

# Phillip S. Strain

by Rebecca Stoffel

**Philip Strain** is a well-known and prolific educator and researcher in the field of special education. His contributions to the field are many, especially his work in assessing and developing intervention techniques for young children with emotional disorders and [autism](#). Throughout his career, he has published over 250 scientific papers and has been awarded more than \$38 million in research grants. Dr. Strain's work has impacted the field of early childhood education and his dedication to improving the lives of children with special needs is reflected in the many awards and honors he has received.

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## Background Information

Phillip Strain was born February 19, 1946 in San Antonio Texas. He lived with his parents for the first five years in Runge, Texas. Later, he and his mother moved to San Antonio where they lived with his maternal grandparents, James C. and Nora McCabe. His first encounter with special education was in the ninth grade when he was placed in the "slow" class. When it was discovered that he could throw a baseball 90mph he was miraculously promoted back to regular education (personal communication, October 22, 2009). After a year at San Antonio College, he transferred to [Trinity University](#) in San Antonio where he graduated in 1969 with a BA in Psychology.

Strain's professional career began after a six-month period in a federal correctional facility. As a [conscientious objector](#) to the [Vietnam War](#), he resisted the draft and refused induction into military service. An overturned conviction led to his

assignment as a special education teacher working with young children in Murfreesboro, TN. Strain felt vastly unprepared for this responsibility and enrolled in the [Peabody College of Vanderbilt University](#) where he earned a doctorate in Early Childhood Special Education in 1974 (Strain, 2008). His early interest in research was greatly influenced by his major professor Richard E. Shores.

After a two-year teaching position on the special education faculty at [American University](#) in Washington, DC from 1974 until 1976, Strain returned to Nashville where he conducted research until 1980.

## **Early Work**

Strain's early research focused on observing the social interactions between children with behavioral disorders. He observed that when reinforced by the teacher, previously non-social preschoolers increased their social interactions (Strain & Timm, 1974). He further developed this idea in later research and expanded his investigations to include typically developing peers as intervention agents. Strain showed that even at the pre-school level, typical children can be trained to interact with their peers with behavioral disabilities and produce an increase in social interactions and meaningful relationships (Strain, 1977). As his body of research grew, Dr. Strain developed an interest in training teachers and parents to encourage behavior that would decrease the social isolation of children with special needs. The [Regional Intervention Program](#) (RIP) in Nashville, TN is an example of a parent intervention program that Dr. Strain helped develop and evaluate since 1970. The mission of RIP is to train parents of aggressive preschoolers to be the primary means of intervention in controlling their children's behavior. The program stresses peer support and parents supporting and teaching each other. Strain concluded that the program resulted in long-term success for the families involved. In a 25-year follow-up study, the children initially involved in RIP maintained

their functional behavioral patterns and became productive members of society. (Eric Special Project News Brief). Dr. Strain continues to conduct additional research on RIP with his original collaborator Dr. Matthew A. Timm.

## **The Pittsburgh Years**

The decade of the 1980s found Dr. Strain in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as an Associate Professor of Psychiatry and a director of an early childhood special education intervention program at the [University of Pittsburgh](#) and its associated [Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic](#).

One of Dr. Strain's most significant accomplishments in Pittsburgh was the founding of the [LEAP Preschool](#) in 1981. LEAP stands for "Learning Experiences: An Alternative Program for Preschoolers and Parents. The preschool is unique as it combines children with and without autism in a single classroom. The children with autism, who generally have profound deficiencies in social interactions, improve while interacting with specially trained, typically developing children (Bower, 1989). Dr. Strain's model was based on his early research, which expanded from observing peer interactions to developing interventions and training parents to be in-home therapists for their children with autism. With over 30 peer-reviewed papers, the LEAP program is one of the most extensively researched intervention programs in the field of Early Childhood Special Education (Teachers Toolbox). An 18 year follow-up study indicated great gains for participants in hallmark problem areas for children with autism; specifically, the children exhibited more appropriate behavior, better developmental functioning, successful placement in mainstream classrooms, and increased social interaction (Strain and Hoyson, 2000). LEAP is replicated in over 100 sites throughout the US and it has been recognized as an evidence-based practice by the National

Academies of Science (2001) and the *National Autism Center* (2009) (personal communication, October 22, 2009).

Remaining in Pittsburgh, Dr. Strain moved on to the *Early Learning Institute*, formerly known as St. Peter's Child Development Center, where he was the Assistant Executive Director of Research, Training and Evaluation from 1993 until 1995. The Early Learning Institute, or ELI, was established in 1958 to meet the needs of preschoolers with developmental delays. (United Way of Allegheny County, 2009)

One of his most significant accomplishments in Pittsburgh was helping to launch the careers of doctoral and post doctoral individuals who have become major contributors in the field of special education themselves. These individuals include Diane Sainato, Scott McConnell, Sam Odom, Frank Kohler and Howard Goldstein (personal communication, October 22, 2009).

## **University of Colorado-Denver**

Since 1995, Dr. Phillip Strain has held a position as a Professor of Educational Psychology and Psychiatry at the [University of Colorado Denver](#). During his years at the University of Colorado-Denver, Dr. Strain created the [Positive Early Learning Experiences Center \(PELE\)](#). PELE evaluates early intervention programs for preschool children with special needs. PELE also provides support and technical assistance to preschool programs throughout the country. Through the PELE center, LEAP preschools operate to provide early intervention services and to serve as training sites. Additionally, it is through the research component of PELE that Dr. Strain has conducted large-scale randomized trials to document the success the LEAP preschool model and school-based Positive Behavior Support (University of Colorado Denver, 2008)

## Publications

As a researcher and author, Dr. Strain has been awarded more than \$38 million in research grants and he has published over 250 scientific papers, multiple book chapters, and several books, primarily dealing with the social needs and interactions of exceptional children in the classroom. Some of his more notable journal articles include “An experimental analysis of ‘spill-over’ effects on social interaction among behaviorally handicapped preschool children” in the prestigious [Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis](#), written with R.E. Shores and Mary Margaret Kerr. His books include

- “Teaching Exceptional Children: Assessing and Modifying Social Behavior” (written with T.P. Cooke and T. Apolloni)
- “Mainstreaming Children in Schools” (written with Mary Margaret Kerr)
- “The Utilization of Classroom peers as Behavior Change Agents”
- “Social Behavior of Exceptional Children”
- Children’s Social Behavior: Development, Assessment and Modification” (written with M.J. Guralnick and H.M. Walker)

His most recent work, *Prevent – Teach – Reinforce, a manualized approach for school-based teams to implement Positive Behavior Support* is scheduled for publication in November, 2009 by Paul Brookes Publishing. Additionally, Dr. Strain published a series of instructional audio cassettes, training manuals and videos aimed at assisting teachers and parents in dealing with the emotional, educational, and social needs of exceptional pre-schoolers (Strain, 2009).

## Awards

Of the many honors and awards bestowed upon Dr. Strain are:

- Mary McEvoy Service to the Field Award by the Division for Early Childhood (1991)
- Teacher of the Year awarded by the Council for Exceptional Children (1997)
- Researcher of the Year awarded by the University of Colorado-Denver (1999)

Dr. Strain has been nominated for the Council for Exceptional children 2010 Special Education Research Award for his achievements with peer mediated interventions, the LEAP program, and the Regional Intervention Program (RIP).

## Affiliations

Dr. Phillip Strain holds current membership in the following organizations and associations:

- [Council for Exceptional Children](#)
- [American Association on Mental Deficiency](#)
- [Analysis of Behavior Association](#)
- [Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps](#)

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