00:23

Hello and welcome back to Moments In Mind!

You're listening to the first episode in the second season of this podcast from Pearson Clinical Assessment. Thank you so much for tuning in.

My name is Andy McLean. I'm a podcast producer based in Australia, and in this season, I'm back to share extraordinary stories of professionals who make a difference in people's mental wellbeing every single day.

In each episode, a special guest reveals moments that have changed not only their life—but also the lives of the people who they support. We have a sensational lineup of guests for season two. I'll be introducing you to clinicians from the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

In today's episode, you'll hear my conversation with the amazing Cordilia Justin, who is Senior Principal psychologist at Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore. She reveals that very personal reasons why she decided to pursue a career in psychology and specialise in serving people with special needs—specifically those with neurological and developmental disorders.

This episode is full of rather wonderful true stories. We start with the tale of Cordilia and her twin sister, who was experiencing some real challenges at school. And then one day in the school library, Cordilia made a discovery that would change the course of both of their lives. Suffice to say, that isn't the only wonderful story in this episode. We also hear some real-life examples of how Cordilia and her colleagues are helping people with cerebral palsy or multiple disabilities to realise their full potential and lead fulfilled, dignified lives

But that's all I'll say for now. No more spoilers from me. Let's jump in and hear the conversation.

**Andy McLean**

Hi Cordilia, welcome to Moments In Mind.

**Cordilia Justin**

Thanks Andy, and lovely to be here.

**Andy McLean**

I've been really looking forward to chatting with you today. I can't wait to find out more about the moments that have shaped your career. Before we get into all of that, though, let's go right back to your childhood. Can you tell me about your earliest memory?

**Cordilia Justin 02:34**

I think the earliest significant, colourful memory I have is falling from a tree and breaking my arm. I can still remember the dress I was wearing, the tree I climbed, and the stunt I tried to do falling from the tree. And I still remember how I hit the floor and the sharp pain that went through my right hand. So that is the earliest memory I have.

**Andy McLean 03:00**

That sounds extremely painful!

Now, I can't help but ask this question, Cordilia, because I know you have a twin sister, and I have twins in my own family too, and sometimes they have a way of sensing one another's pain or discomfort. So, when you hurt your arm, did your sister feel a twinge too?

**Cordilia Justin 03:20**

No, I don't think so. We don't feel each other's pain, but I think we are so attuned to each other that probably we sense things about each other.

**Andy McLean 03:32**

It's an incredibly special bond that twins share with one another, isn't it. You and your twin sister grew up in Chennai in Southern India, I believe. And in fact, it was *her* learning difficulties that became *your* inspiration to pursue a career in psychology, wasn't it?

**Cordilia Justin 03:50**

Yes. So growing up, we studied in the same school, and the earliest experiences I've had about studying is taking care of her, making sure she's okay, and carrying her things, making sure she brings back everything home.

Moving on to our primary school years, that's where we were introduced to, writing, reading, doing math and all of those things. And I realised I could learn faster. I could pick up things as it was taught, whereas she struggled, and as she struggled, I think I tried to teach her as well when I was as young as I could have been like, maybe, what, six or seven?

So, as the teacher teaches, I know she's not following. I know she's not able to figure out what is the teacher saying—where in the textbook the teacher is at, or where in the board we are supposed to be looking at. So I will always have her next to me, and I will be pointing out things to her, and then I will read along with her, unknowingly.

At that point, I didn't know that I was doing phonics teaching with her. I was doing the blending, the rhyming and the sounding of the alphabet, the numbers, the directions it was written.

So from then on, I have been her teacher, her protector, someone who would fight for her. In spite of all that I saw that she was struggling and she got all the spellings wrong when we copied from the board and things like that. And teachers used to say things like, "Your sister can study, why can't you?" And she those kind of comparisons were made.

**Andy McLean 05:33**

That must have been difficult for both of you.

**Cordilia Justin 05:37**

Yes because I could see the pain in her face. Because it wasn't that she wasn't trying—she was trying! And it wasn't that she was not being taught. Because my mother used to engage extra tuition for us in the evenings and make sure that she kind of caught up and stayed with the curriculum.

But all that didn't work. She used to fail all her exams, and I used to pass, and these were comparisons that were going on.

