

Motivation and Reinforcement: The Verbal Behavior Approach to ABA Autism Intervention

By Robert Schramm, MA, BCBA

Life is a journey. It is a constant search for a better way. We search for a better way to teach our children, make and keep friends, earn money, organize our files, and keep control of our hectic lives. As we experience successes, we become increasingly better about repeating the behavior that leads us to these desired outcomes. Conversely, we become better about avoiding the behavior that has been unsuccessful at achieving our goals. This is the basic concept of Behaviorism.

Autism has been a mysterious disorder since before there was a name for it. The longer our society studies autism the more effective we are at identifying those affected by the criteria that are considered autistic. Although more people are diagnosed with autism every year, the criterion of autism has not changed. What has likely changed is our interpretation of the criteria and/or the number of people who fall within its limits. A child is diagnosed with autism when he exhibits at least six specific types of behavior in three deficit categories. These three categories are social interaction, communication, and behavior and interests. Deficits include a lack of appropriate eye contact, failure to develop appropriate peer relationships, a lack of spontaneous attempts to share enjoyment, and a lack of varied spontaneous fantasy play. Signs may also include a delay or total lack of spoken language, the use of stereotyped or repetitive use of language, preoccupation with one or more abnormal patterns of interest, and stereotyped repetitive motor movements. Please realize that this is only a partial list. You will find a complete list of behaviors associated with autism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, IV-TR, revised in 2000 by the American Psychiatric Association. If your child demonstrates a minimum of these behavioral deficits in specific categories, he is likely diagnosed with autism. In addition, these delays must present themselves before your child is age three and are not attributable to another problem such as Rett's disorder. If your child demonstrates enough of this behavior but has learned to talk at an early age, you will probably find him diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

Once a parent receives a diagnosis of autism for his child, he begins a new journey. This journey is a search for a better way to help his child learn the skills necessary to live a happier more fulfilling life. The problem with this journey is that for those living in remote parts of the world without a connection to others in similar circumstances, this road is mostly barren and lonely with few markers to point the way. Conversely, the road for those connected to the larger autism community is cluttered with signs pointing in almost every direction. Under these two circumstances it is impossible for parents to guide their children's growth and development without experiencing confusion, fear, and guilt.

Children with autism can and do learn from their environment and through the science of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) with Verbal Behavior (VB), we can learn to change their environment in ways that teach them how to be more successful in life. For many years, the science of ABA was known in the autism world as either Behavior Modification or the Lovaas method. However, it is more appropriate to say that Dr. Lovaas and others like him were the designers of the first implementations of ABA used to help people labeled with autism. The principles Dr. Lovaas based his program on were developed by B.F. Skinner and can be found in his book called "The

Behavior of Organisms” (published in 1938). Although Dr. Lovaas did so much to help others see ABA as a method of helping to teach children with autism, the understanding of how to implement behavior principles at that time would generally be considered crude and inappropriate by today’s standards. However, time and research have led to vast improvements to these early procedural methods of ABA. Although there is still an unfortunate stigma in much of the world attached to ABA because of the procedures used by many Behavior Modification professionals in the 1970s and even the early 1980s, the science of ABA has progressed steadily over the years. As older techniques and strategies were tested and improved upon, our ability to understand how autism affects children and how we can best affect autism has increased. As the science of ABA developed, so did its effectiveness. The ABA used today only loosely resembles the ABA used in the early days of autism intervention. Generally, the use of aversive techniques has been replaced with positive reinforcement procedures and the programmed teaching has been replaced with individualization and spontaneity. Regardless of these and other changes made in technique, Skinner’s principles remain intact, as the foundation for all that is Applied Behavior Analysis.

ABA is evidence-based teaching that has been proven scientifically to be effective. This evidence has been published, reviewed, and in most cases replicated independently. For these reasons ABA has become the most commonly accepted path for families of children with autism to follow throughout much of the world. In addition, ABA is currently the only autism therapy recommended for long-term benefit by the United States Surgeon General. As a treatment for autism, Chapter Three of the Surgeon General’s report on Mental Health, 1999, states, “Thirty years of research demonstrated the efficacy of applied behavioral methods in reducing inappropriate behavior and in increasing communication, learning, and appropriate social behavior.”

Parents who were exposed to the early methods of ABA often had an extremely difficult choice to make. Although the evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of ABA in teaching children behavior and general learning skills has increased each year, parents had to deal with the use of procedures that were often times difficult to accept. Parents were told that there was a way that they could help their children to learn more effectively, but the methods being used to accomplish this were often distasteful. As it was for many years, ABA was a great benefit to some families while many others decided that the outcome was not worth the process.

