The day Mary Barua learnt that her only child, Neeraj, was autistic, she headed straight for a library. She wanted information on his condition, which the doctors were at a loss to explain to her. When Shivaya Chona’s second child, Tania, a pretty little girl whom people came for her ‘very special smile’ was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, the world seemed to have come to an end for her.

Shanti Auluck’s feelings were no different when she realised that her son, Puncet, now 21, was born with a chromosomal abnormality called Down’s syndrome, which is accompanied by a mental handicap. Sanjith Sengupta had to cope with his daughter’s suicide note when she killed herself after giving a bad paper. He noted that “So sorry for the fumbling mistakes.”

For each of these parents, the trauma of their children could have led them down the path of self-pity and remorse. Instead, they have not only overcome their grief, but in the process have also initiated efforts that are today benefiting many parents like themselves and their children. It has not been easy. But the obstacles and disappointments they faced while bringing up their children gave them the courage to cope with their personal and educational problems. They have learnt to do block printing on wrapping paper, gift envelopes, carrier bags and letter pads and make decorative dolls and candles.

The Mumbai-based Make-A-Wish Foundation (an affiliate of the US foundation) was the result of the personal tragedy that Geeta and Uday Joshi faced a couple of years ago, when their ten-year-old son Sandhyar died of leukemia. They had taken their son to America for treatment and miserable when they found it
cial to meet medical expenses. They were alone pay for a trip to the Disney World that Gandhi wanted to go on. That was when they met a volunteer from...
According to consultant psychiatrist, Pratibha Chaudhuri, it is quite common for parents to work for a bigger cause in coming terms with their child's disability. "In fact, when parents come to us for counselling, the reactions are typical. Either there is guilt, or frustration or plain denial of facts."

The parents are normally advised to come to terms with reality by associating themselves with an organisation through which they can know more about families facing the same problem. "This is what we mean by 'sublimation', in psychological terms. Not only does it serve an altruistic purpose, it also helps one come to terms with grief," avers Chaudhuri.

Take Mary Barun, for instance. Mary had put her autistic son in a special school that had just been set up for mentally challenged children. But she soon realises that the school was treating him like a mentally retarded one and decided to keep him at home, "professionally living with their child the right way but I feel parents can make the best guides for children with special needs," she says.

Mary began networking with parents of autistic children across the country, and even went abroad to attend training courses. Enthused by the progress her son had shown, Mary took on two more autistic children at home and worked with them until she went on to become the School for Autism in Delhi.

The School today has about 30 children and six teachers besides Mary. No method is followed, a recipe card at the school, but besides developing cognitive and academic skills, emphasis is laid on developing the social and communicative skills of the children. Her own son, Neeraj, now 17, can dress up on his own, express and cater to all his personal needs and even strike conversations by himself.

Sanjit Sen Gupta set up the Crisis Intervention Centre, an organisation in Calcutta which tries to cultivate positive thinking among children, after the suicide of his own daughter. She killed herself after doing badly in her examinations. Today, the Crisis Intervention Centre regularly includes teaching them yoga, dance, music and drawing. It is also starting Young Adults Centre which caters to people over 18. All I can say is that autistic children are extremely happy. It helps us parents as well, not feel the odd parents out," says Sarkar.

Says Manju Chaterjee, who runs the Delhi Public School, the school has an active participation in the social, cultural and sports activities and has won several trophies.