It went on for a very long time until she was retained a year to repeat a year. So we were separated like that, and it was a very painful experience, because I think for about five years of studying primary school, I was always with her, and she was always with me. She was like my shadow. And then when we went into high school, I was promoted, she wasn't. So it was like two different campuses within a big campus, and the timings were also very different. So all that used to affect me a lot.

So I started wondering at that point, “Why is she different? It's not that she's not smart”. Even as young as then, I used to think “She's not like somebody who cannot do things—she can. But why is that she's not able to, you know, study the academic part of it?”

So that that question always remained in me.

**Andy McLean 07:00**

And you only started to figure out the answer to that question a few years later in the school library when you stumbled upon a book called *Developmental Psychology*, right?

**Cordilia Justin 07:11**

Yes. So I didn't know that was a subject book, but I picked it up because there were cute pictures of kids in there, so I wanted to read it.

And I started reading. I mean, I think after chapter one (which was a little boring, because it was all theories), and then it moved on into conception and the child being born and being an infant, the toilet, the different stages of being a child, and I could see what had happened to us play out there.

So this book was nice in that it covered developmental disorders as well, and in that I saw learning disorders. And then I started reading [about] learning disorders a little bit more. And then, because I had this experience, I could connect with what I was reading. And I felt like all what they were telling are things that I've seen in my sister.

So then I started wondering, okay, “So what is it that I'm going to do with my life? This is what I want to do! I want to figure out what is happening to my sister, and I want to see how I could support her better.”

**Andy McLean 08:11**

So you discovered the field of psychology almost by accident. You studied science and maths, and that started you on the journey to studying psychology, and in fact, your sister did the same thing, right?

**Cordilia Justin 08:24**

Yes, and I'm so glad, and I'm so proud of her today, because she has done her Masters in Psychology as well, because she follows my footsteps. And so she studied psychology with

me, she did her Masters with me, like one year behind me. So it was again easier for me to teach and learn.

And I would say I learned a lot of my leadership because of her and the sense of justice that I have right now. It is because I have seen how the weaker people could be subjected to a lot of things that is not fair, simply because they are weak in something. So I owe a lot to her for who I am today.

**Andy McLean 09:10**

Well, let's talk about where you are today, Cordilia. You came to Singapore in 2007 where you initially worked at the Rainbow Centre and AWWA. And in that time, you worked with individuals with special needs and their families, and specifically worked with people dealing with neurological and developmental disorders.

Then in 2023 you joined the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore (or CPAS, as they're known) where you are today. It's a fascinating organisation that does some incredible work, so I'm keen to find out more about your role there. But first, for any listeners who aren't familiar with exactly what cerebral palsy is, could you give us a quick definition?

**Cordilia Justin 09:53**

So cerebral palsy is a condition that happens because there is some form of damage to the developing brain in utero or during the process of birth. So what happens is it affects the child's muscle coordination, movement and posture. So when that happens right, it could affect one arm and one leg or four limbs are affected. Your whole body is affected, or probably just affects the legs or just the hands. So there is different conditions under this that has various presentations.

**Andy McLean 10:34**

And so how does your organisation help people with cerebral palsy?

**Cordilia Justin 10:39**

So my organisation has about 800, we serve about 850 clients. So what happens is, as soon as a child is diagnosed with this condition, parents and families don't know what to do typically, and they don't don't also know what cerebral palsy is like, or what it is and how it would present itself for the child throughout their lifespan. So what happens is the hospitals would start the process of educating and then they would refer them to early intervention.

**Andy McLean 11:14**

That's interesting. So CPAS works with people living with cerebral palsy...

**Cordilia**

Yes, yes, we do.

**Andy McLean**

...and also their families. Tell me about that work.

**Cordilia Justin 11:23**

We work with the whole family in that we help the parents understand what the condition is, and at the same time helping them to know that they are going through grief. Because many times the presentation is anger or despair, and this could be misunderstood as probably “She's going through depression or going through anxiety”.

All these are part of grief, the grief process parents experience, and we help them through, supporting them through this whole process, helping them understand what they're going through. So the social workers and psychologists are kind of we do our job together, and also because we are trying to bring in the transdisciplinary practice, we work together as a team.

So sometimes when the speech and language therapist or the occupational therapist or the physiotherapist says things the family is not able to understand, we will be the people who will help them understand and help them also with the emotions that they experience.