In the past decade there has been a change that allows us to say that ABA is now the right choice for almost all families of children with autism and its related disorders. This change was the development of the Verbal Behavior approach to ABA. A good ABA/VB program is designed to teach your child the reasons behind the give and take that is so important in connecting with the social world. It is connecting your child with this natural societal reinforcement that will motivate him to make beneficial relationship and learning choices beyond the teaching setting. VB has moved ABA beyond the rote, repetitive, table learning of its past and developed it into a natural, relationship building, holistic learning program.

VB is both a philosophy of ABA and a series of evidence based teaching techniques that focus the principles of ABA on the acquisition of language skills. The people developing VB, Dr. Jack Michael and others, including, but not limited to, Dr. James Partington and Dr. Mark Sundberg, had founded a series of new techniques to apply Dr. Skinner’s book of 1958, “Verbal Behavior” to the needs of children with language delays. It was from the procedural differences of the Verbal Behavior approach to autism intervention that the true potential of ABA began

to be realized. In the relatively short period from the late 1990s into the 2000s, Verbal Behavior has become the autism therapy of choice in the United States.

The goal of any good ABA/VB program is to identify the child's naturally occurring motivation, capture it, and use it to help him learn. In doing so, we can begin to add new, more typical or appropriate desires to his list of motivating items while making his less appropriate motivators less important to him. ABA is the study of interactions and the application of that study to help people be more successful in meaningful ways. Reinforcement is the major principle that has been driving ABA and its successes over the years. This principle states that anything that happens after a behavior and increases the likelihood of that behavior recurring is a reinforcer for that behavior. Additionally, Verbal Behavior offers us a detailed understanding of motivation. Motivation is the reason your child will attempt a skill this time. Reinforcement is the reason he will have more internal motivation and require less external motivation the next time. Using motivation and reinforcement in unison will create an ever-increasing desire to accomplish any skill to which these two principles are consistently applied. This last statement is extremely important as it clearly states why Applied Behavior Analysis and Verbal Behavior help a child desire the learning process. If your child is consistently given motivation to attempt a new skill and finds that the successful completion of that skill is consistently met with a positive experience, your child will have an ever-increasing desire to accomplish that skill again. If you can begin applying these two principles of reinforcement (ABA) and motivation (VB) to every skill you want your child to learn, then he will begin to desire learning every skill you want to teach him.

Thanks to ABA, and in a large part to the advancements of the Verbal Behavior approach to ABA, more children are making important progress and recovering from the effects of autism every year. One of the main reasons for this success is the inclusion of parents as the most important teachers of their children. For too many years, parents were pushed to the sidelines expected to watch as their children became increasingly delayed and controlling. In modern Behaviorism it is now understood that parents and teachers can be taught the principles of ABA and procedures of Verbal Behavior for themselves. Once they know these methods, they can begin grasping the opportunities presented during every daily interaction they have with the child.

One of the best examples of this scenario comes from a family who had two children with autism. The mom's name is Juliet Burk and the use of the word "had" is correct because as of July of 2004, Juliet's second son Ethan, is considered recovered from autism. Juliet and her in-home team of supporters had in about four years time lifted the label of autism from the younger of her two sons.

I have two (autistic) spectrum kids. One is completely recovered and wouldn't believe you if you told him he was ever autistic in any way. It's gone. No signs. NONE! I have another who got a lot better. He still has struggles, but he has a life, and joy... I never had anybody promise me recovery. I've never heard of anyone promising that. Everyone has always rather cautiously warned me that, "peculiarities will persist." But, dedicated teachers, our angels, always fed me with hope based on progress. (Juliet Burk)

If your child's therapists or teachers are not using some form of ABA to educate your child with autism, they are likely working unaware of the large body of evidence supporting its use. In addition, if they are using ABA with your child but not incorporating Verbal Behavior, they have fallen behind the available research and, for most children, are no longer offering optimal levels of intervention service.

