Looking Beyond

APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS THERAPY

Next Steps and Alternative Treatment Options

Dr. Myah Gittelson, PsyD

Applied Behavior Analysis Therapy may or may not be the right treatment approach for your child. Dr. Gittelson, a clinical psychologist who specializes in evaluating, diagnosing, and treating Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), spoke with AAPM about how to determine if ABA is working and what other possible treatments are available.

The Use of ABA
Let's first address the elephant in the room: ABA Therapy has been surrounded by controversy, and its efficacy has been questioned by many in the community. The ABA model, originally developed for young children ages two to six years old, is helpful for tantrum behaviors. It can also help when a child lacks the internal motivation to learn a skill or, once it is learned, apply that skill. While ABA continues to be the frontline intervention for the ASD population, no two children are the same. Some are not as responsive, and others may reach their ceiling potential through ABA sessions but then might need to pivot. Parents, therapists and teachers need to work as a team and watch for such moments.

Is there more than ABA?
Since all children move through different developmental stages, the treatment approaches may need to shift as well. ABA Therapy focuses strongly on behavior, and parents should also consider the developmental, social-emotional and cognitive levels of functioning for their child. Additionally, they should consider the wide variety of presentations found across ASD profiles and the fact that each child has unique strengths and challenges. This explains why one child may see success in ABA, and another may not. Such awareness helps parents understand that a one-size-fits-all approach does not always apply when it comes to the ideal therapeutic course of treatment, unlike other conditions where there is a single cure or medication. Many psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and even ABA therapists agree that a new, more individualized approach is needed.

My Therapeutic Style

In my own private practice, I have introduced connecting to emotions through color and the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) model to provide insight into thoughts, behaviors and feelings. I take the time to understand the client's specific profile and design a personalized treatment plan accordingly. I work together with the child and parents to develop agreed-upon weekly plans that include clear boundaries but that give choices to the child. This approach helps to hold families accountable for their plans to accomplish the best outcome. When treating pre-adolescents and adolescents in particular, I find that gaining their buy-in is critical to success.

I frequently recommend that school-aged children and teenagers enroll in enrichment classes or programs, or in team sports, as a means of targeted intervention to improve deficit areas and foster social skills. This gives them a chance to learn, grow and practice via trial and error in an environment where all peers are working together towards common goals.

Other Treatment Approaches

In my experience, children with ASD have multiple developmental, behavioral and medical diagnoses. Some factors playing a role in treatment planning may include the following: coexisting mental health symptomatology, such as anxiety and depression interfering with peer relationships; food-related concerns, such as pickiness or restricted dietary preferences; sensory processing dysregulation making it uncomfortable to be in noisy or crowded situations; and sensory-seeking behaviors impacting age-appropriate types of play, interaction with peers and adults, and attentional skills.

To address these various presentations, parents can turn to professionals skilled in other areas of expertise, such as occupational therapy, speech and language, child development, psychology, neurology and others. In seeking out such related services, parents should ask professionals about their experience working with autistic individuals. They should also seek to form a multi-disciplinary team that includes teachers to ensure consistency across the home, the therapist's office and the school setting.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is an alternative method gaining more acceptance. Research has shown its efficacy and effectiveness in treating anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias. Journaling about one's thought-feeling-behavior cycle throughout the day is one of many ways to confront and modify behavior.

Parents can also take advantage of emerging digital technologies to accelerate their child's progress. Neurofeedback therapy, which has been around since the 1990s, is one example. It offers brain enhancement training via computer-based exercises while measuring brainwaves with non-invasive sensors. Supporters of neurofeedback therapy claim it can help autistic people by improving their social skills, communication, speech and ability to focus.

Final Words

As our understanding of autism continues to evolve, so will the forms of treatment interventions. It is important for parents to recognize that they can play an active role in deciding which therapeutic approach, or combination of approaches, works best for their child. As they do so, they should carefully consider the recommendations of family physicians, therapists, Individualized Education Plan teams and teachers.
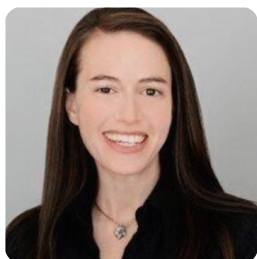
Dr. Myah Gittelson, Psy.D., earned her Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology from California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles campus. She has over a decade of experience in the field of Autism. She has been a consultant for multiple Regional Centers in southern California conducting evaluations within the intake eligibility process. Dr. Gittelson also has a private practice located in Studio City, CA, providing diagnostic evaluations and treatment, as well as social-emotional peer groups and parent workshops. Read more at www.drmyahgittelson.com.

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