

Behaviorism

Behaviorism measures the surface, badly — and the primary legacy of ABA is trauma.

Reach for it when compliance is being described as progress, and you need the evidence in one place.

Behaviorism is a dehumanizing mechanism of learning that reduces human beings to simple inputs and outputs. There is an ever-growing body of research (www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...) suggesting that behaviorism is not only harmful to how we learn, but is also oppressive, ableist, and racist.

— More Human Than a Ladder or Pyramid: Psychology, Behaviorism, and Better Schools | Human Restoration Project | Chris McNutt (www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...)

Behaviorism is ableist (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/ableism/>).

Here's why:

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Behaviorism measures the surface, badly.

- Behaviorism is a theory of learning that focuses on observable behaviors and environmental stimuli. (<https://www.verywellmind.com/behavioral-psychology-4157183>)

- Behaviorism only looks at observable behavior which can be measured. It doesn't take into account thoughts, genetics, anxiety, trauma, health, or emotions because those things cannot be measured. (<https://neuroclastic.com/2021/04/08/what-is-aba-and-does-it-work/>)
- The more our attention is fixed on the surface, the more we slight students' underlying motives, values, and needs. (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/>)
- Behaviors are just the protruding tip of the proverbial iceberg. What matters more than "What?" or "How much?" is "How come?" (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/>)
- Behaviorists ignore, or actively dismiss, subjective experience – the perceptions, needs, values, and complex motives of the human beings who engage in behaviors. (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/blogs/autism/>)
- Behaviourism is a reduction of dimensions which creates an illusion of scientific worth by focussing only on what we can 'know for sure'. (<https://monotropism.org/dinah/dimensions-of-difference/>)
- Ultimately behaviorism provides a simplistic lens that can't see beyond itself. (<https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/>)
- Why is the doctrine of behaviorism still being used, at all? (<https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/>)
- Behaviorism is a repudiation, an almost willful dismissal, of subjective experience. (www.youtube.com/watch/...)
- It's time we outgrew this limited and limiting psychological theory. That means attending less to students' behaviors and more to the students themselves. (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/>)
- How can ABA be the gold-standard for autism when it ignores everything we know about autism? (<https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/>)
- The focus on surface behavior, without seeming to understand or be concerned about the complexity, or even the simple dichotomy of volitional versus autonomic (stress response) and the use of outdated, compliance based, animal based behaviorism (which has no record of long term benefits) continues to fail our country's students. (<https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>)
- Radical Behaviourism is broadly seen by psychology professionals as a simplistic and restrictive theory which is useful in certain situations but cannot sum up the entirety of the human experience. It doesn't even satisfactorily answer some questions about behaviours seen in animals. (neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/)
- Findings did not reveal compelling evidence that ABA is an approach that improves the quality of life or wellbeing of autistic people. (<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/items/ec20e1ed-593c-4c71-82b8-0dc6cf4b637a>)
- It's been refuted so overwhelmingly. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrQQLfqxABM>)

The primary legacy of ABA is trauma.

- "I have ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) therapy and I hate it, probably the worst part of my autism. Everyday I have someone come to my house wake me up and boss me around for 4 hours." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmhnNWH10UJw&t=3s>)
- The problems associated with ABA run very deep. It is a human rights violation to continue to ignore and discount the voices of Autistic people about deeply traumatising and harmful "therapies" such as ABA. (https://twitter.com/jornbettin/status/1525331264659546112?s=20&t=89NQYIy_HYjPMz6wO94onA)
- The behaviorist strategies caused a fracturing of identity and mental health problems. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ES9Z1xdWiI&t=63s>)
- "I became a frightened passive prisoner in a world I was alienated from by their violent attempts to avoid seeing who I really was and what I may contribute to humankind." (<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/62638/>)
- ABA is a breeding ground for meltdowns. The only way ABA knows how to "train" a child, to "motivate" them (as if they were lacking in motivation before this), is to negate their needs or take away their joy. ([autisticscienceperson.com/2023/...](https://autisticscienceperson.com/2023/))
- This is a child's heart in fight or flight mode, constantly, that is being bombarded with all these instructions and prompting. ([www.youtube.com/watch/...](https://www.youtube.com/watch/))
- Nearly half (46 percent) of the ABA-exposed respondents met the diagnostic threshold for PTSD, and extreme levels of severity were recorded in 47 percent of the affected subgroup. ([henrykdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/...](https://henrykdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/))
- Adults and children both had increased chances (41 and 130 percent, respectively) of meeting the PTSD criteria if they were exposed to ABA. ([henrykdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/...](https://henrykdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/))
- Current research has suggested ABA as causing a severe level of trauma from childhood participation. ([pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/...](https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/))
- Autistic individuals continue to highlight the suffering felt through ABA's inability to acknowledge the negativity inflicted through forceful coercion. ([pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/...](https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/))
- To be punished for a stress response is harmful and traumatic. (<https://endseclusion.org/articles/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>)
- Adults who received ABA as children are at an increased risk of suicide and PTSD. ([neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/))
- The conditions created by ABA foster psychological ill-being. (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>)
- It focuses on training children by holding their sources of happiness hostage and using them as blackmail to get the children to meet goals which are not necessarily in the best interest of their emotional health. ([neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/))

