Expanding the Happy Few:  
A Review of *The Critical Years* by Doris Durrell

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Some years ago, B.F. Skinner (1981) presented a paper titled "We Happy Few, but Why so Few?" That title summarizes the sentiments of many professional behavior analysts who have long recognized the benefit our culture would derive if the general population applied some basic behavioral principles and concepts to ordinary daily interactions. Other disciplines are not as ignored by the public as behavior analysis seems to be. Skinner comprehensively analyzed some broad cultural reasons for this in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971). An additional reason may be simply that few books on behavioral psychology are available for the general population, as a scan of local bookstore shelves reveals. (Also, see Morris, 1985.)

Some behavioral books, of course, have been widely read, among them *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948). Other attempts to write behavioral books for general audiences have been made, with varying degrees of success. Some books offer an overview of ordinary daily applications of the behavioral approach such as *Don't Shoot the Dog* (Pryor, 1984). Other books have a general appeal to wider audiences, such as *Enjoy Old Age* (Skinner & Vaughan, 1983). Many other behavioral books, however, are more limited in scope and are often written chiefly to help the already distraught parent (Becker, 1971; Patterson, 1975, 1976). The limited scope of writing mainly for distraught parents, where the emphasis is on solving already developed problems, may have reduced the chance that these works would be picked up by the ordinary bookstore customer for simple informative reading or as gifts for friends. Behavioral psychology does not have the popular writers that other disciplines have. We have no Isaac Asimovs or Stephen Jay Goulds. A book that begins to break this mold, however, is Doris Durrell's (1984) *The Critical Years: A Guide for Dedicated Parents*. (Also, see Christophersen, 1982.)

The purpose of this book review differs from the usual purpose of book reviews. The usual purpose is to show readers where and how a book fits into the present scheme of the discipline and to encourage readers to obtain and read it for their own edification. Trained behavior analysts, however, are already familiar with the information contained in *The Critical Years*. The book was not written for the professional but for the lay person. The benefit behavior analysts would derive from this book stems mainly from the extent to which it can help popularize behavior analysis. Hence, the purpose of this review is to inform behavior analysts about the book so that they can assist in (a) promoting more effective parenting and related helping activities (i.e., improvements in our cultural practices) and (b) promoting the field of behavior analysis in general (and thereby help counteract the "we happy few" syndrome).

Before treating each chapter, a number of characteristics (the book's aim, theme, and examples) deserve separate attention for they occur regularly throughout Durrell's book. Sometimes these characteristics are obvious; more often, they are found "between the lines." The overall aim of the book is to improve our culture's child-rearing practices by teaching parents a planned approach (an approach based on the principles of behavior rather than based on causes attributed to ages and stages) to some of the most significant aspects of child-rearing, including language development and training, the effects and appropriate use of punishment, social skills training, intelligence, and creativity.

The underlying theme of the book is primary prevention rather than crisis intervention ("cure" for short) as seen in the emphasis on the early and easy solving of emerging behavior problems. The tactic is one of "let's do it right the first time" and avoid later problems if possible. Not surprisingly, Durrell concentrates her efforts on the practices applicable from birth to three years of age, although she also gives much advice on how to continue after that. This theme, with the emphasis on the first three years, differs from most behavioral books on child-rearing, such as those mentioned earlier. Those books usually deal with older children and can usually be characterized as cure-oriented. Problems have already developed, and those books suggest ways for solving them. *The Critical Years* is different, taking the view that such problems "might have been prevented altogether with the application of a few simple psychological principles" (Durrell's italics, p. 11). Durrell's goals are to make the principles obvious and their application routine for the daily life of the dedicated parent. This reviewer believes that the author achieves her goals remarkably well.

Then, too, Durrell treats behavior control as a fact. The question she tackles is whether the variables generate desir-

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1 *The Critical Years: A Guide for Dedicated Parents* is available from New Harbinger Publications, Suite 305, 2200 Adeline Street, Oakland, CA 94607 (207 pages, $9.95, softbound.)

