

# CHOOSING ABA: A PARENT'S STORY

by Clarissa Kripke, MD

When our son was 18 months old, acquaintances would marvel at his skill at naming numbers and letters. More than one person quipped, "Raising a genius is difficult!" We knew he was an odd child, but our mutual affection blinded us to the fact that we were the only ones who could engage him.

At age 2 1/2, my daycare provider urged me to get him a developmental evaluation. Initially I resisted. However, by the time I had slept on it, I knew she was right. He had a huge vocabulary of nouns and talked to himself in memorized sentences. However, he didn't use words to communicate. He had many odd rituals. Also, it was becoming more noticeable that his social, self-help and motor skills were lagging.

Although I am a doctor, I am embarrassed to say it was my partner who first considered autism. In medical school, I don't recall learning anything about pervasive developmental disorders. Once I acknowledged that my partner's diagnosis was right, I was confident I could redeem myself by learning everything there is to know about autism.

Like many parents, my search for answers began with the Internet. I was gratified to find a wealth of information, but discouraged that my cocky attitude would have to be adjusted. There isn't anything intuitive about autism. It isn't like any other developmental disorder. There isn't consensus on best treatments. There are hundreds of anecdotes, but little research. What is worse, the professional literature is riddled with patronizing and negative language. When I describe my son I use words like, "precocious," "studious," and "observant." I would never think to use words like "deficient," "lack," and "restricted." The early pioneers of Applied Behavior Analysis use some of the language that I find so disturbing, and was a barrier for me to seriously consider it.

By the time my son received his formal diagnosis, I knew one thing for sure: our son would not be subjected to an ABA program. Based on my superficial understanding of ABA, I concluded that it was cruel. I know our son is capable of much more than doing tricks for treats. Also, like most parents, I care deeply about how my son feels. I don't want to force him to conform to social norms if it means he won't be happy. I want to appreciate him for who he is, and help him express his unique perspective.

When our son's doctor recommended ABA she explained that it can be used to teach learning readiness skills such as attention,



compliance, imitation, and functional speech. It can be fun and respectful of individuals. ABA can be used to give autistic kids a foundation upon which they can build. Based on her recommendation, I had to reconsider. Although our son is able to teach himself an impressive amount, he doesn't learn things he isn't interested in learning. That would be acceptable if the things that bore him weren't critical skills like communication and potty training. Even his expert evaluators couldn't get him to do anything he didn't feel like doing. We had already dedicated ourselves to providing him a rich environment and encouraging him to expand on his own play. We are able to teach him some skills with encouragement alone, but it is very inefficient. We can't teach him to string a bead if he won't look at his hands. We can't teach him to put on a shirt if he won't hold onto it. It is hard to teach speech if he won't pay attention and imitate. We needed to do something different, or the gap between his function and ability would continue to grow. Behavior and communication issues which are minor now, will become dangerous when others become less tolerant, and we can no longer control him physically.

By the time we decided to give ABA a try, we were feeling discouraged. We tried getting him to stack blocks for raisins. We got nowhere, and we didn't have much hope that strangers would do better. After all, by this time we had seen six expert evaluators and four speech therapists work with our son. The best any of them were able to do is to get him to demonstrate skills he already has. None were able to teach him anything new.

When the ABA approach was introduced with Rami for the first time, something magical happened. Within an hour of entering our door, the BIA team had our son doing activities he had never done before. He was working on their agenda and giggling as he did it. My despair turned to relief. Within two months our son has made remarkable progress. When asked to do something that he finds hard or dull, he still sometimes fusses. However, we have learned new strategies for making learning fun, and ways to give our son the skills to protest when he is frustrated. Overall, he is a happier child. He doesn't always like the process of learning a new skill, but he definitely likes it when he has mastered one. I think his experience is a little like learning multiplication tables. It seems rote and pointless to memorize a table, but nobody regrets having put in the effort. My partner and I are much happier too since we have more activities we can share and we no longer have to spend as much time keeping him out of mischief. We have found an invaluable tool for helping our son achieve his potential.

ABA methods are powerful. It may not meet the needs of every child with autism. There are plenty of examples of the harm ABA can cause when done poorly by people who do not truly love the kids. However, when it is done by people who have the knowledge, experience, and respect, it can be life altering. We now know our son will have the tools he needs to make his life a blessing. ●



## Site Search

BIA continues the search to find a suitable location for "The Village" which will house an intervention clinic, our administrative office, and eventually, a full inclusion preschool. If you know of any locations to lease that meet the following space requirements, please give us a call!

Preferred location: Emeryville, Oakland, Berkeley, SF  
2,500 sq. ft. – 3,500 sq. ft. customizable indoor space  
1,050 sq. ft. outdoor space

## Dyer Family Foundation

*Supporting Autism Education  
and Services in Fresno*

Behavioral Intervention Association (BIA) received a generous grant in December 2004 from the Dyer Family Foundation (established in the memory of Calvin and Frances Dyer), in support of autism education and services in the Fresno area. This grant is currently funding a variety of programs provided by BIA to the Fresno community.

In partnership with the Fresno LEADS Special Needs Inclusion Project, BIA has presented 2 workshops educating Fresno area preschool and daycare providers about the early warning signs of autism. Later this year, a workshop on the early diagnosis and treatment of autism will be presented to Fresno area Pediatricians and nurses. Free workshops for the families of children with autism are also planned for the summer and fall of 2005.

In addition, the grant will fund the "Give Me A Voice" project targeting school-aged children with autism. The goal of this project is to provide a one time 6-hour consult program that will address communication strategies in the home, and give families the necessary tools and skills to implement these programs themselves.

We offer our sincere appreciation to the Dyer Family Foundation for responding to the needs of the Fresno community. For more information on programs and services offered by BIA in the Fresno area, please call 510-652-7445. ●