



What is the ABLLS?

In our previous issues we have discussed building rapport with the learner and introduced the concept of manding. These are two very important steps in preparing your child or student for the educational programming you will institute in your home or classroom. If you have carefully followed the procedures, you now have a child who is happy and comfortable in the learning environment and who is approaching you for reinforcement. You are ready to teach. You may be wondering, "Now what?"

Knowing what to teach is every bit as important as being prepared to teach. Many discrete trial programs for children with autism have goals and objectives that may seem arbitrary at best. An early learner in such a program may have an individual Education Plan filled with objectives related to matching, two or three step direction following, labeling, time telling, and daily living skills such as setting the table. Programs like this tend to produce learners who are able to label almost everything in their environment, but who do not know the functions of these things. They may be able to set up a banquet for fifty people, but cannot tell you what a knife is for. Questions like "what did you do today" or "what's your favorite toy" seem like they are being asked in a foreign language.

Anyone, who has a child that has been classified as needing special education services, knows the battery of tests and assessments that are administered by the professionals charged with evaluating them. The specific tools vary, but most children are given a number of standardized tests. These are tests that are meant to evaluate the need for special education intervention and compare the child's level of functioning to that of other children her age. Standardized tests - that's where your child is taken into a room with someone she doesn't know, who does not know her, and is then presented with novel tasks, out of context, and is expected to respond according to the prescribed conditions with no reinforcement for correct answers. Pretty standard stuff for three year olds, don't you think? The fact is that armed with all of the information these tests deliver, a teacher still has no identified starting point for working with a particular student.

There is tool that can address this problem. It's called the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills, more commonly known as the ABLLS. It was developed by James W. Partington, Ph.D. and Mark L. Sundberg, Ph.D. The ABLLS is one tool that serves three purposes. It is primarily an assessment, but it also provides a curriculum for teaching children with autism, and acts as a monitoring device. It is the centerpiece of most Verbal Behavior programs. Laid

out in a developmental format, the ABLLS acts as a road map for developing an Individual Education Plan. This may sound too good to be true already, but there's more.

Using B. F. Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior, the ABLLS breaks language skills down into components that are usually combined on other assessments. This allows the assessor to identify critical skills that may be missing from a child's repertoire. For example, a parent may be asked if a child can follow instructions as a means to assess the child's receptive skills. The ABLLS breaks direction following into eighteen different tasks. It is also criterion referenced, so it takes into account that some children may only be able to respond correctly when prompted or provided with reinforcement. It also considers spontaneity and generalization. The entire domain for receptive language contains a total of fifty-two tasks.

The ABLLS gives a picture of where a child is right now, what they know and what they need to learn. It contains a total of 25 domains covering skills in the areas of language, academics, social development, and self-help. Depending on the child and the skill of the assessor, it can take some time to complete, from several days to as much as a month or two. According to seasoned teacher, Maureen Rubin, "The very first time I did an ABLLS assessment; it took me a long time because I wasn't familiar with it. Once you get used to it and once your class is already done and as new students come in, it might take you a couple of weeks to assess a new student." Of course a parent's input is invaluable and the assessment can and should be a group effort. The information should actually be gathered from three sources, questions to parents, teacher observations, and formal presentation of tasks.

Once the child's scores have been determined, they are recorded on a tracking grid. One look at the grid can tell you a great deal about the learner. It is easy to see where the gaps in the child's skills are and IEP goals and objectives can be easily gleaned from this information. According to the ABLLS Scoring Instructions and IEP Development Guide, "A curriculum should emphasize teaching a child a set of basic learner skills such that he will 'learn to learn.'" This is where the ABLLS clearly parts company with other assessment tools. It has at its core the goal to teach children to learn on their own, without a lot of highly specialized intervention. That's good news for everyone involved because learning goes on throughout the day, across environments.

When using the ABLLS to develop IEP goals and objectives, several points should be kept in mind. Always choose skills in all language domains of the assessment. Especially for early learners, less emphasis should be placed on academic and self-help skills. The program should be heavy in language development. That is not to say that these other skills are not important or should not be addressed. These tasks can be added as others are mastered. Think about it logically, children

should be able to ask for the things they want and need before being required to do long division or clean up the bathroom.

When using the ABLLS as a curriculum, teachers and parents will still need the ABA skills necessary to teach children using "best practices" techniques. There are several support mechanisms in place to help. First is the ABLLS itself and the accompanying Scoring Instructions and IEP Development Guide. These two books contain a wealth of information about how to set up a program. Next is a third book which we have mentioned in previous articles. It is called Teaching Language to Children with Autism or Other Developmental Disabilities also by Drs. Partington and Sundberg. This book addresses how to teach the skills outlined in the ABLLS. These books are available through at least two sources, a website called www.behavioranalysts.com, and a catalog called Different Roads to Learning. You can find the catalog online also at www.difflern.com. This catalog also contains many of the supplies you will need to teach your student or child. According to Abigail Schlaifer at Different Roads, tally counters and picture cards are the primary items that are needed. Many homes and classrooms are already well supplied with many of the necessary items used to assess and teach using the ABLLS.

Another avenue of support is the training that is available through POAC. If you have been reading this newsletter on a regular basis, this is a song you have heard before. Has it gotten stuck in your head yet? Parents and teachers are accustomed to doing their own research and many have become really good at it. However, reading can only take you so far. Eventually you need to get the guidance of someone with a lot of knowledge and experience. Keep checking the website, www.poac.net, for details about training opportunities.

By using the resources outlined in this article, you should be able to begin an assessment of your child/student and to design and begin to implement an intervention program. It's important to start slowly. You can begin by mastering just three basic concepts: pairing, manding, and errorless teaching. Pairing and manding have been covered in previous articles and errorless teaching will be covered in a future article. So, keep reading The Difference, visit the POAC web site for training opportunities, and stay involved with your children's education.