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Use of applied behavior analysis on the rise

By Pamela Berard
August 19, 2016

The use of applied behavior analysis is increasing and more educational programs are rising to meet the demand.

Chrissy Barosky, MA, BCBA, started her ABA master's program at Columbia University in 2006. "When I was picking a program, there weren't nearly as many options as there are now," Barosky said. "I've seen a huge growth in it, and I would say with master's programs specifically."

Barosky is vice president of clinical development, clinical director, at Bierman Autism Center in Boston, which works with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, providing early intervention and personalized ABA programs.

Barosky said some people may have outdated views about ABA, such as that the work is all done by sitting at a table.

"There's a lot of naturalistic teaching, and other components," Barosky said. "I think it's come a long way, especially with autism treatment. There's a lot more to it than what people's original views are."

ABA is an applied science and is concerned with identifying how people learn and what motivates their behavior. ABA uses research-based techniques to increase positive behaviors and reduce harmful ones.

According to the Bierman center, ABA therapy is the most effective evidence-based treatment for autism and is recommended by the American Psychological Association and the US Surgeon General.

It was also recommended by the National Institute of Mental Health in 2007, said Rebecca McDonald, Ph.D., licensed psychologist and board certified behavior analyst and program director at the New England Center for Children.

The NECC curriculum has been based on the principles of ABA since it was established more than 40 years ago.

McDonald said ABA wasn't as widely accepted at that time, but that acceptance has grown over the years as the body of scientific evidence increases.

McDonald said she believes ABA is the most effective treatment approach for individuals with autism.

“What we’re really interested in is the relationship between behavior and the environment,” McDonald said, and how that can result in either an increase or decrease in the likelihood of behavior.

“Individuals with autism oftentimes need skills broken down into smaller units of learning. ABA provides a great structure for us to break skills down and teach them in a sequential manner, so that we can get more complex skills and behavior, but starting off with very simple skills.”

Over the last decade, the United States has seen a “particularly dramatic” increase in the use of ABA to help persons with autism, according to Autism Speaks.

Ronald Lee, Ph.D, director of the new master of arts program in ABA at William James College in Massachusetts, which launches this fall, said that as a result of increasingly inclusive diagnostic criteria for ASD, professionals in many fields, including clinical psychology and applied psychology, may be more likely to see ASD as part of the diagnostic make-up of populations they serve.

“What is happening in autism is creating the demand for practitioners trained in ABA,” Lee said. Lee said despite decades of research supporting ABA as an evidence-based approach, numerous misconceptions of ABA remain, such as that it is too simplistic for anything more than teaching simple, single responses.

Lee said a sufficiently trained applied behavior analyst exposes a multitude of variables that are in effect during the seemingly simplest of teaching procedures and is able to problem solve and not abandon the principles if they don’t initially seem to be working.

Trained behavior analysts are able to adapt to non-responders – those who don’t respond initially to rewards – by investigating further and implementing more complex techniques. “(ABA practitioners) look at behavior and what is it that behavior serves for that individual,” Lee said. “That kind of attention to detail is why it’s so effective.”

“You can get a degree in education or psychology and you will get some training in these principles, but that surface level of training is often insufficient to really give someone a comprehensive understanding of why behavior occurs and how to change it,” Lee said.

Barosky said her work at Bierman is completely individualized to the child and treatment is 1-on-1. ABA teaches skills across the board, but examples of how it can be used include helping children increase food variety, use utensils while eating, increase language skills or work on social and job preparation skills, Barosky said.

Barosky said she works with the child’s parents, caregivers and educators. “That’s a huge component of what we are doing, because if you are reinforcing something in one environment, you want to make sure it transfers to all environments,” Barosky said.

Lee said that while ABA has had its largest impact in the field of autism and developmental disabilities, it has also been effective in a diverse range of fields, including clinical/mental health settings (in treating anxiety and depression, for example), clinical and applied health psychology and education.

The behavior analytic analogue of Industrial-Organizational Psychology, Organizational Behavior Management, is one of the most rapidly growing subfields within ABA, he said. “ABA is definitely a profession that is on the rise,” Lee said.

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