

Raghavun

A Silent Journey

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Table of contents

Raghavun	3
A Normal Birth	4
The Diagnosis	6
Acceptance	8
Therapy Continues	10
Special Schools	12
Raghavun's Mother	14
Silent Sibling	17
Skill Development	19
Autism and the Senses	22
Entering Adulthood	25
Goodbye to Schools	27
Homeschooling	29
Bright Future	31

Raghavun

A Silent Journey

This is a book that traces the journey of Raghavun, an autistic adult, over a period of 35 years.

A Normal Birth

Human beings come with a destiny into this beautiful world. Depending on the country, religion and the times in which we are born, the experiences we go through differ. Everyone is unique. No two things or no two persons are similar, cannot be similar. Some lives are eventless. Some are beds of roses. Some are full of struggles. A small incident may completely change the course of our life. Though these things are predestined, our approach towards such happenings can always be positive.

I was born and brought up in Karur and enjoyed a good childhood, just like most children in orthodox Indian families. Until marriage everything was as quiet as a calm sea, but little did we know that this was the calm before the storm. My husband Thiagu and I were made for each other and were on top of the world. The first few years of our life were spent in Bangalore. We were expecting our first child in a couple of months. Raghavun was born on one fine Deepavali day. Now, I am going to tell you a story of thirty two years.

Our life can be classified as before and after Raghavun's birth. In world history, Jesus Christ's birth has such a great significance and the same is true with Raghavun's birth in our lives. Things changed. Can I say, changed for the better? Day 1: Raghavun was born normal. Everything seemed normal. But his inability to suck milk was one of the first signs of abnormality. We helplessly tried all possible means to help him suck milk. Finally, we had to feed him with an ink filler. At that stage, that did not seem like a cause for concern or at least that is what our doctor said. Besides, he was well fed, and slept peacefully most of the time for the first three days, just as any newborn would do. Even in my wildest dreams I didn't expect that many sleepless nights were going to follow.

As is the tradition in all Indian families, I came back to my parents' place with Raghavun after spending merely three days in the hospital. The baby was awake at night and slept during daytime. That too was not a cause for concern because many babies follow that pattern. The older women in my family assured me that it was quite normal. I was pampered in my parents home. I ate and slept well as I was a feeding mother and my mother took care of the baby throughout this period. In life we don't know what God has in store for us. Maybe for the first few months, God was preparing me to run for the next many years, the warm-up and preparation before the marathon.

Days passed. The first seed of worry was sown in me after two months when Raghavun kept crying incessantly whenever he was awake. I couldn't discuss my fears with my husband as he was employed in a company at Bangalore and we were yet to join him. When we are surrounded by people close to us, worries take a back seat. Raghavun was still an infant and

I was hopeful that better days would follow. Four months passed in this manner and it was time I joined my husband in Bangalore.

During the entire period of the four months that I was with my parents, Raghavun didn't show any special preference to me. On joining his father, he spontaneously got attached or attracted to him. He was always with his dad whenever he was at home and cried when Thiagu left for work. At first I wasn't too bothered by this behaviour. But as the days went by, it was becoming increasingly difficult to handle him. His sleep habits were still nocturnal. He didn't sleep at all at night. We took turns and kept awake. Obviously I allowed my husband to sleep a little longer as he had to go to the office and I was a homemaker and stayed home. Though Raghavun slept during the day, we had to finish all chores before he woke up.

Fortunately, by this time he had learnt to suck milk. He slept alone in bed. He didn't expect me to put him to sleep. Even if he woke up, he would be lying quietly without searching for me. We had a joola at home and at nights he would sit on the joola and would want us to rock it. He loved that rocking movement. It calmed him. He would cry his heart out and get tired and sleep on the joola itself. Those days we never slept in bed. We would sleep near the joola holding its strings in one hand and wake up with a shudder when Raghavun woke up from his short fifteen minute nap at night. Gradually this difficult and different routine started having an impact on our healths and moods.

At this point I would like to pause and tell young parents something. Never allow anything to come between husband and wife. Only if you stay united can you win the battle. Don't start the blame game. When things go wrong, it is easier to find fault with others. We always have a pitiable tendency to think that others are responsible for our problems or misfortunes. This is not so. Moreover, solving the problem we are facing at the present moment is more important than analysing who or what is the root cause of the problem. Though that's also necessary, the immediate thing we have to do is to strike a balance, get back to normal health, keep the mind a little more calm so that we can think of the next course of action.

The Diagnosis

All of Raghavun's developmental milestones were delayed: rolling over, sitting, standing, walking and so on. The difference was apparent, and even striking when we compared him with our friends' children. Toys didn't amuse him. Instead he preferred to rotate round-shaped objects and he would keep looking at them for a long duration. He would lie on the bed, look at the fan and laugh. Giving him a bath was not at all a problem. He loved to spend time in the bathtub, splashing water. He didn't like the company of other children. He hated their shrill, high-pitched voices. He also didn't like to be cuddled.

Raghavun started speaking at the right time. That was the only thing which happened at the correct time. We were happy. But again the happiness was short lived as his speech was different. He used to parrot whatever we said. He couldn't initiate a conversation and answer questions. His memory was excellent. He could recite many slokas, sing all nursery rhymes without faultlessly. He was two years old at this point.

We gave him all the mandatory vaccines. We visited doctors following small occasional setbacks to his health in this two year period. Surprisingly, none of the doctors detected anything abnormal or different about Raghavun's behaviour during these visits. Meanwhile, we got used to Raghavun's behavioural patterns and learnt to cope with them. The only person who had some nagging feeling was, as the reader might have guessed, myself. I felt that something was not in place but didn't express it because it was still a vague impression, a subtle intuition, and I couldn't exactly pinpoint what the difficulty was.

We made a few visits to our parents' and in-laws' homes during this period. The elders noticed Raghavun's odd behaviour, but attributed all the wrong reasons for it. They claimed that we didn't allow him to mingle with other children of his age and that we didn't teach him to talk properly and many such things. As these accusations were blatantly false and lacked any understanding of the situation, we managed to stay unperturbed.

As if to make things worse, he suffered periodic bouts of high fever and urinary infections. This happened once every month and he underwent treatment for that. He was very quiet when he was sick. The doctor advised us to go for a circumcision operation as a solution for the urinary infections. We did it when he was two and a half years old. He came out of the operation theatre wailing loudly as the anaesthesia that he was administered didn't have the intended effect on him. He spent two days in post-operative care and was discharged soon. This incident marked a turning point in his life.

After coming home, he completely stopped uttering even a single word. It was as if the divine Goddess of speech had abandoned him and retreated to her abode. His capacity to recite slokas and rhymes fluently seemed to have vanished into thin air. What was earlier a lively gushing stream had turned into a trickle. A deadly silence descended.

We felt sad. Even at that time we were more worried about his admission to schools. How would schools admit a child who didn't even answer simple questions? Such were the questions that troubled us, but never did we entertain any other doubt. In hindsight, perhaps our level of awareness of his peculiar situation was low. All children of his age group were being trained by parents to face interviews before admission into kindergarten. We were pensive and decided to see a doctor. I was a very light-hearted person till that evening.

