

## Editor's Column

### In defense of Ivar Lovaas

By Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

My telephone began ringing early on March 10th. The *New York Times* headline, "Researcher Reports Progress Against Autism," was followed by an extensive story based on a 15-year study of early intervention in autism. The *Times* article ended with an enthusiastic quote from the researcher, Ivar Lovaas of UCLA: "I am positive now that autism need not be chronic if you take autistic children and give them an intensive reorganization of their life year-round." Parents everywhere telephoned our Institute in San Diego for more information. "Is it true?" "Should we take our child to UCLA?"

The phones started ringing again April 14th, when the CBS television network news carried a similar story about the Lovaas report. It is obviously a rare and newsworthy event when a carefully controlled research program shows almost half of a group of autistic children to have improved dramatically. We have all heard of "miracle cures" of autism based on a single case, or on a small number of cases, with no control groups or verifiable scientific data. Such reports are not very credible. The Lovaas study, a carefully controlled experiment with two control groups and many pre- and post-experiment measures, is credible.

The Lovaas report is surprising, not only because of the positive findings, but because Lovaas himself, a leading advocate of behavior modification since the early 1960s, had in the past been very frank in explaining to lay audiences that behavior modification, while worthwhile, can improve an autistic child's functioning to only a limited degree. I have heard him say, at parents' conferences, "If your child is on step two of a ten-step ladder, with the tenth step being normal, behavior modification will move your autistic child to perhaps step four. That is a big improvement, but there is still a long way to go." Others in the field have reflected similar views.

Lovaas' new, much more optimistic attitude is a surprise to many people, including me. It is also quite a surprise to Lovaas himself. "I never believed we would see results this good," he told me recently.

The news is not uniformly good. The bad news includes the fact that only half (47%) of the children showed the excellent improvement on which most attention has been focused. The bad news also includes the fact that the findings are based on children started very young, at about age three-and-a-half, and that the treatment requires 40 hours per week of intensive behavior modification, year-round, by trained and dedicated parents and teachers. Such extraordinarily intensive interventions are

obviously very expensive. Lovaas' research project was paid for by a government grant, which has recently expired. (Lovaas has offered to help parents who are trying to establish similar programs in their local areas by supplying a trained graduate student who will conduct intensive one-week parent/teacher training workshops.)

While most parents have reacted with excitement and interest, many professionals have reacted to Lovaas' report with skepticism and hostility. One prominent professional went so far as to call Lovaas "another Bruno Bettelheim", implying that what Lovaas has done is destructive to autistic children and their families. It is not unusual for humanity to treat its pioneers with hostility.

In Lovaas' case, the adverse reactions started even before his report was published. The journal editor submitted the paper to three reviewers, all of whom responded negatively or ambivalently. To his everlasting credit, editor Alan Kasdin of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School gave Lovaas an opportunity to respond to the criticisms, rather than taking the easy alternative of simply rejecting his controversial paper. Kasdin was satisfied with Lovaas' responses to the criticisms of his paper, and published it in the first 1987 issue of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. Soon after, the *New York Times* and the CBS Evening News picked up the story and my telephones began ringing.

Lovaas is no stranger to adversity. He endured much of it as a youth during the Nazi occupation of his native Norway. He has endured a good deal more of it as a result of his courageous attempts over the years to bring about the greatest possible improvement in the autistic children brought to his clinic at UCLA.

I first met Ivar Lovaas in October of 1964, soon after my book *Infantile Autism* was published. I had heard about his work with a new and strange technique called "behavior modification" and wanted to learn a bit more about it. I was skeptical, since the technique seemed much better suited to training dogs or seals than people. However, after visiting his clinic I was very impressed with his efforts. I was also impressed with his intelligence, his integrity, and his obvious dedication toward helping the children.

Lovaas had a profound effect upon me. I returned home, convinced of the truth of Lovaas' assertion that autistic children, like all the rest of us, must be held accountable for their own behavior if they are to develop to their potential. To my wife's horror, I began to use Lovaas' techniques in training our very difficult eight-year-old

autistic son. I realized that the extremely permissive, indulgent attitude toward autistic children which had been fostered by previous authorities in the field of autism was in fact terribly damaging to the children. Kindly but firmly I used behavior modification to "shape up" my son. Self-stimming was no longer tolerated. I used Lovaas' techniques to ensure that Mark paid close attention to what he was told and to what was going on around him. Some day I will write a book about this, but for the moment I can only say that it helped my son Mark, as it has helped many other children. Mark has come much further than we dared dream. Behavior modification undoubtedly contributed to the improvement. (See Rimland, "Operant Conditioning," 1972.)

Lovaas was courageous enough to use aversives with autistic children, just as for centuries parents have used aversives with normal children to socialize their behavior. Mostly Lovaas used "positive reinforcement"—praise and nibbles of food. If positives didn't work, the trainers would shout, "No!" or give a spank on the thigh. No child was harmed. Lovaas' critics, brainwashed by decades of psychoanalytic theorizing about autism being an "emotional disorder", began to castigate Lovaas for departing from their preferred mode of indulging the children and treating them with extreme permissiveness. The fact is that Lovaas' treatments have helped thousands of children, while the permissive approaches have certainly not helped and have in all likelihood caused great damage. (See Rimland, "Freud is Dead," 1970.)

As it turns out, that 1964 meeting also had a strong impact on Lovaas. After I introduced Lovaas to a group of parents of autistic children in the Los Angeles area, Lovaas turned to me and said, "What I have been telling my students about autism being caused by the failure of parents to reinforce their children properly is obviously wrong. Now that I know some parents of autistic children personally, I can see that you are correct. Autism is a biological disorder, and the parents are not the cause of it. The parents and I will work as a team to help the children."

During that first meeting, Lovaas called my attention to the remarkable work that transformed Helen Keller, a blind deaf-mute, into an intelligent and productive human being. The methods for teaching autistic children have been available ever since the days of Helen Keller, Lovaas noted, and none of us were bright enough to recognize that they were available to us. Now we know about these methods and can use them.

When the history of autism is written, the name of Ivar Lovaas will be writ far larger than the names of his many shortsighted critics.