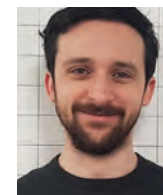




“We can use reinforcement to increase certain behaviours and teach particular skills”

ABA ways to better behaviour at school

How do you help a child in school with behaviours that challenge teachers and the pupil themselves? Cormac Duffy makes a case for using Applied Behaviour Analysis



Cormac Duffy is a former tutor with Ambitious about Autism and is now the registered manager at Beam ABA Services, having previously worked as an ABA supervisor

When you speak to teachers about their job, they will describe many things that they love: the ability to teach young minds; seeing progress in pupils; preparing them for the teenage years and beyond. Interestingly, when you talk to the same teachers about the challenges of their work, one common topic they raise is behaviour management.

We've all been in class where teachers have lost control of things. With a focus on Ofsted inspections, lesson plans, results, and everything else, understanding and consistently applying the principles of behaviour may not always be possible in mainstream schools.

As an approach, Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) is often seen as the antithesis of the mainstream approach to teaching and learning. ABA is sometimes criticised for being too rigid (a long-standing criticism based on traditional work that focused on discrete trial training). It is also sometimes criticised for being too unstructured (21st century ABA targets a lot of learning in context, for example through natural environmental teaching and play). Such criticisms may lead to practitioners ignoring or dismissing the utility of ABA in mainstream schools. This may be premature.

Mainstream schools

Teachers in mainstream schools may have pupils in their classrooms who have a learning disability, developmental disability, and/or complex behavioural needs who may display disruptive behaviour. Many teachers will tell you that in a classroom of neurotypical (or typically developing) children, there are still likely to be issues with particular students' behaviour.

In fact, a recent study listed students' misbehaviour among the most common reasons teachers give for leaving the field (Bogden, 2009). Could ABA, an approach that focuses on understanding behaviour, be used to greater effect in the classroom to address these issues?

ABA is sometimes viewed as an 'autism therapy' – most likely because there is 60 years of

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Group dynamics: peers are motivated to encourage one another to behave in a desired way

scientific evidence for its effectiveness with this population. ABA, however, is an approach with fundamental principles that can be seen in everyday life. We all do things for similar reasons: the main reason is because we receive some form of reinforcement, or reward, as a result. In other words, our behaviours will continue to occur in the future if they are reinforced.

This needn't be every time: think of the lovesick teenager who incessantly texts his on-again-off-again girlfriend. She may only send him a response when she's not hanging out with another boy, but that response might be enough for that poor chap to keep messaging. The point is that as long as behaviours at least sometimes receive reinforcement, they are likely to continue.

When we talk about ABA, reinforcement is the cornerstone. We can use reinforcement to increase certain behaviours and teach particular skills. We can withhold reinforcement to decrease other types of behaviours.

Reinforcement can take various forms, but one particularly popular form is receiving praise and acknowledgement of our worth. Getting a pay rise is wonderful, but is extremely unlikely to be given a number of times in a month, or even in a year. Having your boss sit you down and acknowledge the good work you're doing, the long hours you're putting in and the contribution to the team you're making can be reward enough for many. The same can be said for the classroom.

Teachers, often over-worked and under-supported, may sometimes focus on the pupils who misbehave in the classroom. They may deliver reprimands ("don't do that, that's not nice"), threaten consequences ("if you keep talking, there'll be no sports this afternoon"), and enforce some form of exclusion ("leave the classroom and go to the Head's office"). Any of these responses may be successful in the short-term, but some research shows that this may end up being counter-productive, whereby negative behaviours actually increase.

A focus on reinforcement (often praise and acknowledgement) may prove more effective, bringing about more meaningful change in pupils' behaviour. Francie Murry (2015) outlined some key features of an effective reinforcement system in a classroom setting:

- Only give reinforcement when you see the behaviour
- Immediately give reinforcement when you see the behaviour

“A recent study listed students' misbehaviour among the most common reasons teachers give for leaving the field”

- Give reinforcement each time you see the behaviour
- If using a tangible reinforcer, pair it with a social reinforcer
- Once the behaviour reaches a satisfactory level, you do not need to reinforce all the time.

At the heart of this is consistency. If a teacher and support staff are able to identify the behaviours they want to see in their students, they can give this positive feedback when they see the behaviour.

