

August 14, 2006

My name is Victor Clark and I am the father of a child with Downs Syndrome and Autism.

I am against aversive therapies and restraints in any form. Negative reinforcement does not work after the reinforcement is no longer constant and consistent. Have we come so far ahead in technology that we are coming full circle with our beginning? Aversive therapy teaches our children that "Might" is "Right" and abuse is alive and well, as long as it is State sanctioned.

My child has behavioral issues, a severe language deficit, coupled with mild retardation; yet, to place him in an environment that would use torturous techniques on him because his behavior isn't how I'd (or they'd) like it to be, is barbaric. Have we forgotten the consequences learned from Milgram's experiments or Skinner's Box.

Alternative therapies should move us, as a people, towards more humane approaches to reaching the difficult to reach kids.

Have we forgotten patience as an alternative? What's the hurry to immediately restrain, shock into submission, deprive (withhold) basic needs (i.e. food, water, clothing, restroom usage, etc.) to extinguish the behaviors we do not want exhibited? Modeling the appropriate behaviors, being creative, talking about our feelings and creating a repertoire of anger coping skills have proven to work. It takes time, and these are our children, our future and we should make the time.

If "Bobby" likes to express his anger by throwing objects at people, why not remove the objects, or the people? It costs more emotionally and is more damaging psychologically to the child and our own psyche, to use restraints and/or other aversive means in

altering behaviors. “Bobby” didn’t grow up in a vacuum, where did he “learn” to cope with his anger by throwing objects, cursing, having tantrums, acting out violently, etc.? Where did he learn impatience? Does his brain create the stimuli to self mutilate? If so, why can’t I as a parent, an advocate, find an alternative to torturing him into submission? What am I teaching my child with aversive/restraint techniques? That causing pain to stop behaviors is okay!

As difficult as it is, I talk with my child. We work out what is going on with his feelings and how the world is affecting him. We work on possible solutions to make him safe, the world safe and give him a lasting means of dealing with issues that aren’t comfortable for him at the moment. There are alternatives if we just take the time and look, be creative, work outside of the box, reach out and teach, as opposed to react and grab for the quick fix.

If what I’ve witnessed here today is a supportive example of and for aversive/restraint therapies, then we are a sad, demoralized people. Whose quality of life is enhanced by aversive/restraint therapy? The parents or guardians who now have a less stressful day and night? Or the children who I now observe, have lost the sparkle in their eyes, their zest for life and experiences; the creative difference we are born with, their basic ability to choose.

As a parent, I must constantly remember to struggle with “whose quality of life” I am advocating for. It is so easy to lose focus, especially after so many, many disappointments and setbacks; and suddenly the “quality of life” that is improved shifts from my child’s to my own. It’s sad because I may not be able to, or want to acknowledge when that change took place; because now I am relieved, I am happy.

Alternative therapies are constantly changing and we must grow with change, and struggle not bend it to our whim because it's the convenient and speedy thing to do.

If you're straddling the fence about aversive/restraint therapies as a viable tool amongst our children, please rent the original version of "The Island of Dr. Moreau"; Richard Basehart and Burt Lancaster do not mince words when they demand a response to "What is the Law?" nor on their means of extinguishing unwanted behaviors.