



Understanding Positive Behavior Support and Applied Behavior Analysis

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Introduction

The principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Positive Behavior Support (PBS) have been applied by practitioners and researchers to address concerns involving persons with challenging behavior and learning difficulties in schools, homes, and communities for over 60 years (Baer, Wolf & Risley, 1968, 1987). Yet, there continues to be confusion and misconceptions about the relationship between ABA and PBS. The purpose of this brief is to explain the relationship between ABA and Positive Behavior Support, respond to common misconceptions about Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support, and discuss important future directions for providing safe, effective, and person-centered ABA- and PBS-based practices.

What is Applied Behavior Analysis?

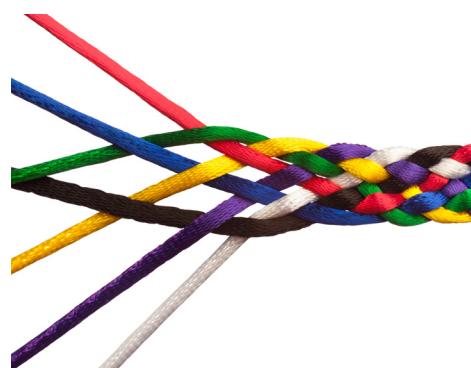
Applied behavior analysis is a pragmatic science concerned with the development and evaluation of effective educational, behavioral, and organizational support strategies that lead to improved outcomes for individuals and groups of people (e.g., students, teachers, people with disabilities, staff supporting people across the lifespan, and parents or care-

givers). ABA provides a way to understand the behavior of individuals by focusing on the dynamic interactions between a person's behavior and the social environment in which they live and learn. ABA research has provided a deeper understanding the basic principles of learning and behavior, such as the four-term contingency, comprising antecedents, behaviors, and consequences, setting events, motivating operations, reinforcement, maintenance, and generalization, that influence human learning and behavior (Cooper et al., 2020).

It is important to note that while the initial development of the field of ABA was consequence driven and, at times, included the use of aversive behavior change procedures, the field of ABA has made significant shifts towards preventive, values-driven, trauma-assumed, culturally responsive, and compassionate, non-aversive behavior change procedures (see Jimenez-Gomez & Beaulieu, 2022; Penny et al., 2023; Rajaraman et al., 2021).

What is Positive Behavior Support and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports or PBIS?

Positive Behavior Support is a values-based approach focused on addressing the underlying causes of challenging behavior while emphasizing environmental and systemic changes that support quality of





life improvements (Carr et al., 2002; Horner et al., 1990; Kincaid et al., 2016). Positive Behavior Support involves a clearly articulated process for assessment and evidence-based interventions, which is tailored to the person's unique needs. Its foundational features are the use of functional behavior assessment from the field of applied behavior analysis (Horner et al., 1990) and contemporary service elements informed by person-centered practices with a strong values-based ethos (Fisher et al., 2024; Gore et al., 2022). These foundational features inform interventions that prioritize individual agency, choice, and respect while upholding a person's rights and enriching the lives of the person, their families and support networks.

Positive Behavior Support has the dual aims of improving quality of life and reducing challenging behaviors, such as verbal and physical aggression, self-injury, property destruction, and/or inappropriate social and sexualized behaviors. Such behaviors have been documented among various disability groups, including intellectual disability (Bowring et al., 2019), acquired brain injury (Kelly et al., 2008; Sabaz et al., 2014) and dementia (O'Connor et al., 2021), and can have detrimental implications for the person (e.g., posing risk of harm and limiting community participation), family members and support staff (Biswas et al., 2014; Merrick et al., 2017; Ng & Rhodes, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2021).

Positive Behavior Support strategies prioritize proactive and preventative supports designed to avoid challenging situations. These strategies address potential or determined causal factors and support skill development for both the person and their support team. Close collaboration with the person and relevant partners such as family members, teachers, support staff, and therapists is important to ensure interventions are socially valid, effectively

