

*Note from Jonathan Dosick (used with permission): It's a long and bold article, published nearly 30 years ago, about what was then the Behavioral Research Institute (BRI) - which was later renamed the Judge Rotenberg Center, and its founder, Dr. Matthew Israel. This was published when BRI was operating in Providence, RI and before electric shock began to be used there, although the end of the article shows that at the time, Dr. Israel was seriously interested in shock. It also shows that the public was made very aware, in great detail, of Dr. Israel's methods and abuses...28 years ago - but Massachusetts has done very little since then!*

*Note from transcriber: I have indicated what appear to be typographical mistakes with italicized [sic] following the original language. (Un-italicized [sic] indicates a typographical mistake in a quotation that the original article author noted.) Otherwise, the transcription should be an exact match to the original, including punctuation and paragraph breaks. The only material that I have added are text descriptions of each image, marked within brackets [] and rendered in italics. I have included these for the benefit of anyone who cannot see the pictures from the article and thus have written myself to the best of my ability. — Lydia Brown, 4 February 2013*

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Article and related pictures arranged by Derrick Jeffries, March 10, 2008. Used with the exclusive permission of Clif Garboden, Senior Managing Editor, Phoenix Newspaper Group, Boston, MA.

# The Boston Phoenix

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## Doctor Hurt

### The aversive therapist and his painful record

by Ric Kahn  
Photos by Michael Romanos

Little Janine flashes on the screen groaning, a wild child star in a Matt Israel home movie. She jumps up and down, whacks her face with both palms. She squirms on the floor, bashes her head against the ground. She's pulled so much out of her hair that you can't tell if she's a boy or a girl. Her scalp resembles a golf course scarred by divots. She used to abuse herself so often she'd wake up with blood on her pillow. Then the child in the child somehow returned while she was at the Behavior Research Institute (BRI) in Providence, Rhode Island. Eight-point-five months later, captured by Israel on film, Janine is smiling and playing on the swings and flinging a Frisbee.

And say, hey, José. Before BRI: big belly bulging from an open shirt; drinking vodka, smoking weed; ready to kick, punch, bite anything in sight. After 14 months at BRI, José's lost 50 pounds, looks like a new man, in shirt and tie and sweater. "You're looking pretty handsome," BRI executive director Matthew Israel says to his student. "Yeah," José replies.

Wayne was in another program before he came to BRI. He used to play with a "rectal gouge" until he bled. Blood on the sheets, blood smeared on the furniture. Room smelled of urine.

Wayne once reportedly tore out a hundred-pound radiator. Broke into a Li'l Peach store, naked. In the film of his first few days at BRI, he's rocking, ripping sheets, going after a worker's throat. Three and a half years later, Wayne is happily disco roller-skating. "Wayne, what's your favorite reward?" Israel asks his student. "I like ice-cream sandwich," Wayne tells his mentor.

Matthew Israel, this self-styled savior, is a radical Skinnerian behavior-modification psychologist. He is vehemently opposed to drug therapy. He has emerged as the country's most outspoken proponent of aversive therapy, saying positive reinforcement alone can't eradicate the most bizarre behaviors. Over the past 14 years he has devised and revised a complex system of rewards and punishments and pain that he claims can eliminate inappropriate and life-threatening behaviors in the most hard-core autistic, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and just plain too-troubled children and adults. Currently, Israel is also trying to modify the behavior of the state of Massachusetts, which he claims is acting too aggressively. On September 26, after a seven-month review of the program that intensified following the death of a 22-year-old autistic BRI student, the state's Office for Children (OFC) issued an emergency measure to shut the program down. OFC charged that Israel's operation — the school and its group homes — was jeopardizing the health, safety, and welfare of its students through food deprivation, excessive punishment, and disregard for regulatory requirements. OFC suspended the licenses of the seven group homes in Massachusetts where BRI houses its 64 residents, ages 13 to 28. A magistrate upheld the OFC emergency suspension, though she ruled against the state on her findings of fact. A full hearing on whether BRI's group-home licenses will be revoked is not expected to take place until January. In the meantime, the Providence school has been allowed to remain open but under severe OFC restrictions (OFC has influence over whether the school remains open or closed even though it's in Providence, because Massachusetts children are in the program). Now the staff of BRI can no longer use physical punishments, also known as aversives; they cannot withhold meals as a punishment; they cannot take in new students or implement any new aversives or restraints.

In 1983 OFC approved a hierarchy of aversives that Matt Israel was already using in the school and group homes to treat the bizarre behaviors of many of his students. The hit list ranged from ignoring the behavior and the benign "no" response to ammonia sprayed near the nose, harsh tastes applied to the tongue, spankings, muscle squeezes, pinches, and brief cool showers. The agency now claims that Israel not only went too far with the approved punishments but also instituted new aversives without its okay. OFC's own ambiguous regulations and restrictions, however, make it hard to decipher where the aversives were supposed to end and where the abuse may have started.

In his dealings with other states as well, Israel has often translated his understanding of leeway into "my way." His current conflict with the commonwealth has brought attention to the fact that he has never published the results of his findings at BRI. Critics in his field wonder why a man who claims he's on the cutting edge has not submitted his work to the scrutiny of scientific, blind review.

"If he's found The Way, why not share it with the rest of us?" asks a source who works with autistic children. Anne Donnellan, a professor in the Department of Studies in Behavioral Disabilities at the University of Wisconsin, says, "He's running around showing his movies, why

can't he show his data?"

On a visit to BRI in Providence, before you can reach either Israel or his program, one of his minions guides you into a plush library with mirrors, a sectional couch, ceramic dogs, a fireplace, and nine fans humming overhead. Here, seated at a large table facing a big screen hooked up to a Sony Betamax, you are required to receive a heavy dose of visceral videotapes starring Israel and his children.

Caroline arrived at BRI in an ambulance, the film relates. Restrained. She wore a helmet and hammered her head on the floor. "What's your favorite reward?" she's asked. "Restraint," she says. Seven years later, Caroline is sitting in the parlor combing her hair. Her nose resembles a boxer's. Self-abuse. "I think you're really pretty without the helmet, don't you?" Israel asks, smiling.

Over the past decade, this film has been shown more often than *The Wizard of Oz*. Israel has used the before-and-after tape to sell his supercontroversial [*sic*] program to parents, peers, and the press. Besides his attorneys, his greatest allies have been the majority of the moms and pops of the students themselves and the media, all of whom have elevated Israel to the rank of martyr.

Israel's favor with the *Boston Globe* peaked on October 25 with an extraordinary *Globe* editorial that admonished the state for trying to shut down his school. "The program has drawn the ire of a group of advocates who describe BRI's treatment as inhumane," reads the key paragraph. "Unfortunately, the state's Office for Children has overreacted to the complaints of these advocates and sought to close the institute." Last week the *New York Times* rang in on the side of BRI with a story that reported that some students had regressed when the aversives were stopped. The story questioned OFC's motives in suspending BRI's license, suggesting that OFC had jumped the gun because it feared drawing the sort of criticism it had received previously for reacting slowly to sexual-abuse cases in day-care facilities.

But far from overreacting, the state has ignored, or been ignorant of, the unsettling facts about Israel's operations dating back to 1973. Like the tapes Israel has peddled at conferences and conventions, the state-versus-BRI scene has been played out in varying degrees in Rhode Island, New York, and California. Even in Massachusetts advocates of the developmentally disabled were posing many of the same questions to the state back in 1979 that the state is now posing to BRI.

