What is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA): Understanding the Misconceptions.

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Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) has received considerable attention in recent years, particularly in reference to treatment for individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Despite this attention, much of the information on ABA is inaccurate and potentially leads to reduced collaboration and adversely affects social, education, and behavioral supports for individuals with disabilities, such as ASDs. The purpose of this article is to briefly highlight what ABA is, what it isn’t, and discuss the unique contribution ABA can make for individuals with ASDs.

Simply put, ABA is a science of learning and behavior* focused on helping individuals experience greater happiness, success, and independence. The focus of ABA’s is on the effect of the environment on learning and behavior. The science of ABA is built on roughly 100 years of research examining the effects of large and small variables on behavior. This rich research base has consistently demonstrated that learning is a systematic process, and that by understanding this process and critical components in the process, learning can be enhanced. Currently, coursework covering these variables is not part of the training of other professionals. By understanding how these variables impact learning, behavior analysts can use that knowledge to assess individual’s skills and design specific programs to improve their success, such as in social communication, personal care, and academic areas.

Unfortunately, ABA is often misrepresented as a particular strategy, such as discrete trial teaching (DTT) or delivery of tangible rewards. Such a description of ABA is similar to saying speech and language pathology IS simply practicing articulation. Although many SLPs design programs that include programming to improve articulation, “practicing articulation” does not define the field of speech and language pathology. Another common misconception is that ABA is primarily about reducing inappropriate behavior. Although assessment and intervention to reduce inappropriate behavior is important, it is only a part of what behavior analysis can address. Some ABA-based treatment may include particular strategies, but the science of ABA can be used to design an infinite number of different treatment programs based on individuals needs, including social skills, academic skills, problem solving, creativity, self-management, and athletic performance. It is through the ability to thoroughly assess and design individualized interventions, with additional focus on critical variables that are often overlooked, that ABA makes a substantial and unique contribution to the education of individuals with ASDs.

Because ABA is based on a scientific understanding of variables that impact learning, it has the unique ability to identify barriers to success that are often missed. Once these barriers are identified, decisions can be based on what we know about the way learning works. For example, the key to improved progress could be identifying and arranging more powerful reinforcers, changing educational materials, revising prompting formats, changing prompting hierarchies, altering practice schedules, designing subtly or substantially different strategies, changing schedule of activities and breaks, and modifying
educator/caregiver training. In other words, a behavior analyst can bring a new perspective to a situation where an individual is not making desired progress and identify things that have likely not been considered previously. This unique understanding of the importance of subtle variables empowers parents and professionals, because it means, even if the current strategies are not working, there are always other options to improve success. In many situations, the role of ABA is to augment what is already known about an individual’s strengths and challenges and add to caregiver’s and educator’s understanding by taking a closer look at the learning situation. The combination of these perspectives can then lead to improved success when carefully designed interventions are put into place based on available resources, current knowledge of the individual, and a scientific understanding of learning.

With this scientific understanding of learning and behavior, we no longer need to blame the disability or the individual nor should we assume the individual with ASD just needs more time. Everyone can make progress, once the variables reducing their progress are identified and appropriately addressed.

* ABA is not the only science of learning and behavior; cognitive psychology, social psychology, and neuropsychology among others, also study learning and behavior. Each of these sciences examine human behavior through a different “lens” (i.e., cognitive psychology focuses on thoughts and emotions, social psychology focuses on behavior in social settings, neuropsychology focuses on the brain's impacts on behavior). A key advantage of ABA for working with individuals with ASDs is the ease in which we can examine the environment, whereas it is much more difficult to accurately examine thoughts and emotions or the brain of individuals with ASDs.