The New York Times

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December 31, 1985

DISCIPLINE RULING AT AUTISM FACILITY

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

A Massachusetts state agency agreed yesterday to reconsider its order barring a school for autistic children from using a program of physical punishments as treatment.

The agreement, by the Massachustts Office for Children, appeared to be a significant victory for the school and the parents of many of its 64 clients. The parents had protested that their children had regressed into violent or self-abusive behavior after the agency sought in September to close the school and banned physical punishment, known as aversive therapy, for the autistic clients.

Autism is a baffling brain disorder that leads to speech defects and aggressive or self-abusive behavior.

Director Sees a Victory

Matthew Israel, the director of the school, the Behavior Research Institute in Providence, R.I., said he regarded the agreement as "very much a victory." The agreement followed a judge's decision restoring aversive treatment for a child in the school, as requested by her parents.

According to Mary Kay Leonard, the director of the Office for Children, the accord calls for her to appoint a panel of experts "to advise the agency on the conditions, if any, under which aversive therapy should be authorized in Massachusetts as a treatment for autistic children." The panel is to deliver a report in 30 days.

Without conceding that she had backed down from her order banning the physical punishments, Miss Leonard said, "This will allow B.R.I. one more chance to present to the office exactly what aversive procedures it wishes to use" and "to demonstrate that B.R.I. now has the needed safeguards in place."

Client Died in Treatment

The Massachusetts agency has jurisdiction over Behavior Research because while the school building is in Providence, the students live in seven houses in suburbs just across the Massachusetts border.

The agency's decision to ban aversive therapy came after the death of Vincent Milletich, a 22-year-old autistic man from Queens, who died while being bombarded with staticlike "white noise." His death and the agency's action touched off an emotional dispute among parents, officials in Massachusetts and New York, psychologists and civil liberties groups.

The Office for Children and the civil liberties groups contended that the school's program was cruel. But many of the parents whose children had been expelled from other schools as too violent said it was the

only effective treatment the children had ever received.

The parents also feared that if the school was shut, their offspring would end up in state mental hospitals in restraints and heavily sedated. Behavior Research refuses to use drugs.

In part the dispute grows out of sharp disagreements among psychologists over how best to treat autism, with some arguing that patients can be helped by a program solely of rewards, like compliments, hugs and candy, for fulfilling assigned tasks.

Rewards or Punishments

Behavior Research uses rewards, but Mr. Israel had also worked out a graduated system of punishments to be used when the rewards alone were ineffective. These included pinching, spanking, sprays of water or ammonia vapor, and cold showers.

The agreement on the center came 10 days after a probate court judge in southeastern Massachusetts ordered restoration of aversive therapy for Janine Casoria, a 15-year-old from Queens. Judge Ernest I. Rotenberg acted after the girl's parents, Judith and Carlo Casoria, contended in court that their daughter had reverted to uncontrollable, self-destructive behavior, including banging her head against objects and pulling out her hair.

Judge Rotenberg visited the school and watched a videotape of Janine made when she arrived four years ago. The film shows Janine repeatedly banging her head on the floor, pulling out her hair and groaning, despite efforts by attendants to hold her.

"That is one of the most violent scenes I have seen in my life," Judge Rotenberg said later in court. "Why is there a controversy? I have viewed the school. I have seen Janine. I can't understand any reason in the world why this is a controversial procedure."

Mr. Israel responded that the current trend in child rearing stressed as little punishment as possible.

Mr. Casoria said Janine had made enormous progress after entering the school.

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