HONEYKIDS

PARENTING



From managing meltdowns as a child to finding self-expression and confidence through art, we chat with Ivan Lim and his son, Alex aka The Unskilled Boy about their journey thus far, and the launch of the teen artist's latest postcard collection!

What's one thing that people should know about autism? "That the meltdowns are not because the child is bad, but is their reaction when overwhelmed by sensory overload," says Ivan Lim, whose 18-year-old son Alex is a celebrated artist who also goes by the moniker The Unskilled Boy.

Alex first began showing signs of being on the autism spectrum from the time he started to speak – his parents noticed that he would repeat words that he liked (an action called 'echolalia'), and although he had a considerably large vocabulary for his age with no problems enunciating words, even big ones, he would not use his ability to speak as a means of communication. Even if he did, it was through single word expressions or short phrases.



Alex working on a commissioned piece

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability developed during early childhood. People and children with autism may have difficulties in communication, social interaction and behaviour. According to Autism Recovery Network, an estimated 1% of the population in Singapore are on the autism spectrum. With April being Autism Awareness Month (also sometimes called Autism Acceptance Month), Ivan shares more about his son's journey in the hopes that parents with kids of all abilities can learn more about children with ASD. We also speak to Alex later on on what inspired his latest collection of postcards!



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Learning about the diagnosis at childhood

"It was sometime after his birthday when his grandma noticed that he would line up his toys in a single file and was always fascinated with spinning objects, that she suggested he could be autistic," says Ivan. "However, we did not send him for evaluation though we did commit him to a stint of speech therapy sessions. We also sent him to a mainstream kindergarten in the hope that it was a phase."

Ivan, who's a classical guitarist, recalled that he and his wife Cara were informed by Alex's kindergarten teachers that he could be autistic, due to his lack of interaction with his classmates. He was also attention-deficient. He then entered the Early Intervention Programme at Rainbow Centre (Margaret Drive) after going through assessments at KK Hospital as well as with a private child psychiatrist.

"One of the biggest challenges when growing up was managing the triggers to a meltdown – car honks would set him off, as would other kinds of noise such as people talking loudly on their mobile phones, even children playing or a baby crying. We had to navigate these carefully and remain calm whenever we were unable to avoid the triggers."

Alex attended Rainbow Centre before going to Pathlight School in 2014, where he is still studying today. Pathlight specialises in education for children with autism and teaches life readiness skills. Alex is now in Senior Year 7 (Vocational Track) pursuing his Skill Certification in Guest Services.

Ivan (left) and his son Alex aka The Unskilled Boy (right)

Finding art and independence as a teen with autism

"Alex is able to do many things on his own but he is under constant supervision because we worry that he might hurt himself especially during a meltdown, though this has, thankfully, become increasingly rare as he grows older," Ivan shares. "Alex began to be more expressive (verbally and artistically) as he became more confident with his skill over the years. Art also calms his mind. He draws, colours or paints every day – and doing this makes him the happiest kid in the world. Art, in many ways, has encouraged self-expression, positivity, creativity, and developed his confidence."

With that confidence, Alex has also fared better at school. Some of his accolades at Pathlight School include Most Contributive Student (2023); Best Student (2022); Best Student In IT (2021); and Most Contributive Pupil (2020).

"Today at 18 years old, he is no longer afraid of thunder and is a lot more tolerant of honking and crowded places (although he still doesn't really like it)," says Ivan. "He is encouraged to keep an open mind to new things and people."

Alex and his dad speaking to guests at the Shaping Hearts 2023 art exhibition

A quick chat with The Unskilled Boy

After several successful art series and exhibitions in Singapore and South Korea, The Unskilled Boy has released a limited edition series of postcards titled "It's OK". The theme of the 12 postcards represents Alex's candid attitude to everyday situations and life in general. Alex centres the postcards' pictorial theme on his deep love for animals. It's OK comes from a meaningful lifelong learning for the autistic teen that's it's OK to be different and imperfect – and to accept things or people for who and what they are. We chat to Alex about what inspired him to create this new collection!

Hi Alex, congrats on your new postcard collection! How did you get the idea for this series?

I got my idea from the animal biscuit I like to snack. I draw the animals on paper first then I add the words. I decided to make them into postcards with different things I have learnt. I use Canva and the vectors to make digital collage. I also make my own flash cards.

The animal biscuits that Alex took

How old were you when you began to pick up art?

inspiration from I don't remember when I was very young.

Photos: Jean-Michel Basquiat (Little People, Big Dreams #42) via The Wynwood Walls Shop; and Matisse's Garden

Where do you get your inspiration from?

I surf the Internet... like YouTube videos and Google different kind of images. I also have many picture books at home where I can look for ideas. I have picture books by Jean Basquait and Henri Matisse. My parents bought for me.

Do you manage your online store and social media yourself?

My store is by a website designer. I upload my social media on the computer because the screen is bigger.

The Unskilled Boy's It's OK postcard series

How do you juggle school with your artist life?

I study in Pathlight School. I start school at 8am and finish school at 1pm or 4pm. I draw at home for four hours a day. I bring my pens and paper everywhere I go to practice.

What are your biggest achievements since embarking on being an artist?

People buying my art.



What Alex's parents want people to know about children with autism

"Those with autism may appear weird to people who are not accustomed to their ways and our hope is that no matter how odd they may seem, they do not get made fun of or bullied as a result," says Alex's dad, Ivan. "They are special human beings with feelings, too. They just express these quite differently.

"If you have a child with autism, just love your autistic child with all you have because you are all they have. It can be very trying at times, but be patient. The autistic child is not being naughty – he is struggling in the only way he knows how."

Shop the It's OK postcard series and more beautiful artworks by The Unskilled Boy here!

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Syazana Hishamuddin

Our Editor Syazana has a background in digital marketing and fashion design. Add to the fact that she's a millennial mom to two toddlers and a hyperactive Bengal cat – let's just say life keeps her busy! Loves the beach, dislikes the cold, and has a huge passion for bargain hunting and all things vintage.

Read more from Syazana Hishamuddin

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