FIELD REPORT

Field Report: Autism Partnership

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“Teachers can’t just implement a protocol,” remarks Justin Leaf, Ph.D BCBA-D, Director of Research at Autism Partnership. “They need to be able to make an in-the-moment assessment of the learner and use their assessment, along with clinical judgment, to adapt instruction ‘on the fly.’” Leaf adds, “The child’s behavior should likewise shape the teacher’s behavior. This is what ABA [applied behavior analysis] is all about.”

Autism Partnership has emphasized skilled clinical judgment from its inception in 1994. Founded by two former graduate students of Ivar Lovaas, Ronald B. Leaf, Ph.D., and John J. McEachin, Ph.D., the agency now has about 300 employees, with offices in Seal Beach, CA, USA; Calgary, Canada; London and Leeds, England; Melbourne and Queensland, Australia; Hong Kong; Seoul, South Korea; and Manila, The Philippines (Leaf et al. 2011). In all locations, staff complete rigorous training with the resources available to that location. At the Seal Beach office, the average amount of training before a staff person works independently is 8 weeks. The training includes didactic instruction, role play, and live coaching with performance feedback; it covers not only ABA procedures but also underlying principles. Perhaps because of this intensive training, staff retention is high.

Staff provide many services in the agency’s offices, allowing for close oversight by clinical directors. Parents are encouraged to participate so that they too can become experts on ABA procedures. The agency offers comprehensive, one-to-one, ABA intervention, primarily using the models developed by Lovaas (1987). The agency also provides more focused interventions involving procedures such as systematic desensitization to reduce fear. In addition, it conducts numerous social skills groups for children with ASD at all ages and stages of development, given the importance of improving these children’s social skills (Taubman et al. 2011) (Fig. 1).

Further, it has short-term services, including jump starts in which children come to the agency for a week to receive top-level input from staff and crisis management in which families receive intensive, in-home support. Moreover, the agency provides counseling to parents and to high-functioning youth and adults with ASD. The counseling often involves cognitive-behavioral therapy, but all of the other interventions are based exclusively on empirically supported ABA procedures and principles.

Although the lengthy staff training and thoroughgoing ABA approach might appear to be barriers to working with non-specialists, Autism Partnership consults to home and school programs all over the world, from Italy and France in Europe to Tanzania in Africa to Singapore and South Korea in

Fig. 1 Autism Partnership emphasizes flexible, ABA instruction. It offers social skills groups to children with ASD of all ages and stages of development

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Fig. 2 From left to right: Dr. Justin Leaf, Director of Research; Drs. John McEachin, Mitchell Taubman, and Ronald Leaf, co-directors

Asia. Leaf believes this successful outreach shows that Autism Partnership can be applied in a wide range of settings and should not be viewed as a “Ferrari model.”

In 2010, Autism Partnership set up a not-for-profit foundation to support treatment for families who cannot afford it and to conduct research on topics that are important to the ASD community. Examples of these topics include analyzing ABA techniques, comparing ABA to other interventions, and developing new treatments in areas such as social skills. The foundation recruits research interns so that it can train new investigators. Looking to the future, Leaf hopes to scale up these research activities to include national and international collaborations (some of which have already begun) and to conduct randomized clinical trials of the effectiveness of interventions. In addition, Leaf envisions creating a Center for the Advancement of Behavior Analysis that would attract interns who would go beyond meeting the basic requirements for certification by the Behavior Analysis Certification Board. Ultimately, Leaf sees these activities as moving ABA

away from being protocol-driven and back to being a profession in which the behavior of teachers and researchers is shaped moment to moment by the behavior of learners (Fig. 2).

References

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