

Book Review:

Sense and Nonsense in the Behavioral Treatment of Autism: It Has To Be Said (by Ron Leaf, Ph.D., John McEachin, Ph.D., and Mitchell Taubman, Ph.D. (2008, DRL Books, \$39.95) *(Reviewed by Beth Curry)*

Nonsense

Are you an educator who believes that attending a few ABA training workshops prepares you to supervise an “ABA program”? Have you ever told parents that ABA consists mostly of “discrete trials” or that their child is too mildly impaired to “need” ABA?

Are you a parent who has been told that your child is too young or too old to benefit from ABA-based treatment? Do you believe that your child is receiving an “ABA program” at school even though you yourself have never been offered any ABA training?

If you fall in to any of these categories, prepare to be surprised and educated by *Sense and Nonsense in the Behavioral Treatment of Autism: It Has to Be Said*. The widespread prevalence of these kinds of myths about ABA treatment, e.g., that schools can provide it with minimal training or that only certain kinds of kids benefit— motivated the authors to set the record straight.

Misunderstandings about ABA treatment often are perpetuated by those who promote competing treatment models; however, even well meaning ABA professionals can play a role in disseminating inaccurate information.

What makes these three authors such experts? Psychologists who direct a California-based autism services agency called “Autism Partnership,” they have been involved in autism research and treatment for decades. Separately, they each have more than 30 years of experience in the behavioral treatment of autism.

Ron Leach, John McEachin and Mitch Taubman trained extensively with Ivar Lovaas, the psychologist and university professor who first developed an intensive specialized ABA treatment protocol for teaching young children with autism. Lovaas’ research publications, documenting the unprecedented progress made by the children who received this treatment, sparked a growing demand for ABA based treatment.

Ivar Lovaas is the psychologist and university professor who developed the ABA treatment protocol for the “Young Autism Project” (YAP) at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

The YAP was a long-term research project that spanned more than 15 years and was designed to document the unprecedented outcomes achieved by children treated at Lovaas’ clinic.

The authors decided to take what they had learned in the clinic out into the field. They have since worked to develop and refine an approach to ABA treatment that can be implemented in the “real world” of school systems, agencies and families. That approach is always, in their words, “a work in progress” which changes and improves with experience.

Some years after leaving Lovaas’ Young Autism Project (YAP), the authors published an ABA treatment manual, *A Work in Progress (1997)*, which shared the new insights they had acquired while providing treatment in non-academic settings. (See a full review

elsewhere in the *Recommended Reading* section of the CT FEAT web site.) That book's sustained popularity, among both parents and professionals, is a tribute to the authors' distinctive ability to explain complicated issues in plain language and provide practical advice that can be readily understood and implemented.

Sense

Autism Partnership's new book shares many of the features that have made *A Work in Progress* such a success. But rather than focusing on imparting specific skills, *Sense and Nonsense*'s goal is teach parents and professionals how to think clearly and objectively about autism treatment.

The book appears to have grown out of the authors' frustration with the entrenched misconceptions that prevail about the treatment model pioneered by Lovaas. In such an uninformed environment, it's easy for parents to be misled into thinking their children are receiving "ABA treatment" based on that model.

Incomplete or erroneous information about the necessary components of a bona fide ABA-based autism treatment program can lead to other dangers as well. It makes it easy to dismiss the treatment (e.g. "My child was in an 'ABA' program and it didn't help"). Disappointing experiences with fake ABA programs can make it more likely that a parent will get caught up in the latest purported "cure" for autism or unsubstantiated speculations about its cause.

So, what “Has to Be Said?”

Despite the widespread demand for the kind of ABA treatment made famous by the Lovaas research, much of what passes for “ABA Treatment” isn’t even remotely similar to the model developed at UCLA. That model, which was validated in outcome research published in peer-reviewed journals, has a lot in common with treatment provided today at two other leading academic centers for autism research and treatment: Rutgers University in New Jersey and the University of Washington. But, unfortunately, the ABA model provided in those settings often bears little resemblance to what passes for “ABA treatment” in most schools and early intervention programs.

Sense and Nonsense describes the elements that are most important to the success of these kinds of programs, including the necessity for high standards of professional training and supervision. Other essential elements include intensive treatment -- measured by hours of individualized instruction -- and parent training.

