Basics of Verbal Behavior

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Verbal behavior was first introduced by B.F. Skinner in 1975. Since then verbal behavior has increasingly gained interest. Verbal behavior looks at language skills, shapes and reinforces the behavior, and looks at what the individual is saying and why. Verbal behavior is an applied behavior analysis approach to expressive language skills. Verbal behavior language is a behavior that can be taught. An example is an individual is taught to ask for a pen, label picture of a pen, touch a pen when staff asks, and lastly answer a question about a pen.

There are two myths about verbal behavior. The first is it is only for individuals that are not talking and the second is it is only for individuals who are already talking. If an individual is nonverbal they are immediately taught an alternative communication system such as sign language, AAC device, etc. Verbal behavior has 2 forms; verbal and non-verbal. Examples of non-verbal forms are sign, pointing, writing, gestures, and tantrums.

There are four verbal operants for verbal behavior. The verbal operants are mands, tacts, echoics, and intraverbals. Mands are requesting items. The mand will vary from individual to individual. For example, if you are teaching ball and the individual can only say "ba" that is how they request ball and staff pair it with the verbal word ball. Eventually the word will be shaped to ball, want ball, etc. Mands are the most important verbal operant because it is before motivation and ends with the individual receiving what they want. Tacts are labeling items. Echoic skills are the imitation of verbal or written language. Intraverbal skills are responding to a question that is asked.

When you begin teaching verbal behavior you first complete a reinforcer assessment. This will give the individual motivation to start the process. Once reinforcers are established you teach mands. The individual will mand (ie. request) the reinforcers. Once requested the individual will have access to the reinforcers for a specified time. The instructor also does pairing during this process. This teaches the individual that the staff is a fun person and you get good things when the individual is around them. Once the individual is successful with manding reinforcers it typically generalizes to other items such as pens, food, bathroom, etc.

Verbal behavior almost always reduces tantrums and other problematic behaviors. This is because verbal behavior starts with what the individual likes. Once it is determined what the individual likes mands are taught. For more information, review the resources and references below and be on the lookout for future verbal behavior trainings by TASN.

Resources and References:

Books and articles

Barbera, M. L., & Rasmussen, T. (2007). *The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children with Autism and Related Disorders.* Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Carr, J.E. and Firth, A.M. (2005). "The verbal behavior approach to early and intensive behavioral interventions for autism: A Call for Additional Empirical Support." Journal of Early and Intensive Behavioral Intervention, 2(1), 18-26.

Sunberg, M. L. and Partington, J.W. (1998). *Teaching Language to Children with Autism or Other Developmental Disabilities*. California: Behavior Analysts Inc.

Websites

www.verbalbehaviorapproach.com

www.firstsigns.org

www.establishingoperationsinc.com

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Autism and Tertiary Behavior Supports
www.ksdetasn.org