

# Training an autistic child

*It is difficult for parents to come to terms with the fact that they have a 'special' child. But with wider research, autism is being better understood and you are no longer alone in dealing with such children*

By Ganga Subramaniam

make it easier for him to respond to other human beings too.

In any case, once the barriers between the educator and the autistic child have been broken down and the two have developed a rapport, it is not so difficult to tackle their other problems, such as speech echolalia or their ritualistic behaviour. It is essential to find out what the child likes most and proceed accordingly. Many therapists have discovered that autistic children usually respond favourably to music. Purnima Jain, who teaches at Tamana Special School, points out that visual stimuli in the form of puppets or pictures can also be used in order to communicate with these children. Imitation is another technique that is used at the Enabling Centre. Often the autistic is asked to imitate what the others are doing and this can help make them less repetitive.

A highly debatable aspect related to the training of autistic

them. Therefore, they are forced to pressurise these children to do as they say.

But does that justify the use of such techniques? Merry Barua points out that there are facilities to train autistic children who need special attention. One of the schools which has effectively balanced the training of autistic children as well as other special children is the Enabling Centre, which is funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. There is usually one special educator for every five children but this number varies with the severity of the child's condition. Says Deepa Jain, the school's principal, "The activities are devised in such a way that the teachers spend adequate time with autistic children." Speaking about how they deal with hyper active children, she says that a balance is maintained between "making the child sit and allowing him to pace around". They try to occupy the children with some activity so that their restlessness decreases.

**M**ost therapists agree that medication should not be used in order to curb their restlessness. Medicines have side-effects and may not always produce the desired result.

Educators should take care that they do not become overbearing and impose their views which may have a negative impact. This is often done unconsciously by parents who desire to make the children respond in the manner they want them to. What is needed is a more sensitive and humane approach to these children.

Though there has been a

metime, somewhere, somehow  
we shall find that which we seek.  
We shall speak, yes, and sing too,  
for God intended we should speak  
and sing.

—Helen Keller

**W**hat is it like to be a special child? The term special, itself has various connotations and over the years a number of general terms have been used to refer to these children — 'exceptional,' 'disabled,' 'handicapped' and 'dysfunctional'. They need skilled intervention and special care because of their physical, psychological or cognitive disorders. One such condition, about which there is as yet no acceptable comprehensive theory is autism. It was first described as a distinct disorder in 1943 by Leo Kanner.

Most therapists, however, agree that the central characteristic of autism is a 'cognitive-language handicap'. The controversial 'frigid mother theory' propounded by Brunop Bethlehem, which created waves in the 1960s, is no longer held. Lack of awareness about autism stems from the fact that its diagnosis started only a decade ago. Prior to that, this condition was almost





gnosis can be due to various factors. The rarity of the condition could be one of the factors. According to a recent estimate by Japanese scholars, 10 in 10,000 children are autistic.

Another reason for the difficulty could be that on the surface

autistic children look normal and it is only after the child is three years old, that parents realise that he or she is not communicating as well as other children of the same age. A more important factor have been... autistic children, with the result that autism is often confused with other forms of mental retardation. This is the reason why Bindu Prasad, a clinical psychologist and special educator, emphasises the need for a differential diagnosis. She says autism should be differentiated from related syndromes like developmental aphasia, where a specific area in the brain (related to language) is affected.

So, how does one distinguish an autistic child from children with other disorders? The first thing one can look out for in these children is the absolute lack of communication and socialisation. They relate more to objects than human beings. Another characteristic is that, unlike other children, those who are autistic rarely engage in any form of imaginative play. It has been noticed that they have a pathological attachment to the same surroundings,



Merry Barua with her son Neeraj: "Eye contact in autistic children is the easiest to improve"

the sameness of their environment is threatened, they react with either severe anger or increased withdrawal. Moreover, most autistic children are extremely sensitive to sound and sight. When speech or language is also characterised by repetition. Yameena Rizvi, a special educator working at the Saraswati Puri Nursery School, pointed out that these children cannot integrate the messages they get and respond accordingly. Another distinct feature that one can notice in autistic children is restlessness and a limited attention span. Some of these children have a tendency to get violent and may even be self-destructive.

**W**ith early intervention, the process of training an autistic child can be much easier. While there are special schools which train these children, it is important for parents to ensure full cooperation in the training process. One parent who almost single-handedly brought up her autistic son is Merry Barua. The initial phase of pain, anguish

her decision to travel to the US in order to train herself adequately to teach her son, Neeraj. At Suzie and Barry Kaufmann's, Option Institute, Merry was introduced to the option philosophy, a positive attitude towards Neeraj.

After returning to India, she started an intensive and individualised training programme. One of the first things to build on was interaction and communication with her son by developing eye-contact. "For training purposes, I had a separate room in the house where I would spend hours with him," she recalls. In order to establish eye-contact with Neeraj, she would position herself at a lower level so that it would be easier for him to focus on her.

Different special educators have their individual methods of developing and improving communication with autistic children. At the Saraswati Puri School, one of the methods used is to pair an autistic child with an outgoing child. Indu Kaura, the school's principal, says, "This kind of peer teasing has worked wonders for them." The idea is to establish trust with the children and make them more sociable.

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fixed programme that the special schools follow. Each special educator has an individual programme based on his perception of the child's requirements and sensitivity to specific things.

For instance, in order to establish eye contact with the child, specialist sometimes take an object in their hands and move it waist upwards, till it reaches close to eye level. The result is that the autistic child, who has been following the object closely, finally meets the eye of the teacher. This process has to be repeated a number of times to be effective. A different method is used by Radhika Alkazi, who has recently started the Alternative Society for the Handicapped (ASTHA). She makes the autistic child stand in front of a big mirror so that he can respond to his

children is whether special educators in schools should resort to force or pressure in order to tackle restless and over-active autistic children. Merry Barua strongly feels that as far as possible physical pressure should not be applied on the child in order to make him sit in one place. She says "Coercive techniques do not help at all and may only create further behavioural problems." However, teachers at special schools admit that sometimes they do apply pressures on the children. These could be in the form of tying their hands or legs or locking them up in a room. These tactics are defended with the argument that if autistic children are allowed to wander around whenever they feel like, other special children in these schools could get distract-

a case of "delayed development". Some children may be normal initially and may regress later on. There is still an am- lack of awareness regarding nature of autism, even among doctors and special educators. A teacher at one of the special schools admits that there is a clear understanding of autistic children. Radhika Alkazi points out that not many people know that autistic children have a "plateau of development", where they may be have a low level of skills, but they can excel in other areas such as music, mathematics, mechanics. If they are allowed to develop their interests, they would probably show signs of improvement.

Though it may be a very long time before we have a special school only for autistic children, steps need to be taken to offer a specialised course on autism for special educators. This would be a long way in improving the knowledge of how to train autistic children. With new techniques about autism emerging, it is inevitable that more modern techniques and methods will be introduced. The silver lining in the cloud for parents of autistic children is the fact that autism is considered a life-long impairment, there have been rare cases of complete recovery. So far, no such case has been reported in India. But there have been cases where autistic children have shown great signs of improvement. What is important is that parents and teachers should adopt a positive attitude and not despair over