- Behaviorism is harmful for vulnerable children, including those with developmental delays, neuro-diversities (ADHD, Autism, etc.), mental health concerns (anxiety, depression, etc.) (<http://endseclusion.org/research/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>)
- Any reasonable observer cannot confidently deny that ABA is negatively affecting the autistic population. (fortune.com/2022/...)
- Compliance, learned helplessness, food/reward-obsessed, magnified vulnerabilities to sexual and physical abuse, low self-esteem, decreased intrinsic motivation, robbed confidence, inhibited interpersonal skills, isolation, anxiety, suppressed autonomy, prompt dependency, adult reliance, etc., continue to be created in a marginalized population who are unable to defend themselves. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258>)
- These children are the population that was chosen to be the subjects of an experimentally intense, lifelong treatment within a therapy where most practitioners are ignorant regarding the Autistic brain—categorically, this cannot be called anything except abuse. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258>)
- Applied behavior analysis receipt was associated with 30% higher odds of experiencing a mental health hospitalization. (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13623613251390604>)
- ABA therapy was associated with a greater use of acute mental health services; autistic youth in the ABA group had an overall risk that was 30% higher for mental health hospitalizations; and a 32% greater frequency of mental health hospitalizations. (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13623613251390604>)

ABA violates the fundamental tenets of bioethics.

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) ... manifests systematic violations of the fundamental tenets of bioethics. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/>)
- Adult autistics who have undergone ABA have described as violating the fundamental tenets of bioethics, as well as the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (fortune.com/2022/...)
- Autism advocates are fully justified in their concerns-the rights of autistic children and their parents are being regularly infringed upon. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/>)
- Employing ABA violates the principles of justice and nonmaleficence and, most critically, infringes on the autonomy of children and (when pushed aggressively) of parents as well. (<http://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32336692/>)
- Radical behaviorism is an erasure of identity through “correction.” This all assumes a dominant culture that one strives to unquestionably maintain. (www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...)
- PBS is not actually supported by Disabled People's Organisations and allies. This is because PBS does not meet human rights, has a poor quality evidence base and its risks and harms are not understood. (<https://amase.org.uk/pbs/>)

- Providing a treatment that causes pain in exchange for no benefit, even if unknowingly, is tantamount to torture and violates the most basic requirement of any therapy: to do no harm. (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>)
- Autistics have been excluded from all committees, panels, boards, etc., charged with developing, directing, and assessing ABA research and treatment programs. (https://www.sentex.ca/~nexus23/naa_aba.html)

Behaviorist education is ableist education.

- Behaviorist education is ableist education. (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/behaviorism/>)
- We are in a sort of remediation industrial complex, where there's all sorts of services and treatments and interventions to make the square peg fit the round hole. Parents are relentlessly told that that's their job. (longreads.com/2019/...)
- This is a top-down, power over, authoritarian approach that is not in alignment with the rest of the goals of the educational system that is designed to teach children to think and learn. (<https://endseclusion.org/research/the-problem-with-behaviorism/>)
- The most restrictive virtual straitjacket that educators face is behaviorism. (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/behavior/>)

ABA violates autonomy.