Rather than prompting a close look at the state's relationship with Israel, however, current controversy has degenerated into a public debate about the merits of aversive versus nonaversive therapy. For two decades the debate has been sizzling within the psychological community and burning within a subgroup of that community, the behavior-modification advocates. It's a debate best left to the professors and researchers. Already this war of words has obscured the fact that BRI received special permission to employ its controversial physical-aversive therapy. And authorities in Massachusetts and California, plus some parents, have charged that Israel and his associates have abused this privilege, and abused the children.

At the beginning of his promotional films, Israel issues a caveat. The films do not reflect

scientific data, he says, but rather a student's best and worst behavior, the ultimate in before-and-after transformations.

From across the country, a critical mass of state and professional reports, investigations, and recommendations laced with testimonials from former BRI parents is beginning to fill the void and tell the true tale of the tapes: what goes on in the in-between. Call it the unedited version of the Matt Israel/BRI story.

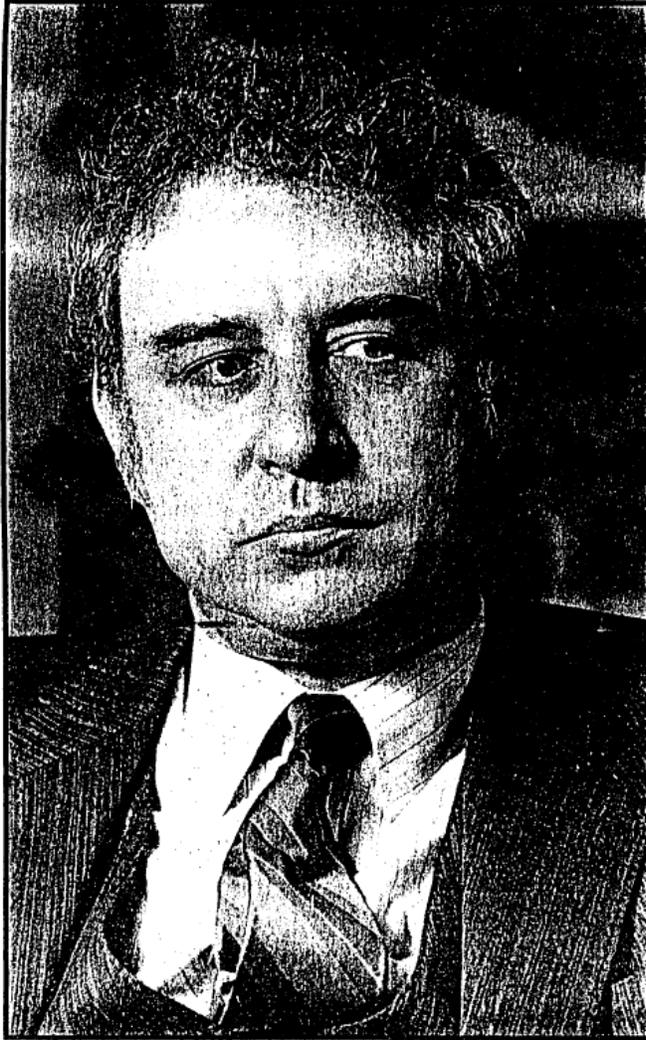
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Matt Israel looks pale. He is standing in the cramped confines of Room 413 at 1 Ashburton Place. Magistrate Joan Fink is presiding over BRI's appeal of OFC director Mary Kay Leonard's emergency suspension order. He is wearing a black three-piece suit with the belt buckle halfway between his navel and his right hip. Later he would say that he felt like this was a rerun of the Scopes trial and he was the evolutionist.

Over the next seven days in October, he passes notes to his attorney. He sees a woman in the audience he doesn't know, asks her name, and then jots it down with three question marks next to it. When he needs coffee he politely asks one of the mothers to get him some, explaining that he can't leave the room. She obliges dutifully. Later he shows his videotapes.

On the witness stand he seems less in control. He testifies in great detail about his intricate reward-and-punishment system. But when asked to name the three people who train the school's personnel, he initially draws a blank, nervously admitting that he's terrible with names. Attorney Gerald Caruso, representing OFC, asks Israel, "Do you know what a blind review of your techniques would be?" "A blind review?" Israel asks. "Yes," Caruso says. Israel, a Harvard PhD in psychology who studied under B.F. Skinner, says, "I have not heard that expression."

But Israel is surrounded by a great supporting cast: the parents of his students. Magistrate Fink allows them to intervene as a party in the emergency proceedings. Their children all entered BRI carrying the same broken baggage. Numerous and severe behavior problems, including life-threatening self-abuse and aggressiveness; a history of unsuccessful placements, many in psychiatric hospitals or state institutions; failure to respond to other therapies; rejection from other treatment facilities because of their severe acting out, and a poor prognosis for entering a less restrictive environment or the community.



Israel: menace or martyr?

On the witness stand, Kettee Boling speaks for all the desperate mothers and fathers who went to BRI as a last resort. Boling says, "My son's primary. . . very dangerous behavior is running away and stealing cars." She pauses. "He's managed to do this without benefit of driving lessons."

*[Image: Black and white image of a white man with short, dark hair and a serious expression, wearing a suit, collared shirt, and tie. The image's caption reads, "Israel: menace or martyr?"]*

Her son was in eight programs before entering BRI, in July 1982. He had walked out of a school in New York in the middle of the night and stolen a car. He returned home, and was placed in a psychiatric hospital for three months. Then for nine months he was at Metropolitan State hospital, in Waltham. But he couldn't stay there forever. At the next school he went to, the staff placed two-by-fours on his window and locks on his door. But he still managed to run away and steal cars. His mother took him to the psychiatric unit of Waltham Hospital.

"They said he wasn't psychotic," she says. Later he was arrested in Boston after going the wrong way down a one-way street. There were court appearances in Boston, Framingham, Newton. "I couldn't keep him at home . . . I'm a single parent," Boling says.

She sent him to BRI, which refuses to turn down any student. She knew about the aversive techniques, she says, and every year signed a consent form okaying their administration. In August 1982 her son ran away from BRI, taking an autistic student with him. Later he stole a car and drove off the road into a gully. For running away, according to BRI officials, for one hour he had to wear what's known in BRI parlance as a white-noise visual screen (a football helmet with an opaque screen to occlude vision while white noise fills the wearer's ears), undergo vapor spray III (compressed air mixed with water sprayed on the face or back of the neck for about two minutes), and have ammonia sprayed near the nose every 15 minutes. At one point, OFC maintains, his beard was shaved off, he was prohibited from interacting with staff or residents, he had to wear a helmet for a month, and he had to wear the same clothes for 30 days (the clothes were washed regularly). OFC says these punishments were in violation of the spirit of its regulations.

After staying put for a couple of months, BRI gave him more freedom to "test his self-control." In July 1983 he ran away, was struck by a car on Route 95, and was hospitalized for 10 days. In February 1984 he ran away again, stole a garbage truck, and tried to run over several cops. He was arrested and charged with assault and battery. He received a six-month suspended sentence and one year of probation. To avoid his



Rewarded with a ride



Students and staffers (above and below): most of Israel's charges failed in other programs.

having to go to prison, Boling says, she and the judge and her attorney and Matt Israel agreed to have leg restraints put on her son. In September 1984 OFC licensing inspector Michael Avery discovered the student had been placed in ankle cuffs connected to one another by an 11-inch chain. He told Israel the punishment went against regulations. In March 1985, seeing the boy still in shackles, Avery says he told Israel again that this was a violation of BRI's "mechanical-restraint waiver" and had to stop. OFC regulations forbid the use of physical restraints for punishment or for the convenience of others. In 1983 BRI had received special permission to use mechanical restraints in these general cases: when a student is likely to injure himself or others, or damage property (which could lead to injury or self or others); when restraint is one of the only available effective rewards; when restraint is necessary to protect the student while another aversive is being applied or during medical or dental treatments. No stipulations were made regarding the length of time such restraints could be applied. According to Avery, Israel told him the cuffs had to stay or the boy had to go. Avery believes the boy was forced to wear shackles from February 1984 to March 1985 for every waking and sleeping hour, save shower time. But in one of her rulings, Magistrate Fink maintained that the boy's shackling did not violate BRI's restraint

waiver, evidence that the state's restrictions on Israel were vague.

