

This Week's Citation Classic™

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Tharp R G & Wetzel R J. *Behavior modification in the natural environment*. New York: Academic Press, 1969. 236 p.
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The application of behavior modification procedures by significant adults in the families and schools of problem children is suggested and exemplified; also, a theory is developed. Outcome data are presented. [The Science Citation Index® (SCI®) and the Social Sciences Citation Index™ (SSCI™) indicate that this book has been cited over 240 times since 1969.]

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"Dissatisfaction with psychotherapy, its frequent disruptive effects on social relationships, and the failure of therapeutic gains to survive into natural environments were issues which led me through several years work in natural-group treatments, such as marriage and family therapy, and the therapeutic community. When Ralph Wetzel, who had been trained at the University of Washington, which was a seedbed of the behaviorist movement, became my colleague at Arizona, we joined forces and theories.

"Wetzel was himself dissatisfied with the state of behavior modification, largely limited then to institutional applications. Then, as now, behavior improvements did not seem to generalize to environments or relationships beyond the one of treatment. We reasoned that prosocial behavior would be maintained only if the natural environments of children—their families and schools—could be altered to support the desired behavior. Therefore the actual targets of behavior change must be the parents, teachers, siblings, aunts, etc., of referred problem children.

"To make the demonstration more dramatic, we did not contact the children themselves whatsoever, beyond a very brief period of initial assessment. Over a four-year period, we consulted the 'natural environments' of 77 delinquent and pre-delinquent children, helping them to create and maintain programs of contingent reinforcement. At that time, the 'deprofessionalization' of helping relationships was much in the wind. Our demonstration staff consisted entirely of baccalaureate-level young men and women whom we trained and supervised. This produced the 'triadic model' of intervention, in which the expert worked indirectly with parent or teacher 'mediators,' who in turn worked directly with the 'target' children. This, hopefully, produces a changed social environment, not dependent on continued professional counseling.

"The outcome data were quite favorable. The demonstration opened up behavior modification into the real world, and suggested operations which have now become routine for mental health workers.

"I believe the continued frequent citation of the book is due to two features. First, it contains a clear theory and a practical manual. Second, though, is the full discussion of problems, and ultimate limitations of the approach; for this focus, Wetzel is primarily responsible. Gaylord Thorne, who was the on-site director of the project, was unable to participate in the authorship, but he made great contributions from his background in probation and community psychology work.

"During the project, we encountered enormous resistance from the establishment of psychiatry and clinical psychology. Now, 15 years later, applied behavior modification has become the establishment itself. My current work is directed toward correcting some of its excesses "