

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

**Christine Reeve:** I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education but my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I am Christine Reeve. I'm your host. It's April, which means that it is Autism Acceptance, Autism Celebration Month. I have a lot of different views about what this month should be for autism but I'm not going to go into those here. I'm going to focus on something a little different. If you are looking for an autism appreciation episode, definitely go and listen to Episode 73 at [autismclassroomresources.com/episode73](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode73) and that will actually take you to a discussion about my family's experience with autism.

Instead, this month, I am going to talk about Applied Behavior Analysis. Applied Behavior Analysis has become a little bit or a big bit of a sticky issue in the autism community. I know that there are a number of self-advocates who feel very strongly against it. I obviously am a board-certified behavior analyst so I'm not against it, but that doesn't mean that I don't recognize that it has had, and still has in some situations, some problems. I'm not going to focus on those today, instead, I really want to focus on what ABA really is because still, there is a lot of misconception about what Applied Behavior Analysis truly is.

The things that I like about it are the things that sometimes get morphed or kind of left out, so I'm going to talk about some of the myths and I'm going to talk a little bit about what it is since it's not just an educational strategy. A lot of people think about it as being just something we do in a classroom or something we do with children with autism. That is not at all what ABA is. ABA is much bigger than that. That's what we're going to talk about today. I hope that you will stick with me and I will share some of the myths and some of the strengths of ABA as we know it. Let's get started.

Let me start by saying that I have been in the field of ABA and autism for almost 30 years now, not counting growing up with a sister on the spectrum, and when I first started, no one knew what autism was and no one knew what ABA really was. It was amazing, the misconceptions that occurred from that. I will also say that my background is in positive behavioral support and working on using Applied Behavior Analysis to improve the quality of life of our clients as a primary focus of what we're doing. Just let me put those out there to begin with.

The other thing I think that is important to start with is that Applied Behavior Analysis is not just about teaching. Applied Behavior Analysis is the science of instruction. It's the science of behavior as it applies to socially significant issues. It's big. It includes a lot of educational strategies. It also includes organizational behavior management that can be used to change the behavior of people in an organization like in a company. It also can work to improve recycling. It can improve people's follow-up of doctors' care in behavioral medicine.

There are lots of different branches of Applied Behavior Analysis. The one that people know of the most is the early intensive behavioral intervention for children with autism. That is the one that gets the most attention, but ABA is a very big understanding of the science of how people behave, why they do the things they do, and how we address it. It covers reducing and addressing challenging behavior, improving quality of life through the instruction of skills. It has to do with a very wide variety of things. ABA is also a science that is designed to be applied to real life problems, so what behavior analysts are trained to do is to learn how to read research, follow the research. We're trained in data collection and analysis and we're also ethically required to make decisions about interventions based on research, as well as the individual's learning data and their families and the individual's input into what to address.

ABA is the science of strategies. It is not a curriculum. It is not something that we have to teach all these things. EIBI (Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention) has its own element within ABA but there's a lot of branches of that as well. I'll talk about that in a few minutes. But I think it's important to recognize that all ABA done with any individual needs to be collaborative with that person, with their community, with their family, with their classroom. We have to look at the context that they're in, what their strengths and weaknesses are. When we choose behaviors that we're going to teach or change, we choose those as a collaborative process. It is not something that should just be left up to a behavior analyst. It's a very big thing. It's not related to just teaching, it has a lot of different offshoots of it. The focus of it is on changing behavior through teaching skills in collaboration with the individual and their families or their communities to make decisions about what we are teaching or behaviors that we are changing.

I've alluded to the fact that ABA is not just for autism, but that is certainly one of the biggest myths that I hear. Most people who've heard of ABA heard about it in relation to autism. ABA is something though, that we use all the time with typical individuals, typical adults, typical children. We change parenting behavior, we work with families to change behaviors that they're interested in. We work with adults to change behaviors that they want to change and we also work on society's behaviors, like increasing seat belt use and increasing recycling. There are a lot of applications that ABA can be used for that have nothing to do with the world of autism. Just keep in mind that it's a very broad thing.

Along those same lines, ABA is not just using discrete trials. No. That drives me crazy. Discrete trials are a very structured format for teaching new skills. It is one that is used in the early intervention world. Most frequently, it is the one that has a lot of research behind it for that. However, there's a ton of other tools that we have in our toolbox and we should never be relying on only one of those. ABA includes a lot of naturalistic approaches that teach skills in the environment, so pivotal response training, incidental teaching, natural environment training, there's a lot of teaching strategies out there to choose from, biofeedback. There's lots of stuff that we can do, direct instruction. If you've ever used reading mastery or any of the SRA programs, they're based on ABA, so ABA is not limited to just discrete trial drills.

While I'm on that subject, I want to say that it is not a mystical type of strategy that requires secret handshakes and mystical understandings. I know that might be overstating a little bit but I really swear, sometimes, that's what people make it sound like. They make it sound like only

certain people can do this. Yes, ABA requires training and supervised practice with coaching and feedback to do it well, so does teaching. A lot of ABA is just good teaching. In reality, so is doing anything well. You need practice. You need training. You should never be practicing any kind of intervention without that.

