

Sundberg Tunes Up Verbal Behavior Programs

Verbal Behavior: New Findings from the Field
Mark Sundberg, February 4-5, 2006, Herndon VA

Parents and professionals using Applied Behavior Analysis/Verbal Behavior programs to teach children with autism rely on two basic tools: the 1998 book Teaching Language to Children With Autism or Other Developmental Disabilities and the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS). The two together provide a practical program to apply the functional approach to language first described by B.F. Skinner in his book Verbal Behavior in 1957. Both tools are the work of Mark Sundberg and James Partington. So when one of these men who 'wrote the books' recently came to Northern Virginia it was an event for the ABA/VB community.

The conference was an advanced session for experienced practitioners. Dr. Sundberg presented complex and challenging cases studies and used them to provide new strategies and new tools for implementing ABA/VB in home or school settings. He also provided many tips and cautions along the way. He gave specific focus to strengthening early learners' visual performance, to avoiding rote responding, and to carefully developing the most challenging skill, the inter-verbal (conversational skills). Throughout, Dr. Sundberg emphasized two general principles.

The first, and foremost, is the emphasis on the learner over the methodology. Sundberg stresses the important distinction between behavior modification and behavior analysis. Behavior modification is the set of techniques and procedures to shape a learner's behavior. Behavior analysis is the study of an individual learner--what motivates them, what brings responses from them, what their particular needs are. It is behavior analysis that must always be at the center, keeping constant attention on the daily changes of the child. Techniques of behavior modification are chosen and applied in response to that analysis. For parents and professionals who invest so much time and effort in learning the techniques, this served as a valuable reminder.

Dr. Sundberg's second key principle is developmental appropriateness. After years running a private school for children with autism, he has recently begun working in public education and has found the experience enlightening. Teachers who work exclusively with developmentally delayed students can lose sight of what typically developing students can achieve at the same age. Targeting skills that are not developmentally appropriate can be the underlying cause of learner frustration and behavior problems. A common refrain through the conference was 'what can typical kids do?' In the future, Dr. Sundberg envisions a revised ABLLS that will be tracked to developmental age like the Bayley Scales and other instruments. This will be an exciting advance for ABA/VB programs.

Dr. Sundberg pushed parents and professionals to apply these principles daily to ensure continuous improvement and refinement of their programs. He modeled continuous improvement by distributing the current drafts of revised chapters of the Teaching Language book in the course materials, previewing a future edition. No part of this approach should be static. By applying continuous analysis and refinement, we can serve our children more effectively using ABA/VB programs.

