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Applied Behavior Analysis

Addressing Cognitive and Emotional Development in Children with Autism

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It has become well known in recent decades that behavioral intervention procedures can be effective for teaching simple skills in the areas of language, socialization, self-help and academics to individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). However, far less attention has been paid to behavioral approaches for addressing complex cognitive and emotional skills. In fact, some professionals outside the behavioral community contend that complex cognitive and emotional abilities cannot or should not be addressed from a behavioral perspective. In this article, we will explain how this perspective is incorrect and is largely based on a misunderstanding of what Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is. Further, we will discuss how and why ABA is a useful perspective from which to address complex skills in individuals with autism and describe how many of us in the field have been doing this for years.

Social Cognition

The autism community generally accepts the distinction between social cognition and executive functions. There is significant overlap between these two areas of functioning, but we will describe the two areas and how we address each separately. *Social cognition* refers to one person's ability to understand the mental states of others. Some refer to this ability as "Theory of Mind" or "mind reading" (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985), while others use terms such as "perspective-taking." Whatever you call it, the ability to understand what it is like

to stand in another's shoes is crucial for many areas of social and emotional functioning, including empathy, compassion, social problem solving and even just being a good friend or partner to someone.

A significant amount of research

has demonstrated that many individuals with ASDs are

impaired in their social cognition abilities. In

the children and adolescents we treat,

we often see difficulties in the following

areas: 1) understanding others' emotions

(identifying how others feel, what caused them to feel

that way and what one should do about

it in various situations); 2) understanding others' moment-to-moment desires

(e.g., my friend and I have been talking

