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Growing strong with their plants

Garima Prasher, TNN Jan 25, 2013, 04.04AM IST

Tags: Autistic child | Autism

BANGALORE: Standing alongside a table covered with potted plants, she patiently filled compartments of a plug tray with wet sand, using a scoop. After finishing the job to perfection, she picked up brown bean seeds from a box and sowed them one by one, in each compartment. The exercise took her over 30 minutes, but Humara, 5, moved away from the table only after her therapist called 'over'.

Many kids would baulk at the idea of sowing seeds, watering plants and weeding. But for Humara, gardening is more than a hobby - it has changed her life.

Humara is an autistic child. Two years ago, she started attending horticulture therapy at Asha Foundation Trust, Indiranagar. Today, she spends hours sprinkling water, and pruning and trimming hedges in her home garden.

"Before the therapy, Humara had poor concentration levels. Now, she can sit in a chair for more than an hour and has become independent," says Shaila Hegde, horticulture therapist, who has been training Humara with plants, water and flowers.

Similarly, when Guru, 6, came to the Trust for special training, he had acute behavioural issues. He could not sit in one place for more than a minute and had problems with hand-eye coordination. "The therapy has done wonders for my son. Now, he spends a lot of time in our garden, pouring water and arranging soil. He's developed sitting tolerance too," says A Sumati, Guru's mother.

One might associate therapeutic effects with advances in medicine, but nature's healing powers can be seen at the horticulture therapy sessions being given to autistic kids at Asha Foundation Trust. It was during one of her visits to 'Thrive' research centre in the US that Shaila noticed the healing power of horticulture therapy.

"I was amazed to see the improvement in differently-abled kids who were undergoing horticulture therapy at the centre. My husband, a horticulturist, accompanied me on the trip and it was he who suggested that I start this therapy in the city," says Shaila.

Improvement in eye-hand coordination, sensory stimulation, reduction in stress level, enhanced attention span and emotional bonding are some of the areas Shaila focuses on with horticulture therapy. "Children with autism have very limited attention span and concentration level. The therapy uses plants, water and flowers to help them improve. They

also get to know about different colours and textures, apart from learning about medicinal plants," said Shaila.

Building emotional bonds

Shaila says the therapy also helps improve emotional bonding.

"Children with autism can barely develop emotional bonds with people or their surroundings. They don't understand the concept of death. Sriram, a student at our centre, had the same issue. He kept watering plants and wouldn't stop doing so. To explain the consequences to him, I got a potted plant which was already dead. Whenever he started pouring water, all I had to do was show him the pot with the dead plant. Slowly, he got the message," she explains.