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2020-06-01

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What is ABA?

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Applied Behavior Analysis, often referred to as ABA is a science for addressing socially significant human behavior. People who are licensed and/or certified in behavior analysis are referred to as behavior analysts. Behavior analysts practice ABA with people to help them meet their goals for behavior change and to help them have the best quality of life possible. Behavior is something a person does; that is, a behavior analyst might help a person to increase a behavior they want to do more of, such as physical activity, or decrease some behavior that they want to do less of, such as smoking.

To help people with behavior change, behavior analysts observe and analyze the functional relationships that surround a behavior. Specifically, we examine the events that occurred right before a behavior and the events that occurred right after. If identified correctly, changing those events might help to change a behavior. This helps the behavior understand what we call the function of a behavior. The function of a behavior helps us understand why a person does what they do. Very simply, there are reasons why we all do what we do. A behavior analyst tries to figure out what those reasons are and help change them to improve a behavior (for example, studying) or decrease a behavior (for example, using a cell phone in class).

Importance of ABA

ABA is a science that relies on the evidence base of peer-reviewed, published findings. It is important because it works- which is demonstrated by thousands of professional articles showing its effectiveness. This is especially true in supporting the needs of persons with significant impairments, including severe challenging behavior. Behavior analysts are transparent with their work, in that they collaborate with other team members to assess, select, and define behaviors targeted for change. Behaviors that are targeted for change are measured specifically, and often the adaptive alternative behaviors are specifically taught to the person to help increase their skills to change their own behavior. Behavior analysts rely on the visual and graphic display of data and trends on which to base decision making and future recommendations. The display of measured data intends to show whether or not progress is being made. If progress is being made, the behavior analyst will make recommendations to continue the intervention and generalize the results to other settings, people, and situations. If progress is not being made, the behavior analyst will make changes to refine the measurement system, intervention, or other aspect of the behavior change procedure.

Advances Made in the Field

As a field of study and practice, ABA has evolved since its early beginnings in the mid 1940s and 50s to the development of ABA as a distinct field of study in 1968, with the inception of its own peer reviewed journal, The Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. In its early days, ABA, like many sciences in their infancy, was implemented in a variety of ways that would not be done today (during this time period behavior analysis was referred to as behavior modification by many people) . Today, ABA has become a sophisticated science based on the careful and planned use of positive reinforcement, the assessment of the reasons for a behavior, and the use of the least intrusive, most effective interventions possible. While applied behavior analysis was first found effective with persons who were diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the thousands of publications since 1968 have demonstrated that the principles upon which the interventions are based are effective for just about any behavior. Although it would be impossible to include an exhaustive list, some that have been most important for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities include self-injury, aggression, wandering, pica (eating inedibles), extremely picky eating, and repetitive behavior that interferes with a person's ability to have a good quality of life, among others.

Development of Degree Programs

There are numerous degree programs in ABA around the world. Educational opportunities are increasingly available at the undergraduate and graduate levels. While Bachelor's Degree and Doctoral programs in Behavior Analysis are continuing to emerge, there are hundreds of Master's Degree programs in Behavior Analysis, in both the traditional and distance education formats. Because behavior analysis emerged from the fields of both psychology and education, these programs can often be found in those respective schools or departments; however, there are more and more independent departments of applied behavior analysis every year.

Development of Behavior Analysis Credentials

The Behavior Analyst Certification Board, Inc. ® (BACB®) is the primary credentialing body for the field. The BACB has developed four levels of certification, the pre-bachelors level (Registered Behavior Technician; RBT), the bachelors level (Certified Behavior Analyst Assistant; BCaBA®), the masters level (Certified Behavior Analyst; BCBA ®) and the doctoral level (Certified Behavior Analyst-Doctoral; BCBA-D™). According to the BACB there has been an 80% increase in demand for behavior analysts with the BCBA ® or BCBA-D™ credentials from 2018 to 2019 with a steady, rapid increase since 2010. Similarly, there has been a 157% increase in demand for those with the Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst™ (BCaBA®) credential. Board certification in behavior analysis is recognized nationally, and 31 states in the US also have licenses in behavior analysis. If your state has a license in behavior analysis, the licensure laws, rules, and regulations must be followed in addition to the certification requirements.

How and Where Do Behavior Analysts Practice?

Because it is the most well-studied, evidence-based intervention for the learning needs of individuals with autism, behavior analysis is very often associated with autism treatment. The second group that the field has contributed to treatment with is broadly the developmental disabilities community (for example, people with intellectual disabilities, Down Syndrome, Prader-Willi Syndrome), particularly in the areas of treating significantly harmful challenging behavior, such as self-injury, and developing successful instructional strategies to help with academic and skill-based learning. Behavior analysts are often found in early intervention, schools (positive behavior intervention and supports; PBIS; personalized systems of instruction), child welfare (treatment of trauma-related concerns; preventative parenting strategies), hospitals (e.g., tolerating medical treatments, feeding disorders), clinics (e.g., habit and other behavior change), business (e.g., occupational safety), among many others. Behavior analysts often work with differently trained professionals as part of an interprofessional team, such as psychologists, teachers, and speech therapists, to maximize the outcomes for the persons seeking help.

If you are interested in further information about the field of behavior analysis or think that you or your family member could benefit from the help of a behavior analyst, you can go to:

The Behavior Analysis Certification Board: <https://www.bacb.com>

Association of Behavior Analysis International: <https://www.abainternational.org>

Association of Professional Behavior Analysts: <https://www.apbahome.net>

Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies: <https://behavior.org>