We waited at the doctor's clinic. We were called in after fifteen minutes. The doctor was a pleasant gentleman and had a way with children. He examined Raghavun and asked us many questions. As he processed our answers, his face became grave. We were anxiously looking at him. Every second that passed was like an eternity. He held my husband's hands and said, "Young man, you must be bold, I am going to give you some bad news. Your little son has Autism. Take an appointment with the National Institute for Mental Health And NeuroScience (NIMHANS) and get it confirmed so that you can start therapy immediately without further delay." We looked at him sheepishly. It was the first time we had heard the word Autism and didn't know anything about the condition or its seriousness. But from the doctor's expressions we understood that something was seriously wrong with our child. I collected myself and asked him, "Doctor, can you please explain the condition as we are hearing this word for the first time?" My voice choked and was hardly audible.

The doctor then explained the condition:

"Autism is a condition which affects the overall development of a child, especially language and social development of the child. It is a 'spectrum' disorder. Children with autism fall on a wide spectrum: some are mildly autistic, while others are severely autistic, and there is an entire gradation in between these extremes. Autism may or may not be associated with mental retardation. Some autistic children, also called autistic savants, possess extraordinary capacities to do few things. The causes for autism were not well known then, and continue to remain obscure even to this day. There is no cure either. Only by training could we bring about changes in them. Tremendous patience would be required to handle these children. Results would be slow. There are many characteristic features of autism. A child may have a few or all the features and the severity of the condition is proportional to the number of features. More the features, the greater the severity. A complete cure is non-existent. The features remain well into adulthood and even beyond that, but definitely there will be improvement. People with autism will always need support."

This was the general outline of the condition given by the doctor. I felt as if we had received a blow with every sentence the doctor spoke. He was kind enough to explain the condition in detail and assured us that we would get better guidance from experts at NIMHANS.

Acceptance

We left the doctor's clinic and drove back home in complete silence. I felt too numb to react. On entering home, I went inside the bedroom, closed the door and wept bitterly for about ten minutes. That was the only time I have cried in these many years for his condition. I then gathered myself, became a little calm, and came out to see Thiagu's reaction. He was calmer. We looked at each other deeply and then at our sweet little child. As usual, he was enjoying the rotating movement of the fan and was lost in his own world. It was our first understanding that his world was different.

We spoke for an hour, trying to come up with a plan of action. These were some of the questions on our minds: what should we do next, when should we visit NIMHANS and the most delicate of all, how do we break the news to our parents and the first circle of family members. All the weaknesses that were weighing us down suddenly left us. We felt quite strong and understood that it requires tremendous strength of mind to face the future. The responsibilities increased several-fold and many other unwanted stresses we had been carrying along left us in a moment. I will elaborate on them, as and when I talk about the different stages of our life.

Soon, we took an appointment at NIMHANS and met the chief doctor. Fortunately, NIMHANS was located in Bangalore. Raghavun underwent a brain scan and an EEG. We had to make quite a few visits to the hospital, for tests, getting results, and so on. By now we were sure about the results and only waited for confirmation and guidance from the chief doctor. The scan report said that he had termed bi-frontal atrophy and the doctors confirmed that he had autism. They gave a big list of dos and don'ts. We were asked to report to them every month. No medicines were prescribed, as it was not a disease but a condition.

We just kept quiet for two weeks as we needed time to digest the fact. We searched for books on autism from libraries as internet facilities were not available in those days. The first circle of family members were informed. They knew nothing about autism and the news shocked them. I was the target of their criticism. All of them felt that I was the cause of my son's condition. We tried to convince them that mothers are not the root cause of their children's autism. But all our efforts were in vain. Though we had a matured approach to Raghavun's condition, at times, even very close people made me feel guilty. The good thing was that my husband and I never had any difference of opinion in this matter. We never argued, never quarrelled and ignored comments. Our only focus was Raghavun's improvement.

Raghavun was three years old now and we tried for admission in normal schools. We took this approach because from the books we read we came to know that some normal schools admitted

one or two special children and gave them additional attention and helped them to grow out of their problem. We were in Bangalore and the schools we approached politely refused him admission. So the next step was to approach special schools and special educators. There was a developmental centre for exceptional children. We took him there and started training. It was on a one to one basis. One teacher for one child. The fees for the training sessions were a bit on the higher side. Each session lasted for just an hour as the attention span for autistic kids is much less compared to normal children. As Raghavun was a small child, I had to sit with him throughout the session. Another reason why I was made to sit with him was that the training was as much a necessity for the mothers as it was for the child.

It was only after I started going to the centre, did I come to know that there were many children with this condition, and that too with worse disabilities. I made many friends. The condition of autism was the common thread that ran through all our lives. Different roofs, but similar stories. We shared our experiences with each other. I felt I had a mission to fulfil and that my husband and I were a specially chosen couple. This may sound like hyperbole to some readers, but it is far from that. All that you need to do is to spend a day with my son to understand the truth behind this assertion.

I must say I started enjoying the sessions. When Thiagu returned home from office I had an interesting story to tell him everyday. Our world revolved around Raghavun. We woke up with a lot of hope with every sunrise, worked with Raghavun, taught him simple things, and enjoyed the little improvements he showed. We started sleeping peacefully and got used to his sleeping pattern. Somehow we never worried that he was not like other children. We accepted his condition as God-given. When parents start accepting special children, the world will also do that. We had wonderful neighbours, friends who empathised with our condition and they were ready to extend any help.

Therapy Continues

We were going to NIMHANS every month and we were waiting for the next visit to the doctor to discuss Raghavun's self harming behaviour. By then, he had hurt himself on several occasions. Stepping out of the home and taking him to public places was posing problems. The phenomenon of autism is rare, so the number of children with autism is less. Consequently, the awareness among the general public is also less. This problem was even more pronounced about 30 years back. So, people used to look at us with curiosity, a few started advising, others laughed, some showed faces. In a single word, it was embarrassing. But we ruminated over this and concluded that such embarrassment was unnecessary. To parents with autism, here is a question: Why should we feel embarrassed? The so-called "normal children" let their parents down quite routinely in public places. Some kids are adamant and they cry to get things done. Parents tag this as typical children's behaviour and call them smart. Here, little Raghavun didn't know what he was doing. It was not his mistake. Yes, we dropped our embarrassment, that day, that moment like a hot potato. The word was removed from our dictionary.

We had a longer session with the doctor. He said that self-harming was one of the most common features among autistic children. There are around eighteen features that define autism and Raghavun had almost all of them. The doctor gave a few words of advice. I can never forget them. Now, I am passing on what we learnt, to whoever is in need of it. When the self-harming behaviour started, Raghavun was very small. It is easier to correct or bring these things under control when children are under ten. At this stage, we as parents would be physically stronger than our children. That's the reason the sessions for special children insist on early intervention and training. We should be strict, but not beat the children. We must somehow make it clear to them that we are not pleased with their behaviour. Small positive reinforcement can be given for good behaviour. That will motivate them. Raghavun loves cakes. We used to keep small cake pieces ready. Whenever his tantrums were short-lived, we gave him a small piece of cake. We informed him why we gave him the cake.

