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Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities

Teachers' Corner

Unsubstantiated Treatments for ASD: Making Sense of the (Pseudo)Science



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We are living in a time where the majority of us living in developed societies have easy access to the internet. Information is now at our fingertips, literally. We have at our disposal devices that have internet capabilities that allow us to find information about any topic. Here within lies a problem: the information posted on the internet is not regulated for scientific accuracy.

The term *fake news* has been coined to describe propaganda intended to deliberately spread misinformation. The term has experienced a popular resurgence in recent years, most commonly referring to contentious social and political topics. The concept, however, is not new and has had a strong influence in education broadly and the education of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) specifically. Facilitated Communication (FC; Jacobson, Mulick, & Schwartz, 1995), Rapid Prompting Method (RPM; Lang, Harbison Tostanoski, Travers, & Todd, 2014; Hemsley, 2016), sensory integration therapy (Zimmer et al., 2012), and special diets (Whiteley, Rodgers, Savery, & Shattock, 1999) are a few examples of treatments that are widely used in the United States (Hanson et al., 2007) despite lacking empirical research to support their effectiveness. The use of unsubstantiated, or *pseudoscientific practices*, carries potentially dire consequences (Matson, Adams, Williams, & Rieseke, 2013; Whitehouse, 2013). At one extreme these methods may physically harm the individual being “treated” such as the case with chelation therapy. A more common risk of using pseudoscientific practices results from delaying or even preventing individuals with ASD from accessing much needed evidence-based interventions that are more likely to produce favorable outcomes.

Sifting Science from Pseudoscience in Social Media

Our knowledge about ASD has grown exponentially over the last several decades. We now have a strong—and growing—body of research aimed at identifying effective evidence-based practices (EBPs) for individuals with ASD (National Autism Center, 2015; Wong et al., 2015). Despite the existence of EBPs, pseudoscientific practices continue to be used. To understand why this happens, it may be helpful to understand how the public consumes information about autism that is posted on the internet, with a particular focus on social media outlets.

We conducted a study to explore the quantity and quality of information about ASD practices posted on the social media platform Facebook (Earixson & Fleury, 2018). The focus was on information posted during 2016 about interventions to support communication, specifically the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), which is an EBP, and an unsubstantiated practice called the Rapid Prompting Method (RPM). No differences were found in terms of the overall number of posts for each practice, with the majority of posts carrying generally positive emotional sentiment. There was a difference, however, regarding text readability. The text contained within posts about PECS were written at a higher level of text difficulty compared to that of RPM posts. Posts about RPM were written with lower text complexity, and therefore easier to read and understand, compared to posts about PECS.

This provides preliminary evidence to suggest that (1) consumers are able to access information about pseudoscientific practices with the same relative ease as EBPs; (2) Facebook users tend to post about treatments that they like, meaning that consumers can find posts that will confirm their biases regardless of scientific accuracy; and (3) posts about pseudoscientific practices are written with less text complexity, making them more comprehensible to consumers.

Implications for Practitioners

Incorporating EBPs as the foundation for instruction is mandated by federal legislation and aligns with the ethical principles that guide special educators' professional practice (Council for Exceptional Children, 2019). The following are specific tips for professionals and researchers to help combat the spread of misinformation about ASD and the use of pseudoscientific treatments.

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President's Message

Ginevra Courtade



Happy February, 2020! By the time you read this, many of you will have attended the 21st Annual DADD International Conference on Autism, Intellectual Disability, and Developmental Disabilities in Sarasota, Florida. I hope you enjoyed the conference, including the invited speakers and many impactful sessions and posters. There was also a strong DADD member attendance at CEC 2020 in Portland, Oregon. We had a stellar panel at our Showcase Session and enjoyed the social!

