

The Special Report/ Action for Autism gives hope to helpless parents

Autistic children learn to live normally

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Open Door: A special school which makes dreams happen

By AYSWARIYA VENUGOPAL

New Delhi, Oct. 22: There was once a king and a queen who lived happily in their beautiful castle. Soon, a charming little prince was born who brought sunshine into their lives. The apple of his parents eyes, his every murmur was precious to them. But one day, the little prince stopped speaking. He did not call his mother "Mama" and his father "Daddy." He wandered about his castle in a dream-like state. And no one knew what had happened.

For Merry, Mini, Indrani and scores of parents of autistic children, the first symptoms appeared as if a fairy tale had gone wrong. It pointed towards a path that would be difficult to traverse and fraught with disappointment until they understood the disorder that would not only give meaning to their lives but hope to other such parents.

Autism is a self-focused neurological disorder that afflicts an estimated 17 lakh Indians, 80 per cent of whom are males. The person loses the ability to communicate, socialise and think cohesively. Its cause is unknown and diagnosis is difficult. Loss of eye contact, hyperactivity, mood swings, avoiding touch and muteness are some of its symptoms. Having discovered that Neeraj was autistic, Merry embarked on a mission to draw her son out of his shell. Armed with knowledge from books she had read and advice from professional, she devoted herself entirely to his care. Progress was slow, but she succeeded in bonding with him. Through consistent efforts and in spite of frustrating times, she dis-

covered a sensitive and fairly intelligent person lurking behind all that incoherence. Inspired by her successes with Neeraj, Merry founded Action for Autism, a Delhi-based non-governmental organisation that would provide support and counselling to autistic children and their families. In 1994, under the auspices of AFA, Open Door, a lab school for autistic children was started with just two students: Neeraj and Indranil. And since then they have come a long way. Indranil, who was diagnosed as a severe case of autism, learnt toilet manners as his first lesson at Open Door.

Learning to read and write, he loves going to school and playing with his friend Akash, says Indrani, his mother. "He is a very important member of the family and nothing can happen without his presence," she adds, happy that she has been able to help her son in this crisis. "I did not know the difference between Rahil and the other children and even the doctors were unable to diagnose it when the symptoms surfaced," says Mini. Rahil was finally diagnosed at five and a half years but not before Mini had gone through doctors who said Rahil was normal and yet others who blamed her for his problem. "I was lucky that Rahil was diagnosed at an early age and I was able to get timely help from Open Door. The earlier autism is diagnosed, the easier it becomes to mould the child. Later, obsessive behaviour can become difficult to change," says Mini. For these children, Open Door is their world and their oyster.

It is here that they have the freedom to be who they are and be accepted for



CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD: Merry Raj (right) and her assistant Sandra (left) help a group of autistic children perform at a concert to raise awareness about autism held at the Farmhouse Restaurant in Qutab Minar, New Delhi, a few months ago. The concert was organised by Action for Autism, a Delhi-based NGO that runs a special school for these children. A file photograph.