implemented, and aligned with individual need. Positive Behavior Support can be effective in supporting people across the lifespan and can be applied in a range of situations (e.g., school, home and community settings).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a prevention-focused framework that has been applied in schools and other youth supporting systems including juvenile justice, residential programming, and early education (Lee & Gage, 2020, Sugai et al., 2000). The PBIS framework follows a data-informed public-health approach to organize a continuum of evidence-based practices and align supports with students based on their need (Walker et al., 1996, Kincaid & Horner, 2017; Sugai & Horner, 2020). At the universal level, basic principles of behavior analysis are at the core of guiding how schools arrange the environment to promote success (e.g., antecedent strategies), teach positive behaviors, and recognize desired behaviors while responding in proactive, instructional, restorative, and to challenging behaviors (Algozzine et al., 2019). Secondary supports are provided to students needing additional assistance, and these strategies are often provided in group settings (e.g., social skills groups) or involve efficient interventions that provide ongoing practice of universal strategies. Tertiary supports include individualized and more intensive plans for students and include monitoring and data-based decision making at both individual and systems levels for tier 3 interventions. Across all tiers of support, PBIS emphasizes the creation of predictable, consistent, safe school settings that promote behavioral and academic success (Lee & Gage, 2020). In addition to leveraging the public-health model, the PBIS framework includes a focus on the organizational structures and policies (using

research principles from Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) and implementation science) promoting sustained high-fidelity implementation of evidence-based practices to promote student outcomes. The systems-approach of PBIS is now being applied across a range of human services domains. These include residential, home and community settings for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism and brain injury (Fisher & Kelly, 2024; Freeman et al, 2024).

Misconceptions

The relationship between Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support is often mischaracterized and misunderstood (Hayward et al., 2018). Positive Behavior Support has been described as no different than ABA, as entirely distinct from ABA, or as being an evolution of ABA. While there is no clear unified consensus across fields regarding the exact nature of the relationship between ABA and Positive Behavior Support, there are characteristics that are shared across practices (Fernández-Mateos et al., 2022). There are also some meaningful differences that lead professionals and practitioners to make positive behavior support a field of study.

Shared Characteristics

It is important to note that Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support share important theoretical, philosophical, and practical foundations (Fernández-Mateos et al., 2022; Leif et al., 2022; Simonsen & Sugai, 2019). Specifically, both fields emphasize the impor-

tance of assessing behavioral and environmental interactions and designing functional and contextually based interventions. In practical terms, this is evident in the use of functional behavior assessment to identify and prioritize changes to the environment, inform planning for skill development and intervention, as well as support data-driven assess-

ment of progress towards valued goals in both fields. Specifically, practitioners working in the fields of both Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support focus on the use of antecedent and reinforcement-based interventions aimed at improving the quality of environments within which individuals live and work. This is based on the desire to support the development of personally relevant and socially significant skills, the pursuit of personally relevant activities, as well as the reduction of behaviors that negatively impact an individual's quality of life.

Some Differences

Applied Behavior Analysis—as described above—may be understood as a pragmatic scientific approach to understanding, predicting, and influencing socially significant behavior change as part of the broader field of behavior analysis. Practical applications, assessments, and interventions within ABA can be applied and explained in ways consistent with the theoretical and conceptual principles of the broader field of behavior analysis. Applications of ABA are not limited to supporting people with disabilities who display challenging behavior. ABA-based interventions have been evaluated in diverse settings with diverse populations. ABA subspecialty areas include clinical behavior analysis, behavioral gerontology, behavioral sport psychology, behavioral treatment of substance abuse disorders, and behavioral pediatrics (BACB, 2023; Heward, 2022).

Positive Behavior Support may be viewed as an application of the science of ABA that focuses on specific practice components, including functional behavior assessment, reinforcement-based interventions, data-based decision making, and implementation support (Tincani, 2007). However, Positive Behavior Support has also been influenced by other theoretical frameworks and fields of study, including ecological systems theory, prevention science, and implementation science. One unique feature of Positive Behavior Support is its emphasis on person-centered values and the promotion of self-determination for people with disabilities (Gore et al., 2013). Contemporary applications of Positive Behavior Support have been strongly influenced by human rights and values-based movements in the field of

intellectual disability, concurrent with the emergence of the social and human rights models of disability (Fisher et al., 2024; Leif et al., 2024). Today, applications of Positive Behavior Support incorporate Applied Behavior Analysis and other evidence-based and contemporary practices drawn from other fields (such as special education, disability studies, positive psychology, and medicine) to target broader quality of life outcomes for the direct recipients of services.

