

This Week's Citation Classic

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Foxx R M & Azrin N H. The elimination of autistic self-stimulatory behavior by overcorrection. *J. Appl. Behav. Anal.* 6:1-14, 1973.
[Anna State Hospital, Anna, IL]

Self-stimulatory behavior is a common problem of retarded and autistic individuals. Yet, no method was in general usage and of demonstrated effectiveness in eliminating it. Overcorrection procedures eliminated the self-stimulatory behaviors of a variety of individuals and these effects endured. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 170 publications since 1973.]

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"In the early years of my research career in California institutions, I had been looking for logical, natural consequences to use in reducing the maladaptive behaviors of retarded individuals rather than more traditional or 'artificial' behavioral consequences. My feeling was that artificial consequences might make normalization¹ more difficult whereas natural negative consequences might enhance it and thereby help close the gap between the behavior of mentally handicapped individuals and normals. In late-1970, I left California to pursue a PhD at Southern Illinois University and to work at the Anna State Hospital Research Lab which was directed by N.H. Azrin. This *Citation Classic* resulted from our research on developing new treatment strategies or rationales.

"The overcorrection rationale originated during the development of a toilet-training program for retarded individuals.² We decided to discourage accidents by requiring soiled individuals to clean the floor and themselves and then repeatedly practice the proper sequence of toileting. These natural, negative consequences effectively eliminated toileting accidents and appeared to make more sense than such traditional

negative consequences as time-out. The treatment rationale that emerged was that individuals should assume responsibility for their inappropriate acts by undoing or correcting the effects of these acts by restoring the situation to a vastly improved state from that which existed prior to the act and by practicing overly correct forms of relevant behavior in those situations where the act commonly occurred.

"After refining and expanding the rationale, we began applying it to other maladaptive behaviors. In our first effort, we successfully treated aggressive-disruptive behaviors.³ Initially, we labeled the method restitution, but soon rejected it because it was less descriptive than the term overcorrection.

"We then decided to use the rationale to develop effective consequences for self-stimulatory behavior. Self-stimulation consists of repetitive, stereotyped behavior that has no apparent functional effects on the environment and is a serious problem of retarded and autistic individuals since it interferes with learning adaptive skills. At the time of our study (which was my dissertation with Azrin serving as adviser), the only successful procedures for eliminating self-stimulation involved the use of physical punishment by a slap or contingent electric shock. For obvious reasons, neither had received widespread usage. Specific overcorrection procedures were developed for the specific self-stimulatory behaviors of retarded and autistic children and compared with several alternative procedures including punishment by a slap. The overcorrection procedures rapidly eliminated self-stimulation, were more effective than the alternative procedures, and produced long-lasting suppressive effects. Even so, the paper received mixed reviews. Fortunately, the editor (Ivar Lovaas) decided it merited publication.

"Our study has been cited so often because it: 1) described the successful and acceptable treatment of a widespread difficult problem; 2) was the first time that the overcorrection rationale had been fully delineated; 3) described a new treatment strategy that was applicable to a wide range of maladaptive behaviors; and 4) raised a number of conceptual issues that spurred other researchers."⁴

1. Wolfensberger W. *The principle of normalization in human services*. Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation, 1972. 258 p.
2. Foxx R M & Azrin N H. *Toilet training the retarded: a rapid program for day and nighttime independent toileting*. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1973. 141 p.
3. -----, Restitution: a method of eliminating aggressive-disruptive behavior of retarded and brain damaged patients. *Behav. Res. Ther.* 10:15-27, 1972.
4. Foxx R M & Bechtel D R. Overcorrection. (Hersen M, Eisler R & Miller P, eds.) *Progress in behavior modification*. New York: Academic Press, 1983. Vol. 13. p. 227-88.