When American anthropologist Roy Richard Grinker found out his daughter had autism he set out to learn all he could about the condition. He tells MICHELLE STANISTREET about his revealing journey.

S AN anthropologist, Roy Richard Grinker has always been interested in the way people live and what they think. It is this interest, so the gradual realization of his daughter’s condition, that his six-year-old son had autism. It was a shock. It was also a huge blow. Isabel was nearly three years old, 14 years ago, when the diagnosis came - she was autistic.

Unlike other children of that age, who add new words to their vocabulary every day, Isabel used only about 20 - all of them nouns and rarely nouns of things. She'd even learned the names of The Bubble Guppies and Disney characters. "Mummy" and "Daddy" were almost absent from her list.

Her contact was minimal, too, and Richard (as he's known) and his wife, Joyce's heart would fill every time they thought they heard a new word from Isabel or she glanced their way - little signs of development that they came to call "this milestone".

Richard and Joyce would have lived their increasing fears to be assuaged and to have been told that Isabel's development was normal but, sadly, that was not to be. "We know in our hearts that there was something very wrong," recalls Richard, who lives with his wife, Isabel and her 11-year-old sister, Olivia, in Maryland.

"The diagnosis was a glimmer of hope for us but there was a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. I would have stood still if Joyce had set me down - it was a painful decision," she said.

At the time, autism was considered to be a fairly rare condition, with teams meeting in every two to three children. When that situation changed and scientific studies were recording rates as high as 1 in 100 and even today the talk is of 1 in 100.

In a fascinating and moving book, Isamerica's lifestyle have we seen dramatic changes to how autism is treated worldwide?

The book is a product of a man's relationship with his daughter, Isabel, and her condition provided a turning point in her father's career as an anthropologist. It is a book used to get asked questions about prevalence rates in places like Bolivia - people assumed that Isabel's was caused by her autism and what was an anthropologist's I'd know? Actually I was only virtually nothing - that's when I knew I'd found my topic," says Richard.

He also talks about the vast gaps in our knowledge of autism - a condition that in the Nineties was whispered in hushes and remnants of when cancer was the dread "C" word. Even today, prevalence rates in all countries in South America, and most of Asia in Japan, are simply unknown.

Richard's book looks at how autism is treated in different countries, not just by the medical profession but by societies too.

He explains how in some countries an autistic child is cast out. In Korea the word for autism actually means "crazy", yet in Central Africa the Elaho people's approach illness completely differently - if someone's unwell the whole family goes to the doctor because they believe the symptoms are a manifestation of a larger underlying problem with the family. Any treatment is taken by everybody.

'The cases serve to back up Richard's thesis that disorders do not exist outside of culture as well as making the point that the 21st century's a better time than ever to be autistic.'

'Not a day went by when I didn't feel like I was living in a time when science and human understanding autism much more and doctors can treat some of the symptoms. In Isabel's lifetime we've seen massive changes in autism treatment. Sure, we've had to fight for the best deal for her at a level I felt that if I had something to fight for'.

Richard and his team at George Washington University are working on a study in Korea of 10,000 children. The results, released at the end of this year, will point towards a prevalence rate of autism that will shock a country where the condition is believed to be very rare. In the more recent parts of Unstrange Minds is Richard's recollection of a visit to a Japanese museum in Normandy that became a turning point in Isabel's development. The family decided to visit the garden, the source of huge inspiration to the artist after Isabel became fascinated with a storybook in which it featured when she was nine years old.

It was amazing to hear him in the garden. I've never seen her as engaged and interested. Her anxiety dissolved - we couldn't get her out of there. She seemed to want to say French words. She was even repeating consonants in words she'd heard in the street.'

When the family returned home, Richard enrolled Isabel in French classes and the effect on her behavior was astonishing. She began to engage with people for the first time in her life. "We realized that sometimes we need to get out of our routine and do something dramatic. Whatever that happens we see jumps in Isabel's development. 'We don't do expensive therapies, we've never spent thousands of dollars on an oxygen chamber or on a deep clean of our house to remove allergens. We don't take on an trip to Blount's garden than on unproven therapies,'" says Richard.

Isabel now attends high school, taking special classes for English, Math and, joining mainstream classes for other subjects. From what we've read of the book, Blount's disability is not currently having a great impact on her studies.

"Isabel pips the cells and can do much of this absolutely passion is for animals. Her goal in life is to visit every zoo in the world and she is spending this summer working as a volunteer in her local zoo. It's great to see her blend in. Once she worked on a school day as part of the stage crew. I was so proud. I got teary on the way home and Isabel put her fingers up to my eye and licked my cheek. She asked me, 'Is it street or is it salty?' I told it was probably both and she replied, 'No, it's sweet, because you're not upset, there are tears of being happy, right?'" It was moving, a sign to me that she was getting in touch with other people's feelings. She was starting to connect."

To order Unstrange Minds, A Father's Journey The World Of Autism for £12.99, call 0871 321 2002 or visit www.hm.com. Alternatively, send a cheque to PO Box 294, Plymouth (TXL 02/3, or order online at www.pressdisplay.com.uk/dp.html price.