

Attending the 2013 Applied Behavior Association International (ABAI) Autism Conference: Building Towards Independence

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The *Association for Behavior Analysis International* held its seventh annual Autism Conference in Portland, Oregon earlier this year. A three track conference, the organizers promised novel autism solutions for practitioners, parents and researchers. With a programme broad in scope and delivered by a range of reputable presenters, as well as an excellent selection of poster presenters, the conference lived up to this promise. While perhaps not an intended theme, one of skill building towards independence did emerge. Several presenters referenced sobering statistics coming out of early autism intervention programs. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), despite our best intentions and services, are largely still not going on to post secondary education, still not engaged in full time employment and still not living independently once they reach adulthood. While best practises may be firmly established, the availability of competent behavioural service providers to assist in community settings is still limited and waitlists prevail. So it was bearing this in mind that presenters called on service providers and families to work together to engage children and youth with ASD in meaningful and practical programming with a long range, visionary approach.

Dr. Marjorie Charlop opened the conference and advised service providers to take equal footing with families and forge partnerships. Dr. Charlop suggested that professionals respect parents as the experts on their own children but to let them know that those in the field of behaviour analysis have the techniques that might help them in their role. In terms of sharing that ABA wisdom, Dr. Travis Thompson suggested that providers look not to teach specific ABA strategies for specific needs or concerns but rather to encourage

families to adopt an “ABA lifestyle”. Thompson encouraged attendees to look at including the principles of behaviour analysis in all aspects of family life and to identify teaching opportunities throughout their day, embedding opportunities if they don’t exist. Dr. Meme Heinemann and Dr. Thompson echoed Charlop’s message of ensuring that providers offer services that fit a family’s own ecology, acknowledging cultural factors, other demands that families may face, as well as their individual capabilities and cognitions. By ensuring that service providers provide support that “fits” with families in this way, presenters asserted that families will be more engaged, more motivated and ultimately more successful in their endeavours. Families should feel encouraged in knowing that the research indicates that while clinical treatment may produce faster results for those with ASD, parent mediated models of ABA services yield results that are more robust, more likely to be generalized, and maintained over time.

Conference speakers Dr. Peter Gerhardt and Dr. Bridget Taylor both encouraged professionals to work with parents at identifying and prioritizing those goals that promote independence as independence ultimately leads to increased opportunities in terms of vocational, social, and residential options as well as greater community integration. Dr. Gerhardt’s work focuses on adolescents and young adults with ASD and he champions the following goals for his clients. Ideally he works towards:

1. Employment – no less than 20 hours per week.
2. Development of not just social skills, but a social network in one’s home community, and;

3. The ability to not only follow directions, but to initiate accomplishing the task at hand. Additionally, Gerhardt argues that happiness can be defined, reliably observed and systematically increased using the tools of applied behaviour analysis and consideration of this is critical to increasing the quality of life for our young adults on the autism spectrum.

Dr. Taylor warned that teaching interventions that incorporate high levels of adult initiated responses may result in a generation of adults who are dependent on other adults. If you don't know where to start in prioritizing and targeting skills, Taylor suggests that parents or teachers spend one full day logging every occurrence of adult support provided to their child in that day. Do you fasten their belt? Pack their school bag? Prompt toilet use? Cut their meat? Apply toothpaste to a brush? This becomes your curriculum. Work towards building these skills and ultimately increase independence. Increase motivation with incidental teaching, says Dr. Taylor. If a child wants to go outside, teach them to tie their shoes. If a child wants to eat, teach them to prepare a snack. Dr Taylor closed with a final inspirational thought from German thinker Goethe "If you treat an individual as he is, he will remain how he is. But if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be and could be, you will help him to become what he ought to be and could be".

Other areas examined at this year's conference included emerging themes such as autism and the criminal justice system, and teaching perspective taking, as well as those topics more commonly seen at autism conferences – play and social skills, and feeding and sleeping solutions. The conference closed with an invited panel of parents and professionals who spoke on the topic of "what keeps you awake at night?" and here the practical importance of many of the topics presented over the weekend was further emphasized. What will the future hold in terms of education, employment, housing, adult services, government supports, dignity and quality of life? While the answers seem unsure, one thing remains certain – the autism community, both families and professionals present at this conference seem prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder in realizing our children's potential.

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