As the new president, I would like to thank the division leaders. **Jordan Shurr** completed his term as immediate past president. During his tenure, the updates to our bylaws were completed. Thank you to **Mike Wehmeyer** who, as our president, co-planned the 2019 DADD and CEC conferences, as well as orchestrated our second mini-conference in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He also was a wonderful mentor to me! Mike will continue to contribute to the division's mission in his role as immediate past president. **Rob Pennington** served as vice president, taking on leadership roles in the Representative Assembly and the Interdivisional Caucus. He now has assumed the role of president-elect. Rob will be the program co-chair for the 2021 DADD conference. **Gardner Umbarger** completed

another year as treasurer, keeping us fiscally responsible. **Angi Stone-MacDonald** has done an excellent job as secretary. **Kimberly Maich** brings her expertise to the board in her role as Canadian representative. **Liz Harkins Monaco** and **Nikki Murdick** were important contributors in their roles as at-large members. In addition, Nikki served as the Membership Committee chair and Liz as Diversity Committee chair. **Cary Trump** was passionate in her role as student representative and gave student members a voice. **Emily Bouck's** role as Communications Committee chair includes overseeing the publication of *DADD Express* and all division web activities (including an updated website). Emily also served as the Critical Issues Committee chair. **Cindy Perras** is our amazing conference coordinator! **Stan Zucker** (when he is not golfing) ensures that *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* remains a high quality journal. Many thanks to Chris Denning, editor of *DADD Express*.

I would be remiss if I did not thank **Teresa Taber Doughty** for her remarkable work as our executive director. For the past five years Teresa has guided this division with her strong leadership skills, her significant knowledge of the field, and her ability to keep the board focused on our mission to enhance the quality of life of individuals—especially children and youth—with autism and developmental disabilities, including those with intel-

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Executive Director's Corner

Emily Bouck



As I sit here writing my first message as executive director, I can't help but think how far both the division and I have come since 2007 when I first became involved in an official capacity with what is now known as DADD. As a second-year assistant professor, I was elected to the presidential cycle of the division, taking office as vice president in July 2007 (back in 2007, elected officials assumed office July 1 rather than January 1, as we do now). In 2007, the flagship journal of the division was still known as *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*. The use of the term *mental retardation* was also used across articles in 2007, and the division was referred to as the Division on Developmental Disabilities (DDD).

Flash forward 12 years, and the division is now referred to as the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities, the journal *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, and the term *intellectual disability* is used throughout articles. The division and myself—now a professor—have grown

so much in these 12 years, and I credit much of my professional growth to my involvement with DADD.

I hope there are many of you out there who, like me, found a professional home in DADD. Whether it be the people you connect with, the shared professional goals and content covered, or the wonderful conference locations in the winter months (thanks, Cindy, for pushing us to change our conferences from October as well as to yearly... two more changes during these last 12 years).

I hope DADD has provided each of you what it has provided me. When I think of DADD, I think of colleagues and friends made, who I look forward to seeing each January; I think of people whose names instantly come to mind when faced with a professional question; and I think of knowledge gained and opportunities presented—I hope the same is true for each of you. If not, I invite you to get to know us. I invite you to get involved, in little or big ways. And as the new executive director—an honor I humbly thank the board for bestowing upon me—if I can help in any way to connect you with the same benefits DADD has given to me, please let me know. DADD is a great organization with great people, and my goal is to help keep it that way during my time as executive director. ■



Legal Brief

The Role of Ethical Standards in ABA Service Delivery for Students with ASD



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Applied behavior analysis (ABA) interventions are considered among the most effective evidence-based interventions for children with ASD (Fein et al., 2013). Moreover, ABA-based interventions are effective in reducing problem behaviors to the extent that many with ASD can be educated with their typical peers, in either a general education classroom or a combination of both self-contained and general classrooms (Dawson et al., 2012; Eapen, Crnec, & Walter, 2013). In fact, ABA interventions are frequently requested and implemented by educators, service providers, and parents in public school settings (Hess, Morrier, Heflin, & Ivey, 2008).

The primary service provider responsible for the direct implementation of behavior-analytic services is a registered behavior technician (RBT). The RBT role in school settings is becoming increasingly important as RBTs collaborate with school professionals to provide ABA to support students with ASD. A registered behavior technician is a paraprofessional who practices under the close, ongoing supervision of a board certified behavior analyst (BCBA). While RBTs do not design intervention or assessment plans, they do deliver ABA programs. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) describes ethical/professional standards for RBTs that are important for all school personnel to understand (see <https://www.bacb.com/ethics/ethics-code/>). Some common areas for ethical compromises include confidentiality, social media use, and multiple relationships. Herein, we describe example vignettes illustrating ethical issues and explain applicable BACB standards to guide practice and ensure that ethical standards are maintained.

Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) Ethical and Professional Standards

Ethics and Confidentiality

Vignette 1: Jennifer is an RBT who works with a number of children in her small community, including two children at the local elementary school. Jennifer also provides ABA treatment in the children's homes after school hours. Two of Jennifer's clients, Michael and Melissa, are brother and sister. Their father was in and out of the home and had been abusive towards their mother in the past. Some of the office staff at the school know the family from church. They care very much about the children and ask how they

are doing. They have shared with Jennifer what they know about the family situation and inquire about what the children are working on and how the children do when she works in their home. Some of these folks donated clothing to the family in the past and included the children on the list to receive holiday gifts.

According to the Professional and Ethical Compliance Code for Behavior Analysts, section 2.06a, "behavior analysts have a primary obligation and take reasonable precautions to protect the confidentiality of those with whom they work or consult" (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2014, p. 7). Therefore, Jennifer should give serious consideration to her clients' confidentiality, particularly given that children constitute a vulnerable population. She should avoid sharing specific details or information as to the children's situation and take reasonable precautions to protect the family's confidentiality. Moreover, section 2.06d dictates, "behavior analysts discuss confidential information obtained in clinical or consulting relationships, or evaluative data concerning clients, students, research participants, supervisees, and employees, only for appropriate scientific or professional purposes and only with persons clearly concerned with such matters" (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2014, p. 8). In this case, Jennifer would protect the confidentiality of her clients and their family since these school members, though well meaning, are not included among the professionals or persons listed in the ethical principle cited in section 2.06d.

Ethics, Social Media Use, and Multiple Relationships

Vignette 2: Robert is an RBT who is working with Maria, a young girl whose parents are divorced. He provides ABA treatment in the home and school settings. Maria lives with her father, but Robert gave both parents his cell phone number in case they needed to contact him for any changes to the schedule. Although Robert rarely sees Maria's mother, she has been sending him text messages unrelated to her daughter's treatment, has recently attempted 'friending' him on Facebook, and asked him out for coffee.

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Ethical compliance requires the ongoing monitoring of professional boundaries. According to section 1.06a and 1.06b of the BACB Code,

- (a) Due to the potentially harmful effects of multiple relationships, behavior analysts avoid multiple relationships.
- (b) Behavior analysts must always be sensitive to the potentially harmful effects of multiple relationships. If behavior analysts find that, due to unforeseen factors, a multiple relationship has arisen, they seek to resolve it (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2014, p. 5)

In this case, Robert must adhere to the BACB's ethical code regarding "multiple relationships." The behavior of Maria's mother suggests that a multiple relationship is being sought. *Multiple—or dual—relationships* exist when both behavior analyst and non-behavior analyst roles potentially exist. An appropriate course of action for Robert as an RBT would be to communicate this problem with his supervising BCBA and inquire as to a direct strategy for communicating his refusal to engage in a multiple relationship with his client's mother. In this case, Robert should politely decline and explain the need for clear boundaries between personal and professional relationships. In addition, Robert also needs to use caution in any social media interactions with clients and families. Having social contact with clients and their families can limit objectivity and increase the risk of harm or exploitation (Bailey & Burch, 2011). It may be advisable that an alternate RBT be assigned to Maria's case if direct communication does not resolve this ethical issue. Such relationships should be avoided so that the delivery of

behavior-analytic services is unencumbered and free of external influences that otherwise would not exist.

In conclusion, it's important for behavior analysts to understand the ethical practice codes, as well as the rules for the specific settings in which they work. The role of RBTs is becoming increasingly more prominent in school settings. It is therefore beneficial for all school professionals to understand the guidelines that exist to ensure the welfare of students receiving ABA interventions. ■

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lectual disability, autism, and related disabilities, and to further the knowledge base of the field, thus ensuring the continued advancement of positive educational and life outcomes for those with autism, intellectual disability, and other developmental disabilities. Teresa, your day-to-day contributions will be missed!

