

The Relevance of Verbal Behavior to Children with Autism

What does the analysis of verbal behavior have to do with young children with autism spectrum disorder?

The short answer is that ABA techniques have been proven to be very effective in helping children with autism learn new skills and generalize them to many different environments. And at the heart of ABA is the need to define which behaviors need to change and then measure how behaviors change in response to intervention. Skinner's ideas about analyzing verbal behavior allow us to quantify and measure communication skills and changes in those skills over time in the same way that we measure and graph other behaviors. With verbal behavior, we specifically track and graph the verbal operants (mands, tacts, intraverbals, and echoics) discussed above.

As a parent and team member, you want to make sure that your child's usage of each operant is being tracked and that your child is developing functional skills related to communication. Remember, just because your child can say "juice" when she sees juice (a tact) doesn't mean that she also knows how to ask (mand) for juice, talk about the juice (intraverbal), or repeat "juice" (echoic) when asked. If you understand verbal behavior and the functions of language, you can help ensure that your child meets her targets for language learning and develops a good conceptual base regarding language functions.

Researchers have found that the mand, the tact, the intraverbal, and the echoic have tremendous relevance for learners on the autism spectrum (Sundberg, 2007; Sundberg & Michael, 2001; Sundberg & Partington, 1999; Partington & Sundberg, 1998). Skinner described and defined other functions of communication (verbal operants) as well, but these are the ones that have been described the most in the application of his work to teaching language to children with autism.

One reason for this resurgence of interest in verbal behavior is that most children with autism have severe language deficits in one or more of these areas. Most children with autism do not mand well. They may request only a very few items, they may request in ways that are unclear and ineffective, and they may fail to mand spontaneously (Sundberg, 2004). They rarely label items in the environment in an effort to share their experience. Any tacting they engage in is generally prompted by inquiries from others. Reciprocal conversations (in-

traverbals) are also a very significant challenge. Many children with autism cannot take part in conversation, or can engage only in limited and brief exchanges, often on a restricted range of topics. Articulation and pacing issues make it necessary for many children with autism to practice verbal imitation (echoic training) extensively.

In addition, children with autism do not necessarily transfer language across functions smoothly (Hall & Sundberg, 1987; Lamarre & Holland, 1985; Michael, 1982). They may be able to label an item, yet never request it. For example, if you hold up a bottle of water and ask “What is it?”, the child may say “water.” But she may not ask for water, even when extremely thirsty. This difficulty in transferring language across functions makes it necessary for us to program for each verbal operant (function of communication).

Skinner’s analysis reminds us to program for language acquisition comprehensively across the different functions of verbal behavior. That is, the child’s team will identify each function of communication that is difficult for her and develop goals (targets) and intervention plans for each problem area. For example, often mands are taught first because they enable a child to get her immediate needs and desires met and reduce frustration. This is in contrast to the way speech/language therapy is usually approached for children who have communication difficulties due to other types of disabilities. For example, if a child with Down syndrome or cerebral palsy is having difficulty with language skills (and she can already use language functionally), therapy might focus on helping the child master new vocabulary, grammatical rules, or parts of speech such as verbs, pronouns, or prepositions rather than on the broad functions of communication that she struggles with.

Misconceptions Regarding Verbal Behavior

There has been a tremendous amount of confusion about Verbal Behavior in the last few years, as it has received more attention in educating students with autism. The main misconception has to do with understanding it as an analytical tool vs. an instructional approach. As mentioned above, Skinner did not comment on how language would be taught, and did not have any application to children with autism in mind. He was simply designing an analytical tool that would help to understand verbal behavior in general. Essentially, he developed a classification system to describe the functions of language.

However, in application, many people describe doing a “verbal behavior” program. This really does not make sense, given what “verbal behavior” refers to—this analytical approach and/or classification system. Clinicians who have adopted the use of Skinner’s classification system often do teach in a certain way—for example, they provide fast-paced instruction and they mix different targets of instruction in their teaching sessions. However, these strategies actually have nothing to do with verbal behavior or with the use of Skinner’s analysis of verbal behavior to teach language.

