

AFA Happenings

January to April 2009

Editor's Corner

Hello everyone! It's again time for us to give you a sneak peek into all that has been happening at AFA in the past few months.

Winters in Delhi mean that we grab the opportunity to enjoy the sun and the outdoors. Hence, January and February saw the AFA tribe enjoy outings and picnics. The fun in the sun began with one of our new forays, the Winter Camp and continued with family picnics and class outings. The evenings were not neglected either, as we hosted our Annual Lohri party and a 'Friday, the 13th' party. As we bid adieu to the winter, things started 'hotting' up at AFA, too, with this period being marked with two very important days, the World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD), on the 2nd April, followed immediately with the AFA Annual Day on 4th April.

Our efforts to provide novel programmes to benefit as many individuals as possible across the spectrum continued as we introduced the 'Handwriting Programme'. We continue to spread awareness about autism and appropriate teaching strategies through various workshops and training programmes that were conducted at both our premises and at other venues.

But, above all our teachers, therapists and staff remain dedicated, as always in their effort to make the world a better place for people with autism and their families, through providing the regular programmes that are offered at AFA.

At Open Door

Life continues to be 'a work in progress' at Open Door School. The year ended with the **Winter Camp**, a programme offered for the first time at Open door, during the winter break, with educational outings to the Zoo, the Railway museum, a children's park, shopping and a movie, and a ride on the Delhi Metro. In addition to the camp being a fun-learning time for our children, it was also a great community awareness exercise. Co passengers in buses and people at all the places that our children visited were given brochures and pamphlets about autism. Feedback from parents is that the camp has been a regular feature from now on!

We brought 2009 in with a bang on a frosty 13 January 2009 evening, by having our annual '**Lohri**' party. Spirits rose and warmth descended as children, their families, other guests and staff assembled around a bonfire, shook a leg to the beat of the music, and munched on popcorn, peanuts and 'rewaris'. The evening ended with a sumptuous dinner.

Republic day was celebrated with hoisting the National Flag, singing the National Anthem and other patriotic songs, a 'March Past' by the Aadhaar Trainees, and a parade of sorts with the teachers, staff and the DSE trainees dressed in costumes representing the different states of India.

Our first **picnic** of the year on 1 February saw more than 150 picnickers gather at the Garden of Five Senses. The ambience was one of fun and laughter with games like Antakshari and Dumb Charades being played, songs being sung and children running around, doing their own thing whilst the families had a rare occasion to let their hair down.

With the focus on practicing social behaviours, there were more outings for students, as well as events like a '**Friday, the 13th**' party where the children and their carers all came dressed in black!

Everywhere our children and young people put on their best social behaviour and had a wonderful time.

And then it was time to welcome spring with the festival of colours, with gulal-smearred faces, and toffees satisfying the sweet tooth.

Soon it was April and Autism Month. Time to mark World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD). AFA had organized Autism Awareness Jamboree (AAJ), encompassing a series of events across the city.

Mr. Anand Sharma, Honourable Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister for Information and Broadcasting, joined schoolchildren and artists at the India Habitat Centre at noon, to give a strong message of inclusion. Joining him in a show of solidarity with the autism community were fashion designers Ashish Soni and Rajesh Pratap Singh. A free clinic provided consultations by Paediatricians, Dentist, Psychologist, Occupational Therapist, Special Educators, Music Therapist and Social Worker. A few members of AFA addressed a roundtable meet organized by the WHO, with presentations on what it was like to live with autism from a self advocate's perspective as well as from parents' perspective.

As part of Autism Awareness week, Open Door held our **Annual Day** performance on 4th April. Every single student of Open Door participated: there were students walking makeshift ramps to throbbing music ; enacting a sequence of life under the sea; telling us the benefits of 'eating healthy'; regaling us with scenes out of a kitchen, and of course our topical play – 'Kaun Banega Vidhyarthi', a cross between the Musicians of Bremen and Slumdog Millionaire! The play was specially appreciated by our esteemed chief guest, Mrs. Poonam Natarajan, Chairperson, National Trust. Our audience assured us that it was one of the best 'AFA productions' they had ever seen.

What's new at AFA

A Hand writing Programme that is a combination of sensory activities with direct instructions, where a group of 4-5 children along with their parents participate in activities related to developing prewriting and writing skills.

And **our very own BUS!** For which we are extremely grateful to Nimisha and Amit Kesarwani. A school bus has been on our 'wish list' for a long time. The children at 'AFA' come from various parts of National Capital Region of Delhi, as well as from adjoining states. In addition, arranging transport for educational outings for our children is always a concern. Our new bus is an exciting addition to our resources to better the lives of our children.

Visitors

Visitors who come to have a 'look and see' of life at AFA, and spend a bit of their time getting to know us better are always welcome at AFA. In this session we were visited by:

- Dr. Herbert Campbell, Beatrice H. Cameron (Overseas Child care) and Diane Pollock (CLO), from the US Embassy; Dr Prof Raja Raman, eminent nuclear physicist ; Aloka Guha, Ex Chairperson of National Trust, Consultant SEARO W H O and Abhilena and Bhanu Priya from Smile Foundation, all visited AFA to observe the various activities and programs at AFA.
- Rayag Khilnani, 25, a young man diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at age 15 visited AFA along with his father Arvind Khilnani, PhD (Stanford) from California and shared his experience of living with ASD. Arvind wanted to learn about AFA and shared his experience with students with significant learning difficulties in a mentoring and educational environment.
- Nicole & Stefan from Dortmund University, Germany came as part of an initiative to create Circles of Support under the leadership of Dr Professor Evemarie Knust- Potter.
- Pragya Tiwari, from Jigsaw Learning wanted us to test the efficacy of educational CDs produced by her company that could be used by children with Autism.
- Irengbam Debashish Singh, VP of 'Milaan-Be The Change' an organization of university students interested in making a short feature film on autism visited, observed and held discussions in order to gain an insight into our work and aspects of dealing with autism.
- Vincent Drye, a French journalist, his assistant Helene Ferrarini, and student at Jamia Mr Md Reyat, visited to shoot an interview for a French magazine and record sound bytes for French radio.