*[Image: Black and white image of a young white man facing the viewer and holding something in his hand, while another white man faces him with his arms outstretched. The first figure is seated on a rocking horse with a mane that appears to be made similarly to a mop head. The image's caption reads, "Rewarded with a ride."]*

*[Image: A woman of indeterminate race is standing over a young white boy sitting at a keyboard in front of a computer monitor in what appears to be a classroom. The image's caption reads, "Students and staffers (above and below): most of Israel's charges failed in other programs."]*

Back at the hearing, attorney Robert Sherman asks Boling how she would characterize her son's care at BRI. "I would characterize it as very good care and very caring people," she says. "Does he show any fear of the staff at BI?" he asks. "No, he doesn't," she says. "He considers the staff his friends." Sherman asks, "Have you seen any evidence of abuse of your child at BRI?" Boling says, "No, I have not."

Earlier, Sherman had asked, in all seriousness, "Has he run away since he's been in restraints?"

"No," Boling had said.

On September 30 the State Department of Mental Health had sent a small team of experts to Providence to assess the situation at BRI. One of the residents they'd talked to was Boling's son, who's now 23.

"Why did you steal the garbage truck the last time around?" they'd asked him. "Because I wanted to go home," he'd replied.

\* \* \*

"Desperate parents will sign anything," George Nazareth was saying from his home in Cumberland, Rhode Island. Nazareth is the chairman of the Rhode Island Protection and Advocacy System. He's the former head of the Human Rights Committee of the Rhode Island Planning and Advisory Council on Developmental Disabilities, a state organization. He has a 22-year-old retarded daughter. "You become desperate about a lot of things. Some of the parents [at BRI] are now saying they want the program to continue. They think the state will send their children back home. Some parents would blow their brains out if they [the state] sent their children back home. They've been through the mill."

When Nazareth heard about the charges against Israel in Massachusetts, he scurried for his old documents. A fellow advocate had produced a copy of a report on BRI that Nazareth's Human Rights Committee had put out in 1973. Earlier Nazareth had started hearing from people that BRI's basic therapy program advocated pinching kids and squirting water in their faces. Nazareth was horrified.

"Rhode Island kids were there at the time, but the state wasn't doing anything about it," Nazareth recalls. "As advocates we wanted to see for ourselves." They didn't see much. "We were given a show," he says. Nazareth went back two, three times. He talked to former BRI employees. They told him they were under extreme pressure to put an end to each bizarre behavior in their students within two weeks, according to Nazareth. If a student hadn't responded as the deadline approached, the workers claimed, they "started pinching harder and harder to meet their goal," says Nazareth. Nazareth says the workers told him "they were turning into monsters."



Meting out a hug

*[Image: Black and white image of Matt Israel, a white man with dark hair, wearing a suit, collared shirt, and tie, holding and hugging a young white child of indeterminate apparent gender or sex, in a room with what appear to be circus or fair style stalls, with one having dark and white vertical stripes on a canopy, and another labeled Cotton Candy. The image's caption reads, "Meting out a hug."]*

After two and a half months Nazareth wrote the 1973 report. The committee was concerned about the effects such a rigorous behavior-mod program could have on an individual. "This is especially true when the individuals are severely handicapped

children who may not comprehend the reasons for being subjected to such intense systematic procedures," the report said. Without specific criteria for determining deviant behaviors, it warned, "an individual with behaviors of questionable deviancy might be subjected to a therapy program of excessive intensity merely because his parent or teacher has a low tolerance for the particular behavior exhibited."

Nazareth says that the students he saw were robots, whom Israel controlled. "He controls everything," says Nazareth. "He's an egomaniac. It's either his way or no way. I'm absolutely amazed he's still in business. He hasn't changed one iota."

In 1976 Rhode Island removed all its children from BRI after Israel hiked up the tuition. Advocates in Rhode Island say the state also had philosophical reservations about BRI's heavy reliance on physical aversives. Today, exhibiting a severe case of state split personality, Rhode Island continues to license BRI as a special-education program but refuses to send any of its students there.

In April 1976 Israel expanded his program by founding a parallel reward-and-punishment school/group home for six children in Van Nuys, California. The National Society for Autistic Children (NSAC) (now known as the National Society for Children and Adults with Autism), the country's leading advocacy group for those with autism, took a long, hard look at Israel's expansion.

On December 27, 1976, Israel was officially bounced from NSAC following allegations that he was "practicing as a clinical psychologist directing both day and residential programs in the state of California without obtaining a professional license." Israel denies the charge.

But authorities in California had a none-too-approving eye on Israel's new branch. In a January 17, 1977, letter to Israel, the California Department of Health rejected his application for a license to operate a group home. A department review criticized BRI for its "lack of meaningful

peer review" and charged that "pain infliction and other physically coercive techniques are employed when it is not necessary to do so." Israel was chided for his apparent lack of respect for rules and regulations. "There is unsatisfactory evidence that you are 'reputable and responsible' in relation to the operation of a licensed facility and/or that you have the ability to comply with applicable regulations," the department wrote. "First, you have shown a disregard for the law by operating your program without first obtaining a license from this Department to do so. . . . Also, you are apparently engaging unlawfully in the practice of psychology without securing a California license."

Israel was ordered to "cease and desist" operation or face legal action that would close his school. The day after the scheduled shutdown, according to published reports, the students' parents proclaimed that they had taken over the facility and were running it as a co-op. The school, which had begun as a branch of BRI in Providence, formally severed ties with the parent institute and formed its own indigenous corporation, BRI of California. Instantly Matt Israel went from head honcho to "consultant." The "new" school applied for a license. The move was aided by former California governor Pat Brown, whose law firm represented BRI of California. The institute got its group-home license. Later it received the only permit ever granted by the state of California to use physical aversives.

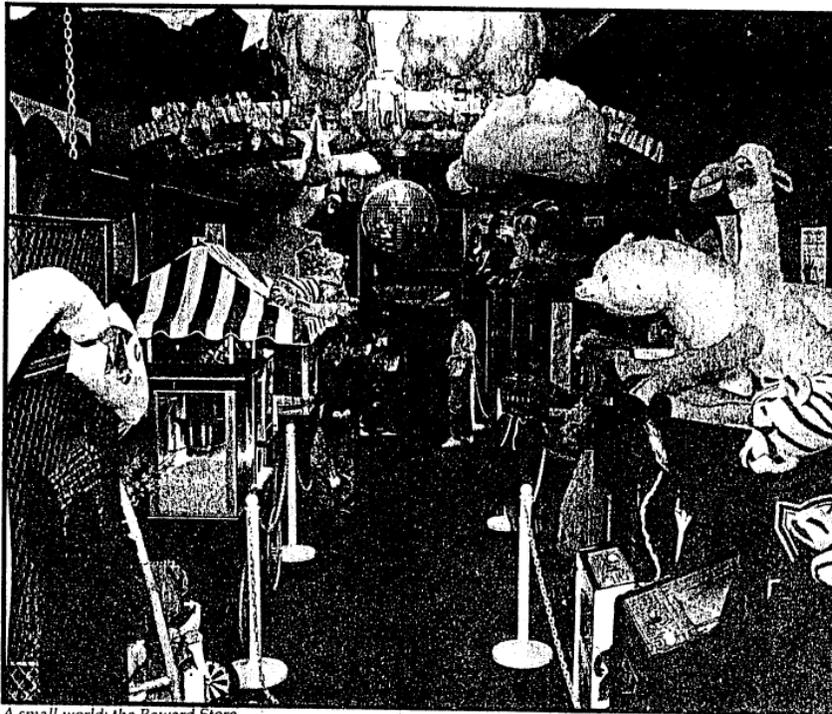
*[Image: A black and white image of two young white women holding hands. The girl to the left-hand side is wearing a light-colored bow in her hair, while the woman on the right-hand side appears to be wearing a two-colored clown costume and matching hat as she holds a ball in her left hand. The younger woman is frowning and looking away from the woman dressed as the clown. The sign behind them says "Candy Store" in script with an arrow pointing to the right. There is no caption.]*



