

Teaching Communication Skills Using ABA

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Applied Behavior Analysis

- Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is devoted to understanding and improving behavior
- B.F. Skinner founded ABA in the 1930s
- Basic assumptions
 - Causes of behavior lie in the environment
 - Behavior can be improved by systematic environmental manipulations



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Applied Behavior Analysis

- Since 1960s ABA has been widely applied and researched with persons who have autism
 - Many negative behaviors reduced
 - Many functional behaviors taught
 - Language and communication increased
- ABA has improved lives of tens of thousands of children and adults with autism and developmental disabilities



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Verbal Behavior Approach

- Uses methods of ABA
- Based on Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior*
- Incorporates over 20 years of research from the journal *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*
- Has been highly effective with thousands of children with autism and developmental disabilities



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Primary Features

- Classifies language according to its “functions”
- Teaches requesting as 1st skill
- Does not directly teach eye contact/ sitting
- Manipulates child’s motivation to reduce avoidance and escape behavior
- Errorless teaching methods used
- Teaches most skills through mixing trials



Behavioral Classification of Language

- Receptive
 - Following instructions or complying with the requests of others
 - Touching picture of ball when asked to “Touch the ball”
- Echoic (Vocal Imitation)
 - Repeating what is heard
 - Saying “Ball” after someone else says “Ball”



Behavioral Classification of Language

Receptive:



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Behavioral Classification of Language

Echoic (vocal imitation):



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Behavioral Classification of Language

- Motor imitation
 - Copying someone's motor movement
 - Clapping because someone else claps
- Tact (Labeling)
 - Naming or identifying objects, actions, & events
 - Saying "Ball" because you see a ball



Behavioral Classification of Language

Motor imitation:



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Behavioral Classification of Language

Tact (labeling):



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Behavioral Classification of Language

- Mand (Request)
 - Asking for reinforcers that you want
 - Asking for “ball” because the child is motivated to play
- Receptive by function, feature, or class
 - Identifying specific items when given a description of the function, the features, or the class of the item
 - Touching picture of a ball when someone asks, “Which one bounces?”



Behavioral Classification of Language

Mand (request):



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Behavioral Classification of Language

Receptive by function, feature, class:



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Behavioral Classification of Language

- Intraverbal
 - Answering questions or conversations when your words are controlled by other words
 - Saying “Ball” when someone else says “Toy”
- Textual
 - Reading written words
 - Saying “Ball” because you see the written word Ball
- Transcription
 - Writing and spelling words when spoken to you
 - Writing “Ball” because someone said “Ball”



Behavioral Classification of Language

Intraverbal:



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The Different Meanings of “Juice”

- It is crucial to teach the various meanings of “Juice”
 - As a label (or tact)- “That’s juice!”
 - As a request (or mand)- “I want juice!”
 - In response to a “Wh” question or fill-in (intraverbal/conversational skills)- “What do you drink?” Child says “Juice!”
 - As a receptive language skill- Child selects a picture of juice when asked.



Importance of Considering Functions of Language

- Many children with language delays will not use words across all categories without explicit teaching
- Some children may have a large receptive repertoire but very few requests or conversational skills
- Often, others blame the child's "cognitive abilities" (not teaching procedures) for the failure of developing many language skills
 - These can frequently be overcome with appropriate teaching methods



Teaching Requests: Rationale

- Establishes therapist and learning environment as rewarding and fun
- Child quickly learns to control own environment
- Motivates child to *want* to learn
- Reduces escape/avoidance behaviors



Teaching Requests: Rationale

- Many collateral behaviors develop naturally as a result of teaching mands
 - Eye contact, sitting, attending
- Allows time to be spent teaching other important skills
- Reduces frustration and negative behavior on the part of the child



Teaching Requests: How to Begin

- Identify various fun preferred items
- At first keep items out of reach but visible
- Set aside at least 15- 30 minutes daily
- Begin to “pair” the work environment with these fun items
 - This is a very important step that can make or break the success of any language program
 - At first items should be given for “free”
- Fade in demands only after the child is eagerly approaching you or the teacher



Teaching Requests: How to Begin

- Assess current vocal/verbal capability
 - Vocal imitation skills, Labels, etc.
 - No vocal imitation- begin with sign language
- Start with 2-3 requests for specific items/activities
 - Cookie, water, ball, car, movie, etc.
 - Don't begin by teaching "more"
- Should also be done throughout the day whenever your child wants access to the items/activities
- Stay consistent and provide a lot of learning opportunities



Teaching Requests: Using Errorless Teaching Methods

- Teaching procedures are used to minimize or eliminate child's errors
 - Increases child's successes
 - Reduces "failures"
 - Reduces avoidance and escape behaviors
 - Prompts are quickly faded to minimize prompt dependency
-
- Let's practice!



Moving Forward: Block and Mand procedure

- Begin once the child can reliably request for items when the item is present
- Allow access to a preferred item while engaging with your child
- Slowly block access to the item
 - Pause the iPad
 - Turn off the toy
 - Cover the cookie
- Use a time-delay procedure (wait 5 seconds) and then prompt the request
- Repeat until an independent response occurs and then provide more of the preferred item/activity.



Moving Forward: Advanced Requests

- Once your child is reliably requesting items using the block and mand procedure begin to teach these requests when the items is out of sight and motivated
- Should be able to request for a variety of items/activities out of sight before moving on to other concepts
 - Advanced requesting skills include:
 - Requesting for attention (e.g. “Watch this!”)
 - Requesting for information (e.g. “Where is my iPad?”)



