

When Applied to Behavior

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One of the first things I learned about after becoming involved in advocacy was *Applied Behavioral Analysis*. My introduction to this technique was less than stellar in that I learned about it through some old VHS tapes I got on loan from the Central Ohio chapter of the ASA.

One of these tapes, which were very old (circa 1970's or so), showed a young boy with autism sitting on the potty with his pants down. There was a guy in there with him who kept forcing (and by forcing, I mean *forcing*) him to drink water through a straw. When at last the boy went, he was given a treat like an M&M or some such. Then he would force him to drink water again. And again. And again. And again.

I remember after watching the set asking the powers-that-be at the local chapter to burn the tapes because I felt they were demeaning, perhaps even harmful to individuals with autism. They refused. This was many years ago, and hopefully the set has since been lost or damaged or destroyed. It may be valuable if looked at from a historical perspective, but as a valid technique, it has no value whatsoever.

In my earlier days on the board of directors of ASA, we used to travel to different states for board meetings. While we were there, we would tour the local residential facilities and institutions for children and adults with autism. This was definitely an education.

Many of these places proudly announced to us board members that they used ABA. This bothered me because of what I had seen on the tapes.

What I didn't know (but of course eventually learned) was that ABA had changed immensely since those early Lovaas days of the tapes. It had become more humane and less aversive. Still, even after learning this, I was skeptical.

But then, as I began to regularly travel for the conferences, and as I got to spend time with and got to know families, I began to see that ABA was *working*.

My opinion began to change.

I can now give countless examples of the benefits of ABA. I have seen so many children with autism who have learned to talk and who have learned to be social and who have learned daily living skills just from this technique. As I began to see this more and more, I finally had to admit to myself that I had made a mistake in judging ABA the way I had. I was wrong to do so.

Today the world has changed. Individuals with autism have something they have never had before. They have the internet. This provides support and understanding and a whole mess of MISunderstanding that wasn't there before. Parents and professionals in the autism field flock to the blogs to read what they have to say. But many with autism are stuck in the past. The ABA they remember is the same ABA I saw on the tapes from all those years ago. They refuse to acknowledge (just as I did for a long time) that ABA has changed.

They scream against the use of ABA and tell parents they are bad parents because of a choice to use ABA as a therapy. Not that one can blame them for doing so...I don't recall any ABA in my past, but I do know if those tapes had been me, I may well be doing the same thing. These are adults with autism who have been hurt as children by outdated and harmful therapy.

But that outdated and harmful therapy has since evolved into a humane, modern and effective therapy for kids with autism. Keep in mind that after age five or six (earlier if they are smart enough, and a lot of them are), they will catch on to the game and then they will play their own game with you instead. At this point ABA becomes completely ineffective.

If one is to be an advocate for the autistic population, one must be kept current. This includes keeping current with therapies, which not everyone is doing. They are leading parents in the wrong direction because they are not up to date. This can be dangerous.

As a parent, it is your responsibility to research *everything*. Don't believe everything the doctors tell you. Don't believe everything the writers of the *Autism Expert Report* (including myself) tell you. If you are going to try ABA or DTT or AIT or FC any other acronym therapy for your child, you must research it first to be sure it is safe and viable and valid. Yes, this takes time and energy, but the rewards are well worth it.

As popular as ABA is, you will have many people recommend it to you. This is a good thing as early intervention is crucial.

Please remember, however, to investigate these things for yourself before you agree to them. There *are* some dangerous therapies out there by people who are all too interested in making a buck. Protect both yourself and your child when choosing a therapy that you think may be right for you.