

Many of us who first became familiar with a developmental disorder called 'autism' only after we saw Tom Cruise give a brilliant performance in the Oscar-winning film *Rain Man*, still don't know the fundamentals about this condition. Often dismissed as a 'type of mental retardation', autism is one of the most misunderstood conditions in the world. Explains Merry Baruah, the person behind Action For Autism (AFA), the first organisation in the sub-continent to deal specifically with this disorder, "It is a disease that affects a person's social and communication abilities." She tells us that the lack of awareness about the condition, often leads parents to send their autistic children to schools for

mentally handicapped children. "This doesn't help at all," she adds. Highlighting the difference between the two conditions, she says that while retarded children learn in the same manner as normal people, only slower, for autistic children, "the mode of learning is completely different. With them it is the question of finding the right key." It is in this context that providing specialised programmes for them becomes so important. "It can make a world of difference," says Merry, who was singularly responsible for bringing about a positive turn-around in her son's condition when he was eleven years old.

AFA runs Open Door, a unique school in Delhi with 32 children in all, attending dif-

# Hope For Autistics

## Action For Autism



Merry Baruah with her son.



- Approximately 80 per cent of all children affected by autism are boys
- There is no cure for autism, but international opinion agrees that the condition can be greatly improved by training that begins with family involvement

**Taking a break  
at the Open  
Door School**

ferent programmes. It is the only institution of its kind in South Asia – a laboratory school where intervention methods are tried and developed. Every child is given individual attention and all the teachers are specially trained. AFA has also received training from the TEACCH Program of the University of North Carolina and the Option Institute in Massachusetts.

Based on the principle that it is a parent-directed, parent-supported organisation and its basic philosophy that all families possess the capability to successfully handle autistic members if they are given the proper guidance and resources, AFA provides help in a number of different

areas. *The Autism Network* an AFA journal focuses on news and feedback. AFA also provides for complete counselling, home-based management programmes, awareness campaigns, resource library, curriculum development, teacher training and organisation of workshops and lectures.

"We don't think of ourselves doing a noble job here," says Merry Baruah. "We have fun and we use a completely non-judgemental approach. We respect each individual as a human being." It is Merry's positive and optimistic approach that is infectious. "Anything is a tragedy if you look at it like one," she says. She certainly didn't look at her son's autism as one. Au contraire, it was her efforts to understand the problem and her determination to make sense of it that eventually grew into an organisation called Action For Autism, that is today, providing a very vital forum for families with autistic members throughout the sub-continent.

For more information contact: Action for Autism, Post Box 3678, Defence Colony, New Delhi 110027 Tel: 4620360, 4690132. Fax: 4690132. E-mail: [actaut@nda.vsnl.net.in](mailto:actaut@nda.vsnl.net.in). Website: <http://www.autism-india.org>.

– PAYAL KOHLI

### How you can help:

- If you have a spare apartment that is vacant, you can offer it to AFA for a few months, to house families visiting from out-of-town
- Participate in the 'Be-A-Buddy' programme where you are, quite literally a friend, and can take your pal out for a pizza, a film or a musical concert
- If you are a professional (a photographer, a doctor, a musician...) and can spare a day, call AFA.

## The Hard Facts

- More than 20 lakh Indians are autistic
- Autism is the third most common developmental disorder (more common than Down's Syndrome).
- It is a population-based disorder, with certain number of the population necessarily afflicted by the disease.
- Autism is a 'spectrum' disorder – where the severity of symptoms range from mild learning problems to severe impairment.
- Autism may occur alone or with accompanying problems like mental retardation, seizures or tuberous sclerosis.
- Every community, race and income-group is affected by autism.