

# OPERANTS

THE B. F. SKINNER FOUNDATION REPORT

QUARTER I, 2014

2014: A SPECIAL YEAR

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*Operants* is a quarterly report produced by the B. F. Skinner Foundation.

*“We shouldn’t  
teach great  
books; we  
should teach a  
love of reading.”  
— B. F. Skinner*

in memoriam

# Nate Azrin (1930-2013)

My thoughts on my father, Nathan Harold Azrin

by Rachel Azrin, daughter, with contributions from sons Mike, David and Rick

**A**s the oldest of Nate Azrin's four children, and as someone who continues to practice in the field of behavioral psychology myself as a certified behavioral analyst, I was honored to be asked to share my thoughts, along with my brothers', on my father, Nathan Azrin, who passed away last year and who left a lasting legacy of wisdom and inspiration to his family, colleagues and the field.

As a father/husband/sibling, Nathan Azrin was inspirational and supportive. His ability to propose solutions to any problems that came up was impressive. He was able to discern what was important to his relatives and identify how a positive solution could be reached. He was loving, close and kind to his family. Nate Azrin believed family celebrations were an opportunity to be together with his family. He had one daughter (Rachel, a behaviorist) and three sons (Michael, a doctor; David, a lawyer; and Rick, a psychologist) all successful

professionals. He had seven grandchildren (Jessica, Joshua, Daniel, Lauren, Jacob, Sarah and Lexi). In most of his pictures you will notice he is waving as if to reach out to reinforce people taking or looking at the picture. He also had a long and enjoyable marriage with his wife Victoria, a psychologist as well, and they wrote a number of books and often worked together. Nate believed in the techniques he developed and especially utilized reinforcement continuously. Although an intermittent schedule is more

effective, he believed in people using continuous reinforcement. The reason for this choice was that often a continuous schedule becomes intermittent, due to circumstances that prevent the delivery continuously.

He was the kind of father and person who believed in you. He also believed that we should try to make our decisions in life based on scientific research. Rather than imposing his views, he encouraged us to look at research such as journals, consumer reports, and at medical research to guide us in our life decisions and choose something that would achieve the functional outcome we wanted for ourselves. He was always available to discuss things or go to family or convention activities, and he never said he was too tired to do something with us. He was always there for dinner and at night. He chose to work late into the night, after dinner, rather than take time away from his family and friends. He believed in showing love for others with actions and would even cry when he saw a sad movie about someone and

their problems. He took that extra time and was patient while teaching his children

everything from using the bank to fishing. He seemed to understand what you were thinking or concerned about, and how to help you try to solve your problem while he taught you something. He would often discuss with you in detail the options and the pros and cons based on the facts and research of the options. This empathetic, kind, step-by-step, scientific, patient manner with others made it very easy to learn things and to make difficult or important decisions.



**He believed in showing love for others with actions**

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# Nate Azrin

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As a colleague/friend he also inspired people. He had the ability to listen to them talk about themselves and identify the most exciting ideas they had. He would inspire the other person to pursue these goals with great vigor. Many people have expressed to the world and his children that my father changed their life after even just one conversation with him. He was well known for talking to colleagues late into the night at conferences, work, and even at home too. His eyes, facial expression and arms would be excited and moving around, as he intently focused on the other persons' passions, and together they found a plan to promote the dreams for projects they discussed.

He founded and inspired a multitude of organizations, journals, procedures that became common practice in society. He had the ability to gather others into a common force to achieve a goal through an organization. He inspired the birth of journals, conferences, oversight regulations and groups as well as new principles and areas of research in the field of psychology. Some of these developments included time-out, overcorrection, token economy, marital counseling, and procedures for drug addiction, Tourette's, job finding, self-injury, self-stimulation, toilet training, bedwetting, stuttering (regulated breathing), habit reversal for nervous habits (ex. nail biting, ticks), positive practice and reinforcement techniques.

Nate was born in Boston (to Harry and Esther) in a family with seven children (Jack, Morris, Violet, Trudy, Sylvia and Dorothy) and went to Boston University and to Harvard. He studied with B. F. Skinner at Harvard. Skinner was supportive of his efforts to find new ideas and techniques in his research at Harvard. They would spend hours talking about theories and research possibilities. I often feel the room seems empty without the excitement and intensity these men brought to every conversation.

Skinner inspired Nate to take the tech-

niques that were theoretical and research-based and use them in applied settings in numerous areas. Nate repeatedly, in all his talks, asked that his colleagues go forth and continue to apply research-based principles to any problems they were presented with in life. Nate was discouraged with the techniques then available in psychology and wanted to develop techniques that were validated and based on research, which could be used by people throughout the world. Nate stressed that we should find the problems that are especially troublesome to people and solve those first as a priority. The reason for this was so that we could develop new programs and procedures that would have the greatest impact to be useful and helpful to the most people.

The magnitude (number of people affected) of the impact of his ideas, dreams, goals and work in the human population is astounding. There are millions of people with developmental disabilities, autistic spectrum, job problems, Tourette's, marital problems, toileting or other self-care problems that used my fathers' techniques to solve their problems. I remember talking with him one time, and telling him the astounding numbers, maybe millions of people (I tried to estimate the exact numbers based on each of his procedures) he had affected with his work, and as he listened to me, his eyes stared ahead intently deep in thought, wistfully and contently at me quietly for what seemed quite a long time. Dr. Nathan Azrin was an expert at discerning the problems that needed to be solved and arranging a large number of new innovative psychological techniques that were able to solve the problems. These techniques were based on outcome research. He was one of the first to stress the importance of outcome-based research in psychology.

Many of the basic principles Nathan Azrin developed are now standard practice – the “gold standard” in the field. There are research programs that follow in his approach in universities around

the world, including Australia, Scandinavia, China, Japan, South America, and throughout the United States. He wrote seven books and published about 200 articles, and he received eight lifetime achievement awards from different organizations, including a Trailblazer award.

“I loved my father and so did the world” that is the very last thing I said to him before he passed away, and even at that final moment he had his famous smile on his face. The number of new smiles and new lives he contributed to developing normally is astounding. My father was known for starting new ideas and techniques and hoped that others would use them - and they did. He was truly a founding father of behavioral psychology. And I am grateful that he was my father as well. ■



*To enjoy seeing more pictures from Azrin's life, a list of his books and articles, and watch speeches that he gave, visit [www.nathanazrin.com](http://www.nathanazrin.com).*