

Teaching autistic kids ain't no child's play

DNA, Sunday, Dec 12, 2010

The two-day conference held by the Association for Behaviour Analysis (ABA), India, an affiliate of ABA International, US, opened the floor to parents, special educators, behaviour analyst, psychologists and educationalists on Saturday. Papers were presented on topics revolving around Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This is the first conference being held in India. One of the sessions, 'Going to school and being effective in school shadowing', presented by Meera Ramani, who is from Al Noor Special Needs Centre, Dubai, addressed parents, taking them through the phases of shadowing — how it can help the child in a mainstream school and how a shadow can fade away over time.

Ramani said the role of the shadow for an autistic child can be played by either a parent or a professional who helps prompt the child in class when the teacher gives general instructions. "My daughter is four years old. Initially, she did not take general or group classroom instruction because she was used to one-on-one learning. As a shadow, I would prompt my child," says Lakshmi Satish. Her daughter was diagnosed when she was one-and-a-half years old. Early detection has helped her daughter, she says: "At 19 months, my daughter did not speak, she would bang her head against the wall; cry incessantly." After the reason was found out, her daughter was put in a comprehensive ABA (applied behaviour analysis) programme.

"Ramani's presentation showed that shadowing can be phased, that involves high level of prompting during the first phase, fade prompting and language promotion in the second phase, promoting peer monitors or sharing and lastly step in only when necessary," said Lakshmi. The four phases are exhaustive and need constant teacher-parent support. While this model is successful in Dubai, India is yet to get a school on the same model. One of the themes of the conference is to promote and encourage ABA to be taught in the country by faculty educated in ABA. With autism diagnoses at 1 in 150, there is a definite need for qualified professionals.

Smita Awasthi, president, ABA India, said: "Currently, for a population of 2 million children affected by autism, the country has three behaviour analysts and eight studying ABA from abroad." The conference has invited universities and educational institutes that are keen on taking up this as a course of study. However, that's not all. Papers and workshops are being conducted for parents and special educators.