

On-Line Journal Aids Understanding of ABA/VB

Putting together the puzzle of an effective treatment plan for a child with autism is challenging enough. So it doesn't help that so many pieces of the puzzle are labeled with acronyms. Caregivers and teachers wonder: Is IBI the same thing as ABA? Should we do PRT? TEACCH? What about RDI? Or is that DIR? Well, it could be either... So when a resource comes along that helps parents and professionals make sense of any of these labels, it is very welcome.

Just such a resource appeared earlier this year in the spring issue of the on-line journal *The Behavior Analyst Today*. Kelly Kates-McElrath and Saul Axelrod, both Board Certified Behavior Analysts and faculty at Temple University, provide a clear definition of the distinctions between two popular forms of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Their article "Behavioral Intervention for Autism: A Distinction Between Two Behavior Analytic Approaches" offers a side-by-side look at Discrete Trial Intervention (commonly called 'Lovaas ABA') and ABA using B.F. Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior (commonly called ABA/VB).

Both interventions use the basic behavior modification techniques of giving rewards (positive reinforcement) or taking away unpleasant things (negative reinforcement) in response to desired behavior and withholding rewards in response to undesired behavior. Both employ a 1:1 or at most 1:2 learner to teacher ratio. But how Lovaas ABA and ABA/VB employ the techniques varies considerably.

A key difference the authors show is the kind of reinforcement each program chooses. Lovaas ABA employs negative reinforcement, with students working to receive breaks from demands. In ABA/VB, all reinforcement is positive. Teachers seek to establish themselves as givers of rewards and then use the student's motivation to receive rewards to keep them focused on learning. This difference is mirrored in how the two programs use prompts. Lovaas ABA programs sometimes use a 'no-no-prompt' strategy in which students are prompted after 2 wrong answers. ABA/VB uses an errorless model of teaching in which prompts are provided immediately for new tasks and then faded as the student gains mastery.

Another key difference the authors cite is the delivery of instruction. Lovaas ABA typically is delivered via 'table time' – learning trials performed at a desk or table to minimize distractions in the environment. While ABA/VB also uses table time for certain learning tasks, it emphasizes natural environment teaching to promote generalization of skills learned at the table or to target skills not easily learned there.

Kates-McElrath and Axelrod compare the two programs on curriculum, data collection, language acquisition and other points. Especially handy for parents and teachers, they summarize the comparison in a useful one-page chart. The authors' hope is to clarify understanding of ABA approaches because "behavior analytic programs remain best practice for autism intervention in the public school system."

You can find this article through the Behavior Analyst Online organization. Go to www.behavior-analyst-online.org, and then click the buttons for Behavior Analyst Today and for issue 7.2. This website is home to four FREE on-line journals that publish articles by nationally recognized figures like Tristram Smith, Andrew Bondy and others. It is a treasure trove of information for parents and teachers.

Review by: Wil Gehne, December 2006

