

NEWS

Community Newsletter: Researchers and advocates debate applied behavior analysis

BY CHELSEY B. COOMBS

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Hello, and welcome to the Community Newsletter! I'm your host, **Chelsey B. Coombs**, *Spectrum*'s engagement editor.

As a reminder, *Spectrum* will hold a Twitter chat during the Society for Neuroscience conference this week. Join us from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. EST on Wednesday, 10 November to chat with your fellow researchers and our reporters about conference posters, keynotes and presentations, using #SpectrumChat. We'll lead the discussion from the @Spectrum Twitter account.

Several autism researchers commented online this week about a statement from the Autism Science Foundation (ASF) expressing **"strong support" for applied behavior analysis** (ABA).

<https://twitter.com/AutismScienceFd/status/1453717976775987202>

<https://twitter.com/AutismScienceFd/status/1453718120745549825>

"We have concluded that ABA therapy, when properly rendered in an ethical manner, is beneficial to individuals who are impacted by autism," ASF wrote.

The underlying principle of ABA is teaching autistic people skills that they may find challenging. But it has long faced criticism from autistic adults who went through the therapy as children and say they **feel it was harmful**.

Although some ABA therapists used punishment in the past, today ABA "promotes the use of positive, rather than negative, reinforcement," the ASF statement reads. And ABA techniques vary widely and have changed dramatically since it was first developed in the 1960s, ASF wrote in a

follow-up tweet.

Laura Crane, associate professor of psychology and human development at University College London and deputy director of the Centre for Research in Autism and Education in the United Kingdom, tweeted a nuanced thread about ASF's statement.

<https://twitter.com/LauraMayCrane/status/1455662611169677314>

<https://twitter.com/LauraMayCrane/status/1455662613686374401>

It's hard to know what is ethical or unethical in this context, Crane wrote, using the example of social skills training in ABA, which can potentially lead to camouflaging autism traits. Research shows **camouflaging has negative effects** on autistic people, she writes, and that "professionals need to deeply reflect" on the ethics concerning ABA and other interventions.

<https://twitter.com/LauraMayCrane/status/1455662616840445959>

Kristen Bottema-Beutel, associate professor of teaching, curriculum and society at Boston College in Massachusetts, replied to Crane that some of the research ASF cited in their statement as evidence of the therapy's effectiveness "didn't support ABA."

<https://twitter.com/KristenBott/status/1455702784888737794>

Kristie Patten, vice dean of academic affairs and associate professor of occupational therapy at New York University in New York City, tweeted that "who gets to determine what is ethical" may not include the autistic people in ABA therapy.

<https://twitter.com/Kpk3P/status/1455986652057378821>

Richard Woods, a graduate student of the School of Law and Social Sciences at London South Bank University, asked whether ASF's scientific advisory board had been consulted on the statement.

https://twitter.com/Richard_Autism/status/1455856651219701760

David Mandell, professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, *Autism* editor-in-chief and a member of ASF's scientific advisory board, replied that the foundation's position on ABA "is not an issue that we have discussed as a group" and that the members would likely have a wide range of opinions on the therapy.

<https://twitter.com/DSMandell/status/1455920211542953992>

Alison Singer, president of the Autism Science Foundation, later responded to Mandell's tweet, saying, "While the SAB did not meet to discuss the statement, it was discussed via email and every member of the SAB had the chance to give input."

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— Alison Singer (@alisonsinger) **November 5, 2021**

Singer also gave the following statement to *Spectrum*.

"We stand behind this statement. The science is clear that ABA is safe and effective. We wrote this statement because we were becoming increasingly alarmed that families might be discouraged from using this evidence-based treatment due to unfounded criticism from some members of the neurodiversity community and a handful of autism scientists who focus on the high-functioning end of the autism population. ABA is not appropriate for all, but for some it can be life-changing.

"ABA" has been used as a monolithic term to refer to one type of behavioral support when, in fact, ABA is an extremely diverse set of principles that drives a wide range of interventions. New literature, written collaboratively with autistic adults, has shown that the practice of ABA has evolved over the years, has been improved, and has been responsive to the needs of the autism community."

Register for the 29 November *Spectrum* webinar, featuring Ari Ne'eman, a doctoral student in health policy at Harvard University and president and co-founder of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. Ne'eman will speak about ways to assess clinical progress in autistic people that don't also promote that they 'pass' as non-autistic.

You can now watch our **28 October webinar** featuring Zachary J. Williams, a medical and doctoral student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who spoke about measuring alexithymia in autistic people.

That's it for this week's Community Newsletter! If you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere, feel free to send an email to me at chelsey@spectrumnews.org. See you next week!

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