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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, Crncec, & 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.

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 con-

tact 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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