Introduction to the Special Series on Developmental Disabilities

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This issue contains the first two of a series of papers on developmental disability. Jo Jenkinson begins the series with a discussion of the problems associated with defining and diagnosing developmental disability. She highlights the difficulties associated with assessing the usual defining characteristics of low intelligence and deficits in adaptive behaviour, and concludes by suggesting that new developments in studying etiology may assist in improving diagnosis, particularly in assessment of level of support need. The remainder of the papers focus on interventions developed essentially from a framework of applied behaviour analysis.

In the second paper, Marti Snell writes from a North American perspective and reviews 114 studies of interventions by school personnel with children who were identified as having mental retardation. The studies were published in 11 journals over the 1990–1996 period. After a discussion of the strength and weaknesses of the research, Marti draws some conclusions about what constitutes effective teaching.

In the first paper in the next issue, Jeff Sigafoos reviews literature relevant to the important area of teaching communication skills to people with severe communication impairments. Particular attention is given to the work of researchers such as Carr, Duker, Sundberg, Cipani, Reichle, and Bond and Frost. An important focus of the research has been on teaching skills that will enable the learners to express basic needs and indicate preferences.

In the following paper, Laura Hall reviews contemporary literature relevant to interventions for the defining characteristics of autism, namely, impairment in social interaction, impairment in communication, and stereotyped patterns of behaviour. Laura concludes that practitioners have a menu of effective strategies to select from for effective treatment of these characteristics.

It is pleasing to see in the Snell, Sigafoos, and Hall papers a strong emphasis on the use of behaviour analysis procedures to promote skill acquisition by people with developmental disabilities. All too frequently, behavioural procedures are associated with ways of removing problem or challenging behaviours. Apart from being a fundamental right of people with disabilities, exposure to skill acquisition opportunities increases independence and reliance on service delivery systems.

In the final paper in this series, Don Tustin and his colleagues report on an empirical study of the antecedents of problem behaviours exhibited by people with intellectual disabilities. The study resulted in the production of a 19-factor scale for the assessment of these antecedents.

It is hoped that Behaviour Change readers enjoy this series of papers from the general field of developmental disability.