

So You Are Thinking of Becoming a Behavioral Interventionist for Children with Autism!

By Jason K. Baker, Ph.D., *Center Co-Director*

Many of our students hear about behavioral interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through their coursework or as internship options, so we at the CSUF Center for Autism would like to provide students with a brief overview of this wonderful career path.

First, allow me to disclose that I am fairly positively biased towards this work. I began as a behavioral therapist at its birthplace, the UCLA Young Autism Project, under the mentorship of O. Ivar Lovaas. I so fell in love with the work, that I continued for six years before pursuing my graduate degree. It was a special time in my life, and one of the best decisions I've ever made.

So, what does this mean for you? Before providing some answers to frequently asked questions, I would like to start by telling you **the top four reasons that you WANT to become a behavioral interventionist.**

1. Marketability and job security.

I simply do not know any skilled behavior therapist that does not have a job. Unfortunately, ASD rates are growing exponentially, and there is some evidence that rates are climbing even more so in Southern California. We NEED trained therapists to keep up with the demand. We recently co-hosted a career panel that invited ten of our partnering agencies and every one of them was hiring.

2. It is incredibly rewarding.

Forbes recently recognized behavior analyst as the Number 6 most meaningful job that exists. I, of course, already knew this. You are rewarded both by the children's progress and by the gratitude of their parents. I have repeatedly helped to raise the IQs of children with ASD over 20 points in a year. While not all children make this type of progress, many do, and those who do not still learn a great deal. I once spent a year teaching a child her first word. That word was "Mama," and her mother burst into tears of joy when she said it. O. Ivar Lovaas read a poem in our introductory course that spoke of these beautiful



flowers that would grow in the desert, only to perish because the environment could not help them to flourish. He ended his lecture by telling us, "You can help these desert flowers." I was hooked. I still keep various crafts and pictures from the children and their families in my office for inspiration.

3. You get to be a scientist while playing with kids.

While there are many ways to help children with ASD and related difficulties, there is quite simply only one fully empirically supported treatment that addresses important, comprehensive outcomes, and that is early intensive behavioral intervention. Often when it comes to helping children and families, we can choose to attend to heartwarming stories of individual families, or to the (admittedly dry, but incredibly important) scientific research base of the work. The great thing about behavior intervention is that it has both—you don't have to choose. The scientific basis of this work is impressive and, if understood correctly, will provide you with skills to help other children and even to understand certain aspects of your own life. There is detailed note taking and decisions about how to help a child are based on the child's own data. At the same time, you get to be enthusiastic and have a great deal of fun with the children (indeed, this is an important part of the treatment). I developed both impressive juggling skills and the ability to generate the voice of practically every Sesame Street character. The sillier the better.

4. You can start immediately.

There are several ways to get started. If you are a CSUF student in the Department of Child & Adolescent Studies, you can explore this option through course credit. The CAS/Center for Autism's Fieldwork Coordinator, Professor Diana Robles, has worked tirelessly to increase our autism-related fieldwork options, and we currently partner with several local agencies. This course (CAS 394/494) will allow you to participate in this treatment for one semester. At that time, you can move on; however, several students receive offers from the agencies to remain as paid therapists. If you are not a CAS major, many agencies will hire and train you with little to no previous experience necessary, assuming you are pursuing your degree in a related field. This career path is a really nice option to explore if you are getting ready to graduate, as it is an easy way to ease your transition from school to the workforce (it was for me!).



So, now that you know that you want to be a behavioral interventionist, you probably want to know what one is. **Here are a few answers to frequently asked questions.** You can find more FAQs at our Center for Autism's website.

What is ASD?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the new term for a neurodevelopmental disorder that was previously referred to as "Autistic Disorder," "Asperger's Disorder," or "Pervasive Developmental Disorder." The primary challenges that children with this disorder encounter are problems with social communication and the presence of restricted interests and rigid (inflexible) or repetitive behaviors. These challenges can be relatively minor (e.g., a child has a great deal of language but experiences difficulty with complex social skills), or can more significantly affect a child (e.g., a child may not have verbal speech and may not understand much language). Working with every child has its own unique rewards, and it is best when agencies can give a therapist the opportunity to work with children with a range of skills and symptoms early on.

What is EIBI?

Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI), also commonly referred to as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), is the leading research-based treatment for ASD. It is a combination of a psychological approach and an educational approach. It is based on the idea that children with ASD have difficulty learning from the typical environment, thus we must alter the teaching environment in several important ways. For example, we make the teaching environment more focused, utilize more systematic and somewhat more repetitive teaching methods, and provide clear instructions and feedback.

What would I expect as a behavioral interventionist?

Behavioral interventionists can be referred to by several titles, including “therapists,” “aides,” or “tutors,” depending upon certain regulations and the culture of the agency and/or the family. The treatment is based on (at least initially) one-to-one teaching. Thus, you will typically be working with a child for a few hours, providing teaching and behavior management. This is often done in the home, but therapists can also be school “shadows” and may take the children into the community to work on related skills. The pay from most agencies is fairly competitive for current students or recent graduates and there is often room for advancement (i.e., moving into more of a supervisory position), particularly if you pursue certain licensure and/or a graduate degree. You may encounter some aggression from a subset of the children, but the biggest injury I ever received was a bad back from several years of flying little Buzz Lightyears to infinity and beyond.

What exactly is the therapy?

As noted above, you use a certain approach to teaching that presents material and feedback in a very structured way. As children progress, this structure is loosened. The main goal is to provide the



children with the base knowledge and skills to be able to tune into the typical environment as much as they can. The program should encompass every element of the child’s development, including academics or pre-academics, language concepts, social skills, appropriate play, and self-help and self-management. The programming begins with skills that form the basis for learning (if necessary given the particular child’s skill level), such as imitation and basic labeling, and will progress over time into more complex

concepts. Some older children may have programming focused on understanding others’ perspectives and reading subtle signs in social interaction. Of note, the “behavioral” in the title does NOT mean that you are only working on behavior! In fact, it refers to the behavioral approach, which utilizes “behaviorism,” or the use of clear instructions and clear feedback to teach many different skills.

Will I like it?

Most people do, but not everybody. The treatment is fairly standardized and detail driven, thus people who are more analytical usually do well; HOWEVER, at the same time, the individual must be motivating to the children, and it is often also necessary to know when and how to move away from the more standardized approach, which requires good people/child skills. In my many years of

training therapists, I would say that the best fit is someone that has both aspects in their personality. That is not to say that someone who is shy or someone who lacks attention to detail will not do well, but they may have to work a little harder and/or may be a fit for some children and not others. I had an amazing time in my work in EIBI. I am known for saying that, “If you are good at the work, and are not enjoying it, then something is wrong.” Remember that some agencies are better fits for certain therapists and vice-versa. There are both benefits and costs for the decision to go with a large vs. small agency, for example.

Do you have any evidence that students like this work?

As a matter of fact, we have several emails like the following (released with the student’s permission):

Hi Dr. Baker,

I just wanted to say thank you for introducing me into the awesome field of EIBI. Now that I've settled into my role I've really had time to reflect on the huge impact you made on my life and I just wanted to tell you I really appreciate it. This job is everything I could have wanted when I was going through school, and I would have never thought to pursue it if not for how excited you were talking about it in class and the panel the Autism Center set up. I'm incredibly grateful and I just wanted to make sure you knew that.

Have a great semester!

Ashley G.

We at the CSUF Center for Autism hope that this short tutorial has been helpful and we encourage you to pursue this line of work if it sounds good to you.

For more information on our CAS Fieldwork Options, and information about agencies with whom we have partnered, please see:

<http://hhd.fullerton.edu/cas/Fieldwork/forStudents.htm>

For a list of local EIBI agencies, please see:

<http://autismcenter.fullerton.edu/AppliedDevelopmentalCore/Information/links.htm>

For more FAQ about ASD and EIBI, please see:

<http://autismcenter.fullerton.edu/AppliedDevelopmentalCore/Information/autism.htm>

For more information about the **CSUF Center for Autism**, please visit:

<http://autismcenter.fullerton.edu/>

To stay connected to the work that our Center is doing, please like our **Facebook groups** at:

<https://www.facebook.com/CsufCenterForAutismKids> (Applied Developmental Core)

<https://www.facebook.com/CSUFAutismEducationCore> (Education Core)



The Center for Autism

California State University, Fullerton

<http://autismcenter.fullerton.edu/>

email: autismcenterkids@fullerton.edu

phone: 657-278-7891