Integrating Other Skills: Mixing it in!

- Begin incorporating other language skills (receptive language, labeling, etc.) once the child can reliably ask for 2-3 items/activities
- Teaching trials for a particular skill are frequently interspersed with other skills
- Maintenance is incorporated in each session
- Provides greater variety and novelty
- Increases interest in learning sessions



Integrating Other Skills: Mixing it in!

- Requesting should always be a priority
- Skills should be taught across behavioral classifications (receptive, tacts (labeling), intraverbals (conversational skills), etc.)
- Maintenance of skills should be assessed (and addressed) regularly
- Generalization should be incorporated from the outset
 - Different materials, settings, people, instructions

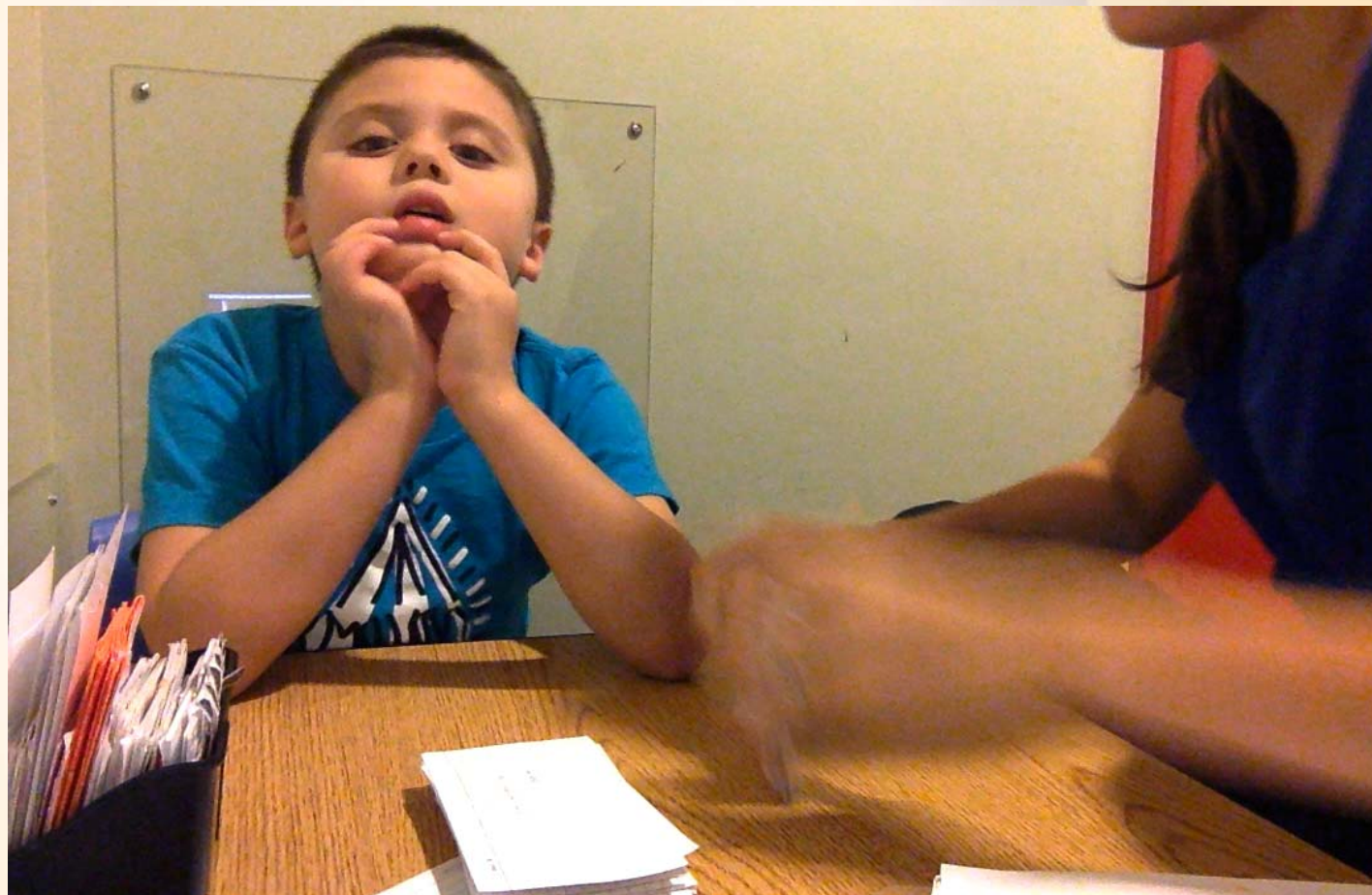


Critical Components of an Effective VB Program

- Assessment of the child's repertoire
- Functional curriculum
- Appropriate teaching methods
- Appropriate data collection methods
- Competency-based staff training
- Monitoring child's progress
- Monitoring staff performance
- Adjusting the program
- Integrated with reduction needs
- Working closely with a Behavior Analyst



Sample VB Session



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Summary

- Must pay careful attention to program to ensure continued success
- Effective treatment is not easy – requires highly trained person to supervise program
- VB is an approach based on ABA
- Has been very effective in improving autistic children's language and communication
- With VB approach children *want* to learn



How to Contact Us

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