

Psychologist Nathan Azrin, wrote 'potty training manual,' dies of cancer

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Nathan Azrin

If toilet training your toddler was a breeze, and if you ever used “time out” for attitude adjustment, you have Nathan H. Azrin to thank.

The world-renowned behavioral psychologist, a Nova Southeastern University professor emeritus, wrote the multi-million-selling *Toilet Training in Less Than a Day*, with Richard M. Foxx in 1974, and is credited with proposing “time out” as an alternative to spanking.

Trained by Harvard University’s legendary behavioral scientist B. F. Skinner, Azrin spent 30 years at NSU’s Center for Psychological Studies, which in announcing his death from cancer complications on March 29, noted that his “hundreds of research publications have been cited by other researchers at an unprecedented rate.”

He earned popular, as well as academic, acclaim, appearing on William F. Buckley’s “Firing Line,” “The Phil Donahue Show” and “The Mike Douglas Show.”

The major news magazines, as well as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and Psychology Today published his essays.

A champion of positive reinforcement as a behavior-modification technique — whether it involved child development or partner dancing — Azrin, of Fort Lauderdale, was the founding editor of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* and founding president of the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis.

Born in Boston on Nov. 26, 1930, Azrin was 82 when he died at North Broward Hospital in Deerfield Beach. Son David, a New York lawyer, said he’d been undergoing chemotherapy for bladder cancer since 2007.

After earning degrees from Boston University and Harvard, Azrin became a U.S. Army research psychologist. He was recruited by NSU in 1980 from the Anna Mental Health and Development Center in Anna, Ill., where he’d headed the Department of Treatment Development since 1958.

He served six years as NSU's clinical director early in his tenure, and retired in 2010. Along the way, he developed the "job club" concept, which has been adopted worldwide to help the unemployed. Azrin developed many of his methods at Anna with another notable in the field, Teodoro Ayllon, now an Atlanta psychologist.

Among them: "token economy," used mainly with people in institutions. The tokens are symbolic rewards, like checkmarks or points, given for a desired behavior, which can be exchanged for "backup reinforcers" like a privilege.

Azrin also rejected negative labelling, reasoning that youngsters would live up — or down — to labels applied to them.

In a statement, Karen S. Grosby, Dean of the Center for Psychological Studies, highlighted Azrin's work "with the severely mentally-handicapped, the so-called 'untrainables,' upon which a large part of his legacy rests... Azrin's pioneering work has included 'job club' reemployment procedures...during corporate layoffs."

She said that his methods work with "a wide array of...problematic, stigmatizing and maladaptive behaviors" such as bedwetting, stuttering, nail biting, obsessive hair pulling, Tourette syndrome, bulimia and teen substance abuse.

In an online tribute, Alan Kazdin¹, director of Yale University's Parenting Center, recalled how Azrin, a colleague since the 1970s, could "cut through all sorts of highfalutin theory and move to creative and practical hypotheses about interventions" that have stood the test of time.

"Being with him at small meetings would be like watching Picasso begin with a white canvas and quickly stroke some lines, add a few colors, and now there would be a face, a mood, a message, and something truly novel," wrote Kazdin, who also noted Azrin's sly sense of humor.

He recalled using the Azrin method to toilet train his own daughter, when Azrin visited his home.

Azrin said: "Just keep the door open when you and your wife go to the bathroom and that should take care of it."

David Azrin said he and his three siblings were long past potty-training age when their dad developed his in-a-day method, but it worked with the grandkids.

Nathan and his wife, Colombian-born psychologist Victoria Besalel Azrin, whom he met at Boston University and married in 1953, "did apply his behavioral principles to everything [their offspring] did," said David. "They always looked at the positive side of things...My father was always 110 percent encouraging about our interests," and never got angry.

Two went into their parents' line of work. Daughter Rachel Azrin is an Aventura psychologist. Son Richard is an Alabama neuropsychologist. Son Michael became a Connecticut cardiologist.

In 2009, Azrin made a video autobiography for his family that reveals the roots of his theories. In it he talks about how he and five siblings grew up above the grocery store that his Russian-immigrant parents ran.

His parents had “high standards of conduct,” and “never relied on punishment not even the threat of it, not even the removal of privileges [and] everything was just fine,” he said.

Late in life, Azrin and his wife took up ballroom-style dancing, and became regulars at an outdoor venue in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea. What they did, Azrin said in the video, “doesn’t look anything like ballroom dancing. We’re all over the place.”

They even gave their free-spirited style a name: Lib Vicky, which is based on psychological principles like communication, eye contact and creativity.

“You know that you have succeeded when you have made your partner smile,” says the text over the couple’s Lib Vicky demonstration on YouTube.

“We have a great time,” Azrin in his video. “No matter where we go, nobody ever says ‘You dance well,’ but ‘we have more fun watching you. You’re awesome.’ It’s a psychological high.”

Even after he could barely feel his legs because of his cancer treatment, his dad would fling himself about doing the Lib Vicky, said David, “just to show the world he was still alive and kicking.”

In addition to his wife and children, Azrin is survived by siblings Violet Baker, of Clinton, N.Y.; Dorothy Marden, of Minneapolis; Gertrude Drobis and Morris Azrin, both of Massachusetts.

To see Nathan Azrin’s video autobiography, and for information about donations to his scholarship foundation, visit nathanazrin.com. To see the Azrins perform the Lib Vicky, go to YouTube.