Meanwhile, back east Israel was scuffling with the state of New York. In 1978 New York was in the midst of a drive both to inspect out-of-state facilities where New York children were housed and to bring some of its handicapped boys and girls home. Israel's request for a per-pupil tuition increase from \$31,600 to \$38,000 heightened the state's interest in his Providence program. After an investigation, according to the *New York Times*, the state education

department found that the BRI program was not in compliance with New York state law and ordered Israel to stop using physical aversives on its students. Israel threatened to kick out the 15 or so New York students if the state didn't back off. A group of New York parents sued the state in federal court to keep their kids at BRI and won. The kids stayed.

*[Image: A variety of circus and fair style stalls, two recognizable from the earlier image, blocked by typical crowd barriers consisting of poles and chains linking the poles, with a pathway*



A small world: the Reward Store

*separating the stalls and a variety of toys and enormous animal plushies, including one recognizable as a polar bear and another as a llama, with a disco ball hanging from the ceiling. The image's caption reads, "A small world: the Reward Store."]*

In January 1979 the state sent a follow-up team from the New York Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities on a three-day unannounced visit to BRI. They found the institute extraordinary. "The January team found BRI to

be a professionally conceived, well documented, and rigidly implemented behavior modification program. Its effects on the students was the singular most depressing experiences that team members have had in numerous visitations to human service programs," the report said.

The New York report offers a peek into the gains-through-pain world of BRI. One student's program contained the following behavior-consequence sequences: biting self — 15 minutes helmet (no vision, white noise); hand play — spank (butt); noises — pinch (butt); out of seat — spank (butt); biting others — cool shower, five pinches (foot); hands to head — muscle squeeze (shoulder); clapping — say "no"; rocking — water squirt.

One of the most bizarre measures they saw was an Israel technique dubbed "behavioral-rehearsal lessons." Israel believes that for his treatment to work, particular behavior must occur often enough for the people to get "consequated," that is, rewarded or punished. When targeted inappropriate behavior comes at a low frequency, Israel believes it makes it more difficult for the student to grasp the connection between the behavior and the consequence. At BRI Israel has solved his problem by having the staff encourage the beginning stages of bad behavior.

Kathy, one of the New York students, was stealing food and drink. To get her to stop, the BRI staff first urged her to steal so they could punish her. The New York team found these instructions taped her classroom table: "Kathy is to receive *one* stealing opportunity per hour. She should be prompted to steal a juice squirter and a spank is to be administered. If Kathy does actually steal the juice she is to receive the helmet and white noise for 15 minutes."

Eric was being trained to "accept disappointment." His instructions read: "Three times during the hour, when Eric earns juice or food for task completion or good working – do not give the

reward and say ‘no reward this time, go back to work please.’ Wait a few minutes and if Eric accepts the disappointment (does not display any inappropriateness) reward with sip of juice. If Eric does not accept it, consequence the behavior displayed.” The New Yorkers did not refer to this as behavioral-rehearsal lessons. They called it “entrapment.”

The team members summed up their impressions of BRI this way: “Rather than being a program of neglect which harms children by not assisting them in growth, the BRI program utilizes a current professional ideology to deny children the opportunity to grow; to deny them any choices; to deny them normal experiences in leisure-time pursuits; to deny them any opportunities for fun; to deny the man opportunity to demonstrate anything other than a few pre-selected responses.”

As a result of its evaluations, in 1979 the state restricted BRI’s use of physical punishment on New York students. Under an agreement the state struck with BRI, physical aversives can be used only when a child is likely to cause “serious physical danger” to himself or others and after positive reinforcement and less dramatic aversives have proved ineffective. In addition, such physical aversives can be used to control patterns of behavior that are “extremely detrimental” to a student’s development after all nonphysical aversives have failed. In such cases, the New York State commissioner of education must be given 10 days’ notice before the treatment is applied. He can veto the physical punishment and try to place the student in another school.

On January 10, 1979, while the New Yorkers were on a second leg of their visit to BRI Providence, the board of directors of the North Los Angeles County Regional Center (NLACRC), a placement agency that distributes state moneys for the disabled, voted to halt the funding of clients at BRI of California. After a review of the operation, according to court records, NLACRC charged that BRI had “abused its allegedly ‘therapeutic’ processes,” inflicted “serious injury” to one of its residents, administered nonapproved aversives, and applied “inadequate” controls on its use of aversives. Three parents went to court to block the move. They said their children would land in state hospitals, where they would be subjected to drugs, solitary confinement, and electric shocks. The parents won. According to a California investigator familiar with the case, the judge’s ruling centered around the regional center’s lack of authority to defund the program and not the specific allegations. Former governor Pat Brown again was on the case for BRI.

“There’s been a lot of political action of *[sic]* behalf of BRI,” says California Supervising Deputy Attorney General Elisabeth Brandt. At one point in the LA fray, the state tried to revoke BRI’s special permit to use aversives. A bill was then filed in the California legislature specifically to give BRI binding approval to employ physical aversives. The bill was killed. But the courts blocked the special-permit revocation.

The anti-BRI action of NLACRC was prompted in part by the accusations of Kathy Corwin, a former treatment worker at BRI. On October 28, 1978, according to court documents, Corwin says she saw Israel fingernail-pinching the bottoms of 12-year-old Christopher Hirsh’s *[sic]* feet. Israel was administering a behavioral-rehearsal lesson to get Hirsh *[sic]* to stop defecating on rugs and in the shower. Corwin said she heard the boy cry and scream in pain. The next morning a BRI worker named Nancy Thibeault got sick to her stomach when she saw Hirsch’s feet. “There were open blisters and a reddish substance oozing from them,” she testified. BRI workers

continued to pinch the boy's feet. Corwin returned to work after two days off. She was horrified at what she found. "The insteps of both of Christopher's feet had a considerable amount of blisters and a considerable amount of open bloody patches where the skin had been entirely removed," she said.

In a 1979 30-page rebuttal entitled "The Corwin Allegations," Israel described the evolution of the behavioral-rehearsal lessons he had designed for Christopher Hirsch – pinching him to elicit the correct answer about where not to defecate – on that October 28:

"It took about thirty minutes to design and try out this procedure," he wrote. "It was tried out about eight times, with variations in the wording each time and with variation in the places Chris was brought to. . . . Since the procedure had three parts, and since the pinch was given in each part, each lesson involved three pinches. Since it required about eight trials before I was satisfied with what the final procedure should be, Chris received about 24 pinches during this half-hour period."