Naturally, doing this on an individual basis would prove impossible in most mainstream schools, given class sizes and lack of available resources. Group-based contingencies may be a useful method that requires less of a focus on the one-to-one. A group contingency is one in which the

behaviour of an individual has an impact on a whole group receiving a reward or reinforcement.

It can be effective, as not only does it focus on regulating behaviour and reducing negative behaviours, it also takes advantage of peer influence. Peers are motivated to encourage one another to behave in a desired way, which has been found to increase the likelihood of negative behaviours decreasing.

Good Behaviour Game

A particular application of this model is the Good Behaviour Game (GBG), used in many mainstream settings. The Good Behaviour Game will identify some behaviours of interest, and the team (some of the pupils) will be rewarded for evidence of these behaviours (or evidence that negative behaviours are not occurring) among team members.

A lot of work has been carried out on the Good Behaviour Game already, and the Education Endowment Foundation has recently funded a two-year trial of the GBG in primary schools in the north-west of England. The summary findings of the trial will be published later this year.

A lot of work has also been done on using other approaches, such as Direct Instruction and Precision Teaching, in the classroom. They are similar insofar as they use some of the core principles of ABA to bring about behavioural and academic improvement among pupils.

A second way in which ABA is used in the classroom is simply in developing and implementing a pure ABA programme with one of the pupils. In this model, a trained ABA practitioner would work in an educational setting (nursery, primary or secondary school) with a particular student.

This often takes place in a mainstream classroom where an individual's behavioural needs require a more specialist intervention than the school-based staff can offer. The teacher would still run the class as normal, with the ABA practitioner assuming a role similar to a teaching assistant. In other words, they would work >>



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Our services are complemented by Cruckton Hall School, Shropshire, which offers residential education to boys aged 8 to 19 (between 16-19 they go to Harlescott House which is a part of the Cruckton registration) with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome and associated communication, social and behavioural difficulties. Placements vary from day care to termly and up to 52 weeks a year.

Our support and care is continued into adulthood with several adult homes in Lincolnshire, as well as a Supported Living unit. We have established an adult provision near our school Woodstock House to meet the demands for provision in the South of England.

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with one pupil rather than across the class. In this way, a learner with complex behavioural needs (sometimes with a diagnosis of autism), can access an individualised support programme tailored to their needs. The focus of the programme would be on teaching small, achievable units, reinforcing correct responding and appropriate behaviour.

There are a number of challenges to overcome when looking to implement an ABA programme in a mainstream setting. First, ABA in its purer form differs significantly from a more mainstream teaching approach. It is data heavy, it focuses more on reinforcement, it involves prompts and an individualised approach that may not be practical to apply to multiple students at the same time. Some teachers in a mainstream school may, therefore, be skeptical about the 'fit' of an ABA practitioner working with one

“One reason for continued undesirable behaviours is this focus on punishment without a balance in providing reinforcement”

of their students.

It is also no secret that ABA is not without its criticisms. Many are wary of an approach that is divisive to parents and professionals alike. There may also be a perception that the ABA practitioner is coming into a mainstream school to show teachers and support staff how to do their jobs. It needn't be this way.

ABA is often criticised for a perceived reliance on punishment. Ironically, 'punishment', in its technical sense, may be more likely to be seen in a mainstream school than on an ABA programme. According to ABA, punishment is a consequence that has the effect of reducing the future likelihood of a behaviour occurring. Examples include reprimands, loss of privileges, and penalties.

One reason studies have identified continued occurrence of undesirable behaviours in a classroom is this focus on punishment without a balance in providing reinforcement when there is an appropriate response. An ABA programme would focus heavily on the latter approach.

In the classroom, it is important that the ABA practitioner understands their role and respects the classroom routine and expectations. There is no sense in putting in a particular programme of support for a pupil if it affects others or disrupts class plans. We are lucky enough to work in a number of nurseries and schools, and the first port of call is always ensuring that our presence is one of help rather than hindrance.

Building on that, there is little use working in a school with a young person for a part of their day if what you are doing is not going to be replicated when you leave. In other words, consistency is key. For there to be consistency, all staff need to buy into the approach. The onus is on the ABA practitioner to disseminate the ABA approach to the school staff.