Here's the long and the short of it. ABA instructional strategies are good teaching strategies when they're applied in a consistent manner. I have sat next to teachers that I've literally watched them do discrete trial training and they have no idea that that's what they're doing. It's not every teacher and it's probably not even the majority of them, but I've worked with them. The more time you spend looking at instruction and trying to pick it apart, to try to decide whether when I present a wind-up toy to a three-year-old and let it wind down to see if he initiates in some way to get it wound up again, is that a communication temptation via [inaudible] as an SLP. Or is it Pivotal Response Training from the Koegels, or PRT? Is it with a natural cue and situational sabotage? Is it situational sabotage and incidental teaching? Or is it a naturalistic teaching strategy that we find in Verbal Behavior instruction? It's all of it. It's all the same thing.

The more that you look at these things, the more you find the commonalities. Yes, there are differences to some degree, but often, they're less than the similarities. They all might be a little bit different, how we follow up, whether or not we repeat it, how we exactly administer it, but in reality, every different instruction is going to be different based on the individual that we're working with too, so it isn't just the strategies that are making it different. One that flummoxes me to no end and drives me insane is that ABA is one size fits all. You do this, you have a child with autism, you do this, you do this, you do this. One of the things I love about ABA and that attracted me to it originally is that it's highly individualized and that we make decisions based on the individual, their situation, and their needs and what their data tells us. Yet I continually meet people who have been trained that say, "You have to do it this way. It has to be done this way."

Is there a best practice to the way we approach things? Of course, there is. But it's not lock step XYZ, whether the student is progressing or not. It's looking at the student, working with their community, figuring out if they're not learning, we need to change what we're doing, we need to problem solve, and we need to figure it out. ABA is not one size fits all, everybody gets the same intervention. It just doesn't make sense. It's not good science. That's what ABA has always been a science that focused on those individual differences.

Finally, let me talk for just a few minutes about the last one that I think is what we hear about the most; that ABA forces children to do things that are unnatural. I will start by saying that any intervention can be done badly. I will also say that especially earlier models of ABA did this way too much, we've learned a lot. ABA done badly is not real ABA. For instance, forcing students to make eye contact. If we think about that and if we look at things in a natural context, you can't make somebody make eye contact. It's just physically impossible to do, but many self-advocates with autism talk about having very negative experiences with earlier versions, and what I believe, are poorly implemented ABA approaches that require eye contact. This isn't good practice. Does ABA try to change behavior? Yes, we try to teach people to do things. But we're not trying to change who they are.

The skills that you teach are governed on a curricula and they're part of a team decision, whether it's a treatment plan or an IEP. I would say that in the last 15 years, "look at me" and making eye contact are something that we have learned don't make any sense because once you show up in a classroom, you realize that kids don't make eye contact that much, they don't stare at people, which is what a lot of young children were taught to do. The long and the short of it is we're trying to focus on what behaviors make the most difference for this individual. Teaching eye contact is one that I don't teach because all I want to do is to have the student give some sort of visual recognition that they heard somebody but they don't need to make eye contact for that. We've heard from many of them that this is something that is very hard and so we change.

I want to leave it with this; no matter what you're teaching, if you're getting a lot of resistance, if something that you're trying to teach is coming against a lot of resistance, it's the instructors, it's the behavior analyst responsibility to figure out why, but also to figure out is this something that needs to continue, change, and to do that in collaboration with the family, the individual themselves, the community that they are living in. If they're an adult living in a group home, it would be the group home folks. Fighting the behavior isn't teaching a skill. It's a power struggle. Power struggles are not instructive. It's something that I think is really, really important for us to remember as practitioners that we do have powerful tools but we have to really think about how we use them in a way that makes someone's life better.

If you're getting resistance to learning a new skill or allowing you to teach a new skill from the individual or from their community, their family, we need to find another way. One of the things that's great about ABA is we have a lot of different things that we can pull from to do things differently. Sometimes the things that we're focusing on may not be the most important thing. I think as a profession, we need to take that responsibility and we need to be humble to accept that that is our job. I think we need to own up to the things that our field has done at times that we now would certainly say are not best practice, and some of us knew they weren't best practice back then.

Some of it is an issue of ABA done badly, which I've seen a lot of in the last 30 years, some of it is an evolution of science, and some of it is a lack of really looking at the context and collaborating with the people who live there to make decisions that are best for their situation of just deciding it's ABA my way or no way at all. That is not the way ABA is designed to be worked. That is exactly the opposite of what it should be. ABA is a very big field. ABA encompasses strategies that include just really good teaching and it's not just discrete trials. It should always be done focusing on the context of the individuals living in to improve their quality of life. Those are some of the values that I practice with. I hope you'll come back next week when we will have another episode talking about instructional strategies and autism. Thank you so much for listening and have a great week.