Israel said he monitored the condition of Hirsch's feet over the next three days. "As I recall," he wrote, "no skin was broken. The normal pinch marks that pinches make on the skin were produced. The only abnormal effect was one tiny blood blister approximately 1/16 of an inch in diameter, which cleared up in a few days. . . . Meantime Christopher Hirsch is alive, well, happy, healthy, behaving better than ever, and with not a single serious or semi-serious injury from any treatment procedure administered by me or the staff of B.R.I. California."

Soon after Christopher had received his "lessons," the boy's father, Clement Hirsch, began receiving reports that his son had been abused at BRI, according to court records. On November 6, 1978, he took Christopher to a doctor. It took three adults to hold him down. The doctor testified that a petrified look came over the boy's face when they tried to examine his feet. "He was absolutely terrified," a friend of the family who was there recalled in an interview recently. "There was no part of this skinny boy's body that didn't have a bruise. Then they took off his shoes. It was horrible."

Christopher's father said the insteps of his son's feet "were covered with strange wounds which can only be described as holes. It looked as if the skin or flesh had been removed and that it was healing and growing back to the level of the skin. They [the holes] were about the size of the circumference of a cigarette."

It was true that BRI had been granted state permission to use the pinching procedure. But the school and the regional disagreed over whether the type of pinch allowed was the "rolling pinch" – skin held between thumb and forefinger, pressure applied – or the nastier "nail pinch."

The LA center also charged that BRI employed "sham administrators for appearance-sake only." When any clinical decision or staffing judgment had to be made, it said, Israel had to be called in Rhode Island. "It was he who made all of the decisions," the complaint report said. The funding agency also said that BRI conducted a "propaganda show" for visitors. "The real BRI is never seen by any outsider," it said. Two weeks before official state or parent visits, it charged, aversives that causes bruises or marks were halted. "BRI," said the center, "informs its staff that

it does not want any bruises on the children's bodies at the time of the visits.”

Commenting on the LA center's unsuccessful 1979 attempt to stop funding BRI clients, NLACRC's attorney wrote: “Society has a great interest in the future development of a child and avoiding diagnosis and/or treatment based on erroneous information. BRI stands virtually alone for its advocacy of physical punishment for behavior that is not life-threatening. . . . BRI should not be allowed to use the children as human guinea pigs and make them suffer needlessly.”

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*In general, there seems to be a very high degree of professionalism, purposefulness and caring for children among the B.R.I. staff.*

— from the Massachusetts Department of Education's “A Position Paper on Behavior Research Institute,” *March 23, 1979*

Barbara Cutler, a longtime advocate for the autistic community, calls the Massachusetts white paper on BRI “a whitewash.” The paper was prepared following the allegations of a New Jersey woman named June Ciric that her autistic son, Michael, had been abused at BRI in Providence. Michael arrived at BRI on April 28, 1978. To keep from running away, the staff handcuffed him to his chair. His chair was cuffed to a fire-escape ladder. On June 28 Michael had to be admitted to Rhode Island Hospital for acute cellulitis, his mother says – blood poisoning of his right arm.

“Michael looked like Auschwitz,” his mother says by phone from her home in Pitman, New Jersey. She says he he'd lost weight, had a black eye, eight-inch black-and-blue marks on both inner thighs, and lacerations on other parts of his body. She says the most severe aversive she was told he would receive was a two-minute cold shower. “I never signed for a damn thing,” she says. She took her son home after he was in the hospital for 10 days. He started having seizures. Israel, she says, “is making these kids less than animals. If he can control the so-called wild behavior, he can turn it on, too.”

The state of New Jersey investigated the incident. It determined that Ciric's charges of abuse were “unsubstantiated.” However, the state urged BRI to maintain “closer medical monitoring of the children.”

Ciric says that like many BRI parents, she “fell for the dupe.” She thought Israel was going to get her son to speak again. In a letter to the former governor of Rhode Island, she expressed how much her attitude had changed after her son's two-month stint at BRI. “I feel,” she wrote, “Dr. Mathew [sic] Israel is being licensed to freely practice child abuse and assault and battery in the name of therapy.”



*[Image: A black and white photo of a man of unidentifiable race standing to the side of the background while looking at a younger boy, likely white or Latino, with short dark hair, sitting at a table and performing a manual activity in a room that appears to be a classroom with shelves and a clock on the wall. There is no caption.]*

*[Image: A black and white photo of Matthew Israel wearing a suit and sitting on the edge of a desk with his hands resting against each other while he smiles. There are a desk lamp, a phone, and various papers and trinkets on the desk. There are three windows behind him, and shelves with books and framed photographs to his left and the viewer's right. The image's caption reads, "What makes this man smile?"]*



*What makes this man smile?*

Meanwhile, up at the Massachusetts State House, Senator Jack Backman was sending off an avalanche of letters about BRI to state officials. In an April 19, 1979, letter to former OFC commissioner John Isaacson, Backman pointed out that Massachusetts had a statute prohibiting corporal punishment. "I believe that this statute, which I personally introduced in the legislature, is being violated by the Behavioral [sic] Research Institute in their Massachusetts residential care facilities." In a memo also dated April 19, 1979, Barbara Cutler suggested to former senator Joe Timilty an outline of items for a legislative hearing about services for autistic children. The points she listed could easily be put on an agenda for November 1985. Among the issues raised: "Report on BRI . . . poor monitoring methods, lack of clear policy on use of aversive behavioral

techniques.” Under “present needs,” she wrote: “statewide planning for services; more residential programs – more clear options for parents; state policy on human rights of these children, including use of punishment as a learning tool.”

The scrutiny of BRI intensified. In the late afternoon of October 30, 1980, Robert Cooper Jr., a 25-year-old autistic student at BRI, was taken to the emergency room of Rhode Island Hospital. He was throwing up. He had diarrhea. At 11 p.m. Cooper was pronounced dead. The medical examiner announced that Cooper had died of natural causes, a “hemorrhagic bowel infarct,” or blockage resulting from a twisting of the bowel. An investigation by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) found no negligence on the part of the BRI staff. But DMH was mildly critical of BRI for transporting Cooper to the hospital by personal car instead of ambulance and for failing to notify the emergency room that a patient was on the way.

Shirley and Robert Cooper Sr. came to the defense of BRI. “It was difficult for myself and my wife to allow Bobby to be pinched or spanked,” Robert Cooper told the *Boston Globe* after his son’s death. “But there were no alternatives. Every other alternative was no alternative. In a state institution he would have become a vegetable.”

In the end it was the parents who had the final word in the Department of Education’s (DOE) 1979 position paper. The report acknowledged the controversy over aversive therapy and the lack of alternative programs in the state. But it recommended that “parents should continue to be given the opportunity to make informed choices and place their children at B.R.I.” The DOE had already taken some steps to improve the safety of the students, making clear that it did not sanction pinching between the toes, for example, and stipulating that the physical condition of each student be reviewed daily by registered nurse. And the report said OFC would be monitoring the program “at least every two months,” a promise that has been broken.

Like many other state agencies DOE showed great faith in Matthew Israel. “In a phone conversation on March 6,” the report said, “Dr. Israel indicated that his program is committed to replacing the physical aversives which sometimes leave bruises – the spank, muscle squeeze and pinch – with aversives like the air blast. . . . Although the Institute leaves open the option of using physical aversives when a child’s needs demand it, Dr. Israel and his staff . . . are to be commended for their commitment to developing creative, effective treatment alternatives.”