How many public school-based “ABA” programs are led by highly trained ABA professionals providing appropriate levels of training and supervision to all staff? How many consider parent training to be an essential element of the intervention? Alas, very few.

Debunking ABA Myths

I can see why they subtitled this book *It Had to Be Said*. The book debunks a lot of common

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myths about what the intervention requires, in terms of training and hours. It also challenges some deeply held beliefs by many of those who support ABA treatment and think, wrongly, that they understand its requirements.

A lot of what the authors have to say will trouble school personnel and parents alike, each group having its own cherished misconceptions about ABA treatment. The authors present these sometimes uncomfortable truths in separate chapters dedicated to “Parental Resistance” and “Educational Resistance.”

In the “Parental Resistance” category, you’ll learn that some beliefs fervently held by many ABA-supporting parents are not true. For example, many YAP children received as little as 30 hours of intensive treatment (not 40); much of the therapy was not one-on-one (often two or three students worked with one highly trained teacher); and it did not take place mostly at home (the goal was to get in to a school setting as soon as possible).

Are Optimal Instructional Settings “Distraction-free”?

Contrary to a belief often shared by both parents and school districts, optimal instructional settings are not free of distractions. In fact, the authors specifically criticize the isolated individual cubicles that have come to characterize early and intensive therapy in most settings as counter-productive to achieving the important goal of

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teaching a child how to learn in a “normal” setting.

How Much Data Is Necessary?

Parents and teachers also may be surprised at the authors’ views on data collection. In many circles, continuous data collection has been enshrined as the supposed “proof” of a bona fide ABA program. The authors emphasize that all data collection should be comparatively easy and have a clear purpose. They also point out that unnecessary data collection can interfere with quality teaching.

School System Biases

As to the “Educational Resistance,” many parents already will be familiar with the uninformed prejudices against ABA treatment often held by school personnel. The general themes are that ABA treatment is: too

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expensive; not for kids like yours; doesn’t generalize; creates robots; is too hard on kids; and doesn’t produce as good results as our “eclectic” approach (which supposedly includes a little bit of everything, including ABA).

Perhaps the most dangerous belief commonly found among school systems is the notion that they can provide ABA-based intervention without obtaining extensive advanced professional training in the field. The authors have written a separate book, *It’s Time For School: Building Quality ABA Educational Programs for Students With Autism Spectrum*

Disorders, which describes in great detail the kind of sophisticated training that is necessary. That book is addressed primarily to school administrators and personnel, but it should be of great interest to parents seeking to analyze the adequacy of their school's "ABA" services or to encourage their school to develop legitimate services.

Is an "Eclectic" Approach Best?

The authors convincingly rebut the all too familiar claim that an "eclectic" approach to autism treatment is best. School districts commonly make this claim and it is ardently advanced by certain autism professionals, like Barry Prizant, who themselves market "eclectic" services. A candid discussion of the vagaries of the eclectic model, and its comparatively inferior outcome results, is long overdue and is truly something that "has to be said."

Is Inclusion Best for Every Child with ASD?

The book also tackles controversial subjects, like inclusion. The authors frankly discuss common "delusions about inclusion" and take the position (very "politically incorrect" in some quarters) that inclusion isn't always best for every child with autism. If you read their thoughtful analysis of the topic, which is informed by decades of real life experience, you probably will end up agreeing with them.

I especially enjoyed the chapter called "Critical Thinking" where the authors teach us how to analyze the claims of various autism treatments and walk us through the possible multiple interpretations of the perceived effects of some of these treatments.

Critical Thinking Skills – Not Only for Students

Sense and Nonsense in the Behavioral Treatment of Autism: It Has to Be Said won't tell you how to set up an ABA-based intervention program for children with autism. If that's your main interest, you'll want to read one of the authors' other books, like *A Work In Progress* (for intensive early intervention) or *It's Time For School: Building Quality ABA Educational Programs for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders* (for developing comprehensive ABA services in the public school setting).

But *Sense and Nonsense* will take you a long way toward being able to “make sense” of what ABA treatment really involves, thereby enabling you to judge whether your school is providing your child with the real deal.