One thing that young parents of such children should bear in mind is this: we must talk to them as we would talk to other children. They may not respond. That is perfectly fine. We won't have any clue if they understood whatever we tried to convey. That too is fine. Once in a while, we can skip giving any sort of reinforcement. Otherwise, there will be an excessive reliance on the reinforcements and they will start basing their good behaviour on the expectation of the goodies. When it thus becomes a habit, they would cooperate only if we give them something that they desire. And that may lead to a different set of issues. Reinforcement need not always be edible. It may be a drive, a small kiss or hug if they allow

us to do that. Now that we are talking about hugs, most children with autism hate to be cuddled. In fact they shrink from any kind of physical contact.

What all this shows is that training autistic children means doing just the right amount of the right thing on the right day. Yes, this is no exaggeration. This is similar to tight-rope walking: walking on a rope with hands stretched so as to not lose balance. Avoiding something and overdoing something will both have consequences that are totally different in nature. What works on one day to calm an autistic child may completely fail on another day. Conscious choices should be made at every step. Actually, all these lessons that we learn while bringing up autistic children have a much wider utility and will help us in other spheres of life too.

Back to the story. The days passed. We didn't give Raghavun any medicine, thanks to the wonderful team of doctors we had. They clearly said that medicines should not be administered unless the child has serious issues like convulsions. Again, it is God's grace that Raghavun didn't develop convulsions or other adverse conditions. But a few children do develop fits and doctors prescribe medicine for such children. It is very important to monitor the child, make a note of such incidents and give medicine as per the doctor's advice without fail. Our doctors said that it would be better if Raghavun didn't develop convulsions for the first fourteen years. We kept our fingers crossed and prayed that everything should go well.

Raghavun's therapy continued and we were asked to take him to a speech therapist. I didn't like or approve of the idea because I knew Raghavun had good vocabulary and that he could speak, but didn't do so for some reason. We also observed that he became tense when people forced him to speak. Post the circumcision surgery, he stopped talking and we expected and hoped he would resume talking again. In such matters, generally the intuition of the mothers will be correct. But Thiagu insisted that we took him to the therapist. Maybe it was because he didn't want to leave or ignore anything the doctors and therapists suggested without giving it a try. He couldn't spend more time with Raghavun because of his professional commitments. So he wanted to do whatever was possible in his capacity through other means.

We tried speech therapy. The therapist made certain sounds and tried to make Raghavun repeat them. It was of no use. Raghavun knew many words already. It was like teaching a grown up school boy the alphabet. We stopped the training after a few visits to the centre. Raghavun's social interaction was poor. The doctors said that it would be better to put him in a special school instead of going for individual sessions. The idea was that he would spend more time away from home, see more people and would be engaged for a longer duration.

Special Schools

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Raghavun's Mother

Things were moving slowly and steadily. But we had to work more than other parents. When parents were taking their children to normal schools in one direction, I would be walking in the opposite direction to the special school, carrying Karthik, holding Raghavun's hand in one hand and a packed lunch bag in the other. I felt a tinge of self-pity and before it turned into a deep rooted depression, I collected myself quickly with Thiagu's support. He used to say that winners always stand apart and that we are born to win, to be different from the masses. I believed every single word of his statement and derived enormous strength from it.

Young fathers and the family should be understanding and supportive. The child stays in the mother's womb for nine long months and a mother always thinks that the child is an extension of her own self. However brave a woman may be, she will be under great emotional stress during the formative years of the special child. If the other family members are able to empathise with the condition it is good. Otherwise, they should at least refrain from passing derogatory comments and from being judgemental. With passing years the family members may understand the condition better. But the initial years are crucial and any unkind remark about the child during these years will leave a permanent mark in the parents' hearts.

Coming back to our story, we would wave happily to other children going to normal schools in the opposite direction and they would return the gesture. There's definitely a power above us which plans and organises everything. I call it God. You can call it nature or give it any other name. There were things I loved to do. Many things... Several years into adulthood, after becoming Raghavun's mother, it finally dawned on me that it was better to enjoy what I was doing than doing what I loved. There is a world of difference between the two attitudes to life. Enjoying the present moment, riding along the peaks and valleys of life without being ensnared by the distant hopes of the future gives a sense of contentment. Not being able to do the few things we like creates stress. We shall choose, choose to enjoy the present moment.

I used to entertain the hope of putting my engineering degree to some use. This hope started fading away. I was born to be Raghavun's mother and was not born to be an engineer. All interactions with my classmates ceased. When I learnt about the success stories of my friends, it didn't incite jealousy, but it did kindle a desire to take up some activity or the other. But this line of action was simply unthinkable then and remains that way even now. I was startled when I heard someone insinuate that my degree was a waste. There are things beyond our control. And we were so preoccupied with Raghavun that such comments failed to evoke any reaction in me. Young mothers, be bold. Never cry. None can hurt you without your consent. Never underestimate your strengths. At the same time, don't have a very high estimate of

yourself because you are doing something different. We should just be natural and spontaneous in our actions. Everybody has problems. It is just that the problems are different.

My identity became “Raghavun’s mother” to such an extent that a lot of parents in my social circle didn’t know my name! This attitude has its advantages and disadvantages. It assists in the growth of a certain detachment from small things, what we call trifles, but we might end up losing interest in life if this tendency gets the better of us. We should not jump to the wrong side. It is always good to remember the “middle path of the Budha”. To stay motivated, we must love life with an energy that doesn’t get depleted. There must be something that replenishes our reserves whenever they go down.

Our attention was equally distributed to our two children. Family outings were rare. Karthik spent his evenings only with Raghavun and tried to play with him. Raghavun was seven and Karthik three. Thiagu wanted to take up a better assignment in Madras. I liked the proposal because it is a Tamil speaking city and we felt that being exposed to Tamil, his mother tongue, both in school and in the neighbourhood would accelerate Raghavun’s progress. My parents were in Madras and we expected that to be a great support. Last but not the least, there was a big jump in Thiagu’s salary. A small, but important digression at this stage regarding financial matters.

Autistic children might outgrow their condition, but the number of autistic adults who become sufficiently independent to earn their livelihoods constitute an extremely small percent of this population. So parents should make hay when the sun shines, as the saying goes. They have to earn well to give a comfortable, peaceful future for the child. I don’t mean that we should aim for an opulent life and make the acquisition of money our prime preoccupation. At the same time, we shouldn’t miss good opportunities either. In India, the man is the breadwinner of the family and the woman supports him. This scenario has changed considerably and women of this age earn on par or even better than men. In the case of parents of autistic children, there must be a clear division of labour. Among the two, one should earn and the other should take care of the child. Only then will the quality of life be good. If both parents are too ambitious and leave the child with caretakers or even with grandparents, the child suffers. There are some insensitive fathers and families who put the blame on the mothers. I have seen fathers who leave the wife and child. That’s a separate chapter.

