

BEHAVIORISM

A theory of learning that attends only to what can be observed and counted. Thoughts, trauma, anxiety, health, sensory pain, motive — none of those can be measured from outside, so none of them are in the model. It is still the default setting of most schools.

IT MEASURES THE SURFACE, BADLY.

BEHAVIORISM IS ABLEIST · HERE IS WHY

WHAT IT CANNOT SEE

Behaviours are the protruding tip of the iceberg, and what matters more than *what* or *how much* is *how come*. A model that counts only what it can see has nowhere to put a reason — so distress is filed as non-compliance, and a stress response is treated as a choice.

WHAT IT COSTS

A 2025 national study matched **17,120** privately insured Autistic young people who received ABA against those who did not: **30% higher odds** of a mental health hospitalisation, and a **32% higher rate** of them. The authors found no dose-response relationship and call for further work.

WHO IS SAYING SO

Autistic adults, overwhelmingly — and most loudly those who went through it as children. Meanwhile Autistic people have been kept off the committees and boards that develop, direct and assess this work. The people it is done to are not in the room where it is judged.

“The most restrictive virtual straitjacket that educators face is behaviorism.”

ALFIE KOHN · IT'S NOT ABOUT BEHAVIOR

WHAT IT DOES TO PEOPLE

- **It violates autonomy.** It coercively closes off paths of identity formation, and modifies a child's behaviour to be misaligned with their own preferences, passions and pursuits.
- **Bioethics has been asked about this.** A 2020 review found ABA manifests systematic violations of the fundamental tenets of bioethics — justice, nonmaleficence, and above all autonomy.
- **It punishes the stress response.** Non-compliance is not rebellion. We decline what harms us; because much of what harms us does not harm most people, declining reads as defiance.
- **It holds happiness hostage.** Taking away a source of joy to motivate a child is not teaching. It is leverage.

THE DOG TEST

Professional dog trainers moved away from these methods because they harm animals emotionally and psychologically. A good trainer will not extinguish a behaviour that supports the animal's wellbeing — they understand a dog needs to chew and dig and bark.

Autistic children need to rock, and flap, and repeat, and go quiet in a corner when it is too much. If the method is not good enough for a dog, it is not good enough for a child.

ASK THIS INSTEAD

- ✓ not “how do we reduce this behaviour”
- ✓ but “what is it telling us”
- ✓ and “what does this person need”
- ✓ and “what would we change about the room”

THE PRINCIPLE

A child who is struggling is telling you something. **A method that can only see the telling, and never the thing being told, is not measuring learning. It is measuring how well the room is being obeyed.**

Attend less to a student's behaviours and more to the student.

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

JULIA BASCOM · QUIET HANDS · JUST STIMMING, 2011

Adapted from the *Behaviorism* Why Sheet at stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism, which carries the full sources and the signatories. Key reading: **Alfie Kohn**, “It's Not About Behavior” and “Autism and Behaviorism”; **Julia Bascom**, “Quiet Hands” (Just Stimming, 2011); **Michelle Dawson**, “The Misbehaviour of Behaviourists”; “Ethical Concerns with Applied Behavior Analysis” (2020); **Aguirre Mtanous, Koenig, Wikahd, Effertz, Silinonte, Hyer, Hand & Bishop**, “Mental health outcomes associated with applied behavior analysis in a US national sample of privately insured autistic youth,” *Autism* (2025) — source of the 17,120 matched sample, OR 1.30 and IRR 1.32, both $p < 0.001$, and of the no-dose-response finding stated alongside them. For what to do instead, see the *Alternatives to ABA* Why Sheet.