

Reports

Know me, Teach me: Annual Training Workshop

By Action For Autism, National Centre for Autism in India

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This annual three-day training workshop was conducted by Action For Autism (AFA), for parents of children with autism, professionals working with children with autism, and those who are interested in learning about it. AFA is a non-profit organization comprising people with autism and their parents, that strives to fight for the rights of people with autism. It has a range of interventional and educational programmes for children, training programmes for adults and family support services. The workshop is one of a kind in India, and participants come from all across India.

For this workshop, sessions were conducted by AFA staff including Merry Barua, Indrani Basu, Sudhanshu Grover, Preeti, Divya, and Sharmila P. G. The trainees of various courses run at AFA also actively participated in the workshop.

The workshop started with an introduction to autism by Merry Barua, who is also the founder member of AFA. She started with a personal narrative about her autistic son and how she was motivated by him to work for the cause of autism in India. She used minimal jargon to get across the concept of autism to a diverse audience. She presented a brief history of autism and the incidence and prevalence of autism across globe with special focus on gender, since four times more males than females are diagnosed with Autism. Autism is considered as uneven skill development in terms of language. Barua talked about the characteristics of an autistic child, stressing upon his/her body

language, eye contact, facial expression and gestures. This introductory session helped the participants to understand some common misconceptions and stereotypes around autism.

In the next session, there was a discussion on the neurocognitive theories used to explain autism by Ms. Barua. These included theory of mind, executive functioning, sensory processing, and detailed thinking. Ms. Barua pointed out that children with autism do not need to be “fixed”; instead we need to understand and accept their needs so that adaptations can be made accordingly. These points were constantly reiterated throughout the workshop to drive home the message that individuals with autism should be respected.

After this session, participants asked several questions. One of the participants queried how long it takes for parents to be happy about their autistic child; another participant wanted to know how to respond to people’s negative comments about their autistic child. Merry Barua took this opportunity to clarify that being happy is an ongoing process that applies to all relationships, not just an autistic child, and also that parents first need to accept their child’s diagnosis. Parents need to be comfortable with the fact that their child has autism and fight for their rights without an attitude of pity.

In the next presentation, Merry Barua and Indrani Basu demonstrated some behaviours of adults and parents that may have a negative impact on autistic children. For example, scolding the child in an angry tone, talking about the child in front of them, being judgemental and negative and dragging or pulling the child along. This was followed by a talk by Indrani Basu about the sensory difficulties faced by children with autism and the strategies to manage these difficulties. She described the symptoms which could help identify the sensory difficulties of an autistic

child. For instance, a visually hyposensitive child may be expected to stare at people or objects and seek bright lights. For such children, toys such as spinning tops, bubbles, shiny bottles, etc. provide stimulus.

The last session of the day was on behaviour and learning by Sudhanshu Grover. He explained the Antecedent – Behaviour – Consequences (ABC) format to analyse behaviour and discussed motivation as a reason for behaviour. He proposed that by changing the A and C, existing behaviours can be modified or new behaviours can be taught. After these sessions, questions from the participants were taken and a thorough discussion on them concluded the first day of the workshop.

On the second day, Ms. Basu discussed some basic rules for communicating with a person with autism. These included: use of simple words, well-articulated speech with detailed expression of the complete thought, a positive approach, and talking to the child as often as possible.

The next session was on how to use the principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to teach children with Autism. The strategies discussed included Discrete Trial Training (DTT), errorless teaching, prompting, shaping and chaining. Structured teaching and visual strategies were also explained. Finally, videos demonstrating the use of visual schedules and work systems by children with ASD were shown.

The next session “Let’s begin teaching” was taken by Preeti, who focused on pairing, communication, imitation, visual discrimination, and other activities that can be done with children with ASD to teach them various skills. The last session of the day was about strategies for teaching cognitive skills such as colour discrimination, pre-math concepts and reading. Students started with sight reading some common nouns. They went on to matching words with their corresponding objects and then with

picture cards and finally matching the word to the picture on a worksheet. Adapted books and structured activities were also discussed.

The third day began with an interesting session on stories that could be used to describe certain social situations and thus give information about how the child may react, thereby helping them to teach appropriate behaviour in a specific situation. This was followed by an important session on dealing with challenging behaviours. Some common misconceptions such as: “people with ASD are loners and deliberately misbehave in social situations”, were clarified. The participants were explained about how the concept of privacy needed to be taught in a concrete and cognitive way rather than in a social way since that is how individuals with autism learn. The penultimate session of the workshop dealt with issues of adults with autism. This session was meant to also address issues of puberty in both girls and boys with autism and how to make them understand their sexuality.

The presenters concluded the workshop with a session on alternative therapies that parents may be tempted to try in the quest to cure their child. These therapies are often outside mainstream science and lack scientific evaluation. Parents were cautioned that they need to check whether these therapies work and whether they are supported by scientific studies.

At the end of the workshop, it was very clear that children with autism display different behaviours and therefore require specific coping strategies. The message for parents was to see their children as human beings, to respect them, to accept their differences, to enjoy them and to empower them. Though the workshop exposed the participants to a wholesome teaching pedagogy, the participation fees for parents and professionals seemed to be a bit high for a three-day workshop. The workshop

had a bilingual approach, which was really appreciable but the teaching manual given to all participants was in English, which may prove to be a hindrance to parents who are not proficient in English. However, AFA provides reprints of some teaching manuals in different languages on demand.

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Report on Book Release: *Rethinking Disability in India* by Anita Ghai

Asha Singh

Rethinking Disability in India authored by Dr. Anita Ghai was released by Smt. Brinda Karat who also chaired a discussion on the book at India International Centre on 14 May 2015. Dr Tanmoy Bhattacharya and Mr Harsh Mander as the panelists presented insightful analyses of the current discourse on the contentious relationship between social indifference towards disability and the absence of knowledge about difference in general.

In her book, the author Dr. Ghai has powerfully written about the struggles of the disabled amidst the “hegemony of the abled”. She has also written about how they experience “social apartheid” as defective and disapproved objects under the sharp gaze of the abled. The book has been written in the spirit of opening up avenues for dialogue between various social

ability groups, addressing the experiential terrain of the disabled and voicing the collective angst of communities with difference as “hope may be an accomplished liar but hope is all that we have”. Both panellists, Dr. Bhattacharya and Mr Mander, compellingly urged for the need for co-existence of different normalities. Tanmoy Bhattacharya took forward Ghai’s personal quests and perspective and the demographic absence of the world of ideas related to the social presence of disability. His analysis of the deceptively minimalist cover of the book with the letters of the title words in different fonts and colour was indicative of subversion and perhaps suppression of the marginalized. With regard to the contents of the book, he identified the dynamic link between the availability of audio-visual and print materials, experiential accounts and interactive spaces of difference with a view to prompt review, reflection and reframing of the societal perceptions of the ability-disability continuum. This in turn would lead to an enriched understanding of the extent of what is “normative”.

Harsh Mander elaborated upon the unique ways in which Anita Ghai has recounted her experiences as a way to bring academic attention to social, emotional, sexual and intellectual knowledge of difference and its usefulness in knowing and viewing the world. Brinda Karat provided excellent anchoring and comments to bind the discussion and expanded on the diversity of disability issues and challenges. All speakers touched on the role and need for increasing avenues for dialogue on ideas of difference. Books and films contribute significantly to the production of knowledge impacting attitudes, values and behaviour. The present book contributes hugely towards stoking the academic imagination in probing epistemologies of knowing, learning and internalizing as well as exploring existing social realities of living with difference. Ghai’s book most importantly provides visibility to persons with disabilities.