This year, we have also welcomed new leaders. **Peggy Schaefer-Whitby** has assumed the role of vice president, **Jenny Root** as an at-large member, and **Megan Carpenter** as student representative. Further, **Jim Thompson** is our new Publications Committee chair, **Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan** our treasurer, and **Bree Jimenez** our Communications Committee chair. Finally, **Emily Bouck** is moving to executive director. We look forward to working with our new board members!

In the coming year, the board will work to advance our mission and work toward our goals of (1) enhancing the competence of persons who work with individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and other developmental disabilities; (2) responding to and addressing emergent and critical issues in the field; (3) advocating on behalf of individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and other developmental disabilities; and (4) expanding and maintaining a viable membership.

We look forward to working together to make DADD a division that benefits its members. Please let me know if you have any suggestions or issues that you would like to see the board address. I hope you have a great 2020! ■

Students' Corner



Cary Trump
University of Northern Colorado



Megan Carpenter
*University of North Carolina
at Charlotte*

Although this is my farewell to an amazing organization that has helped shape who I am today, it is also an introduction to your new DADD student representative. I will miss all of you dearly, but you are definitely in good hands with Megan Carpenter, a doctoral student from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I am thrilled that Megan also served as a teacher, so I am sure she will bring a wealth of experience, as well as a unique perspective, to DADD in the student representative role.

As a part of the transition process into the new student representative role, I interviewed Megan to learn more about her, and here's what she had to say:

Q: Megan, help us get to know you a little better beyond your vita. What are three things you can tell us about yourself—interests, hobbies, weird facts?

- I grew up in a small town outside of Chicago. I loved living in a small town and having access to a diverse, urban environment.
- I enjoy finding a way to celebrate everything: birthdays, milestones, big assignments. It could be a nice dinner out or just watching a favorite movie at home, but I believe every accomplishment, big or small, deserves to be recognized and celebrated.
- I run every morning. I may only have time for a 15-minute run some mornings, but I try to run at least one 5K per month. It helps me be prepared to tackle the day ahead.

Q: Why have you chosen a career in special education?

My sister has a learning disability, and I grew up around individuals with disabilities. My sister did not always have the best experiences in school and was often told she could not do things because of her disability. I knew I wanted to make sure students never experienced what my sister did in school, so I started college in Chicago as an elementary education major. Then I got involved with Best Buddies, an organization that pairs individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities in friendships. I decided I needed to work in special education if I really wanted to make sure students with disabilities had a positive school experience. I unintentionally accepted a clinical placement working with students with ASD, and I have not looked back. After teaching for six years in Chicago and Charlotte, I decided to return to school to pursue my Ph.D. in special education in order to research and train teachers in strategies to help more students with extensive support needs have positive in- and post-school outcomes.

Q: What are your research interests, in a nutshell?

My research interests include educator (i.e., special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals) implementation of behavior interventions for students with extensive support needs that increase access to the least restrictive environment. I want to help educators effectively implement the many established practices for improving socially significant behaviors. I am especially interested in how students with extensive support needs can be supported by all tiers of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports.

Q: Why did you apply to be the new student representative of DADD?

As an undergraduate student and teacher, I was not fully aware of the benefits of DADD membership for myself or my students. I want to encourage other students to join and be an active voice in DADD. Additionally, as a former classroom teacher in urban and suburban settings, a current student, and an aspiring researcher, I am in a unique position to help DADD members work together to bridge the research to practice gap to encourage greater access to quality instruction for all students with autism and developmental disabilities. ■

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1. Know the “Red Flags” of Pseudoscience

This first step to combating the use of pseudoscientific treatments with children with autism is to recognize them. Descriptions of fad treatments will use scientific jargon, appeal to logic, be supported by celebrities, and be frequently discussed by the media and on the internet. These treatments will not have a research base to investigate, and they will likely be recommended for any child with autism, regardless of level of support (Zane, Davis, & Rosswurm, 2008). For an illustration of the key differences between science and pseudoscience, see Travers (2017).

