



What is Verbal Behavior? By Dr. Renee Terrasi

B.F. Skinner and others outlined basic principles of behavior, which include reinforcement, prompting, fading, shaping, schedules of reinforcement, etc., etc., etc. These principles comprise the science of behavior analysis. It's important to understand that these principles are the pure science and not the applied science or ABA. This difference is made when any science is studied in both pure and applied ways. A good example is if someone were say that they were taking a cardiovascular class. There are many types of these classes that promote "cardiovascular health", such as jogging, biking, aerobics ect.

Applied Behavior Analysis or behavior modification is when the principles of the pure science of behavior analysis are used to teach in any applied setting. This means that the principles used to describe how behavior is lawful, observable and measurable, and has an impact on the environment have been adapted into teaching methods based on those principles.

The reason that people who don't know this get confused about what ABA is stems from the difference between the pure and applied science. The science is one thing, made up of these principles of behavior. The applied science is another, made up of strategies based on those principles. There aren't different kinds of ABA rather different applications of the SAME science of behavior analysis. Some variations of this application are the "Lovaas approach," "Discrete Trial Teaching" "Natural Environment Teaching," "Applied Verbal Behavior," etc.

The science of behavior analysis is solid; it's the applications of it that need adjustment. The modifications should be done based on the student and this is what the data are for. They, along with our personal, experiential knowledge of the student, tell us what's effective and what's not. The whole point of ABA is to change behavior? However, the behavior that's targeted for change is always chosen so that the life of the child will be improved.

The most important thing about ABA is that functional goals, determined by a behavior analyst as well as the family, be implemented in a positive and effective way for the child. We at Peace by Piece use the application of behavior analysis known as the verbal behavior approach.

Skinner not only contributed to the science of behavior analysis (operant conditioning) but he also analyzed the functions of language and presented his analysis in the 1957 book Verbal Behavior. This described language in terms of its function and described these as verbal operants. These are mainly mands, echoics, tacts, and intraverbals. To describe what "function" means, I'll

use the word “cookie”. Skinner explains that if a child hears the word “cookie” and repeats the word “cookie”...this is an echoic function. If the child desires a cookie and asks for a “cookie”....this is function of a mand. If someone shows the child a cookie and asks “what is this?” and the child says “cookie” this function is a tact. Lastly, if someone asks the child “what is your favorite dessert?” and the child replies “cookie”....this is an intraverbal. With the verbal behavior approach, the word isn’t considered “mastered” until the child can use the word consistently through all of the operants.

Skinner's book doesn't outline a method for applying verbal behavior. Therefore, behavior analysts like Dr. Vince Carbone and others, took the pure science that Skinner outlined and created an application for it. This application is what is referred to as applied verbal behavior. This is STILL applied behavior analysis, still an application of the science of behavior, but the focus is on the student's verbal behavior.

What we do at Peace by Piece is based on the verbal behavior approach. We always initially form a friendship with the child by pairing ourselves with reinforcement. We only make few, if any demands, keeping the level of reinforcement for learning high and the value of escape low. Our first "demand" is to teach the child to mand for (request) what s/he wants. This is completely functional, since it gives the kids an appropriate and effective way to communicate needs and wants. Gradually, we increase the "demands," in order to teach the child to label everything in his/her environment as well as, to read, write, converse, and all the other functional educational things.

In addition to keeping the work easy, we also make the "difficult" tasks easier by using errorless learning, in which we prompt the child, if necessary, so they are correct and then reinforced. We then immediately transfer the task to a self-sufficient level so that s/he learns to complete it independently.

Usually no more than 25% of our time together is actual teaching at the table; the rest is done everywhere else in what we call natural environment teaching or NET – this occurs inside, outside, in the community, at play, with videos, in the community etc. By doing this the child learns just as much if not more than if we just taught at the table. The most important thing NET teaches the child is that it is functional because it is learned in the environment the child is continuously exposed to.

Collecting and analyzing data is imperative; in order to accurately measure student progress, evaluate the effectiveness of the student's individual program, and to identify skills and/or behaviors that need to be taught. There are a variety of data collection methods such as continuous data procedures and time sampling procedures that yield reliable, accurate, and valid data. The staff at Peace by Piece uses a variety of data collection methods to measure progress. Some of these include probe data, time sampling recording procedures, ABC recording trial and by trial data probes.