- ABA violates autonomy insofar as it coercively closes off certain paths of identity formation. (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753840>)
- ABA violates autonomy by coercively modifying children's patterns of behavior to be misaligned with their preferences, passions, and pursuits. Such superficial change is a pervasive form of interference that compromises children's present and future autonomy. (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753840>)
- Pretty much everything an autistic child does, says, doesn't do or doesn't say is pathologised and made into a way to invent a 'therapy' for it. It's actually hell to experience. (<https://twitter.com/annememott/status/1015968112674574336?s=12>)
- Our non-compliance is not intended to be rebellious. We simply do not comply with things that harm us. But since a great number of things that harm us are not harmful to most neurotypicals, we are viewed as untamed and in need of straightening up. (<http://www.thinkingautismguide.com/2018/04/on-hans-asperger-nazis-and-autism.html?m=1>)
- Many autistic persons who have participated in ABA anecdotally reported feelings of belittlement, expressed the loss of behavioural autonomy, recalled external pressure to "not be themselves", and viewed reward or consequence systems as a form of control. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1750946724001338>)

Autistic adults loathe ABA.

- It is nothing short of stunning to learn just how widely and intensely ABA is loathed by autistic adults who are able to describe their experience with it. (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/blogs/autism/>)
- The majority of the 620 survey respondents from Europe were strongly against the use of ABA and ABA-based methods with autistic people. (<https://eucap.eu/2024/04/02/aba-statement/>)
- Yet the vast majority of autistic people when polled (typically 97%) oppose ABA including and especially those who went through it as children. (neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)

ABA is badly out of date.

- ABA therapy is badly out of date, scientifically speaking. (<https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/>)
- Until ABA updates its scientific methods, its functions of behavior, and incorporates modern day psychology – including neurology, child development, educational psychology, and other vital research – it cannot be considered to be a safe, effective, or ethical field. (<https://neuroclastic.com/2020/10/14/behaviorism-is-dead-how-do-we-tell-the-autism-parents/>)
- Research in ABA continues to neglect the structure of the autistic brain, the overstimulation of the autistic brain, the trajectory of child development, or the complex nature of human psychology. (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>)
- Radical Behaviourism is considered out-of-date by modern psychologists. (neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)
- The future of Autism and other conditions ABA professes to treat is very bleak. (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>)

I would never treat a dog that way.

- Trainers are rejecting behaviorism because it harms animals emotionally and psychologically. What does that say about classrooms that embrace it? (www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/...)
- Dog trainers don't talk about systematically altering behaviour as if the dog weren't a thinking, feeling, sentient being. (neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)
- A good dog trainer doesn't extinguish behaviours which improve the dog's mental health and happiness. But an ABA practitioner may not think twice before doing this to a human child. (neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)
- Dog trainers understand that dogs need to chew and bark and dig, but ABA therapists don't understand that autistic children need to repeat words and sentences, flap their hands, and sit quietly rocking in a corner when things get too much. (neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...)

- So if it isn't sufficient to properly train a dog, is it sufficient in educating a child? ([neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/))
- I would never treat a dog that way. ([neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/...](https://neuroclastic.com/is-aba-really-dog-training-for-children-a-professional-dog-trainer-weighs-in/))

When I was a little girl, I was autistic. And when you're autistic, it's not abuse. It's therapy.

– Quiet Hands | Just Stimming... (<https://juststimming.wordpress.com/2011/10/05/quiet-hands/>)

For details, visit this extensively sourced behaviorism glossary page (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/behaviorism/>).

For alternatives to ABA and behaviorism, visit the “Alternatives to ABA Why Sheet (<https://stimpunks.org/why/alternatives-to-aba/>)”.

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- [Autistic Realms](https://www.autisticrealms.com) (<https://www.autisticrealms.com>)
- [GROVE Neurodivergent Mentoring & Education](https://grove.org/) (<https://grove.org/>)
- [NT in a ND World](https://www.nt-in-a-nd-world.com) (<https://www.nt-in-a-nd-world.com>)
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- [Learning Together](https://www.learning-together.org) (<https://www.learning-together.org>)
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