

Part 1:

Teaching & Behavioral Challenges

Succeeding at the basic skills for daily living

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This presentation...

This is a presentation for families and others who take care of kids who need extra help in learning and managing behavior. It is designed so that you can read through it on your own. On some slides there are additional resources that you can explore on the Internet or in books or organizations.

It is intended to provide a useful introduction and a starting place for learning more about a behavioral approach to teaching and managing challenging behaviors.



This is for parents and caregivers of children whose behavioral and learning style is like this :

- Limited back-and-forth speech (such as commenting, questioning, listening and responding)
- Limited understanding of simple conversation or directions
- Generally, explaining or negotiating with the child does not work very well
- Usually does not learn skills just by watching others
- Learning new skills takes more time and effort than for most kids
- Limited ability to cope with frustration and solve problems

For caregivers of children such as these:

Some of these children might have diagnoses such as encephalopathy, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, or similar conditions, although others may not. The main thing is, *these kids do not learn easily by just telling them or showing them*, and this means that considerable planning and effort may be needed in order to teach new skills. It also means that a lot of the skills that seem to get learned “automatically” in daily life may not come about unless we go out of our way to teach them.

Please note...

As you go through this presentation, you will find ideas and techniques that you may use and that may be helpful. You will find information will help you decide what your next steps might be. However, additional professional guidance is usually needed. This presentation *is not enough, by itself, to prepare families to plan and implement behavioral programs on their own.* This is especially true for children who have problems that are severe or have been going on for a long time.

So what do we do?

What do we do to help a child who can answer a few questions and make a few requests but gets confused by simple conversations (or shows no interest in them)? How about the child who is only willing to do what he wants to do right at that moment, and has outbursts if we insist that he do anything else? Some children with neurological or developmental problems may have trouble with skills that other kids seem to get easily, and some of them have behavior problems that cause themselves and their families lots of grief.

There is no medicine to specifically “fix” such challenges, and being extra nice or extra tough does not work (niceness, combined with a certain amount of toughness or persistence, can be part of the solution, though).

When we have tried lots of things without much success, **we need to find a new way to change behavior.**

Learning and behavior change

In our discussion, when we talk about changing behavior, we are talking about “learning.” Learning takes place both in and out of a classroom. So, if we work with a child to get her to use better social greetings out in the community, learning has occurred. If we teach a boy to handle frustration by using self-calming or asking for help, so that he uses these strategies more often, learning has occurred.

So, teaching and learning are more than just sitting at a desk and raising your hand, or presenting facts to be remembered for a test. *All parents are teachers, every day that they interact with their children.* We have to choose what we want to teach, and we have to teach in ways that match our children's learning styles.



The importance of learning

Our earliest learning happens through direct experience and practice – this is the foundation for our learning. Imitating what others do comes next and verbal understanding later. Here are two examples:

- *When a spoon is offered, with a favorite food on it, the child may use the reaching and grasping skills she already has to get the spoon and bring it to her mouth. What happens next – the taste and the food in the mouth – make her more likely to use a spoon next time.*



- *When a helpful parent is around in the kitchen, the child may try to name his favorite treat. If he is able to say it clearly enough, the parent may sometimes give that treat. This results in the child trying hard to name it clearly in the future.*



The importance of learning

- *A new mother tries to settle her crying baby. When she sways and bounces in a particular way that works for the baby, the baby quiets. Mother is careful to remember how the baby likes to be soothed and is quick to try doing it just that way, next time the baby is crying. (The mother's behavior changes!)*



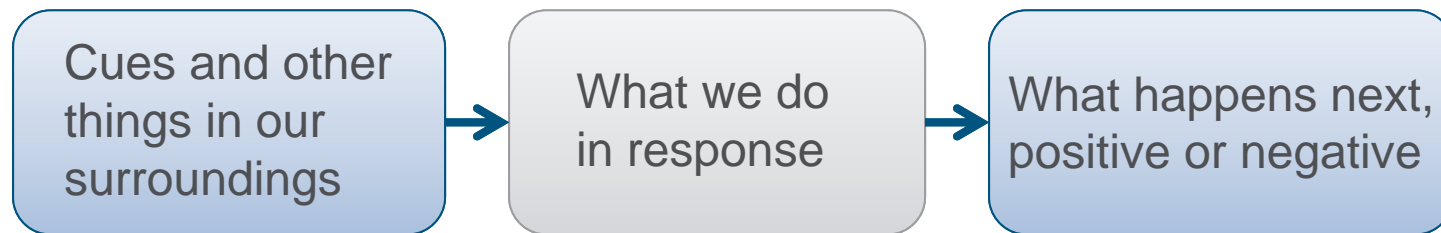
- *A teenage boy is eager to fit in with others at his school. He finds that some kinds of words and conversations get you branded a “nerd” or worse, while other kinds of words and topics are considered cool and desirable. This boy soon begins to sound like the popular boys (or if unable to be accepted by the popular boys, he may start talking more like the leaders of whatever “out”- group he is around).*



The importance of learning

The common theme in these examples is that a person responds to a situation by doing something, and the outcome may help strengthen and refine that behavior in the future.

We could diagram it like this:



The cues and things that come before the behavior are called “antecedents,” and the things that come after the behavior are called “consequences”

The foundation for learning

When does learning occur? When these things happen...

