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# Bonding through books

Joanna Hotung set up Kids' Gallery to teach children how to think for themselves, writes **Hilda Poon**

Joanna Hotung's career has revolved around children and education. In 1996, she set up the Kids' Gallery, an arts learning centre that has since expanded to become a franchise company with businesses operating in Guangzhou, Macau, Bangkok, Seoul and, soon, New Delhi.

"My business has grown up with my children. When I started Kids Gallery, my daughters were four and two, and now they are 19 and 16. They are my focus group," says Hotung.

She is now the managing director of the KG Group, the parent of Kids' Gallery, which has grown to include the Star English language centres and Face Productions, a production company that puts on shows for and by kids.

Hotung decided to go into an education-related business when her daughters were in kindergarten. She says she felt the need to teach children the ability to think for themselves rather than telling them what to think.

She now has a total of 70 staff at Kids Gallery. With an MBA degree and a background in management consultancy – she was a management trainee at Marks & Spencer and a management consultant at Coopers & Lybrand (which merged with another firm to form PricewaterhouseCoopers) – Hotung has made Kids Gallery a very structured and systematic place to work in. "We are quite informal with our policies and we do a lot of training and peer reviews," she says.

"Because I was in consultancy, I was able to work on projects with senior people from other companies and I got to see how other companies worked. It was a huge learning experience," she explains. "And then I had my first MBA. In fact, my final dissertation for my MBA was my business plan for Kids Gallery."

Hotung was trained to look at companies and identify their strengths

and weaknesses, something she does with her own business. "I am always reviewing, thinking if I can be more efficient, more organised and provide better services," she says.

Working with children can be demanding and management intensive, she notes. As her business grows, she has had to work six days a week.

As an ongoing issue for all service industries, finding and retaining the right staff are the two greatest challenges for Hotung and she constantly looks for "people who want to be there".

In September, Kids Gallery will celebrate its 15th anniversary and two of her staff will be honoured for their 15 years of service.

Hotung is also very involved in charity work for children. In addition to being the founding president of the Hong Kong Juvenile Diabetes Association and a committee member of the Playright Children's Play Association, she is also the board governor of Bring Me a Book Hong Kong – a non-profit organisation which serves children who do not have access to quality books and who are not read aloud to on a regular basis.

"I love books and I always read a lot. My parents filled our house with books," she says. "I really believe that books, apart from educating, can bring joy to children. I think it's a shame when children don't read."

Hotung made sure she read to her daughters every night when they were growing up, maybe just a few lines if she was tired. Apart from the reading, it is the sharing and togetherness that count.

"You may not see your children all day, and when you get home from work, you are tired. But if you could spend a few minutes just reading to them at the end of the day, it is really important for the family to get close," she says.

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MANAGING DIRECTOR, KG GROUP



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