Often when parents hear about the “verbal behavior program,” they want it to be used with their children. They may think that there is such a thing as “verbal behavior” instruction, and they may ask to have it instead of discrete trial instruction. Of course, as we just said above, “verbal behavior” does not refer to any particular approach. The analysis of verbal behavior can be combined and applied with any instructional approach, including discrete trial instruction. (Of course, we would want to ensure that the discrete trial instruction is also state-of-the-art. This means we would want to see it done with fast pacing and with the combination of new and mastered material. These are the elements mentioned above that are sometimes erroneously labeled as associated with verbal behavior. In fact, they are just state-of-the-art ABA instructional techniques.)

Sometimes parents and others do not even realize that the analysis of verbal behavior is part of Applied Behavior Analysis. Instead, they may think it’s an alternative model of instruction, since it has not been used in the instruction of children with autism very long. Similarly, it is sometimes seen as “new ABA” in contrast to some approaches and applications that have been in use for longer periods of time. Behavior analysts need to do a better job describing the origins and definitions of Verbal Behavior!

A Note about Verbal Behavior as an Intervention

Much of what we have said in this chapter emphasizes that VB is a classification system and an analytic tool. All clinicians agree that Skinner said nothing about *how to teach* language, but was simply describing communication by its functions.

Although Verbal Behavior is not an instructional approach, it is commonly referred to as an “intervention,” mainly because it has been paired with a wide variety of effective ABA tools. The combination

Books
Games Cards
Software Assessments



Silvereye
EDUCATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

for Special
Education and
Learning Difficulties

Ordering Information

You can order this and any other items:

- online at www.silvereye.com.au
- by phone to 02 8090 5395

Alternatively, you can complete the order form below and:

- fax to: 02 8003 9201
- mail to:
Silvereye Educational Publications,
67 Central Road, Avalon, NSW 2107

All prices include GST and are correct at time of publication.

Freight

We use couriers for deliveries to most Australian destinations. Deliveries to PO Boxes or remote destinations are by Australia Post. Most orders are delivered within 7-14 days or sooner.

Australian Freight Rates

Sydney area:

- \$7.95 for orders up to 5kg
- \$10.95 for orders over 5kg or large/ bulky items

Rest of Australia (all States and Territories)

- \$9.95 for orders up to 3kg
- \$11.95 for orders up to 5kg
- larger orders charged based on weight and destination

There is an additional \$2.50 registered post charge for orders over \$200 which are delivered by Australia Post.

New Zealand Freight Rates

Based on weight. For orders up to 3kg the cost is typically similar or lower than the freight cost within Australia.

Our mission is to positively impact the education of children and youth; particularly those with special needs and students at risk of school failure; by providing educators, counsellors, other professionals and parents with practical, theoretically sound and affordable products and service.

We provide books, games, cards, DVDs, assessment materials and other resources to assist with:

- *Special Education*
- *Behaviour*
- *Learning Difficulties*
- *Language & Communication*
- *Reading & Writing*
- *Guidance & Counselling*
- *Social Development*

ORDER FORM

QUANTITY	CODE	TITLE	AMOUNT

PURCHASER DETAILS

NAME		DATE	
SCHOOL/ORGANISATION			
ADDRESS			
SUBURB		POSTCODE	
TELEPHONE		FAX	
EMAIL			

PAYMENT DETAILS

PAYMENT METHOD (please tick one)	CHEQUE <input type="checkbox"/>	CREDIT CARD <input type="checkbox"/>	INVOICE SCHOOL <input type="checkbox"/>	PURCHASE ORDER NUMBER (for school orders)	
CARD NUMBER				EXPIRY DATE	
NAME ON CARD					
SIGNATURE					

Fax order to: **02 8003 9201** or mail to: Silvereye Educational Publications, 67 Central Road, Avalon, NSW 2107