- The child is **motivated** to do something or get something
- There are previously-learned skills that can be used as **building blocks** to do something new
- The surroundings provide the right “**supports**” – these are the people and objects that can serve as cues for the skill and can reinforce use of the skill
- The new skill produces a **good outcome** that makes it more likely to occur next time it is needed

A scientific discipline that understands this is called:
“applied behavior analysis”

A practical, hands-on approach

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) helps us understand behaviors and skills, and helps us change behaviors in good ways
- ABA involves:
 - Looking at specific behaviors
 - Seeing what happens in the child's surroundings when the behavior does or does not occur
 - Making sure there are enough helpful cues to get the desired behaviors to occur
 - Making sure the consequences for desired behaviors will encourage the child to do more
 - Tracking the results and changing strategies when needed

A science-based approach

- The ABA approach comes from years of applied research in everyday situations
- It has been successful in clinical, rehabilitation, education, and other settings
- The focus is on strengthening positive behaviors and decreasing challenging behaviors
- Data from a very large number of studies demonstrates that ABA is an effective way to teach skills and change behavior
- ABA is not a single set of procedures or a “bag of tricks” – it is a way of understanding behavior that results in individualized, self-correcting procedures

For more information, see this page from the [Kennedy Krieger Institute](#)

Characteristics of ABA

- Decide what skills are currently needed, and what behaviors may need to be managed
- Make these decisions with the child's input, when possible
- Define those "target behaviors" so that everyone consistently knows when they occur or do not occur
- The focus will be on *getting desired behaviors to occur* – that is, teaching will focus on the child's active responding as much as it does on the information we present to the child
- Measure how much the skills and behaviors are happening now, by recording when they occur over a few days
- We use this "baseline" as a way to track progress – do target behaviors occur more often or less often as the days or weeks go by

More characteristics – see next page

Characteristics of ABA

- Identify things that may be used after desired behaviors occur, to strengthen those behaviors (such things are “reinforcers”)
- Reinforcers may be special privileges, fun activities, praise and approval, or other things that work for this particular child
- Identify things that are effective as cues for the desired behavior, including extra cues and prompts that we might temporarily use to help the child be successful
- We use enough extra help (pointing, giving a short instruction, using pictures, etc.) so that the desired behavior occurs, but no more help than is necessary
- Identify things that may be serving as cues and reinforcers for challenging behavior, so we can manage or eliminate them (this involves what is called a “functional analysis”)

More characteristics – see next page

Characteristics of ABA

- Make a teaching plan that spells out what target behaviors we will address (breaking them down into small, achievable steps), how we will teach them, and how we will track progress
- As much as possible, the people around the child and the activities in the child's environment follow the teaching plan throughout the day
- As we measure the behavior and track progress, we adjust the teaching procedures
- This includes gradually shifting so that the supports for positive behavior are more and more "natural," as much as possible like what the everyday environment does to support positive behavior
- As the child masters these skills, we get ready to teach new ones, so that the child moves toward having functional, independent, age-appropriate skills

ABA or other approaches?

- ABA is not the only approach out there – but it is our focus in this presentation, because there is strong evidence that it can be effective for people with many kinds of challenges
- A behavioral approach is a “good fit” for some families, and they can play a major role in teaching their child, with a trained therapist as a consultant
 - For other families, the time commitment, focus on details, and the required consistency of a behavioral approach may not come as easily. They are still very important partners in educating and advocating for their child. They may choose a behavioral approach in which a therapist takes a greater role in teaching, or they may choose a different approach for helping their child.



What does ABA look like?

- Good ABA often looks like fun – with a young child it may look like play, and with anyone it may look like a friendly adult patiently encouraging and supporting a learner who is attempting some everyday skill
- We could imagine a family (we will call them Mr. and Ms. Evans) working with their son John using ABA
 - John has delays in several areas, and his parents have selected five skills to work on right now. They picked these five based on what “building block” skills John already had, what skills would be most functional, and what opportunities the daily schedule provided.
 - John also has tantrums when he gets frustrated, where he may throw something, scream, or fall to the floor. He is currently 8 years old, so this is a real problem for him and for those around him.

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What does ABA look like?

- In the morning, Mr. Evans works with John on grooming and dressing. The particular skill they work on right now is rinsing his mouth after toothbrushing, washing the brush and putting the toothbrush and toothpaste away. When John completes all three steps correctly, he gets an extra five minutes of TV time.
- During the day, Ms. Evans works with John on three other skills before she goes to work in the evening. One of these skills involves a sort of “game” in which John has to ask for help in order to do the next step and possibly win. It is set up so that he does not get overwhelmed and his mom coaches him through asking for the specific help that he needs. The idea is that as he gets better at tolerating a little frustration and asking for help appropriately, he will use this same skill in “real life” situations.

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What does ABA look like?

- After working on a skill, each parent jots down some quick notes on a calendar they keep handy. This morning Mr. Evans notes: “rinse/spit out independently; put brush away with one reminder; required ‘touch’ prompt to put toothpaste away.” Later, Ms. Evans noted that John was able to ask for help in the game 3 of 5 times, required prompts once, and had no tantrums. Compared to last week, things are getting better!
- They meet with a consultant once a week to look at how he is doing with each skill and see if he is ready to try new ones. In these meetings, they ask John what he likes or does not like about each teaching procedure and listen to any suggestions he has. Sometimes John doesn't have anything to say, and other times he may say something unrealistic, but the family and consultant listens for cues as to what motivates John and what teaching strategies are workable for him.

What's next?

You have finished **part one** of “Teaching and Behavioral Challenges.” In the next section we will get more specific about teaching strategies.

For more information about ABA and learning, check out these resources:

- Applied Behavior Analysis, 2nd Edition, by John Cooper, Timothy Heron, & William Heward
- Right From the Start: Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism, 2nd Edition, by Sandra Harris & Mary Jane Weiss
- Overcoming Autism, by Lynn Koegel & Claire LaZebnik

