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# Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron (c. 1788 – 1828), and the Rise of Special Education in Modern France

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## Abstract

The paper examines the legacy of Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1774-1838) as one of the founders of the special education studies. Itard, a physician, spent four years educating Victor, a feral child, who was found in a French forest. After being captured by hunters, Victor tried to escape several times, but eventually accepted human companionship. Victor lived and acted as an animal: he had no clothing, did not understand language, and ate only roasted or half-burned potatoes, raw chestnuts, and walnuts. Contemporaries regarded Victor an "idiot," and, according to the customs and beliefs of the time, assumed that "it is useless to combat idiocy." Doctor Itard brought Victor to Paris and spent several years trying to teach him language and to help him to become integrated in a human society. Itard was not entirely successful: Victor had only learned several words and never fully comprehended French. On a positive note, Victor's fine motor skills became improved, and he actually developed a sense of certain friendship with people who were taking care of him and learned to communicate with the people around him. At the same time, the story of Victor inspired an intense debate about the importance of language for educating a child and also showed that mentally disabled people needed to receive medical attention and that progress in treating their condition was possible. Working with Victor became an important step towards developing philosophy and strategies for working with mentally disabled people and deaf-mutes. An experience of Itard was important for understanding French society during the French Revolution. Itard believed that empathy was the essential characteristic of a human being, and was disappointed that Victor did not develop much empathy. The story of Victor is reflected in several primary sources. A very valuable account of Victor comes from the text written by Itard himself in 1801 and now available in a digital form from the University of Ontario's library.

**Keywords:** Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, Victor, a "feral child," deaf, mute, the rise of special education

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