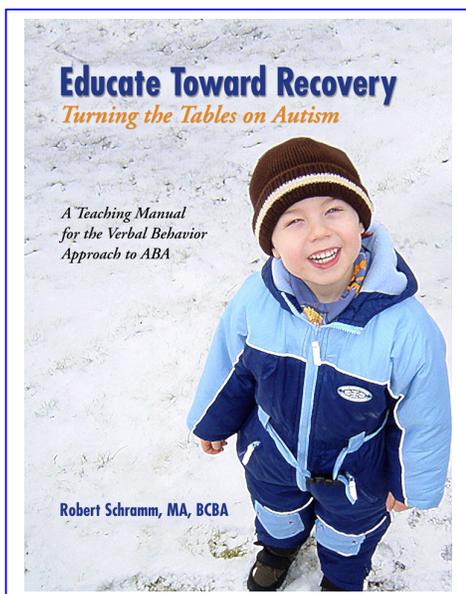
Autism is a spectrum disorder that affects an ever-increasing percentage of the population. It affects the ability of a child to interact appropriately in many social and learning categories. If left uneducated, many children will continue to be pulled by the controlling effects of autism until they are incapable of managing even simple human interactions. If left untrained, parents and teachers will often inadvertently motivate and reinforce increasingly more problematic behavior. However, if you can develop a better understanding of your child, then study and apply the principles and techniques of ABA/VB, you can help your child reduce or replace his diagnosable behavior. At the same time, you will help your child become increasingly more successful in life.

Robert Schramm is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), with a Master's degree in Special Education. He is the lead behavior analyst for Knospe-ABA, Europe's largest ABA/VB autism intervention institute. Knospe-ABA uses the principles and procedures of behavior analysis espoused by the biggest names in ABA/VB to guide the education of over 150 children worldwide. He is also the author of the very popular autism teaching manual, "Educate Toward Recovery: Turning the Tables on Autism" which can be found at www.lulu.com/knospe-aba.com.

“Educate Toward Recovery: Turning the Tables on Autism” A Teaching Manual for the Verbal Behavior Approach to ABA.

“Robert Schramm has written a book that is a must read for parents, therapists, and teachers of children with autism. This book is clear, heartfelt, informative, and provides behavioral terminology in a way that is applicable and easy to understand. He has beautifully explained Applied Behavior Analysis as an effective, scientifically validated treatment for autism. Robert’s book offers realistic hope in a world where it is needed most. We personally recommend this book to every parent or educator of a child in need.”

(Cherish Twigg, MS, BCBA and Holly Kibbe, MS, BCBA, Establishing Operations, inc.)



“This is the best book on the Verbal Behavior approach to ABA that I have seen. If I was going to recommend only one book to either the parents of a child with autism or to anyone who is trying to help a child with autism, this is the book that I would recommend. It has a lot of important information that I wouldn't expect to find anywhere else. I would give it five stars out of five.” *(Reg Reynolds, Ph.D., C.Psych.)*

The book is filled with well-written chapters that address the important aspects of developing a quality ABA program. The best of these chapters discuss understanding behavior, earning instructional control, discrete trial teaching, using motivation to teach, Skinner’s behavioral classification of language, errorless learning, toilet training, VB teaching procedures and the ethics of ABA.” *(Tony Balazs, MSc. BCBA)*

“A first class piece of work and a necessary read for anyone who is involved with a child with autism, personally or professionally. This book has been well worth waiting for. Outstanding! A valuable, one-of-a-kind resource.” *(Brenda Roussel, M. ED.)*

“It is one of the best manuals I've seen to date. I absolutely love it... You are a wonderful writer and I relate to your journey as a parent AND a special ed. teacher.” *(Melinda Poist – Pres. DAFEAT)*

“I have just ordered my second copy of this wonderful book! My first was used so often that the pages have begun to come undone... You are so easy to understand that I can gear the training to any audience with this book as the backdrop. Thank you for putting what I do into everyday plain English for all to finally better understand!”

(Lindajeanne Schwartz, MS, SLP, TSHH, BCBA)

“Robert Schramm’s book, Educate Toward Recovery, revolutionized my work with children both young and old. I gratefully and highly recommend this book to all Montessori teachers whose hearts ache for every student they have had to send away from their classrooms, due to behavior problems and academic, communicative and social challenges.

(Mary Childerston, MA,)

“This book was written by one of the most sensitive and compassionate behavior analysts I have ever known. He used his years of experience and wisdom to explain ABA and particularly verbal behavior to parents in clear words and easy to follow examples. A great buy if you want to really understand ABA rather than just blindly use procedures that have worked for other kids. Robert, you are my hero when it comes to solving problem behavior.” *(Juliet Burk, MD.)*

“ETR” should become the first book recommended to and read by all parents of newly diagnosed children with autism. It is written primarily for parents and therapists who lack any formal behavioral training; however, autism teachers and Board Certified Behavioral Analysts will also be well served by reading it.” *(Barbara R. Bucknam, MD.)*

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More reviews and information about how to purchase a copy of “Educate Toward Recovery: Turning the Tables on Autism” is now available at the following web address:

www.lulu.com/knospe-aba