2 Address reprint requests to Dr. Stephen Ledoux, Department of Psychology, SUNY-Canton, Canton, NY 13617. The author thanks the editor and anonymous reviewers of *The Behavior Analyst* for their helpful comments on an early draft of this review, a brief version of which appeared in that journal (Ledoux, 1986).
able or undesirable behavior, which she sees as typically a matter of whether the variables are arranged by design or by accident. Indeed, the preference for design over accident in the arrangement of the variables controlling behavior forms the basis for the emphasis on prevention rather than cure. This approach has been called the “helping” approach (Malott & Whaley, 1983) as opposed to the “natural” approach in which planned interventions into ages and stages are seen as unnecessary and so, supposedly, undesirable. In fact, The Critical Years as a whole is an expansion of the helping approach described by Malott and Whaley (1983) in the developmental psychology chapters of their introductory psychology text, one of few introductory texts to include this approach.

Finally, the quality of Durrell’s examples merits special recognition. They are drawn from actual everyday situations that every parent probably experiences sooner or later. When stressing that parents should model desirable behaviors for their child (an important point in its own right), Durrell practices what she preaches by providing them with a model to follow when, for instance, she suggests that if their son

wants a bean bag from a child who has several, tell him: “No, Ian, you can’t take that toy away. You have to ask him for a bean bag.” Say, “May I have a bean bag?” (p. 121)

Familiar and helpful concrete examples such as this continue throughout the book’s chapters. In addition, the author proceeds without gender bias throughout the book. Son and daughter examples alternate, and do not always reflect standard gender stereotypes. For example, girls play with trucks and boys show feelings.

Overview

In all, the book contains thirteen chapters in four parts. An index and bibliography are also provided. After the first chapter’s introductory information on the author’s background and the book’s uniqueness, orientation, and outline, Durrell begins the only disappointing chapter of the book, chapter 2. This chapter discusses inborn differences among infants in terms of temperaments. The temperaments are those of the easy baby, the slow to warm up baby, and the difficult baby. Durrell seems to imply that the characteristic behaviors from which these temperaments are inferred cannot be changed. This suggestion may sometimes be true, but while implying that the reader must simply live with the temperaments, Durrell fills the chapter with much advice and examples on how to temper the temperaments. With all the chapter’s advice in hand, the parent-reader is unlikely to be as affected by this apparent contradiction as the professional reader, who is generally more sensitive to this complex issue.

Chapter 3 deals with attachment, substitute care, and sleeping. Checking to see that other caregivers share the parent’s preferences regarding child rearing practices receives the special attention it deserves in this chapter.

Part II, “Advanced Childrearing Techniques,” contains four chapters. The chapter on language development comes first and receives the most extensive treatment because it forms the foundation for success in the other areas. In great detail, Durrell uses example after example to demonstrate the variety and development of simple techniques that can and should be applied to everyday situations to enhance a child’s early language acquisition. After discussing the immediate advantages of early language acquisition, she begins with techniques that lay the foundation for later development, such as talking to the newborn, rewarding cooing and babbling, and teaching imitation. As the child begins to talk, other techniques become important, including echoing and repeating, modeling correct enunciation, and providing exciting experiences to give the child something to talk about. As the child talks more and more, the parents’ avoidance of “baby-talk” is especially stressed, while expansion, elaboration, questioning, modeling corrections, and other techniques come into prominence. A section of the chapter is then devoted to the use of books in language training, plus a discussion for parents who begin planned language training later. The chapter closes by discussing the long-term benefits of language development, especially with respect to the forthcoming chapters.

Chapter 5 deals with increasing the child’s intelligence, which by implication is defined as increasing the behavioral repertoire. The first part of the chapter interprets research findings to form techniques parents can use to expand their child’s repertoire. The second part describes and evaluates the “Better Baby” course designed by Glen Doman (Doman, 1979). Parents are shown how to adapt some of Doman’s techniques for their own use while avoiding what Durrell sees as the dangers of the course.

Chapter 6 is on creativity. Although the definition of creativity relates to responding in novel or unusual ways, the discussion emphasizes divergent thinking. Techniques to encourage creativity and divergent thinking cover the use of imagery and imaginative play, creative toys and play without toys, and “play with improbabilities.” A number of verbal tasks that are often used as measures of creativity could be turned into simple games to enhance creativity, although the author does not state this explicitly. One task asks the child to name things in a particular class, such as objects that weigh less than one pound (a type of abstract tact training). Another task would be to name words that are related to other words, such as words that mean “easy” or things that are easy (a type of intraverbal training). If complex repertoires on these tasks indicate creativity, then practice on the tasks as a game may enhance creativity. Durrell ends the chapter with two cautionary notes, however. Some children’s creative behavior may be mildly undesirable to the parent, but to eliminate such mildly undesirable behav-
ior may reduce the very playfulness and creativity that the parent has worked to promote. Also, not all teachers and caregivers can appreciate especially creative children and deal with them appropriately, so parents may have to do some searching for compatible teachers and caregivers.

