

# DESTINY'S CHILD!

WITH AN AVERAGE OF 1 OUT OF EVERY 200 CHILDREN BORN IN INDIA SUFFERING FROM THIS NEURO-DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY, **DISHA GADHIYA** TRIES TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT AUTISM AND THE REASONS FOR ITS OCCURRENCE.



Eleven year old Rahul (name changed) calls out names of all the cars that drive past him every time he travels with his parents. You might wonder in amazement about his ability to grasp such difficult names at such a young age, almost giving a sense of another whiz kid in the making. But the fact might not be entirely true...

Rahul is one of over 40,000 children in Mumbai who suffer from autism today. "It's a misconception when you say that people know what Autism is!" retorts Dr. Ritesh Shah, Fellow in Paediatric Neurology at Hinduja Hospital when asked about the treatments available for this incurable disorder. Autism is a brain development disorder that impairs social interaction and normal communication. It is likely to start as early as three years of age reflecting restricted and repetitive behaviour.

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While autism is of a highly genetic nature, there are many environmental factors that lead to its incidence. In the last 15-20 years, a couple of external factors have triggered the number of autism affected children in India. "The rise of nuclear families and watching television before the age of two have been observed to have severely affected the development of the brain," informs Dr. Shah. In a nuclear family setup, where most of the times parents work full time, the child hardly gets an opportunity to interact with them. This leads

to lack of social interaction which in turn affects the behaviour of the child. Same applies to frequent instances of watching television at an early stage. A child is subject to one way communication with the television which limits his scope of developing communication skills. "After birth, the first two years are very crucial for the brain to grow. If proper care is not taken at this stage it will lead to generating brain related disorders," admits Dr. Shah. Another issue that demands attention is 'how to know if a child is suffering from autism?'

"Early diagnosis goes a long way in finding out if there is any problem with the child. Usually, parents come to us when their child has not started talking even at the age of three. There are times when the child even behaves strangely. That is when parents should immediately consult a doctor," explains Dr. Shah. Treatments like behavioural therapy, occupational therapy and sensory integration can be undergone if the child is diagnosed with autism. But even this differs from each patient based on the magnitude. It is observed that consistent treatment may even result in absolute normality of a child suffering from mild autism. Along with these therapies, there are some medicines prescribed for reducing the challenges associated with autism.

There are various support groups and non-profit organi-

### Some famous Hollywood movies depicting an autistic character:

- The Boy who could Fly - 1968
- Rainman (starring Dustin Hoffman) - 1988
- Little Man Tate - 1991
- House of Cards - 1993
- What's eating Gilbert Grape - 1993
- The Innocent - 1994
- Mercury Rising - 1998
- The Other Sister - 1999
- Molly - 1999



sations in Mumbai that have come forward to spread awareness about autism. Their attempt has also been in bringing about its clear understanding and thereby encouraging a sensible approach towards taking care of the affected children. "Parents need to understand the magnitude and accordingly take necessary measures to help their child cope up with the problem," advises Dr. Shah.



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| Behavioural Therapy  | Occupational Therapy  | Sensory Integration Therapy  |
|--|---|--|
| Includes methods of behaviour modification used to treat inappropriate, repetitive, and aggressive behaviour and to provide autistic patients with skills necessary to function in their environment. It usually requires intense, one-on-one training with a therapist and extensive caregiver involvement. | Helps improve independent function and teaches basic skills to improve conducting finer activities of daily life (e.g. tying the shoe lace, buttoning a shirt, bathing, etc). | Focuses on helping autistic patients cope with sensory stimulation (e.g. Sense of Touch). Treatment may include having the patient handle materials with different textures or listen to different sounds. |