We were doubtful if Madras had as many special schools as Bangalore. I categorically declared that I wouldn’t budge an inch without knowing about the situation of special schools in Madras. Before Thiagu resigned from his previous company, we made a few trips to Madras and found the condition to be satisfactory. We bid goodbye to Bangalore with a lot of memories, pleasurable and painful. We felt at home at Madras with our parents, in-laws and relatives around to extend help when needed. The next phase of our life started. Staying positive and extracting good opportunities from any difficult situation is very important for parents like us. Let us enjoy the beauty and fragrance of the rose and ignore the thorns. My husband joined his new workplace. He loved his job and earned a little more. But, does anything come in life without a price? We paid the price. Thiagu spent more time at the office and the quality-time

we had in Bangalore started diminishing gradually. We can never have the cake and eat it too!

Silent Sibling

We didn't want to make the mistake of enrolling Raghavun in a school far away from home. It was difficult for me to spend most of the daytime outside home, come back and work at home. And we couldn't send Raghavun alone either. Moreover, we had to look for a school for Karthik and adjust our timings to drop and pick up both the children. We started searching for a special school first. Madras is vast and though there were schools for special kids, they were scattered across the city. The fact that there was not a single school which exclusively catered to the needs of autistic children made the search harder. Some autistic children may have the ability to enter mainstream academics, albeit with some difficulty, while others are not gifted with that ability. We tried to teach Raghavun what is normally introduced in kindergarten. He didn't learn. Alphabets and numbers didn't mean anything to him. Some parents deceive themselves. Don't do that. In the counselling sessions experts easily find out the IQ of the child. In Raghavun's case the school was only a place to learn self-help skills, better concentration and social skills. All of these were essential skills without which it was becoming difficult to engage him in a useful manner throughout the day.

As in the life of normal children, schooling is important for children with special needs at least until the age of twenty. After that the school will itself send the young autistic adult out in order to welcome small children. Basically, all rules applicable for other children hold good for special children. Raghavun was already seven. Time and tide waits for none. We enrolled him in a nearby school for normal kids. They accepted special children because the headmistress was a kind lady and she believed that these children would benefit by mingling with other children. She had Raghavun in school for a few months and Karthik also went to Pre-KG in the same school.

Karthik was a very quiet, sweet child and would narrate what happened in school everyday. Initially things seemed okay. But, Raghavun's odd behaviour started attracting the attention of parents and they complained to the teachers that they would withdraw their children from the school if Raghavun continued there. The headmistress was so polite and with a heavy heart told us to search for a special school for Raghavun. The children also made fun of Raghavun and we could sense that it hurt little Karthik. The next academic year, Karthik got admission in a very good school nearby and we found a special school for Raghavun. The instruction was similar to special schools in Bangalore. In the formative years children learn very fast. Raghavun was crossing that period. Now he was a small boy. The improvement was slow and the self-harming behaviour continued. These episodes were becoming increasingly distressing because he was no longer a kid now. When a small child cries or misbehaves, people ignore.

We expect older children to behave well and Raghavun's tantrums definitely made people turn back.

With a lump in his throat, Karthik told us one day that his friends asked him if Raghavun was dumb. He was fighting to control his tears. We felt too sad. Even at that time, he didn't curse Raghavun or say anything against him. I make a special mention of this because siblings of special children sometimes start hating them because parents focus more on their brother or sister with disability. There was a natural bond between our children. We don't wish to take any credit for instilling these qualities in Karthik. He simply loved and accepted Raghavan. We too never thought that one child needed more care than the other. Of course all of us think like that, and know that it is the right thing to do. But good intentions have never solved the world's problems. Our actions must speak for our high ideals. Even in a stressful situation, we should not show more preference to one child and ignore the other. We shouldn't do it even once. I am not suggesting we have to be on our toes at all moments. If our thoughts, words and actions are always aligned in a straight line, we will seldom make such a mistake.

Now, we felt that it was important to educate Karthik on Raghavun's condition. We spent a day and told him about autism, why Raghavun was different, how we diagnosed his condition, how our support would bring about a difference in Raghavun and all that. We also told him that it was no wonder that children of his age were curious and asked him questions. He listened with a lot of interest and attention. He understood what we spoke and also the unspoken pains. He has never become angry with Raghavun, never hesitated to respond to awkward questions about him, or share with his friends or anybody, any information about his brother's condition. Be that as it may, Raghavun's condition certainly had some impact on him at this stage.

Karthik was a reticent, but happy child. Whether his reticence was a natural development over the years or a congenital trait, we don't know to this date. Let me put it more clearly. He would speak to everyone but never initiated conversation. He would respond if some came and spoke to him, or if it was absolutely necessary. He made friends with children, played with them, but was still very quiet in his own group. He was not demanding, very calm and peaceful at all times, was ready to adjust to anything, did not complain about anything, anyone, was friendly with everyone around but enjoyed spending time with the three of us more. Our intuition suggested that he had a lot of potential and that it would manifest itself sooner or later.

Luckily, most of his teachers and friends understood him. A few of them did not understand him. Such people have often asked why Karthik was different from "normal" children of his age. Not autistic like his brother, and yet not "normal" enough. We have heard them saying that Karthik is introverted and that we as parents haven't taken any effort to bring him out of his shell. Their intentions may be absolutely pure but they do not know the exact situation at our home. Better to be indifferent to all such things and do what you feel is best for both the children. We didn't take any of these comments too personally. We loved both our children. The second time I cried secretly after Raghavun's diagnosis was when Karthik returned from school one day with a proficiency prize for Mathematics, in LKG.

Skill Development

Karthik did very well in school. We attended all parent-teacher meetings and got good reports from all the teachers. He sang well, but was shy and never exhibited his talents. The music teacher spotted him and made him a part of the school music troop. He went to a few places along with the group to participate in competitions. His horizons widened. As the days passed his friends stopped bothering him with questions about Raghavun and loved him for what he was. When I helped him with his homework Raghavun used to sit with us and scribble with crayons in his notebook. For a year or so, six or seven of Karthik's friends came home in the evening and I was teaching them along with Karthik. It was a happy period. Raghavun was always around. And the great thing was that all those children started talking to Raghavun which made Karthik happy. We used to wait for evenings during that period. Karthik got promoted to secondary school and he didn't need our guidance anymore. What was taught in school was enough for him. He wanted to be on his own. We got ready for the next turn in the journey we call life.

Raghavun liked his school. But we were looking for some place nearer to our home and one of our friends told us about a place called "The School of Empathy". The school was run by a couple who had a special child. They were really empathetic. Though they didn't operate under a big banner, they were very genuine. On our request, they came home, assessed Raghavun and agreed to admit him into their school. It was the best of all the schools Raghavun had attended till then. The teacher was Mrs. Rajalakshmi. Her husband Shankar provided all the support his wife needed in managing the school. Their son Raju was in the same school and Mrs. Rajalakshmi's daughter was an occupational therapist. There were a limited number of children and the fees were less compared to other big schools with a banner.