In Chapter 7, on achievement motivation, Durrell develops three topics concerning preparing children, beginning at age one, to do well in school. Each topic receives rather brief treatment; the chapter is only 10 pages long. While brief treatment may be adequate for the first two topics, decision making and self control, the importance of the third topic, reading preparation, would seem to justify an expanded treatment. The reading preparation section touches on the use of puzzles, toys, games, and books in promoting reading readiness, as well as the importance of beginning to shape some important reading readiness skills early on. The skills include attention span, following directions, sorting and classifying, top to bottom and left to right orientation, spatial positions, descriptive words, colors, and geometrical shapes. The chapter closes with mention of the sight-reading versus phonics controversy. Durrell promotes phonics, and highlights ways parents can use phonics at home to improve reading readiness. Unfortunately, many of the benefits of phonics training go unmentioned, including possible contributions to vocabulary skills, spelling skills, and the reduction of similar-letter discrimination problems. Nonetheless, children of parents who follow the phonics related methods should receive the benefits.

Part III, “Socialization,” begins with chapter 8, a description of how to prevent or minimize temper tantrums, and how to apply the principles of the book as disciplinary strategies. The focus is on “preventing undesirable behaviors while they are in the making and teaching alternative, pro-social behaviors at the same moment” (p. 100). Strategies for parents to use with younger children include “satiating curiosity,” controlling the stimuli that evoke disobedience or tantrums (the “terrible twos”), controlling the consequences of desirable as well as undesirable behaviors, and setting rules about only serious undesired behaviors and then following the rules consistently. Strategies for parents to use with older children concern how to teach asking nicely, how to avoid conditioning an undesirable behavior chain, and how to make cooperation easy. The chapter ends with a section discussing the components involved in using reasoning as a means of discipline, including teaching moral principles, building relationships, and providing natural and logical consequences.

Chapter 9, on aggression, empathy, sharing, and cooperation, retains the focus of the previous chapter. Regarding aggression, Durrell offers insights that are often overlooked even by people familiar with the topic. She points out that the environmental consequences which normally keep aggressive behavior in check sometimes fail as the child explores the environment, producing particular consequences on demand, through aggressive acts. (Professional psychologists have no monopoly on the reinforcing value of controlling the environment.) In the remainder of Chapter 9, the teaching of empathy, sharing, and cooperation receive the same skillful treatment so notable throughout the book.

Part IV, on behavior modification, contains four chapters. These chapters are not merely a reworking of basic principles as found in any typical cure-oriented text. Although terms get a little more technical, and many techniques described earlier receive some elaboration, Durrell’s prevention approach, and her admirable ability to make principles understandable and applications to familiar experience numerous and clear, remains manifest.

Chapter 10, on increasing desirable behavior, breaks down positive reinforcement into a six-step procedure and takes the reader through each step in detail using toilet training as the example. (Also, see “The Technology of Toilet Training,” Appendix I in Ledoux and Cheney, 1987.) Techniques designed to minimize the dangers of accidentally reinforcing undesirable behaviors and the unwanted schedule effects of inconsistent reinforcement round out the chapter.

Chapter 11, on modeling, shows how to teach by example and how to avoid the dangers of exposing your child to models emitting undesirable behavior. Some of the topics include modeling and TV violence, modeling and sex role socialization, and the superiority of modeling to instruction. A sampling of both positive and negative examples where modeling is relevant includes initiating play, neatness, proficiency, and smoking. The importance of early modeling is seen in Durrell’s conclusion to the chapter. When you model, and so “teach your child behaviors that will be maintained by the natural reinforcers of friendship and the warm responses of other people, you teach social skills which will be lasting” (p. 159).

