

Autistic Kids

Sir.—I would like to make a few comments on your news item, "Early detection can knock out autism" (March 29). Undoubtedly early detection and intervention is crucial for the future prognosis of the child. However, it does not 'knock out' autism. Such sweeping generalisations are distressing for families already dealing with a perplexing condition. Cases of recovery from autism worldwide are minuscule and, barring a handful, are still under scrutiny.

Autism is indeed different from mental handicap; not because one is reversible and the other not. Rather because unlike mental retardation, autism implies uneven skill development; and because persons with autism require educational strategies that are distinct from those useful for individuals with mental retardation.

All children with autism are not hyperactive; some are the exact opposite — extremely passive. Hyperactivity, however, can be controlled by individualised programming. As can what has been labelled 'violence'.

For those who have seen the film *Rainman* about an autistic savant: When Raymond Babbit was being forced by his brother to take a flight that he did not want to, he started shouting and flinging himself about. We could view that as violence. Or we can view that as a person, unable to communicate, doing the best he can to take care of himself.

Finally, it is not true that barring 10 per cent, children with autism have no hope of improvement. Every child with autism can improve. And institutionalisation is not the best option for our children.

MERRY BARUA
Action for Autism

New Delhi.

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Sir.—You have projected an excessively negative picture of autism in your news item.

My son is autistic and attends a regular school. I have friends who have autistic children. None of them are violent and some are actually rather placid. Yes, some do appear aggressive when they are under stress, but that is not the rule. The kind of generalisation made in your report does great damage to the cause of autism.

Also, it was mentioned that only 10 per cent have any hope of improvement. The fact is that all of them can be helped if timely therapy is provided.

SARITA CHHABRA

New Delhi