2. Attend to the Source

Readers do not automatically attend to the source providing information about autism (Fleury, Trevors, & Kendeou, 2019). Be critical of any new information about ASD and actively try to determine who is providing the information. If it is an unknown author or agency, practitioners can cross check the information with reputable nonprofit organizations such as the following:

- **National Professional Development Center on ASD** – <https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/national-professional-development-center-autism-spectrum-disorder>
- **National Standards Project** – <https://www.nationalautismcenter.org/national-standards-project/>
- **Association for Science in Autism Treatment** – <https://asatonline.org/>
- **Organization for Autism Research** – <https://researchautism.org/>

3. Address Deficits in Background Knowledge

Teachers can be particularly influential in reducing the spread of misinformation, as they are commonly a trusted source for families, particularly for children receiving special education services (Adams & Christenson, 1998). The teaching licensure structure varies across states, with many states mandating specific endorsements or licenses specifically for teachers who educate students with ASD. These regulations have been enacted to better prepare educators to provide effective, evidence-based instruction for their students with ASD. Moreover, educators should be able to direct parents to credible sources for ASD information.

4. Engage in the Conversation

Pseudoscientific beliefs and treatments are frequently disseminated through different media outlets such as movies, news publications, and the internet, while the evidence discrediting them is published by researchers in journals whose primary audience is other researchers. This leaves consumers without access to scientific evidence, which may leave them unaware that it even exists (Ganz, Katsiyannis, & Morin, 2018). This points to a pressing need for researchers to disseminate their work to broader public audiences. Researchers should be encouraged and supported in publishing their work in accessible language in outlets commonly used by broader public audiences.

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DADD Changes in 2019 and 2020: Looking Back and Ahead

As DADD members you are probably aware that DADD goes through changes yearly—a new person is elected into the presidential cycle and other positions are up for election (e.g., student representative, member-at-large). In 2019/2020, DADD experienced a few more changes than typical, which we will highlight below:

- As of December 31, 2019, **Teresa Taber Doughty** ended her cycle as the executive director of DADD. Teresa was only the fourth executive director in DADD's history, serving from 2014 to 2019. Her predecessor was Tom E. C. Smith, who served as DADD's executive director from 1994 to 2013. Before him, Dana M. Anderson served from 1990 through 1993. The first DADD executive director was John Kidd, from

1977 to 1989. The DADD board thanks Teresa for her years of serve to the division and wishes her well!

- A few other appointed board changes occurred during the switch from 2019 to 2020. **Mike Wehmeyer** stepped down from the role of publications chair, to be replaced by **James Thompson**, and **Emily Bouck** ended her time as communications chair, to be replaced by **Bree Jimenez**. Finally, **Gardner Umbarger** stepped down as DADD treasurer; he was replaced by **Lynn Stansberry Brunshahan**. DADD thanks Mike, Emily, and Gardner for their service to the organization.
- DADD moved to a new website (<http://www.daddcec.com/>). We encourage our members to use this website to stay up-to-date with DADD information and gain access to DADD publications and documents. ■

Some Upcoming Conferences

NC CEC 33rd Annual General Conference

“Learning, Teaching, Empowering”

2/26/2020–2/28/2020

Embassy Suites by Hilton Greensboro Airport
Greensboro, North Carolina

KDEC 2020

“Dream B.I.G. Build, Inspire, and Grow Young Minds”

2/27/2020–2/28/2020

DoubleTree by Hilton Wichita Airport
Wichita, Kansas

Michigan CEC 80th Annual Conference

“Leading the Change”

3/4/2020–3/6/2020

Amway Grand Plaza
Grand Rapids, Michigan

New Jersey CEC Spring 2020 Annual Conference

“Embracing the Whole Child: Promoting Social Emotional Learning”

3/16/2020

Ramapo College of New Jersey
Mahwah, New Jersey



Editor's Note



Chris Denning

I hope you enjoyed this issue of *DADD Express*. Let me know if you'd like copies of recent Teachers' Corner or Legal Brief and EBP articles, or look for them on the new DADD website at

<http://www.daddcec.com/>. The website is filled with all things DADD.

Interested in writing for *DADD Express*? We are always soliciting articles for Teachers' Corner and for our EBP and Legal Briefs sections. If you would like to contribute, please contact me with ideas or questions (christopher.denning@umb.edu).

Look for photos from the DADD Conference in Sarasota, Florida, in the Spring 2020 DADD Express! ■

DADD Website:

<http://www.daddcec.com/>