

Dr. Richard M. Van Acker by Sacha N. Matthews**Contents**

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Dr. Richard M. Van Acker is nationally recognized in the field of special education. He is best known for his work in the prevention and intervention of violence, aggression, and antisocial behaviors of children, as well as social interactions between students and teachers (Mayer, Van Acker, Lochman, & Gresham, 2008). He is also considered an expert regarding best practices in the implementation of Functional Behavioral Assessments (Bullock & Gable, 1999).

Background Information

Dr. Van Acker shared, during a personal communication, that it was a desire to work with troubled youth that lead him to attend [Western Illinois University](#) in 1972 where he received a Bachelor of Science (BS) in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Due to an interest in the biological issues that occur in neglected and abused children, Dr. Van Acker pursued a Master of Arts (MA) in medical anthropology from [Northern Illinois University](#) in 1975 (Van Acker, 2010). He then rediscovered his passion for working with troubled youth, and went on to obtain a Masters of Social Work (MSW) from the [University of Iowa](#) in 1982. Prompted by the desire to research and develop more effective intervention protocols, Dr. Van Acker earned his Doctor of Education (Ed.D) in special education at Northern Illinois University in 1987 (R.M. Van

Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010).

Early Work

Dr. Van Acker began his career as a child care worker at [Covenant Children's Home and Family Services](#) in Princeton, IL, where he focused on working with children with emotional and behavioral disorders (Van Acker, 2010). As a result of his interest in working with troubled youth, Dr. Van Acker obtained his teaching certification in special education (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010). From this, Dr. Van Acker began working as an educator at Covenant Children's Home and Family Services, as well as at [Princeton High School](#) working with students in both special education and general population systems. He was later promoted to the position of Director of Program Services and Program Development. He went on to become the Clinical Director of Guardian Angel Children's Home in Peoria, Illinois. Later he taught undergraduate and graduate courses at the Clinical Child Care Program at the [College of St. Francis](#). Dr. Van Acker was also a founding member and vice president of the Illinois Child Care Worker Association, a group working to improve the quality of services to children and adolescents in residential facilities (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010).

While working on his doctoral degree, Dr. Van Acker became one of the first educators to explore [Rett Syndrome](#) (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010). In a personal communication, Dr. Van Acker shared the following story of how he came to focus on Rett Syndrome:

My doctorate was funded through an OSEP Leadership Grant and the research I was working on related to stereotypic behavior in children. When we found one student whose stereotypic behavior did not look anything like the others we had observed (using computer-based naturalistic observation), I discovered she had Rett syndrome – a disorder that basically only affects girls. They appear normal at birth and then go through a rapid degeneration and ultimately function within the severe to profound range of

mental retardation with a characteristic hand stereotypy. My daughter had just been born and the disorder fascinated and frightened me. I was also one of the first educators to explore this disorder (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010).

Later Work

In 1987, upon completion of his doctoral degree, Dr. Van Acker joined the [University of Illinois at Chicago](#). He expeditiously made his way from assistant professor to full professor in 1999, as well as the Special Education Chairperson. Dr. Van Acker currently continues to educate students and conduct research at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Dr. Van Acker's early research focused on self-stimulatory and self-injurious behaviors, methods for teaching children with severe disabilities, Rett Syndrome, and computer-based technologies for data collection in naturalistic observational settings (Van Acker, 2010). Dr. Van Acker has also examined the violent and aggressive behaviors of children and adolescents, in the context of prevention and intervention strategies (Van Acker, 2010). He studied social interactions of children who are deemed "at risk" for the development of antisocial behaviors, as well as successful classroom and school-based strategies to prevent such behaviors (Van Acker, 2010). Furthermore, he conducted extensive research investigating the relationship between teacher's behaviors, attitudes, and/or teaching styles and the inadvertent reinforcement of undesirable behaviors (Van Acker, 2010). More recently, Dr. Van Acker has focused his research on cognitive behavioral interventions for children with emotional and behavioral disorders within schools, as well as the social status, popularity, and social networks amongst children with and without emotional and behavioral disorders (Van Acker, 2010).

Dr. Van Acker was a key investigator in the [Metropolitan Area Child Study](#) (MACS), a long-term collaborative multidisciplinary research project spanning from 1990-1997 conducted at select Chicago and Aurora, IL area schools (Anonymous, 2010). The goal of this project was

two fold; the prevention and intervention of antisocial and violent behaviors in children and to foster both academic and social success in school (Anonymous, 2010).