- Ms. Diane E Bailey from the Chief English Language Unit, United Nations Radio, Department of Public Information and Mr TV Jayan, Science Editor from the Telegraph both visited AFA to observe the school and the activities, and to interview Merry.

External trainees / interns at AFA

Trainees from Clarke School for the deaf; National Institute of Mental Health; National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities; and AADI, amongst others, came to AFA for their internship and placement in classrooms for two weeks each.

Workshops Conferences, Seminars, Talk

- *As a member on the RCI Committee, Merry attended a meeting to discuss Accreditation and Assessment.*
- *Indu gave a lecture on Understanding Autism at the Blind Relief Association*
- *Merry participated in a two day meeting of experts at the RCI, for a thorough reviewing of the Continuing Rehabilitation Experts (CRE) Programmes.*
- *Indu attended interactive session at AADI to discuss creating awareness amongst NGOs about the different program and schemes of the National Trust*
- *Indu attended a National Conference organised by AAROH with the theme “Transforming lives of persons with disabilities through Recreational & Leisure activities”.*
- *Indu addressed an RCI Teleconference on the topic Activities of Daily Living Training in Autism. She conducted the same topic a second time for the Navshikhar Channel along with another one on Teaching Learning Materials for ASD.*
- *AFA conducted two workshops: Behavior Management and Communication Enhancing*
- *Col Baba attended the conference on Building a Collective Voice: Empowering the parents/Family organized by Muskaan. The issues covered in the conference reflected the concerns of the whole field including parents and professionals.*
- *Viveka participated in the workshop on “Inclusive Education”, organized by AADI as part of their SNAC activities under the National Trust.*
- *Chandan delivered a lecture on the Role of Corporate in Employment and Training of Persons with Disabilities at the RCI Workshop "Summit of Mind"*
- *Guha & Chandan participated in the CSO partners Annual Report Awards for NGOs 2008 organized by the Finance Management Studies Foundation*
- *Col Baba made a presentation on Autism and about Action for Autism to the employees of Hewitt organized by CAF India at the Hewitt offices. Guha gave a presentation on Autism from the perspective of a self advocate.*
- *Merry was a key speaker at the Regional Autism Conference organized by Forum for Autism as part of their observance of WAAD. The theme of the conference was “Increase Awareness on Autism - Know Autism: What to Teach, When to Teach and How to Teach”.*
- *In observance of World Autism Awareness Day, AFA Members participated in a round table meet organized by World Health Organization, where Indu and Sudhanshu shared their experience of parenting children with autism, and Guha talked about his life with Autism. Little Bunny cheered the attendees with his beautiful singing.*
- *Indu Chaswal conducted a workshop at Bhopal for the Parent Support Group and an NGO, AARUSHI.*
- *AFA organised a lecture cum workshop by Dr Louis Silva, a visiting professor at University of Western Oregon on the use of ‘Qigong Sensory Training’ in Autism.*

Volunteers

We are as always grateful to our volunteers who contribute their invaluable time and skills. In addition to enthusiastic individual volunteers, such as Prashant Sharma, Kanika, many others came to help us during the two major events - the WAAD and the Annual Day. We also had the corporate sector volunteer with us as part of their CSR Initiative. 40 volunteers from Group M came to AFA and carried out different activities like child care, painting murals, inventory taking and computer education to staff etc amongst others. Another energetic group of 20 spent times with our children were part of childcare, did painting, organized the notice boards and helped in putting the computer systems together. In addition to spreading awareness, the interaction helped us identify the areas where the corporate and AFA can work together. Jacob a wonderfully enthusiastic young autism therapist from the USA spent three weeks at AFA and pitched in the Smile Unit in the mornings and spent his afternoons in the respite care. He also took over the respite care for the children for an entire day, when the staff was away for the Annual retreat.

Parents including Indrani, Sharda, Shalini, Sangita, Sonal, Taposhi, Neelima and Sujatha continue to volunteer their time at Open Door and were joined by students like Genene, Sneha & Amit Ahuja.

HRD etc

There have been additions to the AFA team. Karuna Aggrawal has come on board as our maintenance supervisor and Raju Sikdar has joined us as an assistant in the classroom. We know they will have an exciting and fun time at AFA.

Upcoming!

And we look forward to:

Our **Annual Summer Camp**, a time to beat the heat with cool activities

A **Playgroup** for young kids from 3 to 8 years. This will be a combination of the disciplines of language therapy along with the curriculum of special education. The aim here is to develop attention, communication, adequate skills so that the child is able to cope in mainstream school.

Our **Science Club** which will start for the older ones aged 9 and above. The group aims at developing interest in science and generating curiosity. There will be indoor fun experiments classes, nature excursions, trip to science parks, museums, learning computers and using various interactive software.

Annual Training Workshop: 16 – 19 September 19 2009 Details on our website shortly.

Action For Autism (AFA)

Pocket 7 & 8, Jasola Vihar

New Delhi 110025 Tel: 91 11 65347422, 91 11 40540991/2

Email: <actionforautism@gmail.com>

Website: <www.autism-india.org>