Because they also think like, “Is it okay to even experience these emotions? Is it normal?” So we kind of normalise that for them. So these families are there with us, and we walk with them through this journey, being with them, holding space, letting them share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening to them, and also being real about these emotions with them. So that's essentially what as psychologists, we do with families in the initial stages and with the child, of course, we work with them, depending on the level of the disability in terms of, do we work with them on the play skills? Do we work with them on classroom engagement activities? And how do we help them make sense of the world? So we work on these aspects with the child.

**Andy McLean 13:15**

And how is it that you determine what kinds of interventions might be required and what the challenge is, and indeed potential of each child is?

**Cordilia Justin 13:24**

So we have what's called as the initial assessment. So when once we receive the child, we come together as a group to interview the parents as well as understand how the child is and how he presents himself, what his routines are like—what are things that he engages or laughs with a lot smiles and laughs and things like that.

So we look at various aspects of how the child responds to stimulus as well as we will be definitely interviewing the parents, because they have the child throughout the day, right? So many of our questions are based on the Vineland assessment's adaptive scale. So we take questions from there to help guide this interview process itself.

So they share with us how the child's daily living looks like, what the child is able to do. How does he communicate? What does he understand in terms of communication? And how does he behave when you bring him out into the community? And is he aware that people are looking at him, or is he oblivious to that? But is, you know, engaged in his own senses?

So these are things that we ask from the parents and understand as well as we you work with the child in the sense we kind of present different stimulus like toys and books and other materials, and also, sometimes we bring them to the gym to see how they would explore. So all that gives us information in terms of the child's ability level and also the ability to follow instructions. So from there, we will determine what kind of support the child would require, whether it would be primarily physiotherapy oriented, or whether it would be occupational therapy that will need to come in, or whether it be speech and language, and also how the psychs can support the whole process.

**Andy McLean 15:17**

Okay, so that covers the Early Intervention phase. Let's take a short break, and afterwards, we'll talk about how you work with kids when they've reached school age. And I'm also really keen to hear some real-life examples of the amazing work that you do. So we'll be right back after this break

**Promotional break 15:41**

For more than 100 years, Pearson Clinical Assessment has tested and refined products and services that give educators and clinicians trusted tools to make a profound difference in the lives of adults and children.

Check out the Pearson website to find out more about the tools that Cordilia and her colleagues use at Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore, including the Vineland adaptive behaviour scales and the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence.

Wherever you are in the world, you can find Pearson by googling "Pearson Clinical Assessment".

**Andy McLean 16:27**

Welcome back to the second half of the podcast. Okay, so Cordilia, in part one, you explained how cerebral palsy can affect people in very, very different ways. How do you determine each child's learning potential for those all-important school years?

**Cordilia Justin 16:42**

Once a child completes early intervention, which is about six years of age, we do what's called as the school placement assessment. So that's when we use standardised assessment tools to kind of determine where exactly would the child's IQ fall, as well as understand the child's ability.

So when we administer some of our students respond quite well on the assessment itself. So we might have a child who can do the full IQ—all the 10 sub tests that we present to the child. So that we get a full scale IQ and as well as the different indexes scores that helps us determine whether the child will be able to access mainstream curriculum. And if the child is able to access mainstream curriculum, we also assess which sort of environment would help this child access the mainstream curriculum.

And then moving on, we also have children who probably will do parts of the IQ assessment, and not really the entire assessment. So again, we have a group of schools that will support these children.

Then we have children who probably will not even engage with assessment. So that also gives us information in terms of, okay, if this child cannot, you know, perform in an IQ assessment, then what sort of schools would help and what sort of educational environment would support his learning needs?

And along with that, we also look at what sort of environmental supports that need to come in, looking at the child's physical needs. Sometimes we have children in wheelchairs, so may not be able to go mainstream because of his handwriting or his physical needs. So then we don't deny the child the mainstream learning environment or the mainstream curriculum.

**Andy McLean 18:35**



And so having established that, what might different children's educational pathways look like from there?

**Cordilia Justin 18:41**

So what we do is we have different tracks within our school. So within CPAS school itself, we have three different tracks that will cater to children's different learning abilities.

So the first track is the academic track, where we teach mainstream curriculum and prepare the children for the national exam, which is called as the PSLE and they probably will need more time, or they will need a lot more support in terms of their physical needs. So these children are taught at a slower pace. At the same time, they have given all the supports that they require in order to be able to use their physical abilities as well.

