

## **B.F. Skinner's Position on Aversive Treatment**

**James C. Griffin**

Richmond State School (Richmond, Texas)

**Timothy J. Paisey**

Connecticut Department of Mental Retardation,  
Region 5

**Mary T. Stark and Joseph H. Emerson**

Richmond State School

*In September 1987, an edited videotaped interview with B. F. Skinner was shown at the second annual Symposium on the Advancement of Nonaversive Behavioral Technology. Articles subsequently appeared headlining that Skinner opposed use of punishment. In a letter of response to the senior author's inquiry regarding his position on aversive treatment in dealing with behavior problems, Skinner stated, "I have been distressed by the way in which my name has been used by those who are opposed to all forms of aversive treatment in dealing with behavior problems no matter how severe." His response appears here in its entirety. His comments were presented within a pragmatic framework.*

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In September 1987, an edited videotaped interview with B.F. Skinner was shown at the second annual Symposium on the Advancement of Nonaversive Behavioral Technology (Rockville, Maryland). The symposium was advertised as featuring nationally prominent speakers who would explore and promote positive, nonaversive behavior management practices. Skinner was later represented as having opposed all use of punishment (Behavior techniques, 1987; B.F. Skinner opposes, 1987).

### **Skinner's Statement**

In consideration of the current significance of the nonaversive issue, we asked Skinner to state his position in writing. Our intent was to share his position with professionals serving individuals with major maladaptive behavior. Here is Skinner's response of January 25, 1988.

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been used by those who are opposed to all forms of aversive treatment in dealing with behavior problems no matter how severe, and I have prepared the following statement of my actual position:

The use of punishment is being widely debated, especially in connection with education and therapy. I am frequently said to be opposed to all forms of punishment, and I should like to make the following correction.

Punishment is usually used to the advantage of the punisher, but there are exceptions, and they can sometimes be justified. Some autistic children, for example, will seriously injure themselves or engage in other excessive behavior unless drugged or restrained, and other treatment is then virtually impossible. If brief and harmless aversive stimuli, made precisely contingent on self-destructive or other excessive behavior, suppress the behavior and leave the children free to develop in other ways, I believe it can be justified. When taken out of context, such stimuli may seem less than humane, but they are not to be distinguished from the much more painful stimuli sometimes needed in dentistry and various medical practices. To remain satisfied with punishment without exploring nonpunitive alternatives is the real mistake.

Except in mating and the care of young, the social behavior of animals is almost wholly punitive. Territory and other possessions are defended with force or the threat of force. Presumably that was also once true of the

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human species, and those who have the power to treat others aversively still often do so. There are unwanted consequences; including escape and counterattack.

The alternative is positive reinforcement. Compared with negative reinforcement or punishment its effect is somewhat delayed and hence not as easily learned. The delay is so critical that other species do not use positive reinforcement. (Animals do many things which reinforce the behavior of others but not because it is a reinforcing consequence.)

There is no doubt of the gains made by practices which are uniquely (and quite appropriately called) humane, but only a start has been made. Ethical, religious, and governmental laws are primarily punitive, especially when designed to restrain aversive behavior. The exceptions which testify to the uniqueness of human behavior are rare. We have not yet discovered adequate nonpunitive practices to replace the aversive part of our genetic endowment. For example, we are far from abandoning the use of force in international relations or in maintaining domestic order. People living closely together, and that includes teachers and students, therapists and clients, can seldom avoid all forms of punishment.

I believe that there is no longer any use for corporal punishment in schools and much to be gained by suppressing it. Of other forms of punishment, then, the main question is severity. Too harsh a punishment for missing an assignment would be far from adequate for bringing a gun or a knife into a classroom.

I have been proud of the success we have had in finding many alternatives to punishment and I regret that this controversy is likely to renew the view that behaviorism means punishment. It is, I believe, the only hope for the eventual elimination of punitive control in all fields.

## Discussion

Although Skinner did not use the jargon

associated with the field of mental retardation, his message appears reasonable to us. Like Skinner, we do not choose to "remain satisfied with punishment without exploring nonpunitive alternatives" and are "proud of the success we have had in finding many alternatives to punishment." Nonaversive procedures for the suppression of potentially life-threatening behavior should be sought, as they have been for decades. Until empirically supported nonaversive alternatives have been demonstrated to suppress *all* forms of maladaptive behavior, aversive procedures should remain as treatments of last resort. Professional organizations, regulatory agencies, and governmental entities should uphold the right of each client's interdisciplinary team to determine the use of aversive therapy. Appropriate checks and balances, in the forms of human rights and program review committees, should monitor whether clients' rights are observed in programming decisions.

Opponents and proponents of aversive procedures share the goal of suppressing maladaptive behavior with the least restrictive procedures. We agree with Skinner that "there is no doubt of the gains made by practices which are uniquely (and quite appropriately called) humane, but only a start has been made."

## References

- B.F. Skinner Opposes Use of Punishment.** (1987, November). *LINKS*, 23(11).
- Behavior Techniques: B.F. Skinner Opposes Use of Punishment.** (1987, December). *DD Directions: Newsletter of the Illinois Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities*, p. 1.