

# Autistic and smiling, there is hope

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INTERIOR designer Reena Sabharwal would often watch her three-year-old daughter Ishita pour water from a jug into a glass and back for hours. Like all parents, she would worry why Ishita was late in her growth milestones. Five years later she was told her daughter was autistic.

Sabharwal panicked — which school would accept her child and where would she get help? Though hardly any mainstream school in the city accepts such children, NGOs such as Action for Autism and People Concerned About

Autism run a number of special programmes and mother-child courses.

Low on India's disability map, autism today is a struggle for 18 lakh families across the country. A disorder of the brain, it affects one in every 500 children, and four out of five autistic children are usually boys. People with autism do not make sense of the world and do not follow the same rules of communication and social interaction which come naturally to others.

But parents are quick to tell you that their children are often underestimated, mostly by parents themselves. Indu Chaswal has two autistic chil-



Aditya with mother Sangeeta Mehra, who is a volunteer teacher. He is heading for a mainstream school.

RENUKA PURI

of Hope, giving these special children space and opportunity

# for this child in the city

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

■ Action for Autism: T-370, Chirag Gaon, New Delhi-110017.  
Call: 29258469, 29258470

■ People Concerned About Autism: C/O Tamana Association, D-6, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi-110057. Call: 26143853

*(Another centre, School of Hope, is being opened by the President today)*

dren and is a teacher at Autism for Action. "We once had a five-year-old boy Ankit, and if you told him your date of birth, he could tell you what day of the week it would fall on every year," she recalled. "We had

no idea how he calculated it and if you asked him, he didn't know either."

Chaswal tells you that though there is no cure for autism, there's a lot of scope for progress. Most parents turn into teachers themselves. Special educators are often required as behaviour patterns of autistic children vary immensely.

A prominent South Delhi school charges upto Rs 14,000 per month for teaching autistic children. Other primary schools which accept autistic children charge anything between Rs 1,200 and Rs 3,500 per month.

When designer Reena Sabharwal was told her child was

autistic when she was eight, she enrolled Ishita with AFA. "Ishita has come a long way. Now she goes out with us, wants to socialise and even points out if we behave differently with our younger daughter, Radhika, who is normal."

However, a lot needs to be done to provide more facilities for these children. "It is not even recognised by the government as a disability," said Usha Rai, an environment expert and journalist, who has a seven-year-old autistic grandchild. "It is very important that these children should be encouraged to join mainstream education. They have a lot of potential, they are just not articulate."