Then we have the functional group. The functional group is the group that learns functional academics, meaning they have functional math and they have functional literacy. So these children know their basic concepts. It's about how we help them understand [apply] what they know to the real world. So we help them connect it.

So instead of teaching like additions and subtractions from nowhere, we probably will teach them things like, how do you read the bus number? And we also teach them things like groceries. How do you go about buying groceries? They are taught experientially as well. So they do go to them community. And do the shopping and things like that. So they are taught about how to use what they know in the real life.

And then we also have the high needs support children. These children require a lot of support in terms of their physical needs and also probably in terms of their level of understanding. So they are more concrete learners. They're more experiential learners. They require a lot of sensory stimulation so they are able to engage and enjoy the learning process through sensory activities.

So a lot of sensory based activities is what is used to teach these children and keep them engaged. So basically, what we are looking at over here is not really teaching them concepts. It's more of helping them to find meaning and purpose in life, in the sense: But how do I stay engaged with the environment? How do I find meaning in my day-to-day life? So we focus a lot on building routines, keeping sameness, teaching them familiar people, using a lot of pictures and photographs for them to understand what we're talking about.

**Andy McLean 21:07**

It sounds like such interesting work that you do. Cordilia. We talked a moment ago about that as a psychologist, you're not only making a difference in the lives of individuals who live with cerebral palsy, you're also able to help their families too, and sometimes even the smallest things can make a really big difference. Could you perhaps share an example of something like that?

**Cordilia Justin 21:29**

So recently, I was working with a parent who felt that she couldn't sleep. I was working with her and trying to find out what exactly was affecting her sleep. And then it was a lot of things that she mentioned, and it felt like she is needed everywhere. She had a child with special needs, a typically developing child who also had her needs to be met as well, and a whole family to take care of. And she felt like she had to be there, she just had to give her all. And there was also a

lot of guilt, because she felt that she was not doing enough. And so all through the conversations that we were having, I was able to share with her the cup analogy.

**Andy McLean 22:18**

Oh, what's the cup analogy? I'm not familiar with that.

**Cordilia Justin 22:22**

Think of yourself as a cup. And if you're pouring into everybody, where do you get your cup filled from? Because you are pouring into everybody, and what happens when you go on empty?

So this made her think. From there, then we started working on some of her self-care practices that she has. From there, we were able to reference some of those things where she used to go for walks in the park. So she was sharing with me all that. That's when I saw her eyes light up, talking about her younger days. And then I asked her this question, "What do you think from there you could bring into, bring into your present that would help you to feel the glimmer of hope that you need right now?"

And she was able to think through and share with me. "Okay, so today I will go for a walk and I will go for coffee by myself and sit by myself." I said, Okay, let's try it. So two things: you'll go for a walk and you'll go for a coffee by yourself.

True enough. She came back [and] she came in smiling. So that gave me a lot of "Okay, something positive has happened". Then when I asked her and she said that she did do that, not exactly every day, but at least, I think every other day she was able to do that. And she felt that she could breathe, sit by herself, and breathe, walk and look around, look at the trees, at the birds and all of that.

And I was like, "Yes, so can we start doing this more, and can we keep it consistent?" So I was working with her in that aspect, and it was beautiful to see that she actually gave herself that gift of self-care. And when she did that, her sleep got better. She was less angry, she was less moody, cranky, and was a better person to others. So I think that was the cherry on the cake for me for that whole year, you know. [laughs]

**Andy McLean 24:16**

[Laughs] Wow. And Cordilia, could you perhaps share an example of your work with a young person who has cerebral palsy?

**Cordilia Justin 24:22**

So recently, we had a child who went into a—it started with an anger outburst—and then went into a tantrum—and then went into a full blown meltdown.

So after the whole meltdown, when we were sitting down and asking him, "What happened? What upset to you?" and things like. The thing that he said is that, "Why must I do everything that everybody else says? Why can't I do what I want to do?"

Actually, another psychologist was working with me on this, and then we were like, "Yeah, we keep telling our children, 'Do this. Do that. This is good for you. You must do this. Do more exercise. Do more worksheets and things.'" Like that. "Where do they get a chance to speak for themselves, right?"

And we were also kind of in a place where we weren't able to tell the child, "Okay, so what do you want to do? Do what you want to do, you know, that kind of thing?" We couldn't do that



because a lot of other factors play in, like his parents, his teachers, the regular classroom expectations and things like that.