We went and saw the school. It was satisfactory. They had helpers and caretakers. They just did not bother to ask if the child was potty trained or any such question. They had so much confidence in their way of running the school and said that potty training children was also one of the things the school would take up. A positive approach to life, confidence, love, determination: Rajalakshmi was all these qualities bundled into one. Raghavun took an instant liking for madam Rajalakshmi. He loved to get ready to go to school. He spent about six hours at school and came home happily in the evening. We started sending Raghavun with a few children from the same school in an auto. The school had a wonderful infrastructure and the madam took complete responsibility and said firmly that I shouldn't come to school to drop him. That gave me three to four hours of free time and I could write, attend music

lessons, read and do a few more things which I wanted to do but had missed out on all those years.

Raghavun's training at home also continued. When children are young we should prioritise what should be taught first. Certain things can wait, while others can't. Making them as independent as possible is very important. Toilet training is the first and foremost skill that they should learn. Raghavun learnt it quite early and never wet his pants even as a child. He was never given bed-coffee. Without brushing and bathing he was not allowed to touch food. Till this very day, he doesn't eat without brushing and bathing. Children need to eat on their own so that they get a sense of fulfillment. But most autistic children don't like their hands becoming messy. We couldn't make Raghavun eat with his hands from a plate. We gave him a bowl and spoon. He gradually started eating on his own. The school helped a lot in this regard. I packed his lunch. The teacher trained him. He also saw other children eating on their own.

Autistic children can learn all life-help skills. It will take time. We shouldn't be in a hurry and give up. There were special children who were better than Raghavun in certain aspects. We should not compare. Even while raising normal kids we must bear that in mind. A child should be taught to better his own records. That is the right way to set goals. Doing and performing better than other children need not be the goal. If a child works consistently to beat his own records, he will gradually move to increasing levels of competence without being driven by peer pressure.

When this routine got fixed, we were advised to consult a psychiatrist because we missed our visits to NIMHANS. Though there was no medicine for autism, it was considered to be a problem which needed a doctor's consultation. We met the best psychiatrist in Madras. He was the person who gave us the real picture. Many schools we had visited before gave us hopes. They claimed that they would make him read and write and integrate him into mainstream normal schools and that he would lead a normal life and all such big promises. But this doctor clearly stated that Thiagu and I should become mentally strong to face what was in store for us. He told us that if we worked with him steadily and patiently, few features of autism may disappear in the long run. When we asked whether we should see him every month, he replied in the negative. He asked us to be moderate about everything, an attitude that we were already holding onto. That visit to his clinic removed many of our doubts. It became clear to us that Raghavun would have to be dependent throughout his life.

Again our planning started. We taught him to brush, to spit and suck, to jump, to run, to throw and catch a ball, to colour with crayons, to drink from a bottle, to dress and undress, how to behave while travelling in public transport, how to behave at social gatherings, how to eat in restaurants and many more things. Few things he learnt immediately. Others took as many as fifteen years and certain things he couldn't learn at all. That doesn't matter. But what I want to impress upon normal parents reading this is the kind of challenges that parents with autistic children face. Challenges that begin on day one and continue for the rest of the life. Those who have not spent a complete day with Raghavun can scarcely imagine the amount of effort that goes into keeping him happy throughout the day.

For example, brushing, colouring, playing with a ball, dressing and undressing were skills that he learnt without any problem. Till today, he cannot jump or run. We taught him how to spit and suck from a straw on almost a daily basis for several years. He learnt this skill only when he was fifteen. He loves to travel. So he generally behaves well when we go out. He likes all modes of transport: bikes, autos, cars, buses, trains. There are few things to discuss here. Autistic children don't like loud noises. They close their ears most of the time. Raghavun too does that. He closes his ears with pillows while at home and with hands while going out. It is their wonderful defence mechanism to escape from the jarring noise of the outside world. We must never try to prevent them from doing it because it will end up in a temper tantrum. Talking about travel, private transport is always better as it is rather hassle free. It is good to teach them to use public transport but parents should be ready to face unexpected difficulties. These children don't like crowds. If the buses or trains get crowded they start becoming restless. Sometimes they will insist on sitting near the window and if the window seat is denied it may end up in a tantrum.

There was a child in Raghavun's school who would always stand and travel whatever be the vehicle. Even if there was a vacant seat he wouldn't sit. As mentioned in the previous chapters, when the child is small, these behaviours may not look very serious. But with a grown up child, it is a problem. Unwanted behaviours should be checked at initial stages. Raghavun insists on sleeping in the upper berth in trains. If we don't send him to the upper berth, he will just push the person in the upper berth or disturb him. That may not be understood by most people. If possible, we can ensure that these children get a seat of their choice while making travel plans. If not, we must try to teach the child to adjust or simply wait for the day when he will understand. With experience, we will get to know the things on which we should not waste our energy. Some like taking risks in life. They are fighters. Some like smooth sailing. Both Thiagu and myself belong to the second category. Most parents of special children belong to this category. We always planned our trips and outings as far as possible. Parents of special children reading this can do whatever works best for them.

Autism and the Senses

Being the parent of an autistic child is a full time job. My husband and I had some bookish knowledge and I was desperate to understand how these children felt. At the right time, an advertisement appeared in a newspaper about a two months training camp for parents of autistic children. I immediately enrolled for the training. The camp was an amazing experience. From this big city, only ten of us enrolled for the first batch. I had the opportunity to meet many therapists, doctors and special teachers. They taught us many things, such as how the five senses work differently for these children. Here, I am sharing what I learnt from the training. I felt as though I had entered a different world. The training sessions were incredible and eye opening.

First comes touch. Autistic children dislike being touched, cuddled. They keep a physical distance from human beings, pets. There is no use forcing them to shake hands and make them hug us. It is not necessary either. Raghavun doesn't like pets. Autistic children like the texture of some articles and it varies from child to child. Some like smooth surfaces and some rough ones. We had noticed Raghavun showing preference to few shirts and utter dislike to some other shirts. He would just remove the shirt if we forcefully made him wear something he hated. Till I attended the training, I was under the impression that it was a meaningless behaviour. It turned out that he had his own reason to do that. He did not like the texture of that particular shirt. Since these children do not have the ability to express themselves using words, parents should understand what is not spoken. It is a blessing that they at least show their displeasure by gestures and actions. We must respect that. Even if they are not able to demand what they want they can definitely convey what they don't want. Few children like to get drenched in rain. Few other kids just don't step on wet surfaces. After the training I was elated and felt as though I had made several great discoveries in a very short period of time!

Next comes sight. Seeing spinning objects gives them a good feel. This is true with most children with autism and Raghavun is no exception. It is their world. Raghavun loves to lie on his back and watch the fan for hours together. He loves to watch the merry-go-round but is afraid of the physical act of riding it. Apparently, autistic children see the hair in our head as separate strands. What we cannot see with normal eyes, they see. They don't make eye contact. They never look at you but look through you. Never stop talking to them because they don't look at you when you speak. They will be listening all the while and every word that you utter gets registered in their brains. We shall discuss more about this when we talk about hearing. The rules in the world of autism are different. If someone doesn't make eye contact while talking, we find it disrespectful. With autistic people it is not so.

They do know colours. Schools teach the different colours and ask children to group similarly coloured objects together. Though these children know different colours, they are just not able to comprehend why items of the same colour should be grouped together. The rationale behind this activity escapes them. In Raghavun's case it is just an amusement, an activity to keep him engaged for a while, nothing more.

