

Workshop brings plight of the autistic child to the fore

Staff Reporter

Ritu, what is your name? Ritu, what is your name?" aimed at the person wearing the name badge prominently, leaves her a trifle fazed.

A moment later the charade ends and the participants visibly relax. This was not a course in dramatics, but a workshop for parents and professionals working with autistic children and the play acting was to make them aware of the plight of such kids.

"How did you feel being questioned like that?" asks a volunteer. Heads nod in dawning recognition as the instructors explain, "we all tend to ask such obvious question to an autistic child seriously underestimating his intelligence and social skills."

The 15-minute awareness creating exercise at the four-day workshop was conducted by Action for Autism, a support group for parents and pro-

fessionals, aimed at sensitising them to deal with greater empathy to the needs of these children labelled as "slow" or "mentally subnormal" in the absence of a clear understanding about the condition even among the medical profession.

Autism is defined as a disorder that affects communication and social abilities. The symptoms range from mild learning disabilities to severe impairments or occur with accompanying problems like mental retardation and seizures. According to Ms Tamara Cohen of the support group, the number of autistics in the country is put at 1.7 million but this is based on a ratio of one in a population of 10,000 since no epidemiological studies have been conducted to establish its prevalence. Though not a rare disorder, being the third most common developmental disorder above even Down's syndrome, it is yet to be recognised as a disability

by the central government.

Probably, the first lesson imbibed by the participants is that the parents were not to blame for their child's condition. "Autism is not of psychological origin nor is it affected by the individual's environment", Ms Cohen says.

Another fact which emerges during the sessions is that some parents and even professionals found it difficult to cope with the behavioural patterns displayed by these children. A structured training programme is the only effective treatment for autism as at present no cure for the condition exists. AFA director Merry Barua says off-repeated queries from the parents were, "The child repeats only one word over and over again. How can I get him to stop?", "My child is nine and still not toilet trained" and "How can I reduce my child's restlessness?"

As the child has a distinctive ten-

dency to echo whatever was being said, reversing the "you" and "I" during conversations and expressing needs rather than emotions, the educators were told to lay stress on communication.

According to Ms Barua, communication is an area where the autistic child faces major problems but it is also where tremendous improvements could be achieved.

For the shy, almost anti-social child, a beginning could be made by teaching them to say "hello". It could be the start of social interaction, she suggests. The next step to inculcate social graces would be to prompt a handshake. The reluctant child could be persuaded to proffer his hand and while returning the handshake, his action could be appreciated in a fun way by asking him "What's your name" and then whispering it in his ear. But even these could be an uphill task with some children. No

miracles could be expected. "The learning will not happen in one week or one month. It could take a long time," she says.

Another challenge was the child's limited repertoire of words. "People with autism are unfocused and their responses are like autistic workshop brings plight of the autistic child to the fore a filing cabinet. One day you can ask them "how does a dog bark" and he goes to the filing cabinet and says "woof, woof". But another day ask him the same question and he might not be able to find the right answer in the filing cabinet," she adds.

The trial and error method is the best way for the instructor to find her way through the maze of communication. "There is no real recipe you can follow and the instructor has to determine the level of intelligence in the child based on the response and receptivity of the child as boredom could set in," she warns.