So we came up with a plan. We said, "Okay, he does need to follow what whatever other people are telling him at this moment in his time, and we need to work with his parents as well in terms of for them to also hear from him what he wants to do or wants to say about things. So that will take a bit of time. Let us look at this child. What do we give him?"

We were able to negotiate and with him, as well as with his teachers, where he would be able to choose what he wants to do at one part of the day. And that gave him a lot of happiness, because he had control of something at least a part of the day, about half an hour to 45 minutes. He could choose his activity, and he can even choose to not do anything.

So we gave him all the options that he could do within the school system and what the school do could also to support him to be able to do so.

That helped him to regulate himself a lot, and also gave him that happiness and knowing that he doesn't have to really do everything that everybody else says. So that was one beautiful experience we had recently.

**Andy McLean** 26:30

Wow, wow. And how does it feel when you share those beautiful moments with children?

**Cordilia Justin** 26:36

Oh, it gives me a lot of happiness, and it helps me to know that this is the place I should be. So every time I experience these kind of successes—or the difference, the positive difference, the impact that we make in these children's lives, it helps me know this is where I should be. This is where I will be. This is where I will retire.

**Andy McLean** 26:56

Now, speaking of retirement, Cordilia, as we round out our conversation, I wonder what you'll remember most after you've retired? Like, what do you think will be the moments that stay with you from your time at the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore?

**Cordilia Justin** 27:10

I think the children that I've helped. The children that I've made a difference in their lives and their families. Those are things that would stay close to my heart.

And every time I make a positive difference in the child's life through the team or face-to-face, direct it gives a lot of purpose and meaning to my life

And that helps me continue to do what I'm doing, to stay here, to continue building this career.

So I think when I look back in life, and look at my time in CPAS, I think this is what I will remember. That I fulfilled my purpose of being alive and being a psychologist.

And I think I would do my do my teachers, my school teachers, especially, and my university teachers and my sister proud and my parents proud.

**Andy McLean** 28:05

Well, what a lovely note to end on. Cordilia, thank you so very much for sharing your journey with us today. It's been such a privilege hearing all about it.

**Cordilia Justin** 28:15

Thank you, Andy, thank you for having me here and letting me share my experiences.

**Andy McLean** 28:24

Thanks for listening to this episode of Moments In Mind, a podcast by Pearson Clinical Assessment.

To find out more about the Pearson tools that Cordilia and her colleagues use, such as the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence and the Vineland adaptive behaviour scales, just google “Pearson Clinical Assessment” and check out the Pearson website. To listen to more episodes of Moments In Mind, and to subscribe, you'll find us on Spotify, Apple podcasts, YouTube—pretty much wherever you listen to your podcasts. Oh, while you're there, feel free to leave us a rating or a review. We'd be very grateful if you did.

And finally, just to add some more details about Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore. CPAS serves around 850 clients of all age groups—the youngest client being 2.5 years of age to the oldest client who will soon reach his 60s. There are several programmes catering to clients needs:

- The Early Intervention Programme caters to children who are 6 and under
- The CPAS school caters to children who are 7 - 18 years of age
- Adult services cater to students who are 18 and over
- The day activity centre (DAC) serves clients with significant physical needs and intellectual disability
- GROW (Goodwill, Rehabilitation & Occupational Workshop) serves clients with cerebral palsy & multiple disabilities: a sheltered workshop that provides employment for clients
- Connect Alumni programme serves clients who have graduated from CPAS to stay in contact with their peers and have opportunities for ad-hoc events and mentoring for employment.

There's also an [Assistive Technology Hub](#), which is an integral part of CPAS services. These bring in low-tech to high tech assistance to help clients reach their fullest potential such devices include the rain shield, sensory & vision aids, electronic aids for daily living, seating & positioning aids, alternative computer access etc.

To find out more about Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore, visit [cpas.org.sg](http://cpas.org.sg).

And that brings us to the end of this episode. Thanks again for listening and goodbye for now.

## Disclaimer

Client details and narratives presented in this podcast have been altered or omitted to protect confidentiality and privacy. Any similarities to actual individuals, events or circumstances are entirely coincidental. Each client interaction is unique, and the outcomes or breakthroughs described are specific to the individuals involved. These examples are provided for illustrative purposes only and should not be interpreted as guarantees or promises of similar results for others.