Raghavun knows the post boxes are usually red in colour. What I mean is that he knows and feels the red colour but doesn't associate the word red with the actual colour. When he sees a fire extinguisher somewhere, he identifies it as a post box. But again, autism is a spectrum disorder and I have talked about children with Raghavun's intelligence. There are children with higher understanding and intelligence who are capable of expressing colour preferences while choosing their dresses and belongings. Try to teach everything. If the child learns well, teach as much as possible. If he has difficulty do not torture the child and feel disheartened if he is not learning. It is like expecting a commerce student to do medicine.

Next comes smell. These children have a tendency to smell everything. They love good smells like all of us. Smell of perfumes, talcum powder, soaps, incense sticks, aroma of good food etc...I think they don't react when they smell something bad. Children who are not potty trained wet their pants and don't find the bad smell irritating and simply keep lying down or moving around. The moment they sense some good smell, they take the object to their nose to enjoy the smell. Obviously it is not socially acceptable behaviour. Sometimes they enjoy strong smells. More than this there is nothing much to discuss about smell. Raghavan knows when sweets are prepared at home. He comes to the kitchen to check if he would be given something nice to eat!

Next comes taste. This particular feature is the same in autistic children as others. Like other children they too like cakes, chips, chocolates and what all children love generally. The difficult thing is autistic children won't mind grabbing food items from others' plates or even from the shelves of a shopping-store. They don't know to wait. Even grown up children with autism don't understand when we ask them to wait even for a few minutes before food is served. They are ravenous when it comes to their favourite food items. We have to always be on our guard in public places. Otherwise they may just run to grab the food and create a mess. Raghavun did this once in a restaurant. We have been careful ever since. They are connoisseurs of good food in general and don't make a fuss about eating anything that's served so long as it is reasonably well prepared. Some only eat with a spoon, some with their left hand. If you wish to teach them to eat properly, do it early. Teach daily. As eating is part of the daily routine we don't have to take extra measures to teach this. Let them eat with the other members of the family. Since they hate noisy environments, it is better to avoid crowded restaurants. Making them wait for food, that too in a noisy place will end up spoiling the pleasant day out. We avoid choosing a table where little children are close by. Actually we are scared to do that even now. We never go to a restaurant where food is served on porcelain plates. Raghavun handles them well, even better than us but when something triggers him he may just push the delicate items and break them. I had mentioned in an earlier chapter that we had stopped

being embarrassed about Raghavun's behaviour in public places. That doesn't imply that it is alright to trouble the people around us.

Finally and most importantly, hearing. These children listen to sounds differently. The least noise that we hear sounds like the beat of a drum to them. That's the reason they always close their ears. That's the reason they avoid children. That's the reason they get agitated if they happen to be around some people who quarrel or make a lot of noise. This particular feature creates a lot of problems. We live in a noisy world. While going out we can't do anything to protect them from the noise of horns made by vehicles and all other external sounds. For that matter, even at home we can't create a soundproof atmosphere. Raising our voice is enough to scare them, irritate them. There is no other way but to take some precautions so that they remain calm. We should expose the children slowly to some of these things. Touch, sight, smell and taste concern the child only. But hearing has a connection with the outside world. It is impossible to create awareness in everyone. Rather we can try teaching our child to cope with everything.

In the two months of training, we learnt how people with autism feel. These are the fruits of several years of research conducted on many children with autism and of course after many interviews with their parents. For everything, there are exceptions. There are about twenty important features that define autism. A child may have one, few or all these features. Raghavun had it all. As the child grows, few features may disappear. Training helps a lot in bringing certain behaviours under control. At first we may have to take some pains to bring order in what looks like complete chaos. Success comes slowly. We should take tiny steps. Order will become a habit after some time. If our children are called special children, we are special parents too. As they need special training, we need more order, patience, regularity, punctuality and perseverance. But that doesn't mean that we should be serious all the time, be morose and act as though we have lost something. Life is a celebration. We must enjoy it. We have an additional responsibility of thinking and living for two persons. So, our spirit should also be twice as that of others.

Entering Adulthood

Coming back to Raghavun, he continued to live in his own world but learnt essential self help skills. Occasional temper tantrums were there. He hurt himself badly on a few occasions and every such tantrum depleted his energy. As a result, progress took the form of a spiraling movement. Good days were followed by the occasional bad day. The progress he had made would be temporarily undone and we had to begin ascending the next arm of the spiral. In some children these outbursts are a routine affair and such children may need a little medication. The doctor should decide the type and dosage and the parents should be convinced that it is beneficial for their child. Parents have an intuition that is quite accurate in this regard and they must learn to trust it. With Raghavun, the tantrums were not a routine affair, but the slightest provocation was enough to get him started. We had to be constantly on our toes. When we started feeling that the frequency of tantrums had increased, we consulted a psychiatrist and took a second opinion as well. Both doctors said that his behavior was actually better than those children suffering from convulsions. Due to God's Grace he didn't have convulsions.

For his age, Raghavun had a sedentary lifestyle as he couldn't mingle with children and play. This absence of physical and mental activity meant that there was no way he could expend his energies. According to the doctors, his temper tantrums were an outlet for the accumulated energy. We were advised to follow some calming techniques such as exposing him to good music, giving a mild body massage, or a hot water bath in the evening. This helped to a certain extent and the gaps between successive tantrums started increasing. Peace was restored, at least for a while.

Now a different problem started. He started wetting the bed at the age of twenty. It was not an involuntary action. He did it purposely, that too several times a day. It was a nuisance. We were finding it difficult to change the bed-spread and wash all his clothes many times a day. I became tired and that showed in my face. These children understand our moods. Raghavun knew that his new behavior irritated us. He started doing it just to provoke us. We had some sleepless nights. Those were very difficult days. We informed his teacher of this behavior. She tried to correct him by being severe with him. This only had an adverse effect. Whatever we did to make him stop this habit worked negatively. We didn't want to give up and believed that the power which watches over us would help us overcome this difficulty.

When tackling such challenging situations, the one thing that shouldn't be allowed to enter is depression. Keep that enemy outside your homes. Even if there are dull moments, never give it any room to express itself. We decided to just stop talking about the problem before

him. We talked to no one about this once we made the decision. When he did it, we paid no attention to him, simply ignored him and just carried out our duty of changing his dress. This method worked miracles. As he didn't get any response from us, he got bored and stopped it. Again we felt great relief. But the fear that he may start doing it again lingered.