While both fields share theoretical and practical roots, some notable differences can be observed in their application:

- Positive Behavior Support often focuses on changing systems to bring about positive behavior change for individuals, whereas ABA often focuses on the delivery and evaluation of behavior change interventions at the individual level (Horner & Sugai, 2015).
- Positive Behavior Support emphasizes the use of person-centered planning in ways that promote shared decision-making regarding priorities for support and the design of intervention strategies (Kincaid & Fox, 2002).
- Positive Behavior Support uses direct and indirect measures to evaluate effectiveness (e.g., changes in office discipline referrals as a proxy measure of changes in challenging behavior; Jamolowicz & Tetreault, 2015, Loukas, 2015), whereas Applied Behavior Analysis relies more heavily on direct measures of behavior change at the level of the individual.
- Positive Behavior Support emphasizes prevention of challenging behaviors through environmental arrangement without the use of punishment-based programs (Carr et al., 2002), whereas Applied Behavior Analysis emphasizes both antecedent and consequence-based interventions (although the field has largely moved away from the use of aversive procedures and punishment).
- Positive Behavior Support embraces the direct



integration of other values-based practices (e.g., person centered planning, promotion of self-determination), whereas Applied Behavior Analysis remains conceptually separate and distinct from other practices/fields of study (Stalford et al, 2014)

The similarities and compatibility of Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support are clear. In many cases, Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) work in schools, homes, and community disability support settings serving in crucial roles supporting the implementation of Positive Behavior Support (Farrell, 2024). Effective Positive Behavior Support practitioners competently apply behavioral principles in their work. Many practitioners appear indistinguishable in their value-based application of behavioral principles.

Future Directions

As the fields of both Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support evolve, there are calls to expand the science into areas of broader social significance (Biglan, 2015; Heward et al., 2022). This will involve several key considerations, including contextual fit, cultural responsiveness, the voice of people with lived experience and protecting and upholding human rights in practice.

Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support-based interventions are tailored to fit the specific contexts in which they are implemented. This requires understanding the unique environmental

factors, social dynamics, and cultural norms that may influence behavior in different settings. For example, interventions designed for schools may need to consider factors such as classroom structure, teacher-student dynamics, and peer interactions, while interventions in community settings may focus on factors such as accessing resources and social support networks. In the future, researchers and practitioners need to tailor programs and interventions while matching the strengths, values, needs, and resources of the contexts in which programs and interventions are implemented.

It is also essential for Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support practitioners to recognize and respect the diversity of cultural backgrounds among the individuals and communities served. This involves actively seeking to understand the cultural values, beliefs, and norms that shape the lives of individuals, families, and care teams. Practitioners who adapt their approaches to be inclusive and respectful of cultural differences, considering factors such as language, communication styles, family dynamics, and traditions implement with a higher degree of fidelity the tenets of both ABA and Positive Behavior Support practices (McIntosh et al., 2021). It is also important for practitioners to engage in ongoing self-reflection and education to increase cultural awareness and competence.

Future directions for both Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support involve incorporating the voice of children and adults with lived experience in Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support at the research and advocacy levels in addition to the facilitation of individualized plans. Collaborative goal setting with individuals and their families and care teams is used to tailor plans to their unique strengths and preferences, soliciting feedback throughout the process, and empowering individuals to advocate for themselves. By actively involving individuals in planning, implementation, and evaluation, interventions may become more person-centered, culturally responsive, and respectful of individual autonomy and preferences. This may, in turn, enhance the uptake and effectiveness of Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support. At

the individual planning level, collaborative goal setting is used with children and adults as well as their families and care teams. Other key directions include increasing, as initially outlined in Positive Behavior Support values, the tailoring of plans to each person's unique strengths and preferences, assessing contextual fit and soliciting feedback throughout implementation, and empowering individuals to advocate for themselves. Actively involving people with lived experience in ABA and Positive Behavior Support in planning, implementation, and evaluation, will assist both fields in becoming more person-centered, culturally responsive, and respectful of individual autonomy and preferences. This may, in turn, enhance the uptake and effectiveness of both ABA and Positive Behavior Support.

Applied Behavior Analysis and Positive Behavior Support practitioners who design and deliver programs and interventions that protect and uphold the human rights of individuals, their families, and care teams, are implementing the original values inherent in these practices (Baer et al., 1968, Carr et al., 2002). Upholding human rights in practice involves ensuring that all individuals are treated with dignity, respect, and equality, regardless of their background or circumstances. This includes promoting and protecting fundamental rights such as autonomy, privacy, and freedom from discrimination or harm (Leif et al., 2024). Practitioners adhering to an ethical decision-making process and standards of conduct, obtain informed consent, prioritize the well-being and best interests of the individuals they serve, and understand how culture impacts ethical decision making (Rosenberg & Schwartz, 2019). Embracing human rights within implementation of ABA and Positive Behavior Support involves actively addressing and challenging systemic barriers and inequalities that may impede the realization of human rights, advocating for social justice, and equity in all aspects of practice (Horner et al., 1990; McIntosh et al., 2023).

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