Uma Girish

"Not everyone is an Einstein," Merry Barua said to herself as she watched her three-year-old son. While the other kids in school enjoyed crayon work and pasting, Neeraj's exercise book lay empty. When she tried to get him to hold a pencil, his fingers were limp. "I knew there was something the matter but I hadn't a clue what it was. I'd read a Reader's Digest article way back and recalled the word autism—but I knew nothing more," says Merry, casting her mind back to twenty years ago. Neeraj had no speech but her husband's family propped her up with the assurance that he himself spoke late. By age 3½, however, the anxious mother was looking for a diagnosis.

Diagnosis shopping. Merry and her spouse ran through a long list of paediatricians and psychologists in Calcutta.

Merry Makes a Difference

From a reassuring but inaccurate - 'Nothing wrong with him' - to a callous 'Obviously you don't hit him hard enough' - to explain his spitting

and colour concepts. When the family eventually moved to Delhi she enrolled him in a Special Needs school where he spent the next five years.

DEALING WITH DISABILITIES

"It was a good place but they were clueless about autism." By age ten, Neeraj's behaviour had become severely challenging—defeating, shouting, hitting. "I cannot even begin to describe it. My family life had become desperate."

As Merry's knowledge broadened it dawned on her that autism was not the same as mental retardation and the school's pride in it had to move on. It was the advanced work done in the US that brought a ray into her world of despair. When she trained in the US and returned a year later, interactive workshops all over India. It was a Chennai workshop organised by WE CAN, a Resource Centre, where Madarsplus caught up with Merry who, true to her name, is sheer effervescence.

Neeraj is 22 and able to take care of his needs today. "He's learning something every day," says Merry who takes immense pride in every new mountain he climbs.