Chapter 12 covers techniques for decreasing undesirable behaviors. Three main topics receive careful elaboration. The first is extinction. The classic Williams (1959) study on eliminating bedtime tantrums is presented. Examples of using extinction after different reinforcement schedules, as well as the necessity of preparing oneself for using extinction, are included. The second main topic is punishment which the author breaks down into nine detailed parts ranging from trying everything else first to modeling alternative behavior. The third topic is time out which is described in five steps, including the importance of not releasing the child from time out until all tantrum behavior has ceased. The examples that pertain to applying time out are among the most elaborate and wide-ranging of the book. These include time out to encourage taking required medication, time out for night waking, and time out at the doctor’s office. Unfortunately, little attention is given to places unsuitable for time out that are nevertheless sometimes inadvertently selected. For instance, places like the basement or garage are usually unsuitable because not only are dangerous tools and chemicals commonly stored in these locations, but playing
with these dangerous things may be fun, and time out by
definition should not be reinforcing. Similarly, the bedroom
must be discounted as a time out room due to the many re-in-
facing activities that are easily available there. Brief discus-
sions of spoiling and negative reinforcement round out the
chapter, the latter being correctly treated (as a procedure
that increases behavior) but included in this chapter due to
its role in accidentally encouraging undesirable behaviors.

Chapter 13 closes the book with a discussion of how
fears are learned, prevented, and eliminated. With the au-
ther's ever-present skills of teaching by example, some of
the fears considered include fear of the dark, of animals, and
of the wind, plus various fears related to noise, water, and
separation.

Conclusion

Overall, this reviewer finds The Critical Years, although
not perfect, to be the most organized and readable collection
of scientifically sound information, advice, and examples
concerning child rearing practices to date. The review would
be incomplete, however, if one particular omission received
no comment. The book contained no mention of the “Airc­
rib” (Skinner, 1945, 1979). One would welcome a future edi-
tion that included a chapter on the construction and use of
the Aircrib, and the special benefits Aircrubs bring to chil-
dren, parents, and the culture (see Ledoux & Cheney, 1987).

Not an omission, as it goes beyond the scope of the
present book, but also worth mentioning is another topic
that would be useful. In additional chapters, or perhaps
even a separate volume, a discussion of the methods for han-
dling the more common situations that arise in the next nine
years of a child’s life (ages 3-12), in the same amount and
type of detail used to cover the first three years, would be
welcome. Durrell’s prevention approach similarly applied to
these later years could improve the lives of many parents
and children.

Until a separate book or additional chapters in The Crit-
cial Years appear, Christophersen’s (1982) Little People (from
Pro-Ed at 5341 Industrial Oaks Blvd., in Austin, TX 78735)
provides quite usable coverage of these years. Although
shorter than The Critical Years, and while dealing with more
topics of general importance (the more common situations)
rather than the specific issues of language, reading, intelli-
gence, creativity, etc., as Durrell does, Little People nonethe-
less also admirably pursues the prevention perspective. In-
deed, rather than competing, the two books complement
each other. A more comprehensive understanding and set
of successful strategies will likely accrue to parents who use
both books.

The prevention, rather than cure, orientation of The Crit-
cial Years serves another purpose in addition to those
mentioned previously. It enhances the potential popularity
of the book by removing the implications of guilt and insult
that are often associated with books taking a cure approach.

Some parents may hesitate to buy any of the excellent cure-
oriented books when one is needed, partly out of self-
recrimination about having failed in some way. These par-
ents may also be easily insulted if someone recommends or
gives them such a book. Prevention-oriented books are easi-
ter to buy and easier to give as gifts because the prevention
approach does not imply that problems already exist.
Hence, prevention oriented books are more likely to reach
larger audiences and achieve greater impact in improving
cultural practices. Such is the potential role The Critical
Years can serve regarding child rearing practices, with the added
benefit of helping to popularize the science of behavior.

The impact The Critical Years may have on people’s un-
derstanding of the science of behavior is a long way from the
understanding that would accrue, say, from teaching the
science of behavior in all high schools, just as the sciences of
biology and physics are taught. A high school behavioral
psychology course requirement (perhaps initially as a scien-
tific child rearing course) may be a reality some day. But in
the meantime, The Critical Years is a step in the right direc-
tion. Behavior analysts need not be “we happy few” forever.

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