

Educate Toward Recovery: Turning the Tables on Autism

By Robert Schramm MA, BCBA (Pro-ABA, 2006)

Review by: Wil Gehne

Parents can find many useful resources to learn about how Applied Behavior Analysis using Verbal Behavior (ABA/VB) can help teach their children with autism. But many of these resources are written by professionals for professionals. Often a layer of unfamiliar terminology stands between parents and the practical information they seek. A plain language book intended for parents about ABA/VB has been needed for some time. Now Robert Schramm, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst who heads a leading autism intervention program in Germany, has met the need.

His title certainly catches attention. “Recovery” can be a controversial term, stirring up powerful feelings both of hope and of skepticism. Schramm speaks of recovery in the most common sense way I have found. He notes that autism is a descriptive, external label and so recovery

“does not mean that this child is somehow a better or more complete person than he was before the label was removed. It also does not mean that the cause of the autism has been mysteriously eradicated. It merely means that as a team of caring supporters, we have found a way to educate this child to the point that the doctors have stopped calling him names.”

Other terms in Schramm’s title suggest more practical ways of thinking about how to help our kids. The idea of education *toward* recovery is very useful. The focus throughout the book is the idea that anything that moves the learner toward interaction also moves them toward recovery long term. Schramm uses this idea to explain why good ABA in general, and ABA/VB in particular, chooses certain techniques.

Delivering lots of positive reinforcement (delivering rewards) and when necessary using response cost (taking away desired items) and extinction (planned ignoring of behavior) are the techniques of choice because they keep the child focused *toward* interaction with us – keeps them wanting more of what we have to give. Similarly, this explains why negative reinforcement (rewarding with escape from interaction) or punishments must be avoided – they propel the child to run away from us and from recovery in turn. This is an insight that helps me think about our daily choices in our ABA/VB home program.

The idea of turning the tables is also powerful. Schramm points to ways we can use characteristics of autism itself to promote the education process. Kids with autism may tend to echo – so he explains how echoic transfer procedures can be the doorway into teaching functional communication. Kids with autism often stim – so he shows how we can use the powerful reinforcing value of those stim behaviors as motivation to perform learning tasks. In seeing opportunities where it would be easy to see just deficits, this book provides both a hopeful outlook and, more importantly, concrete advice toward realizing the hope through ABA/VB interventions.

This book is no replacement for Sundberg and Partington’s 1998 Teaching Language to Children with Autism or Other Developmental Disabilities – the original sourcebook of ABA/VB. It is a useful companion to it. It is good to now have a parent-friendly book on the subject available.

