In Response

In Response to Axelrod's Review of Alternatives to Punishment

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In order to respond to Axelrod's (1987a) review of *Alternatives to Punishment*, I need to digress a bit. In many ways, the review is as it should be: a generally constructive and scholarly critique of a book about intervention methods—nonaversive methods we are all in need of. The clarification of the term “punishment” is important if we are to debate effectively among ourselves and with the general public. The limits of our current research on nonaversive methods is also addressed in the review and serve as compelling evidence that we must devote more energy to quality research and less to nonproductive dispute among ourselves. Only when controversy stimulates the pursuit of knowledge and leads to improved conditions, is it worth the misery. Because I also have been a participant in this controversy over aversive approaches to changing serious behavior problems, I must address some related issues in order to give an alternate view.

Behavior change through punitive methods has problems of which we are all aware. Axelrod's (1987b) recent words express these concerns by examining the advantages of nonaversive approaches:

The advantages of any alternatives to punishment that may be discovered [through functional analysis of problem behaviors], however, are the avoidance of adverse side effects sometimes accompanying punishment procedures (Azrin & Holz, 1966; Newsom, Favell, & Rincover, 1983), improved generality and maintenance of effects by isolating the exact conditions producing the behavior problem (Favell, McGimsey, & Schell, 1982), and a greater level of community acceptance. (p. 166)

One does not need to be an historian of behavioral psychology to realize how young our discipline is. Individuals with severe disabilities, particularly those with extensive behavior problems and mini-

mal skills, regularly test the limits of our knowledge. Still, we apply and we teach others to apply intervention guidelines when working with people who have serious behavior problems. The guidelines are just that, they are far from perfect. When working to reduce behavior problems in our students and clients, we try to:

1. use methods that are the “simplest, but still effective” to obtain behavior change (Etzel & LeBlanc, 1979);

2. begin with the least intrusive behavior change procedures and proceed to more intrusive procedures only when the former do not yield adequate change in the target behavior;

3. use nonaversive methods first along with a functional analysis of the target behavior and continue with at least three successive nonaversive programs, implementing more intrusive methods only if these carefully planned programs fail (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986);

4. take an “educative” approach rather than focus merely upon skill reduction—reinforce existing appropriate behavior and teach the skills missing in the person's repertoire that, in turn, will contribute to the elimination of the problem behavior (Evans & Meyer, 1985);

5. take a “proactive” approach and prevent or reduce behavior problems by improving the environments in which the person lives, works, and plays.

At the same time, we preach that all practitioners must concern themselves with the social validity of their methods to change behavior and with the results. Clients and students with severe disabilities deserve effective treatment without violation of their basic rights. Yet, when we put together all these guidelines—both those that are based on values and those

that are based on data—we frequently find that our interventions for people with severe disabilities are at odds with our guidelines.

Our field is now engaged in a battle over the use of aversive methods (behavioral intervention procedures involving more extreme forms of punishment). Our agreement on the critical need for more data-based demonstrations of nonaversive methods is offset by our disagreement as to what constitutes aversive methods and whether we know enough about nonaversive methods to use them exclusively. It is true, at this point in the development of behavioral science, that we see a large gap in the volume of research on nonaversive methods in contrast to the research on aversive methods to reduce serious behavior problems in persons having developmental disabilities.

Many who are opposed to the further control of aversive methods are fearful that their talents as interventionists will be diminished if aversive methods are outlawed. These opponents worry that serious, even life-threatening, behaviors will not be eliminated completely or fast enough or will continue unabated if intervention must be limited to nonaversive approaches. Those who advocate for the cessation of intrusive interventions are concerned about the control of serious behaviors with treatments relying on physical pain, having potential side effects (e.g., tissue damage, illness, stress), having limits on generalization, being dehumanizing to the individuals, and violating our criteria for social validation.

The recent press coverage given to the battery-powered shock device (the Self-Injurious Behavior Inhibiting System) devised by the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory is an example of our conflict. The parents cited in the newspaper reports indicated that our fields of special education and psychology had not been able to resolve their daughter's serious head-banging behavior. With their own ideas and the technology of Johns Hopkins, the SIBIS was developed and reports appear to indicate that the self-injurious behavior has been

stopped, though continued wearing of the device appears necessary for maintenance. The presence of the SIBIS may be viewed as evidence for one or more flaws in our professional practices of special education and behavioral psychology: (a) our failure to implement what we do know about nonaversive solutions to serious behaviors; (b) our failure to understand nonaversive methods as well as we seem to understand aversive methods; (c) our failure to provide best practices to individuals having disabilities such that the behavior would have been brought under control or avoided through educative and proactive approaches. In fact, many would argue that the all-too-frequent use of spanking to manage children's misbehavior is further evidence of our inability to communicate our science effectively to the public.

Several other factors are central in this controversy, though often ignored. First, in an effort to protect our students and clients we have developed procedures in most public institutions, community-based facilities, and schools to regulate, approve, and supervise behavior control programs when they include "more intrusive" interventions, though the definition of this term varies from one program to another. These procedures usually do not come into play until nonaversive or less intrusive methods have failed, usually more than once. These procedures usually result in more attention and expertise being devoted to the development and implementation of intrusive behavior management programs. We need to extend this regulatory concern and the expert attention to the development and implementation of nonaversive programs as well, in order to give these programs the quality needed to succeed.

Second, nonaversive intervention methods build upon an overall program context that reflects "best practices." Positive methods rely on having behaviors to reinforce and having staff that know and value the approach. Clients should be learning functional and age-appropriate skills identified as being important in their everyday lives and mak-

ing contributions to their futures. These functional skills should address life functions (community use, domestic, leisure-recreation, and vocational skills) rather than merely developmental milestones. Generalization must be programmed, not assumed. This might include using community-based instruction, fading out teacher prompts, shifting contingencies for reinforcement to those that exist naturally in the community, and teaching the best exemplar first or multiple examples to promote generalization. Communication, however simple, needs to be taught and required by the environment. Social interaction skills need to be taught in integrated settings so that peers without disabilities are included. It is not possible to have all these elements in place when the program exists within a large, residential facility. When the program is in a school that is segregated, the conditions for meaningful social skill instruction are inadequate. Even when the teaching setting is integrated, there is no guarantee that the other best practices will be in place. Not only does it appear that nonaversive procedures are less effective when the overall quality of the program is deficient, but the presence of maladaptive behavior appears to be more prevalent when programs are poor.

My primary message in this "Response" is that both professions—special education and behavioral psychology—must get on with the task at hand: improving our knowledge about managing serious behavior problems through non-aversive and socially valid means. I believe Axelrod's review helps us get moving in several ways: He clarifies some definition problems and delineates some aspects of needed research. One aspect of his review that is deficient, I feel, is his reinforcement of one of the first pub-

lished attempts to address something we all desperately need: alternatives to punishment, or put more accurately, non-aversive methods for managing serious behavior problems in persons having developmental disabilities. LaVigna and Donnellan's book takes a bold stand in the midst of a battle. I view their book as a helpful and timely approximation; thus, it deserves reinforcement in addition to scrutiny.

When I was asked to write a response to this book review, I was also asked to treat Saul Axelrod kindly, in a nonaversive way, as he was gracious in his openness to the idea of a "Response." I hope I have treated him kindly. It is probably true that the pairing of constructive criticism for errors with positive reinforcement for successes constitutes a more powerful consequence to behavior than does criticism alone.

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