\* \* \*

*On one occasion during the period September 3 to December 15, 1980 Matthew Israel, consultant for respondent [BRI of California], instructed Nicolas DeCila, a staff member, to grow his fingernails longer so he could give an effective pinch. Such pinches were administered with the fingernails and caused excessive and unnecessary cuts and bruises. . . .*

*On occasion during the period from September 1978 through October 1980 Matthew Israel and Steve Starin would threaten residents with a pinch if they did not respond to statements or to questions in the appropriate fashion. These threatened actions were not called for by the residents’ program and did not constitute a proper use of behavior modification principles: (1)*

*Matthew Israel would pinch the underarms of Eric R. and make Eric repeat phrases. (2)  
Matthew Israel would ask Toby W. in various tones of voice whether Toby wanted a pinch. . . .*

*On or about March 1, 1981, Richard L. was restrained in a large black chair by himself in the kitchen. Richard's hands were tied to the chair, his feet were tied to the bottom of the chair, and a huge box covered his head and torso. He was kept in this position for at least one hour. . . .*

*In or about February 1980, it was confirmed that Willie R. is a deaf child, and his parents so notified respondent. Respondent failed to modify Willie's program, and continued to inflict water squirts and corporal punishment upon Willie in contexts where it was unlikely if not impossible that Willie could understand the behavior he was required to exhibit to avoid punishment. For example, Willie received water squirts for not responding to verbal commands to keep his eyes closed while in bed. . . .*

Prohibited by the courts from simply canceling BRI's special permit, the state of California in 1981, citing numerous violations, moved to revoke the program's license and special permit. BRI appealed. In January 1982 the California attorney general's office, acting as the attorney for the California Department of Social Services (DSS) filed its first amended accusation against BRI of California in administrative proceedings before an administrative-law judge. Charging that BRI of California had "misused and abused behavior modification therapy using aversives in a manner . . . inimical to the health, welfare and safety of the residents," the state complaint listed more than 100 alleged violations of the license regulations, and special permit. Here are excerpts from that report, in addition to those listed above:

*On or about January 31, 1981, and on or about February 7, 9, 21 and 28, 1981, Glen R. had bruises, cuts, and drainage from open wounds on his buttocks as a result of pinches.*

*On April 24, 1980 Willie R. was administered 77 spanks for hitting himself, 33 spanks for crying and 64 spanks for other behavior. In addition, Willie received 100 water squirts.*

*During the period September through December 1980 and for an unknown period of time before and after these months, respondent threatened to fire employees for not learning hard enough on residents who were bent over to be spanked or for not giving an effective spank or pinch. This procedure was unnecessarily punitive and humiliating for the residents.*

*In or about February 1981 Eric K. was deprived of meals up to three times a week.*

*On occasion during the period from September through December 1980 and for an unknown period of time before and after that month, Richard L. was placed in the back yard of the facility by himself while in restraints. Respondent fed Richard L. when he was in the yard by placing a plate of food on the ground with no eating utensils. Ricky would have to eat with his arms restrained to his sides.*

*When Carl was placed in isolation respondent would not allow anyone to speak to Carl for 24 hours. He would be restrained in the classroom behind the boxes until 11 p.m., then he would be*

*tied to a piece of furniture in the living room in a kneeling position to sleep. On these occasions he would be deprived of a bed, pillow, and blanket.*

*On occasion during the period from September through December 1980 and on unknown occasions before and after that period, respondent instructed its employees to administer pinches and spanks to the buttocks, inner arm, inner thigh, and/or the soles of the feet, and to dress residents in long pants and long-sleeved shirts to prevent relatives and other visitors from seeing the bruises and abrasions resulting from pinches and spanks.*

*During the period from September 1980 through February 1981 and on unknown occasions before and after that period, respondent cancelled medical appointments for a resident if that resident was too bruised.*

*In or about December 1980 Danny A. was prompted to grab the secretary's hair so it could be filmed. When Danny was eating Judy Weber [who heads BRI of California] filmed a close-up of food spilling out of his mouth. Danny would be prompted to misbehave, allowed to rehearse, then filmed. Food was scattered around the room by respondent's employees and filmed to make it appear that Danny had thrown the food.*

*On the morning of July 17, 1981, Danny A. was restrained in bed by an arrangement which kept him flat on his stomach in bed. Danny A. died between 9:00 and 10 a.m. on this date while being so restrained.*

The county coroner ruled that 14-year-old Danny Aswad's death had been from natural causes: "Mental retardation" and "cerebral malformation."

Israel says the California charges are a mixture of lies, half truths, and exaggerations. Besides, he says, he was and is merely a consultant to the program and not responsible for its day-to-day affairs. "Why bop me with that stuff?" he says. "Don't you have enough to hit me over the head with?" Still, Israel maintains close contact with the school, which is run by his friend Judy Weber. In fact, Israel helped draft responses to the above allegations and was recently involved in the financial planning of the school's attempted expansion into Oakland. BRI of Providence's own literature continues to refer to the California program as its "sister school."

According to the California Supervising Deputy Attorney General Elisabeth Brandt, BRI of California admitted that DSS had "grounds for discipline" but never specific what those transgressions might have been. Shortly before the scheduled hearing, after a magistrate had ruled that TV cameras would be allowed into the proceeding, BRI and the state reached an out-of-court settlement. As a result of the agreement BRI had been virtually banned from using all physical aversives, restraints, and meals as rewards or punishments.

Brandt says, "The program they're running now is acceptable to the state. It's not a preferred program, but parents should have a variety of programs as long as they're not abusive. As long as Matthew Israel was in charge, there were doubts as to whether the changes would be made. We felt that Matthew Israel firmly believes in severe aversives and wouldn't stop using them. If

he were to come out here and be personally involved, there are doubts as to whether there would be the peaceful coexistence that's going on.”

\* \* \*

*The system is fucked up.*

— A Boston-area psychiatrist involved in the research and treatment of autistic children.

On March 18, 1983, the Massachusetts Office for Children officially gave BRI here permission to punish children physically. In 1975 the State Department of Education had approved BRI, even with its controversial behavior-modification methods, as a special-needs program. From 1975 to 1978 OFC licensed BRI's residences as foster-care facilities. In 1978 OFC decided the residences should be licensed as group-care homes. Although for a time BRI lacked the proper building certificates, the state figured the homes were safe enough for autistics and retarded individuals. But even after BRI got the certificates, the state dragged its feet on granting the program a license.

Programs for autistic people in Massachusetts are few. Matthew Israel, despite the negative vibrations that have trailed him, seemed an attractive ambassador for autistic people. He had an open-door policy. He refused no one access. In a state that is still talking about developing adequate programs, Israel came along and offered to take the state's toughest kids off its hand, no questions asked.

The state didn't ask too many questions, either. “They stuck the kids on a train and didn't care where they went,” says the psychiatrist, who did not wish to be identified, for professional reasons. As it turned out, they were all headed for the same place – the last resort, BRI. “The state funneled the bottom, bottom, bottom of the barrel there. Every kid there has flunked out of everything. The kids should be sprinkled around [to different programs] with support. The system is overloaded. It's inevitable that something will go wrong.”

The state nudged the inevitable to the brink with its hands-off policy.

\* \* \*

Israel says he plots the course of every student's behavior. Good behavior is reinforced intermittently, with at least 15 rewards an hour, three of which must be hugs, and contractually. A student earns rewards by acting appropriately a certain number of times within a certain period of time. The rewards range from a visit by a dancing girl to a trip to the Reward Store, where “It's a Small World, After All” plays in the background while students eat cotton candy, listen to rock music, or ride on a rocking horse. Bizarre behavior, defined by Israel as anything that wouldn't be appropriate on a trip to HoJo's, is curtailed through the hierarchy of aversives such as pinches, spankings, rubber bands snapped on wrists, and students being tied to a person they dislike. In addition, there are eight “food-contingency plans” (different ways to earn food); “self-instructional tasks”; “programmed opportunities”; and “group-management situations.” If positive reinforcement doesn't work, the least intrusive aversive on the list is implemented. If after a minimum of two weeks that doesn't work, a student moves up the ladder of pain. Israel

believes tough problems require tough measures. He points out that rewards outnumber punishments at BRI 10 or 15 to one.