Children were growing. Karthik was very understanding. He was and still is introverted. During all these years we have been particularly careful about not creating any disturbances in Karthik's mind. Karthik was mature for his age. His attitude towards Raghavun reflected in all his activities and helped him develop into a wonderful young man. He has a broad vision, never mistakes or judges people, tries to see things from others' point of view, and rarely raises his voice. The things which generally interest youngsters failed to evoke any interest in him. We as parents dropped a few interests because Raghavun was not comfortable doing them. For example, watching movies in a theater, going to malls, flight travel and so on. Karthik was under no obligation to renounce these activities. Actually, we have never given him any such idea. On the contrary, we have always given him ample space to make his own decisions without worrying about Raghavun's condition. But it so happened that he developed a detachment towards the usual amusements such as going out with friends to theaters and malls. What we did out of a sense of obligation, he did naturally. He enjoys the company of like minded people but never goes out with others except for work. We still do not know what he feels or what is at the bottom of his heart. But I am sure that Raghavun's condition has touched him. I don't know if I should be happy that Karthik is so affectionate or if I should be unhappy that he is missing out on a few small pleasures that boys of his age enjoy. We have talked to him about this and understood that it is his natural state, shall I say as natural as a flower blossoming?

We think autistic children do not have emotions. This is a wrong idea. Once, when Karthik was a one year old baby, he was crying for some reason. Raghavun came running from one of the rooms in our home. We went behind him thinking he might hurt or push Karthik. But, to our surprise, he wiped off Karthik's tears, looked at him for a fraction of a second and left shyly. Yes, Raghavun has emotions but can't show it.

Twenty long years passed. It was time for Karthik's college admission. The children were always together and we didn't know how Raghavun was going to respond if Karthik left Madras for his studies. Due to God's grace, Karthik got admission into IIT-Madras, one of the best institutes in India. But he had to stay in the hostel and came home only during weekends. This created a vacuum in Raghavun's life and he missed Karthik's company. He wished to express that but couldn't do so in a proper way and hence threw a tantrum whenever Karthik came home. We were helpless. Karthik came home with an expectation of spending two peaceful days at home and Raghavun's behaviour invariably spoiled the weekends. It was nightmarish. Raghavun's next lesson started. We told him that Karthik stayed at Tapti hostel inside IIT Madras and that we had to pick up and drop him and it was a nice outing for him and all that. He listened and seemed to understand and started enjoying our visits to Karthik's college after a year or so.

Goodbye to Schools

Raghavun was still going to school. The school had many activities to improve his concentration. It helped to have a routine. He calmed down with age, without any medication. Few parents train their children in skating, swimming, horse riding and other activities. If such activities really make the children happy, there is no harm in trying. But somebody has to accompany the child always unless one is hundred percent sure the child can be independent. In Raghavun's case, we found out that he could not operate independently. We know what we have gone through and feel it is enough just to be peaceful and keep him peaceful. This statement is not applicable to parents of autistic children who have some potential or a lot of potential. Some special children are remarkably bright. It is very important to train them and make them as independent and self reliant as possible.

Another important aspect of being parents of an autistic child is dealing with criticisms. People sometimes pass comments without knowing the problem in its entirety. We cannot do anything about that. Our reaction to criticism is under our control. We will learn to ignore it as we grow older. But the earlier we learn to do that, the better it is. We can't blame those who criticise too. An ordinary family or a "perfect family" will have difficulty in understanding us. It is necessary to be in touch with positive people who have a special kid. Search for autism support groups. You may get suggestions that are more germane to your situation and your experience may also be of some benefit to somebody. Though we encounter curious looks wherever we go we should not avoid social gatherings. Raghavun was a part of all the events that we attended. We never left him with anyone in order to attend a function or party. If some situation demands that Raghavun cannot accompany us, my husband or myself will stay back with him and facilitate the other to attend it. Raghavun slowly learnt socially acceptable behaviours but never failed to attract the attention of people. One thing we failed to teach or couldn't teach was eating using his hands. I made it a point to feed him when we had to eat at weddings and other functions where food is served in banana leaves in India. Now we are trying alternatives, though it is a bit late. But better late than never.

As stated in an earlier chapter, they lay their hands on their favourite food items unmindful of where they are taking them from. So my husband and myself sit on both sides of Raghavun while dining out. Or we will choose a corner seat, so that he doesn't create any disturbance to others. As we eat simultaneously, I have to be very fast or else he gets restless. Regarding this particular thing, we feel we should have done something to make him eat on his own whenever we dined out. As he was very comfortable eating with a spoon when at home, we didn't bother much and took it easy. But it is wrong. Teach them when they are young. Life throws surprises. There will be changes. We will be getting older and the children stronger.

They should be independent, at least to take care of their basic needs when we are away from them in some pressing situations. Introduce more people to the child and look out specifically for those who genuinely care for him.

Next comes exercise. As some autistic children cannot engage themselves in any physical activity, it is our duty to ensure that they get some exercise. Raghavun loves to walk. Rain or shine, we make him walk. He has never missed his walk, no matter how bad the weather may be. Take children to quiet places to walk. When they are small, they can be taken to a children's park and made to play with the equipment there. But again, they may not wait for their turn to use a particular piece of equipment and throw a tantrum. We must choose the proper time, when there will be less number of children. Some children learn cycling. Be that as it may, they cannot be left alone on roads. We have to restrict their movement. If they really love cycling and learn without much difficulty we can teach them. We must judiciously choose the activities which if taught will be really of help to them or their caregivers in future. We have a swimming pool in our apartment. He loves water. We take him to the pool and just let him splash water and have fun. But we didn't teach him to swim. Some autistic children swim well, yet are not at all aware of any danger. It is absolutely essential for a parent or caretaker to accompany them.

Feed them carefully. Food rich in calories and a lack of exercise make them obese. This is clearly not a good situation to be in. When Raghavun turned twenty three, the school called us and said that he must be taken for occupational therapy to some other centre. The crucial thing in the training of autistic children is catching them young. So, to make room for younger children, the schools have to take the difficult yet necessary step of sending older children out. Again the search started. We visited many centres. They had activities like candle-making, making paper plates and paper cups, and some such things which could be sold in a market and bring in some revenue. Some boys and girls could do these things with a little support. They were mostly young adults with Down's syndrome or mental retardation. Actually it is easier to teach people with these problems. Autism is different. The centres wanted me to accompany Raghavun and assist him in learning to do these activities. I tried to do that very sincerely. After a few months I felt that the centres used us, parents, to achieve their targets. Again, I stress that there are exceptionally good centres and unfortunately the places we landed up were like this. We found no meaning in pursuing that and made one final attempt to find if the old school would keep him for a few more years. They couldn't oblige. From that time Raghavun started being at home. It has been almost ten years now. This was the most important period in shaping him into what he is now.

Homeschooling

When a young adult with autism is at home, it becomes a full time job for the mothers. During younger years, when the child was at school, we would have had some breathing space. That is no longer the case now. Seeing and being with the mother alone may frustrate the autistic adult which may lead to tantrums and we will naturally be hard pressed for time unless someone is there to help us in every possible way. A few parents engage a caretaker. The age, sex of the caretakers and their background are all very important as these children are very vulnerable.

