

History Spotlight

**In Memoriam**

**Dennis C. Russo, Ph.D., ABPP (1950 - 2023)**



**Dennis C. Russo, Ph.D., ABPP**

(photograph courtesy of the Russo Family)

**Pediatric Psychology Leader and Cognitive Behavioral Researcher, Clinician, and Administrator**

By Michael C. Roberts, Ph.D., ABPP

Society of Pediatric Psychology Co-Historian

**Dennis Russo, Ph.D., ABPP**, served as President of the Society of Pediatric Psychology (SPP: Section 5 of Division 12, Clinical Psychology) in 1994 (and as member-at-large of the Board of Directors, 1990-92). His initial work focused on the early applications of behavioral principles to problems of children with autism and intellectual disabilities, which remained a strong focus as his career evolved while he also worked extensively with children and adolescents with chronic illnesses. In Dr. Russo's article in the *Journal of*

*Pediatric Psychology* as a “Pioneer in Pediatric Psychology” (2015), he wrote about how he became aware of behavioral psychology’s potential for contributing to resolving problems presenting in pediatric medicine. He sought training and varied experiences to become a major contributor as a researcher, clinician, program developer, and administrator. The Pioneer article outlined his productive career taking on challenging issues facing mental health and medical professionals.

Dr. Russo received his Ph.D. in 1975 from the University of California Santa Barbara and entered the field of psychology, developing and evaluating on applications in pediatric psychology of behavioral and cognitive psychology, and organizing service delivery systems. His leadership was highly valued in academia and healthcare institutions. In a productive career offering multiple opportunities for contributions, he held appointments at University of California, Santa Barbara; Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine; Harvard Medical School; the May Institute; and East Carolina University/Brody School of Medicine. He retired in 2017. In addition to his term as president of SPP, consistent with his primary interests in behavioral psychology, Dr. Russo served as President of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies in 1987-1988.

The range of his research topics can be seen in the publications listed below covering behavioral medicine, integrated care, chronic illnesses and disabilities, traumatic brain injury, autism, pica, self-injurious behavior, epilepsy and seizures, cystic fibrosis, hyperactivity, and pain. His book, *Behavioral Pediatrics: Research and Practice* edited by Dr. Russo and James Varni (1982) was instrumental in advancing empirical foundations of assessment and intervention as an early compilation for the developing field. In his second book, *Behavioral Medicine with the Developmentally Disabled* (1988) edited with Jurgen Kedesdy, he brought together his work with developmental disabilities with his orientation to behaviorally-based psychological applications. A chapter on pediatric brain injury (Russo, Dunn, Pace, & Codding, 2007) synthesized his foundations in functional assessment and behavior interventions, while acknowledging how much more needs to be done in “ameliorating problems and enhancing skills in those with ABI [Acquired Brain Injury]” (p. 113).

In addition to being a Fellow of the American Psychological Association in five Divisions, including SPP (Division 54), Dr. Russo received the Wright-Salk-Ross Distinguished Service Award from SPP in 2001. He also held Fellow status with the Society of Behavioral Medicine, the American Academy of Behavioral and Cognitive Psychology, and the Association for Behavior Analysis International as recognition of his significant accomplishments.

Gerald Koocher, Ph.D., ABPP recalls that “Dr. Russo was the first non-psychodynamically inclined psychologist on the staff of Boston Children’s Hospital. The chief of psychology at the time, Dr. Joseph Lord, was known to recommend that all psychology trainees would benefit from personal psychoanalysis and often fretted that purely behavioral interventions would almost certainly lead to ‘symptom substitution.’ Although hired under pressure to diversify the department’s narrow theoretical orientation, Dr. Russo soon won the hearts and respect of his colleagues, including his wife Debbie who he met when she was a psychology intern and post-doc. He once mused to me, ‘I don’t know what she sees in me, but I’m not complaining.’”

Dr. Koocher continues in his reminiscence, “Dr. Russo was a large, tall man, with a wry sense of humor. He liked to cultivate an intimidating scowl with trainees, only to quickly give way to laughter. He had a strong inclination for inclusiveness that attracted many pre- and post-docs who he often included as co-authors on publications. He built a strong behavioral medicine program by making substantial alliances with medical staff members that in turn triggered an expansive integration of psychological services focused on behavioral interventions into medical specialty clinics.”

Mary Ann McCabe, Ph.D., ABPP, remembers, “Dr. Dennis Russo was my clinical supervisor in Behavioral Medicine during my internship at Boston Children's Hospital. He was brilliant and ignited a lifelong passion for this work. What's more, he remained a caring, generous mentor for many years. Dennis has left a legacy that will last for generations.”

The [family's obituary](#) and colleagues’ reminiscences for Dennis Russo noted his professional prominence and contributions, while emphasizing his gregarious personality and family orientation as a Little League coach, world traveler and photographer, and singer of Jimmy Buffet songs.

Finally, as he outlined in his Pioneer piece, it is appropriate to conclude this *In Memoriam* with “pearls” for pediatric psychology from Dr. Russo.

Pearls from Dennis Russo (2015): *Pioneers in Pediatric Psychology*

## **Some Pearls**

### **Environments Shape Behavior**

*Set up medical and home environments to reward and maintain healthy behavior*

### **It Takes a Family**

*Educating and supporting parents is the best medicine*

### **Catch 'em While They're Young**

*Health can often be improved by small changes made early*

### **Morbidity Can Be a Family Affair**

*Children may suffer the same illnesses as their parents*

### **Building Competencies Reduces Emergencies and Morbidity**

*Patients and families who know what to do can better take care of themselves*

### **TeamCare, Before There's a Problem**

*Pediatric psychologists at the point-of-care as part of the team with doctors and nurses*

### **Speak the Language**

*Screener, warm handoff, curbside consult, huddle*

### **Get Out of Your Office**

*Time-of-care, place-of-care, face-to-face encounters while child is receiving medical care*

### **It's not Psychotherapy**

*Lose the 50-minute hour. Quick encounters fit the flow of the medical environment*

### **No Termination**

*If you go to the doctor for a cold, you can comeback for checkups or when you feel sick*

## **Dennis Russo: List of Publications**

Bird, B. L., Russo, D. C., & Cataldo, M. F. (1977). Considerations in analysis and treatment of dietary effects on behavior: A case study. *Journal of Autism & Childhood Schizophrenia*, 7(4), 373-382. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01540395>

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Cataldo, M. F., Ward, E. M., Russo, D. C., Riordan, M., & Bennett, D. (1986). Compliance and correlated problem behavior in children: Effects of contingent and noncontingent reinforcement. *Analysis & Intervention in Developmental Disabilities*, 6(4), 265-282. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0270-4684\(86\)80009-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0270-4684(86)80009-X)

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Kedesdy, J. H., & Russo, D. C. (1988). Behavioral medicine with the developmentally disabled: Major issues and challenges. In D. C. Russo & J. H. Kedesdy (Eds.), *Behavioral medicine with the developmentally disabled* (pp. 1-18). Plenum Press. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-0999-4\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-0999-4_1)

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