This complex system is run by staff members who are compelled by Israel to progress up the ranks of BRI at prescribed intervals or risk losing their jobs. On top of this system the state has overlaid group-care regulations promulgated back in 1978. OFC officials say the regulations must be general enough to cover the activities of services ranging from a high school for the learning-disabled to a school for the deaf.

Working with outdated regulations, the state granted BRI its mechanical-restraint waiver and approved a hierarchy of aversives but never set specific limits on pain, such as how many pinches could be allowed per day. Instead it relied on the judgement [*sic*] of BRI's impressive-on-paper internal monitoring system of parental consent, local and national peer review committees and a local human-rights committee (all of whose members serve at Israel's behest), daily body checks by nurses, and weekly visits by doctors.

Israel has portrayed the latest OFC action as a political playing-up to advocates. He believes that licensing investigator Michael Avery had no problem with BRI until the state sent him back to find something wrong. According to OFC, however, the emergency measure issued in September was the culmination of seven months of raised eyebrows and suspicions.

Michael Avery headed for BRI in March, when the school's two-year group-care licenses were up for renewal. During March and April Avery spent 250 hours at BI. He experienced some of the aversives firsthand. The finger pinches on the bottom of his feet, he says, stung for two or three seconds but throbbed later, when he put his foot on the gas pedal of his '82 Honda. Three muscle squeezes to his left shoulder left him with a dull ache for three days. Ammonia near his nose kicked his head back, and for a brief time his breathing was out of control. It took 10 minutes for him to breath [*sic*] normally, he says. He took his shoes off and climbed into the automatic vapor-spray (AVS) station. He stood barefoot on a ridged rubber mat. His ankles and wrists were cuffed. He skipped the usual bucket of water dumped on the head. He got a hit of ammonia two or three inches from his nose. Then he put on the remote vapor-spray helmet – no visibility, white noise, and air-and-water combo sprayed in his face. At first he was scared. The ammonia threw him, and then the helmet went on. He thought he was going to pass out. He was in the station for half an hour, but he says he became so disoriented that he felt it could have been five minutes or two hours. When he got out he needed a minute or two before he could put a whole sentence together.

Avery discovered that the hierarchy of aversives had changed since 1983, the year the list was approved. The approved list was: ignoring the action, saying no, token fines, water spray, vapor spray, taste aversive (among them, lemon juice and jalapeño pepper), contingent physical exercise, time-out helmet, ammonia, hand squeeze, spank, muscle squeeze, pinch, brief cool shower, time-out helmet with safety tube and optional automatic vapor spray. According to Avery, BRI had changed the list without notifying OFC. The new order, he said, was: ignore, no, token fine, water squirt to face or back of neck, vapor spray I (three seconds), air spray, white-noise visual screen (sitting), taste aversive, white-noise visual screen (standing up), ammonia, vapor spray II (15 seconds), vapor spray III (two minutes), contingent physical

exercise, remote vapor spray, social punisher (student loosely tied to another student he dislikes), hand squeeze, wrist squeeze, rolling pinch (to buttocks, inner arm, inner thigh, bottom of feet, palms, stomach), finger pinch (same spots), water spray III (bucket of cold water poured over head), brief cool shower, AVS, and multiples of these.

Avery found one student who had been spanked 133 times within two hours. Avery says he was told in March that BRI's policy was no more than 10 physical aversives in a five-minute period; no more than 40 physical aversives in an eight-hour shift. BRI says there never were any absolute limits on the number of aversives. After looking at charts, Avery concluded that there was no real evidence that the behavioral-rehearsal lessons worked. He learned of one student who was in long-term leg chains. He saw students in wet clothes, shaking two hours after having been doused with cold water.

Avery went home, checked out his papers, and decided that BRI was in serious noncompliance with the regulations. For only the second time as an investigator, he would not be able to recommend licensing the facility until he had more information.

Meanwhile, on May 24, as OFC inspector Avery was expressing concern about problems at BI, the state Department of education was issuing BRI a clean bill of health.

Then, on July 24 a 22-year-old autistic student at BRI named Vincent Milletich died. He was going to be "consequated," reportedly for making inappropriate sounds. He became aggressive and started thrashing around. BRI workers pushed his head between a staff member's legs and handcuffed his hands behind his back. Then they threw on the helmet with the white noise and the blocked vision and put him down on the floor. Vincent went limp. He died at the Rhode Island Hospital.

The Bristol County district-attorney's office is investigating the death.

On August 28 Avery went back to BRI with Bette McClure, OFC acting director of group-care licensing. For the first time, Avery says, he saw all the aversive sign-off sheets together. There were 60 of them, he says. And a BRI doctor had approved all 20 aversives for each kid, he says. "That absolutely caused concern," he says. "He [the doctor] had 1200 opportunities to say no, and there wasn't a comment." For the first time Avery had come across "repeated use of physical aversive" forms and could figure out the number of aversives being administered to the students.

In early September advocacy groups started reacting to the death of Vincent Milletich. On September 10, for example, John Roberts, the executive director of the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, wrote to Governor Michael Dukakis: "We recognize that parents do agree to the treatment program when children are placed at BRI, but many do so out of desperation that there is no other placement available. However, even parents are prohibited from abusing their children."

On September 16 Avery received a call from a former BRI worker who tipped him off about a change in the contingent-food program for some students, in which "mini-meals" were either served as rewards or withheld as punishments. Students who missed the meals as punishment

supposedly received the rest of their calories later. He also learned about the BRI's food-intake charts, which kept track of every ounce of food a student received.

On September 17 Avery went back to BRI alone and unannounced. He asked for the food-intake charts. What the worker had told him was true, he says. BRI had changed the food plan without telling OFC. Every student, he claims, now had to earn his food through a system of rewards and punishments.

Avery left BRI with a pile of documents seven inches thick. He and McClure went through the papers. What they saw scared them. They looked at each other and said, "Oh, my God."

What they found is reflected in these excerpts from the OFC complaint:

*On July 16, 1985, student "H" received 173 spanks to the thighs, 50 spanks to the buttocks, 98 muscle squeezes to the thighs, shoulders and triceps, 88 finger pinches to the buttocks, 47 finger pinches to the thighs, approximately 527 finger pinches to the feet, and 78 finger pinches to the hand between 6:00 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. for "aggressive acts and head to object."*

*On July 27, 1985, student "G" received 170 spanks to various areas of the body, 139 finger pinches to an unknown area of the body, 31 muscle squeezes to the triceps, and 139 water squirts to the face between approximately 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. for "aggressive acts and destroy."*

*During April 1985 the OFC licensor review[ed] student "G"'s behavior charts and learned that from March 9, 1985, to March 20, 1985, student "G" was placed in the A.V.S. on a continuous non-stop basis except for a time out of the A.V.S. for bathroom and water opportunities and sleep time. Student "G" was required to wear a white noise visual screen with the noise turned off while sleeping.*

*Of the 84 meals recorded on student "L"'s food intake form for the month of April, 1985, student "L" did not receive approximately 30 meals and did not receive portions of 5 other meals.*

