

Jean- Marc- Gaspard Itard (1775-1838)

Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard was a French physician who was an authority on diseases of the ear and on the education of students who were deaf. Itard is the person to whom most historians trace the beginning of special education as we know it today. In the early years of the nineteenth century, this young doctor began to educate a boy of about twelve who had been roaming naked in the forests of France. Itard's mentor, Philippe Pinel, a prominent French physician who was an early advocate of humane treatment of insane persons, advised him that his efforts would be unsuccessful because the boy, Victor, was a "hopeless idiot." But Itard persevered. He did not eliminate Victor's disabilities, but he did dramatically improve the wild child's behavior through patience and educative procedures.

A student of Itard's, Edouard Seguin, immigrated to the United States in 1848. Seguin had become famous as an educator of "idiotic children," even though most thinkers of the day were convinced that such children could not be taught anything of significance.

The ideas of the first special educators were truly revolutionary for their time. Some of the revolutionary ideas of Itard, Seguin, and their successors that formed the foundation for present-day special education are:

- *Individualized instruction*- the child's characteristics, rather than prescribed academic content, provide the basis for teaching techniques
- *A carefully sequenced series of educational tasks*- beginning with tasks the child can perform and gradually leading to more difficult learning
- *Emphasis on stimulation and awakening of the child's senses*- help the child become more aware of and responsive to educational stimuli
- *Meticulous arrangement of the child's environment*- the environment and the child's experience lead naturally to learning
- *Immediate reward for correct performance*- providing reinforcement for desirable behavior
- *Tutoring in functional skills*- to help the child be self sufficient and productive in everyday life
- *Belief that every child should be educated to the greatest extent possible*- every child can improve to some degree

One of the major investigators of Itard's life and work with Victor in particular, summarizes Itard's contributions as the inventor of behavior modification, creator of oral education for the deaf, and father of special education for the mentally and physically handicapped.

Journal of Child and Youth Care- Volume 9 Number 1