

Workshop for parents of autistic children

By A Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI: Nearly 17 lakh Indians are afflicted by autism, yet there is minimal awareness about the disorder.

Parents of autistic children are the worst affected — they do not know how to deal with their children.

To train such parents and create awareness, Action for Autism, a support group of professionals and parents, organised a workshop in the Capital. About 70 parents of autistic children from all over the country gathered here on Tuesday.

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder which severely affects communication and social abilities. There are no genetic or medical tests which can detect autism and there is, reportedly, no cure.

Says AFA director Merry Barua, "Autistic children are not necessarily mentally challenged." Autism is not a rare disorder, being the third most common developmental disorder — more common than

Down's Syndrome, says AFA. Early detection of the disorder can be, however, helpful, she adds.

Lack of awareness towards the disorder, say group members, has led to a pathetic situation — even psychologists club autistics with mentally handicapped persons, there are no specific schools catering to their needs and parents do not know how to cope with the situation.

Alka Bagdadi, mother of eight-year-old Saahil who suffers from autism, came all the way from Mumbai to participate in the workshop. "I was shattered when I came to know," she says. But not any more, she adds. "Exposure to this problem has helped me. I now try to make things easier for my child."

Saahil is forced to go a 'normal'

school, she says. "I went to schools for special children, but they turned me away," she says. Some schools refuse to recognise it as a disorder altogether, others say they lack facilities and trained staff, adds Mrs Bagdadi.

This, say members, is because schools catering solely to autistic persons do not receive funding from the government — it does not recognise autism as a disability.

Another parent puts forward his problem, "My child sings his favourite song when crying." It turns out a problem faced by more than one parent. It could way to deal with stress, explains a member. An autistic child may have motor and language skills, but faces problem in communicating, she adds.