

A mother's battle to care for autistic children is being hampered by cadres jealous of her success. **GEOFFREY CROTHALL** reports.

THE Beijing authorities are attempting to take over the city's only privately run kindergarten for autistic children apparently because of the glowing publicity the school and its founder have been given by the local media.

The Stars and Rain Education Research Centre was founded last year by Tian Huiping, herself the mother of an autistic child, largely because the Government would not provide help or assistance for Beijing's autistic children.

Positive press coverage of the kindergarten and Ms Tian's efforts to care for the city's unwanted children has now embarrassed the authorities into action.

Last month the city established its own Autistic Children Rehabilitation Association which appears to have little or no resources but is anxious to claim Ms Tian's kindergarten for its own.

Officials from the association have told Ms Tian she has to join the organisation but are offering her no money or help in running the kindergarten in return.

She has so far refused to join the association but pressure from the authorities is growing. Association officials are demanding that any local journalists wanting to write about the kindergarten or interview Ms Tian go through them and have criticised those who ignore their demands.

Most Beijing citizens would have acquiesced to the pressure by now but Tian Huiping is no ordinary Beijing citizen. Her run-in with officialdom is but the latest in a long line of difficulties this determined and compassionate woman has faced in her struggle to care for not just her own son but for dozens of others whose parents have no one else to turn to.

There are, according to conservative estimates, more than 400,000 autistic people in China but very few have even heard of "loneliness syndrome" as autism is known on the mainland, let alone know how to deal with it.

Doctors, with little experience of mental disabilities, tend to dismiss autistic children as retarded and write them off as no-hopers. Some hospitals do take in autistic children but Ms Tian said they were little better than prisons.

"Their attitude was that the child was ill and should be given medicine, that's all," she said.

Parents whose child is diagnosed as autistic often do not realise that with the proper care, therapy and education, the child can lead a relatively normal life and so many resort to *qi gong* specialists, even rural witch doctors in search of a miracle cure.

It was this apparently hopeless situation which Ms Tian faced when she discovered her son was autistic after returning to China in 1988 from two years studying in West Berlin. Her son had shown no real signs of abnormality when she left for Germany but on her return it became apparent there was a problem.

Her son, then about three years old, was extremely withdrawn and had still not spoken a word but Ms Tian, a foreign language scholar fluent in German, only realised he was autistic a year later, after reading medical literature on the subject from abroad.

After trying to look after her son on her limited academic income for about three years, Ms Tian re-



● Woman alone: Tian Huiping's efforts have produced sparkling results in the past nine months - much to the embarrassment of city officials.

Pressure on care centre for autism

signed from her university post in June 1992 and went to work for a Hong Kong company on Hainan Island in order to raise much needed capital, leaving her son with her parents.

But just three months later her elderly parents fell ill and Ms Tian had to leave Hainan to return to

Beijing to take care of the child.

Faced with no income and a child who needed constant attention, Ms Tian, who had no medical training, took the courageous step of opening her own kindergarten for autistic children where she could not only look after her own son but dozens of other children



● Silent minority: China has more than 400,000 autistic people.

who would otherwise be ignored and shunned by society.

The kindergarten was named the Stars and Rain Education Research Centre, in recognition of the film *Rain Man* and the extraordinary, almost unworldly gifts which many autistic children possessed, Ms Tian said.

The kindergarten has been open for 10 months and currently takes care of 14 children from all over the mainland. But it has been a desperate uphill struggle all the way.

Ms Tian has had to move her kindergarten twice since it opened in March because the first two premises, rooms attached to a factory and a school, proved unsuitable environments for the children.

She now rents two rooms in a new complex in the northern suburbs of Beijing built by the China Federation for the Disabled, which is headed by Deng Pufang, the eldest son of senior leader Deng Xiaoping. The facilities may be better but Ms Tian and her son are still faced with a four-hour journey each day, just to get there.

She said she only managed to rent the premises because the director of the complex, which included a rehabilitation centre for deaf children, was a "humanitarian" and sympathetic to her cause.

Should a new director take over, the kindergarten may well have to move again. Although the director of the complex gave her a 50 per cent discount on the rent, Ms Tian still has to find 10,000 yuan (HK\$11,270) a year just to cover basic expenses.

And now, as if to add insult to injury, because the kindergarten is officially viewed as a private enterprise, Ms Tian may well end up having to pay taxes.

Ms Tian has lost four teachers already because she cannot afford to pay them a decent salary or offer them the housing, medical and welfare benefits normally provided by state-run institutions.

As a result, she has had to raise her fees from 300 yuan to 450 yuan a month just to keep afloat. The three teachers who remained were doing so out of dedication, Ms Tian said.

But the increase in fees has put an additional burden on the parents, nearly all of whom are on low incomes.

"Most employers don't understand autism, they don't think it's a real disease, so they don't provide any assistance," Ms Tian said.

Despite the hardships she has had to endure, Ms Tian is still utterly committed to her cause.

Ms Tian said she felt obliged to help these special children adapt to the world in which they had been isolated for so long, and to cope with the prejudice and abuse they would inevitably encounter.

She takes comfort from the fact that nearly all the 30 children who have attended her kindergarten in its nine months of operation, including her own son, have shown signs of improvement.

Many of the children who had previously not uttered a word can now talk and show an increasing awareness of their surroundings. Nearly all the children now respond positively to their teachers and are learning more each day.

The improvement shown by her children has confirmed Ms Tian's belief that the autistic can be helped and should not just be written off as hopeless cases.