Raghavun cooperated well and got adjusted to the new routine. He sleeps for nearly nine hours per day. We had to plan for the rest of the fifteen hours while he was awake. For parents reading this, make a time table for older children once they start spending time at home. The timetable should be good enough to allow some personal time for us and keep the child peaceful and active to the best possible extent. Think differently. Don't allow any stress to build up. It is vital that we keep good health and strong nerves to take care of our children. If needed, make changes in your sleeping pattern. It will be a little difficult in the beginning but it is better to learn. As these children are unpredictable it is impossible to sleep peacefully when they are awake and when no one else is around to take care of the child. Be ready to postpone anything to give yourself that much needed break. Have the child with you and go about doing the daily chores. This has two advantages. One, you will save time and another, you give the child a chance to learn from you. Observing and learning may have more benefits than monotonous teaching. They don't know how to mimic when they are young but learn that as they grow. Our routine was somewhat similar to the one mentioned above during the first few years of Raghavun's homeschooling. This went on for a few years without too many changes. Then came the time for my husband's retirement.

I was happy about this because I was really tired, physically with all the running around for so many years. The feeling that his father would be there to share my responsibilities was great. We were actually excited about Thiagu's retirement and waited for the day. And with that the next phase of our lives started. Raghavun enjoyed his dad's company a lot but there was a byproduct. He slowly stopped cooperating with me. We immediately sensed that this was a cause for concern. My husband had other responsibilities like taking care of his old parents and Raghavun didn't want to be away from his father even for short periods and threw a tantrum every time Thiagu was away from him for a little longer. It was altogether a different atmosphere and routine for my husband and he was getting stressed out. He just couldn't shift roles all of a sudden and conducted some online classes to keep himself active. On such days Raghavun felt ignored by his dad and started hurting himself badly as before. Anything

followed for a week becomes a habit. This is especially true with autistic children. They like routine. Changes to the routine upset them. To give an example, when I used to take him to school, I had to take the same route. If I changed the route for some reason, it made him tense. So, it was very much understandable that his father's erratic schedules affected him. I knew Thiagu couldn't do anything about these things either. Raghavun associates only pleasant car drives, restaurant visits and outings with his father. His father is his hero. I made him walk, took him to school and made him do tougher things. So, now he enjoyed spending time with his dad, showed no inclination to walk, refused to do a few small regular exercises either with me or with his father. Every time we insisted, he behaved badly.

We discussed, argued among ourselves and that irritated Raghavun all the more. To train autistic children or to at least come up with a plan for training them, we must learn to be silent and first observe them. We noted down the frequency of his bad behaviour and decided to be firm about certain things even if it resulted in Raghavun's self harming behaviour. We also spoke to him, just as one would speak to a normal adult, without bothering whether he understood the situation or not. That helped. He understood that his cooperation and good behaviour alone made his father also happy. He started walking long distances with his dad, played with him, and went shopping with him. We too never forgot to reward him with a long drive.

Another very important thing. When these children are indisposed or when they have pains in some part of the body, they are not able to express it. They cry or remain irritable. Slowly we must learn to detect patterns in these behaviours. We must always try to see beyond appearances. Their erratic behaviour may convey something which they are not able to vocalise. Never get angry with the child. As far as Raghavun is concerned he is quiet when he is sick. His pain threshold is high. We have taught him a few things. When I have fever I tell him that I feel weak and am going to simply lie down. He watches me taking tablets. He doesn't give any trouble when he has small health issues and cooperates, takes medicine. Young mothers must not panic when the child has small problems like common cold and cough. At the same time, one must always keep a watch because many autistic children are not verbal.

Bright Future

We will certainly face criticism from our family for focusing too much on our child to the extent of ignoring other people and things. Nothing can be done to change this perception. All criticisms arise because people have difficulty in understanding. So never mind. What I am going to say may sound a bit philosophical but it is true. Actually these children mould us, help us become a better version of ourselves. We become better human beings in the process of helping them. If we just pause to think, we will realise:

- How very important it is to always have a positive attitude in life.
- The futility of attaching undue importance to trivial and trifling events in life.
- How eventful every single day and moment is.
- How to keep calm when nothing is in place.
- How to say no.
- How to remove negativity from life and much more.

Raghavun taught us the purpose of life. Even the best books with motivational essays and stories could not have given us these life lessons we had by just being with Raghavun. We learnt to be grateful for all the little blessings.

There are many videos available now on YouTube on autism. Mostly they talk about children who are able to learn to read and write. Do not get confused or feel guilty. Always remember that autism is a spectrum disorder and the spectrum is quite wide. Besides this, in countries such as the US and UK, they have better infrastructure and the normal schools accept these children. In India it is different. Do in Rome as Romans do. We should be settled and calm in the first place to pass it on to our children. Parents should keep a close watch on their child's development and decide on the treatment and therapy. Who else will be more concerned about the child than parents? Once you decide, walk on the chosen path with confidence and faith.

Do not take wrong inputs and vibrations from people around you. At the same time, listen to the advice of caring people, good therapists and try to incorporate it in your daily routine if you feel it will work out. This book is about an Indian child living in an Indian family. Though human emotions are the same all over the globe, there are bound to be some minor differences in the way people from a different country or culture look at the same issue. And all the books I came across talk only about success stories. I want to stress this important truth which often gets overlooked: every one of us is successful in our own way. Whenever I see a young mother walking with an autistic child, my eyes well up. I relive those years when Raghavun was a baby. I wish all fathers of special children are as understanding and loving

as Raghavun's dad and it is a blessing to have a sibling like Karthik. Patience is the key word. With passing years, these children improve. Do not give up hope. Never get depressed. Teach at least one small thing every day. It will bring about major changes.

We come to the world with a mission. The moment we know our child is different, the mission of our lives reveals itself clearly to us. Yes. To make the child as independent a person as possible. We must strive to do our best to help the child lead an independent life when we won't be around. One of our aims should be to give as little problem to the siblings of the child or his caretaker in the future. Many people do great things, sacrifice many things for achieving greater goals. We must definitely do our bit at least for our child. Other preoccupations and interests should take a back seat automatically. We are not losing anything in this process. We are only shifting our interests.

Generally, women do this more easily than men. There are many changes in a woman's life. A female child is treated differently when she attains puberty. She moves out of her parents' place and goes to live with her husband. When she becomes a mother her responsibilities increase several folds suddenly. Women adapt to all these changes graciously. But it is difficult for men. With a few exceptions men are superficial in general. They are not to blame. They are created that way. It takes time for fathers to shift their interests. Some men don't understand. Sensitive men understand better but even they are not ready to leave behind all other interests for the sake of the child.

We too had problems. In recent years I felt there was an energy drain because Thiagu took his own time to get adjusted and I was in a hurry and in an excited state to include him into our world. Raghavun is thirty two now. When our child enters thirty all relatives and friends in our age group would have been done with the usual responsibilities such as getting their children married. Their children would have started their own independent lives. Let such things not bother us. We should be smoothly flowing along like a river. The river is a blessing to the people on its way. In a similar manner let us radiate happiness to the people around us. We shall do our best. We have felt it is worth going to the maximum extent possible to see a smile on Raghavun's face.

Let us remember to be grateful for even small things in life. When things are perfect we never ask why. However, even the slightest deviations from this state of perfection prompt us to ask "why me"? Let us never ask this question again and banish it from our minds. We shall always be grateful and peaceful. I will be happy if the information shared in this write-up helps someone, some family like ours. I will see you all soon with more positive anecdotes about Raghavun.