*Of the 73 meals recorded on student "P"'s food intake form for April 1 to April 25, 1985, student "P" did not receive approximately 46 meals and did not receive portions of 17 other meals.*

*On April 24, 1985, BRI's staff physician examined "P" and determined that student "P" had generalized edema in the lower extremities and significant weight loss and directed that student "P" be kept out of the A.V.S.*

*It is OFC's information and belief that student "P" had a weight loss of twenty pounds from February 4, 1985 to April 28, 1985.*

*It is OFC's information and belief that student "P" was cuffed to a restraint board for "medical" conditions and removed from the contingent food program on April 27, 1985.*

*On July 5, 1985, the BRI staff physician diagnosed student "P" as suffering from anemia.*

*Student records indicated that behavior [sic] rehearsal lessons were used for student's behavior such as stealing, inappropriate urination and defecation and body tensing. Parental permission forms state that behavior [sic] rehearsal lessons will be implemented only for serious problems such as pulling out hair, biting others or self and opening a car door while driving.*

“Over the past three years,” wrote Caruso, who represented OFC, in his memorandum for Magistrate Fink, “BRI has demonstrated a significant lack of concern for following regulatory requirements.” Caruso’s memorandum, in fact, indicts both BRI *and* the state for creating the current conflict. Noting that corporal punishment and food deprivation and mechanical restraints are generally prohibited by the state, Caruso wrote that “the BRI program exists as an exception to all these policies. As with all exceptions, its functions, operations, and permissive authorizations must be meticulously reviewed and narrowly construed.”

Until Michael Avery gained access to Matthew Israel’s own records, the state did neither. Because it placed no specific limits on BRI, the state has by and large been forced to take on the program with a nebulous and subjective argument, stating that the school has denied each student “a fair and full opportunity to reach his full potential.” In another hearing, scheduled for January, a magistrate could well rule that BRI’s alleged behavior is a violation of its students’ human rights but not a violation of any state regulations.

“If we knew then what we know now, there’s no way we would have recommended a license for BRI,” says Bette McClure, who was part of the team that okayed BRI for licensure in 1983. But back when OFC was on the verge of being axed; there was a high turnover of directors, and eight workers were handling 400 programs. “We knew it was a very controversial decision,” she says. And on paper BRI appeared to have the checks and balances. McClure confesses now that she was not aware of many of the allegations that have dogged Israel nationally.

“The question,” says behaviorist Anne Donnellan, “is to whom do we give that kind of control?”

\* \* \*

Matt Israel is smiling. There is a newspaper photographer in front of him, and he is smiling into the camera. He is finding it hard to keep it up. A woman walks into his office. Israel says to her, “Think of things to make me smile.” She says, “Money.” Israel says, “How about cutting Mike Avery into little pieces? How about group homes for BRI? How about torturing Michael Avery?”

As in previous clashes, Matt Israel has transformed this one into a personal duel. Take the problems with the state of New York. Israel says the woman who wrote that report was biased; she was setting up a competitive program with BRI. What about Kathy Corwin, the former worker in California? Israel says she thought one of the students was possessed by the devil. June Ciric in New Jersey? Israel hands over a thick file. In it is a letter he wrote to the Massachusetts Department of Education: “Notice also the account of the many different medical

theories that Mrs. Ciric has tried – a search that has apparently bordered on the desperate, as when she pretended Mike was her dog, and asked the veterinarian what he would recommend for a dog with Mike’s symptoms.” And her friend, another disenchanted former BRI mom? Israel says she is a member of a witch’s coven. Nonaversive behavior modification? Israel pulls out another file and charges that one of his critics, a proponent of positive reinforcement, was caught using aversives. Israel sees the entire coast-to-coast confrontation as a conspiracy by NSAC to do away with Matthew Israel.

Mat Israel, 52, was born in Brookline. He went to Brookline High with Michael Dukakis. He got kicked out of an honor society after he denounced the school’s plan to offer entrance into the club if you pursued sports and extracurricular activities. “It was too much of an artificial reward system,” he says. While an undergraduate at Harvard he took a course on human behavior taught by B.F. Skinner. At the library he picked up one of his professor’s books that was not assigned for class: *Walden Two*. “It was a real inspiration,” he says. “I knew what I wanted to do with my life. It was a feeling similar to those claiming to have religious conversions. I wanted to start a real utopian behavioral community.”

Israel knew his mission, but he didn’t know a practical place to start. He had doubts about whether his goal was realistic. “It was a very difficult period,” he says. “I thought about committing suicide. If I couldn’t bring a community into existence, what sense was life worth living?” Israel spent his spare time working in the lab with Skinner. In six weeks, using behavior modification he taught a couple of pigeons to play Ping-Pong.

He received his doctorate in psychology from Harvard in 1960 and went on to raise some capital and start a firm selling teaching machines. He hoped that if he sold enough he could finance his trip into Utopia.

The firm never took off. In 1966 Israel attended a *Walden Two* conference in Michigan that attracted 83 people. They exchanged ideas on how to start their own WT’s.

In 1967 Israel started a communal house in Arlington comprising Israel, another guy and his girlfriend, and a teacher and her young daughter, Andrea. “In that house,” Israel says, “I had my first opportunity to do behavior modification”: Andrea. “She walked around the living room with a toy broom, hitting people,” Israel recalls. She screamed and yelled at the top of her lungs and threw awful tantrums. Israel says, “It was so irritating. I was forced to do behavior modification.” He got permission from Andrea’s mother to work on the child. The first aversive he used was time out. When she screamed, Israel would put her in her bedroom, and shut the door and hold it closed. On a chart he plotted how long she screamed. The tantrums diminished. But it was a drag to have to hold the door shut. He recalls, “At one point I gave her a slap to the cheek and say, ‘There’s no screaming in time out.’” He began to use a combination of rewards and punishments with Andrea. “I was a tremendous source of reward for Andrea,” he says. “She was very cute, very smart, and very appreciative of attention. I found that a combination of extraordinary rewards and occasional aversive made an environment that helped change her whole personality.” Israel’s training had begun with Skinner, who believed you didn’t need to use aversives. But Israel could see the results. “Punishment is a fact of culture,” he says. “When the police fine you for parking in a no-parking zone, that’s punishment. She [Andrea] had been a spoiled brat. And

she became a pleasant, attractive, charming feature in the house.”

Unfortunately, the adults didn't do so well, and the *Walden Two* experiment failed. As did another communal house in the South End. The problem with the houses, says Israel, was that the residents weren't really buying into the behavior-mod mode. “There was very little control over the participants,” Israel says. They could always move out.

That's when Israel thought about starting a school. “Maybe a school for the emotionally disturbed,” he says. “Behaviorism is the kind of thing, particularly in these days, that has been allowed to be applied to the handicapped.”

Israel went to the Bradley Hospital, in Providence, to visit a residential program for emotionally disturbed children. There, he says, the director asked him, “Do you think behavior modification would work on autistic children?” Israel thought it would and started a unit there for six autistic children. He used food rewards, spankings, a time-out room, and a plant-spray bottle.

In 1971, some nine months after going to Bradley, Israel started Behavior Research Institute. Now he's getting \$87,000 per student. The miracle man has escaped other scrapes, and he's already plotting how to get out of this one. If Massachusetts shuts down BRI, he says, he may open group homes in Rhode Island. Israel thinks the current crackdown may lead to a greater understanding of his philosophy and allow him a greater array of behavior-modification tools. “I've never used electric shock,” he says in his calm, soft voice. “I wouldn't rule it out. Particularly if we were deprived of other procedures. It's more effective, and you wouldn't bruise or cut the skin.”