As ABA practitioners, we may sometimes be met with initial resistance, doubts, and suspicion. A good ABA practitioner is one who is open and who allows other professionals to see the approach in order to hopefully dispel myths, misunderstandings and untruths. By doing this, we can:

- 1) show that ABA is a person-centred approach to teaching and learning, and
- 2) hopefully promote consistency through shared values.

One of our staff, who provides ABA support in mainstream nurseries and schools, has said that "consistency across everyone within the setting is crucial, whereby both school/nursery staff are following certain protocols". No staff member is going to be on board with an approach they have never seen before.

Thankfully, because ABA is data-driven, the ABA practitioner will have evidence of the effectiveness of an intervention. As another of our staff said: "I think keeping the [school] staff in the



loop with data and progress is also key." Measuring progress is useful, not just to track what is going well but also to share information with fellow professionals.

By seeing this progress, hopefully other professionals will be more likely to embrace some of the strategies that have brought about these improvements.

Better understanding

Behaviour analysts have a responsibility to disseminate the science of behaviour analysis. By doing this, we hope that individuals will have a better understanding of what ABA is and what it looks like. If this can be achieved, more doors may open to ABA practitioners: schools, nurseries, colleges, and universities may benefit from this.

As we've seen, there are some basic principles that teachers may find useful to use in order to manage behaviour more effectively. In other situations, schools may find an ABA programme of support useful in helping an individual with complex behavioural needs. There are some encouraging signs, but a lot more needs to be done.

There is a school of thought that teachers do not receive adequate training in behaviour management. Perhaps more of a focus on some of the underlying principles of ABA will help teachers change their approach, and will help students manage their behaviour in the classroom. Considering that we all want the same goal – pupil progress – perhaps it's time to come together more closely to achieve this ambition.

Classroom routine: there is no sense in putting in a programme of support for a pupil if it affects others or disrupts class plans

Shared goals and exceptional outcomes

The clinical and education teams at Outcomes First Group create vocational and educational programmes around the individual – all focused on achieving the best quality of life



Outcomes First Group operates Hillcrest Children's Services and Options Autism. The group provides care and education to children, young people and adults with autism, complex needs, learning disabilities and social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). At Outcomes First Group we place the people we support at the centre of everything we do. Our services provide a range of vocational programmes designed to help the people we support to build educational attainment, self-confidence and a lifelong interest in self-development.

Supported by our embedded clinical team, we use best practice alongside our own innovative and robust evidence based models to deliver exceptional outcomes for the people we support. Our integrated clinical approach recognises that all the people we support are individual and our provision is tailored to meet their needs and wishes from the point of admission and throughout their placement with us.



At the centre of everything we do: two of the young people that we support from Options Barton

The journey starts with a comprehensive assessment of our young people's areas of strength and weakness, across a wide range of areas, including: cognitive, academic, adaptive, behavioural, social, emotional, sensory and communicative domains. The output of this wide ranging assessment is the production of a comprehensive clinical report which then feeds into our Person Centred Planning (PCP) process.

At this point our integrated clinical approach uses information from the educational and residential services, to support the development of person centred quality of life goals for each individual. Quality of Life is our central focus, and in order to ensure we capture the many aspects of this, we have adopted the Kids Life Scale. Kids Life allows us to capture a wide array of domains important to ensuring our young people are thought about from their perspective in a comprehensive way, including: Emotional Wellbeing, Physical

Wellbeing, Material Wellbeing, Rights, Self-Determination, Personal Development, Social Inclusion and Interpersonal Relationships.

Once we have formed appropriate goals within our Quality of Life Framework, which provides the basis for joint working across all of our services, our various interventions are planned and delivered via, clinical care plans, residential consistent support tools, and educational learning intentions. In order to monitor the effectiveness of our collective interventions, our quality of life goals are constructed in line with a Goal Attainment Scaling Process. This allows us to monitor concrete, behaviourally anchored progress steps which due to their nature allow all parts of our services to ensure that we are all working towards the same aims for our young people.

In 2016 Outcomes First Group won an important national education award for our innovative approach and working practices. While acknowledgement of our work is appreciated, what is really important to us is what it means to the development of our young people. Our aim is to provide the highest quality service which will provide optimum support when it is needed, and independence when it is not.

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