

Amy's Game

The concealed structure of education

By Roger F. Bass

This book documents the underlying reasons why some children are so damaged by their schools. Among other things, the author touches on inadequate teacher training, the expensive fads that endlessly cycle through, the poor quality of much educational research, and the problems with testing. The author is so blunt that his book is painful to read, and few will believe what he says – even though most of it is completely accurate. The excerpt shows why he is so angry.

Excerpt (pages 6-8)

“Amy seethed with full-blown autism: repetitive, stereotypic behaviours like hand flapping; placing objects in a row and calling them a ‘ta’-wain’ (train); and grabbing people (even strangers) by the cheeks and going nose-to-nose with them while cocking her head and staring into their eyes. She had perfected her signature temper tantrums – screams and hitting now escalated into slamming doors so hard the glass broke. Her few, completely out-of-context words compounded with discipline problems exacerbated by a ten-second attention span.

“It was clear that the preschool teachers would be no help. My first observation found Amy belly down on a dolly, the kind mechanics use to slide under vehicles, breast-stroking herself about 40 miles an hour along a hallway turned autobahn. I assumed her reckless driving was some kind of physical therapy or reward for good behaviour, but it wasn’t. Straight-faced, they told me it was her *reading lesson*. Here’s their two-part explanation.

“Part 1. Individuals recapitulate the evolutionary steps of their species. Each of us begins as a one-celled organism floating in our mother’s womb, just like the first life adrift in the primeval oceans. Part 2. We then develop in stages that replicate our species’ climb up the phylogenic ladder: single-celled to multi-cellular to re-enacting millions of years of evolution.”

“They surmised that Amy was at the amphibian stage; so propelling herself alligator-like down a hallway would therapeutically elevate her into a more complex life form capable of benefiting from reading instruction.

“My mentors were experimental psychologists, not educators, so while suppressing questions about why auto mechanics don’t devolve into alligators, I asked for data on her progress. They had none. But their strong general impression was that scooting down hallways for almost a year

hadn't improved her phylogenic standing. The daycare staff attributed that stagnation to the severity of her handicaps. I asked for published research on the instructional method. They had none and knew of none. What they did have was a preschool teacher who's heard a sketchy introduction to the technique in a special education class and, without training or supervision, used it with Amy. Anyone who had risen to the primate level could see it was a failure. So I did something very different. I used proven procedures under the supervision of an experienced behavioural psychologist.

"First, we identified effective rewards, and Amy had plenty: being pulled on a rug, bouncing on my knee, throwing a ball, swinging, riding in a wagon, and more, all of them normal, age-appropriate, inexpensive, easy to deliver, and obvious.

"Second, we started where she was at – ten seconds of eye contact that allowed me to prompt compliance skills I'd use to teach language. Within 10 one-hour sessions over several weeks, Amy's attention span was 45 *minutes* (which is about the same as a college student's) and she was reading individual words on cards.

"Third, those word cards were combined – initially into formulaic sentences and then into novel expressions of her own. The card-sentences included commands from me to her ('Amy throw ball', 'Amy look at me', etc.) and requests from her to me ('Amy ride swing', 'Amy listen music'). Increasing Amy's compliance reduced her disruptive behaviour to zero within 15 hours, and it stayed there.

"I couldn't wait to see the staff's delight in Amy's progress and, together, extend the program to other children. Neither happened. Instead, I was politely thanked and never asked to return. But fate had other plans.

"Several years later, I was a graduate student in psychology when college faculty and public school administrators again randomly assigned me to Amy's classroom. Only her behaviour stunned me more than the coincidence. Everything she'd learned was lost, and her school files contained nothing about all she had so quickly accomplished.

"Amy disintegrated into physically-aggressive tantrums that peaked with smearing feces on bathroom walls and herself. Consultants hired by the school recommended putting her into a timeout box for engaging in the kind of disruptive behaviours she had stopped while a preschooler. No specialized training was needed to see that isolation was the worst possible tactic, because it gave her an unregulated space to self-stim. Not long after, Amy was placed in a residential institution for the severely-retarded, even though by age five she was clearly autistic, not retarded, and with proper instruction, restrictive care would never be needed.

"Locking Amy away was an above-ground burial of her school's failure."