Since 1983, Dr. Van Acker has been a presenter at numerous learned society conferences on an annual basis. He is a member of the [Council for Exceptional Children](#), [Council for Administrators of Special Education](#), [International Rett Syndrome Association](#), and the [Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders](#), in which he served as a member of the Publications Committee (1998-1999), Vice President (1999-2000), President Elect (2000-2001), President (2001-2002), Past President (2002-2003), and member of the Program and Publication Committee (2004-Present) (Van Acker, 2010). Dr. Van Acker is also on the editorial board of several scholarly journals including, [Behavioral Disorders](#), [Learning Disabilities: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal](#), [The Teacher Educator](#), and [Interventions in Schools and Clinics](#) (Van Acker, 2010). Lastly, Dr. Van Acker is a member of the advisory committee on the Best Practices Project for the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in Atlanta, GA, as well as a member of the advisory board of the [National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice](#) at the [University of Maryland](#) in College Park, MD (Van Acker, 2010).

Awards and Honors

In 1987, Dr. Van Acker was the recipient of the Outstanding Graduate Student Award at Northern Illinois University (Van Acker, 2010). At the University of Illinois at Chicago, he was the recipient for the Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1991 and was also nominated in 1989, 1995, and 2000 (Van Acker, 2010).

Personal Facts

Dr. Richard Michael Van Acker was born on December 8, 1951 in Moline, IL, where he grew up on a farm on the outskirts of town (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October

15, 2010). Dr. Van Acker shared in a personal communication that he is one of four siblings, and enjoys close relationships with all of them despite living far apart. He married his wife, Nancy, in 1972, and together they have two children named Chad and Eryn (Van Acker, 1987). Dr. Van Acker also has two grandchildren, Sebastian and Lourdes (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010).

In his free time, Dr. Van Acker enjoys collecting American Indian artifacts and has a particular interest in collecting points, stone tools, and pottery. He also enjoys archaeology and goes on an archaeological dig nearly every summer either in the United States or Mexico (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010).

A Final Note

Dr. Van Acker would also like to express the respect and admiration he has for his colleagues who work with children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders in the following statement:

I have always felt welcome and accepted by my fellow teachers and researchers in the field of behavior disorders. These are a great bunch of men and women who work very hard to assist a group of children most schools would rather not educate. I am proud to be a part of a great tradition that continues to have a great deal of work ahead of them. (R.M. Van Acker, personal communication, October 15, 2010).

Publications

Throughout his career, Dr. Van Acker has authored and co-authored well over 100 publications, including books, chapters, monographs, articles, book reviews, and technical reports (Mayer et al. 2008). His most recent publications include:

- Astor, R. A., Guerra, N. G., & Van Acker, R. (2010). How can we improve school safety research: A tripartite integration of basic theoretical research, evidence-based programs, and translational science. *Educational Researcher*, 39, 68-79.
- Estell, D. B., Farmer, T. W., Pearl, R., Van Acker, R., & Rodkin, P.C. (2008). Social status and aggressive and disruptive behavior in girls: Individual, group, and classroom influences. *Journal of School Psychology*, 46(2), 193-212.
- Estell, D. B., Jones, M. H., Pearl, R., Van Acker, R., Farmer, T. W., & Rodkin, P. C. (2008). Peer groups, popularity, and social preference: Trajectories of social functioning among students with and without learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41, 5-14.
- Farmer, T. W., Estell, D. B., Hall, C. M., Pearl, R., Van Acker, R., & Rodkin, P. C. (2008). Interpersonal competence configurations, behavior problems, and social adjustment in preadolescence. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 16(4), 195-212.
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- Van Acker, R. (2007). Antisocial, aggressive and violent behavior in children and adolescents within alternative education settings: Prevention and intervention. *Preventing School Failure*, 51(2), 5-12.
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- Van Acker, R. (2005). Youth gangs: Their impact on schools and communities. In L. M. Bullock and R. Gable (Eds.), *Fifth Mini-Library Series on Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. Alexandria, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- Van Acker, R., Loncola, J. A., & Van Acker, E. (2005). Rett Syndrome: A pervasive

developmental disorder. In D. J. Cohen & F. R. Volkmar (Eds.), *Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders*, (3rd Edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

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